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How Will Technology Shape the Future of Humankind? (Leader's Guide)

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A Leader’s Guide to

How Will Technology Shape the Future of Humankind?
A Study of Yuval Harari’s *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*

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How to Use This Material?

This study of human evolution using Yuval Harari’s *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* consists of 5 modules. Each module contains two sections. The first section presents a set of Reading and Reflection questions that are to be completed before each meeting and are meant to help the participant wrestle with the concepts introduced in that week’s chapters. The second section consists of two (or more) Discussion questions, which will be written by the participants and the leader as they read. Both sets of questions are meant to foster discussion, but your group should by no means limit itself to the questions contained in these sections.

This study is intended for informal, small group discussion, such as that of a Bible study or small group. The themes presented in each submodule may be unpacked on its own, but it is the hope of the authors that the entire study may be useful to the interested reader (leader and participant alike). The study is also aimed toward high school students, college students, and post-college adults with an interest in how science and the Christian faith interact.

As you read, it is our hope that you will come across (and come up with) questions which challenge you, both in understanding your personal faith and in understanding science. In these questions, you will have the opportunity to grow through asking and answering these questions: Why has the church historically believed in this answer or that answer? How might you be challenged to defend your answer?
Planning and Preparing for a Session

The material assumes that each session will last for about 45-60 minutes. It also assumes that each participant will have read the assigned chapter(s) and considered the Reading and Reflection questions ahead of time.

It must also be noted that the provided discussion questions are intended as a guide for your discussion, but you should by no means restrict your discussion to these questions. Try to keep your group’s discussion relevant to the general themes addressed in the module, but be flexible.

Equipped for Service

This “Leader’s Guide” is meant to equip leaders of these small group discussions, and thus the following pages are far more detailed and expansive than the average participant may judge necessary for complex discussion. We offer information from other references and suggested answers to questions posed in the text. This has been done in the hope that you, as the leader, may more easily facilitate and moderate discussion amongst your peers in the small group. Your small group may be made up of the generation that initiates change in how the common Christian comes to understand these questions and answer – in the service of your peers, do not underestimate your own significance as a leader or co-leader.
Who is the author of *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*?

Yuval Harari is a professor of history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He is most known for his books about human evolution and history, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* and *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, which are international bestsellers. Harari was born in Israel, and he earned his Doctor of Philosophy degree from Jesus College, Oxford, in 2002. Harari has long been interested in how *Homo sapiens* has reached its current state, and he has spent much time considering the relationship between biology (or natural history) and history.

It is significant for readers to be aware that Harari is not a Christian. Indeed, one lecturer noted that Harari "presumes that Christianity is a failed myth which means it can be treated as an interesting artifact" (see "Stories for a Post-Christian Age: Yuval Noah Harari’s Sapiens" by David K. Weber, 2016, [http://thecresset.org/2015/Michaelmas/Weber_M15.html](http://thecresset.org/2015/Michaelmas/Weber_M15.html)). However, he asks many of the big questions that Christians should be prepared to answer, including the implications of bionic humanity and how neuroscience impacts our understanding of human identity.
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Module 1: Introduction to Homo Deus
Chapter covered: “The New Human Agenda”

Reading and Reflection

“The New Human Agenda”
1. Describe the tone of Homo Deus thus far. How do you think Harari views God and religion? Why might he hold that perspective?

Suggested Answer: Harari seems to believe that reliance on God and belief that God is in control are outmoded patterns of behaviour. He is confident, and this can sting if you don’t agree with Harari’s assessment. Even if you do not agree with Harari’s assumptions, what aspects of this chapter do you agree with?

2. Do you agree that not believing in God (or gods) has led to an increase in our sense of personal responsibility and thus a decrease in calamities (2)?

3. What do you think of Harari’s assertion that, in the face of prosperity, health, and harmony, humans will seek to become gods? Do you think it is accurate?

Suggested Answer: Have we not already sought to become gods? What about the Tower of Babel? Do you think that the degree of prosperity, health, and harmony Harari’s believes to be within reach is plausible? What do you think humans will do if things to go this direction?

4. Do you think that seeking to avoid death is a bad thing? If not, at what point does aversion to death become objectionable?
5. Do you agree with the statement that “religions and ideologies do not sanctify life itself” (21)?

Discussion Questions

In addition to answering the Reading and Response questions, please write two questions you have about the content you’ve read for today.

1.

2.

Digging Deeper

For another look at the idea of designer babies, watch GATTACA, a 1997 film that explores life in a society whose caste system is based on genetic engineering. What do you think of IVF? Can IVF be a good thing? How do we determine good uses of IVF versus morally questionable uses?
Module 2: *Homo sapiens* Conquers the World

Chapters covered: “The Anthropocene” and “The Human Spark”

Reading and Reflection

“The Anthropocene”

1. Are humans morally culpable for the extinction of, say, mammoths if they were “unaware of the consequences of their actions” (75)?

2. What do you think of the statement, “The Bible, along with its belief in human distinctiveness, was one of the by-products of the Agricultural Revolution” (78)? How would you explain your response to Harari?

Suggested Answer: This statement seems to threaten (or at least discount) the validity of Scripture and the story it recounts. The validity of this statement is somewhat dependent on animism being ubiquitous in pre-agricultural revolution cultures. The Bible does teach something quite different from animism. Humans are a part of the created world, but they are undoubtedly unique. Is animism a logical conclusion to draw when comparing humankind with other large mammals (or other parts of the created world in general)?

3. How do you think Harari views animals, particularly those who have been domesticated?

Suggested Answer: As is probably self-evident, Harari does not like the meat industry. He adheres to a vegan diet. How do you view humankind’s relationship with animals? Why?
4. What do you think of Harari’s suggestion that Noah’s Flood has traditionally been interpreted to prove human supremacy and animal worthlessness (93)? Do you think that this is a fair assessment?

“The Human Spark”

1. Would you expect to find scientific proof that humans have souls? What do you believe souls are? What assumptions does Harari make when he says that “Darwin has deprived us of our souls” (104)?

Suggested Answer: Most people who believe in souls believe souls to be non-physical things. Science deals exclusively with things that can be measured empirically. This almost always means that non-physical things are outside of the realm of science. So, if you do not find physical proof for a non-physical soul, it is hardly fair to conclude that you have disproven the existence of the soul. Though Harari’s smug dismantling of a foundational Christian belief is popularly accepted by certain crowds, it is hardly definitive or even scientific. The theory of evolution is not inherently incompatible with the theology of souls. Bear in mind that, because of the futurist-focused nature of Homo Deus, much of it is speculation rather than science (though Harari does not regularly make the distinction clear).

2. What do you think of Harari’s discussion of how “using God to explain numerous natural phenomena” has now been put in “the dustbin of science” (116)? What assumptions did the people who attributed natural phenomena to God make? What assumptions has Harari made?

Suggested Answer: Harari may be describing a “God of the gaps” approach to God’s creative activity, in which everything that did not have a well-understood physical mechanism was a divine intervention. Alternatively, the people who attribute natural phenomena to God may understand that, as Creator of the universe, God is ultimately responsible for natural phenomena, even if He uses physical mechanisms to accomplish those works. Harari seems to indicate that belief in God is irrelevant, particularly as a satisfactory explanation of why
things are the way they are. Harari and the scholars he describes seem to have a very specific (though not unique) understanding of what constitutes divine action. *Should* people who believe in God and souls include these beliefs in scientific journals?

**Discussion Questions**

In addition to answering the Reading and Response questions, please write two questions you have about the content you’ve read for today.

1.

2.
Module 3: *Homo sapiens* Give Meaning to the World—Storytelling

Chapters covered: “The Storytellers” and “The Odd Couple”

Reading and Reflection

**“The Storytellers”**

1. What role have stories and storytelling played in your life?

2. Do you think that the parallel Harari draws between gods and corporation is a fair comparison (156 ff)?

**“The Odd Couple”**

1. What do you think of Harari’s rebuttal to the view that scientific theories are a “new kind of myth” (179)? Is it convincing?

Suggested Answer: For being such a significant proposition, Harari does not discuss the dissimilarities between myth and scientific theory very much. In particular, scientific theories, like prayers to Sobek, do not solve problems by themselves. When humans act on the theories or prayers, then things happen.

2. How do you view the relationship between science and religion?

3. What do you think of Harari’s discussion of the authority and history of Scripture (195)?
Discussion Questions

In addition to answering the Reading and Response questions, please write two questions you have about the content you’ve read for today.

1. 

2. 
Module 4: *Homo sapiens* Give Meaning to the World—Science and Humanism

Chapters covered: “The Modern Covenant” and “The Humanist Revolution”

Reading and Reflection

**“The Modern Covenant”**

1. What do you think of the statement “humans agree to give up meaning in exchange for power” (200)? Do you think this is accurate? If so, how? If not, why?

2. What do you think of viewing economic systems (such as communism and capitalism) as religions?

**“The Humanist Revolution”**

1. What do you think of the statement “those people who pose the greatest threat to global law and order are precisely those people who continue to believe in God and His all-encompassing plans” (222)?

   Suggested Answer: This is a stinging assessment—and a rather simplistic one. There are many factors at play in the Syrian conflict, and there are many differences between it and the Netherlands. Chalking the violence up to religion ignores the role of politics and history.

2. What do you think of Harari’s assessment that humanism teaches us that things are bad if they cause someone to “feel bad” (227)? Is there an association between immorality and hurt feelings? What are some benefits or determents of using feelings as standards for morality?
3. What do you think of Harari’s suggestion that the Bible is no longer a source of inspiration, even if it is still used as a source of authority (278)? Is this accurate? If so, what are the implications?

Discussion Questions

In addition to answering the Reading and Response questions, please write two questions you have about the content you’ve read for today.

1.

2.
Module 5: *Homo sapiens* Loses Control—Artificial Intelligence and Determinism

Chapters covered: “The Time Bomb in the Laboratory” and “The Great Decoupling”

Reading and Reflection

**“The Time Bomb in the Laboratory”**

1. Does the biological and chemical determinism Harari describes remove personal responsibility for actions? Is determinism compatible with the theology of humanity’s free will?

Suggested Answer: It is hard to reconcile physical determinism with free will. But, it is important to note that physical determinism is not an undisputed scientific fact. Knowing the biological mechanisms that caused a certain chain of events is not the same as knowing that there could be no other outcome. Quantum theory is not especially compatible with determinism either, and yet it is generally recognized as good science. Also, contrary to Harari’s assertion that evolution is incompatible with free will, niche construction theory suggests that humans have actually had a role in determining how they evolved. Humankind and its societies are shaped not only by biological factors, but by cultural factors as well.

2. What is reductionism? How does this concept relate to the ideas Harari presents in this chapter?

Suggested Answer: This is. Harari suggests that humans can be fully understood by examining the smaller components and processes that compose a human person. Humans are no more than the sum of their parts. Reductionism is helpful in science, but not necessarily in philosophy. Understanding the parts that make up a person does not mean that you actually understand the person.

**“The Great Decoupling”**

1. How would you feel about being treated by an AI physician?
2. Do you agree that organisms are (organic) algorithms? What are the implications of this statement?

Suggested Answer: Organisms are composed of algorithms, but the way Harari describes them is a bit simplistic. It is also a bit ambitious to suggest that all organic algorithms can be replicated with inorganic materials. Often, organs that contribute to the function of an algorithm are multi-functional. Replicating one of those functions in silica might be a reasonable proposition (given a few years, the appropriate resources, and a stack of funds), but replicating all those functions would be cumbersome. Interesting idea, but you do not need to accept the reductionism Harari employs.

3. Do you think that human occupations are truly endangered by artificial intelligence?

4. What does it mean to be human?

5. What is the “great decoupling” to which the chapter title refers?

Suggested Answer: Harari believes that intelligence us decoupling from consciousness.

Discussion Questions

In addition to answering the Reading and Response questions, please write two questions you have about the content you’ve read for today.

1. 

2. 

Chapters covered: “The Ocean of Consciousness” and “The Data Religion”

Reading and Reflection

**“The Ocean of Consciousness”**

1. What do you think of the idea that humans will never know what it is like to be (or to view the world like) a bat (or any other creature)?

2. Do you see evidence of techno-religion in the world? In what ways? Is your own worldview impacted by techno-religion?

**“The Data Religion”**

1. What do you think of Dataism? Do you believe that it will rise to popularity as Harari predicts?

2. Do you agree that “information wants to be free” (386)? Why or why not?

3. Respond to Harari’s interpretation of Scripture’s strictures on Babylonian astrology (396).

   **Suggested Answer:** “The stars are lying”? Really? There is a difference between not practicing astrology and believing that the stars are actually emanating falsehoods.

4. What does it look like to be a Christian in a world tending towards Dataism (assuming the world is indeed tending that direction)?
Discussion Questions

In addition to answering the Reading and Response questions, please write two questions you have about the content you’ve read for today.

1.

2.