

***Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow.* Yuval Noah Harari. Harper. 2016. 389pp.**

This book traces the evolution of human beings from hunter-gathers to the modern day and insightfully speculates on what the future may hold. It is very much in the popular academic genre and is liberally illustrated with every day examples and occasional personal anecdotes. It could be thought-provoking read for undergraduates who are interested in religion, evolution, or futurology.

Harari works in the History Department of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and *Homo Deus* is the translation of his book, published in Hebrew in 2015. In essence, the book argues that most of mankind's history has involved being extremely poor and subject to constant dangers such as war, famine and disease. It has managed to cope with these by means of religion, which has developed in parallel with the nature of human societies. Thus, hunter-gatherers see themselves as equal to animals and negotiate with them via their spirits. Agriculturalists regard themselves as superior to animals; they need to believe this so that they can dominate the land. Harari argues that this trust in the gods was eventually replaced, as we became more scientific, by a kind of replacement religion of 'trust in the future' and a worship of humanity as unique. There were battles between different humanist sects but ultimately liberal capitalism triumphed. Its theological innovation is the need for eternal economic growth, as, if the economy fails to keep growing, we will collapse back into anarchy.

He argues that this worldview ultimately leads to a quest for immortality and, in effect, super-powers. Added to this, he argues, humans clearly lack free will in any meaningful sense, so there should be little problem transferring to a world of robots and semi-robots. He predicts that, for these reasons, humans will be valued much less in the future and a class of modified super-humans may emerge. The final chapters, in which Harari explores

these possibilities, are, in many ways, the most interesting because they are not mere wild speculation. He looks at the potential consequences of technology that is already being developed, such as Google or Facebook as de facto oracles that help us live forever, technological implants in the brain which could alter personality in useful directions and robots replacing humans so that more and more of them have nothing to do other than play very realistic computer games. In fact, Harari gives us specific predictions of how likely certain occupations are to be replaced by robots by certain dates. This is not too far-fetched. It is a process that is well under way in supermarkets. Harari presents the eerie possibility that we will develop biological castes, with the higher castes modified by their use of technology and fundamentally different from lower castes.

Parts of this book are, undoubtedly, an intriguing read. This reviewer would suggest that any future edition or development of this book could be much improved by engaging much more with alternative perspectives and counter-arguments. Most obviously, there is a body of research that argues that human intelligence has been in decline since the Industrial Revolution and that innovation rates are declining (e.g. Woodley & Figueredo, 2013). This would predict that we are unlikely to reach the technological heights which Harari describes but, rather, start to go backwards to a pre-modern world. Harari does not engage with the evidence for this at all.

Harari seems to assume the veracity of the 'eternal progress' model but doesn't explore thinkers who disagree with this, such as Oswald Spengler (1918) who argued that even by 1936 the West was a civilization in decline and that all civilizations eventually run out of steam and decline. One of Spengler's arguments is that religion – in the sense of literally believing in its own eternal importance under the gods – is fundamental to the growth of civilization. Losing its religion leads to decline, as life lacks purpose and people become individualistic. At this point, the society is taken over by a more religious one and descends

into a Dark Age, before rising again. Harari defines religion in a very broad way as anything that makes life make sense. But this fails to appreciate the importance of a sense of eternal significance. Any future edition of this book should also be streamlined, as it seems to take a very long time to get to the point, as the author provides example after example.

But parts of *Homo Deus* are an enjoyable read. It is sobering to see what life could life like if civilization continues for long enough. Whether it will, of course, is quite another matter.

References

Spengler, O. (1991). *The Decline of the West*. Oxford University Press (Trans. Charles Francis Atkinson).

Woodley, M. A. & Figueredo, A. J. (2013). *Historical Variability in Heritable General Intelligence*. Buckingham: University of Buckingham Press.

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