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9-12-2017

Futurology with a Materialist

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Recommended Citation

Marcus, L. (2017). Futurology with a Materialist. Retrieved from https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/student_work/57

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Futurology with a Materialist

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September 12, 2017

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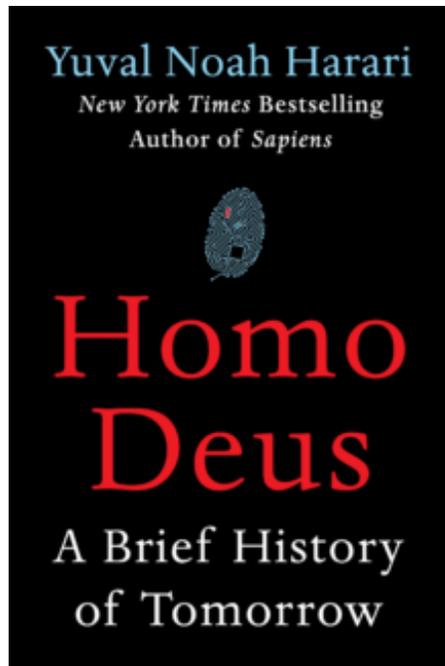
Original Title: ההיסטוריה של המחר

Publisher: Harvill Secker

Publish Date: 2015

Pages: 448

Original language: German, Hebrew



The world is changing—perhaps faster than ever before. Unlike our ancestors, who could reasonably expect the lives of their children to look much like the lives of their ancestors, we are faced with new challenges and technologies at every turn. How will humankind cope? In his book *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, Yuval Noah Harari offers an assessment of the modern world and a few visions of the future.

Harari sets the stage by describing how the historical preoccupations of humankind—disease, war, famine—are now obsolete. Relatively speaking. All three still exist, but humans are better equipped to combat them than we have been previously. Throughout history, Harari says, people were defeatist; they believed the world's problems to be inevitable and unsolvable. In the last few centuries, humanism and science have allowed us to make progress and secure “unprecedented levels of prosperity, health and harmony” (20). All this success has gone to our heads; Harari predicts that “humanity’s next targets are likely to be immortality, happiness and divinity,” hence the title (21). In the future—and already today—humankind will seek to become like God. (Now, why does this storyline sound familiar?)

In the subsequent three sections of the book, Harari asks us to reconsider our assumptions about humankind and human history so we can more freely and creatively think about what the future may look like. First, he challenges humankind’s belief that it is special among mammals (making a plug for veganism while he’s at it). Then, he describes the role mythmaking and storytelling play in the success of humankind, and how accepting these stories as truths rather than viewing them as tools is dangerous. Finally, he examines the consequences of the Information Age and the growing religion of Dataism, which threatens to reduce living organisms to algorithms. The pictures Harari paints are rather grim. But, unlike too many authors who explore futurology, Harari humbly acknowledges that these are mere conjectures. His point is to get us thinking about the modern world and where we are heading.

Throughout the book, Harari assumes a God-of-the-gaps approach to science and progress generally; he assumes that, because we now know how things like disease, weather, and war arise and function, we can no longer chalk these things up to God’s Will. Though this is a faulty assumption—just because we know about the biochemistry of sickle cell anemia doesn’t mean it cannot be part of God’s plan—it is not an uncommon one, especially in scientific humanism.

In the first two thirds of the book, Harari takes regular jabs at organized religion (well, actually, almost exclusively Judaism and Christianity). This is, frankly, wearisome. But, it is interesting to learn how a non-Christian views Christianity, and developing thoughtful responses to these is good practice should you ever meet someone who believes these assessments to be accurate and devastating to Christianity.

Besides, Harari raises worthwhile questions about living in an increasingly technology-dependant age that seems to be pursuing progress for progress's sake. It is good for humans to take responsibility for (or at least initiative against) the problems of the world. If, as Christians, we believe that God has called us to care for His Creation, innovating remedies to the suffering of Creation seems like a reasonable course of action. But, in all our work, we must not forget that our solutions are, ultimately, inadequate. Refusing to rely on God is something Scripture pretty thoroughly discourages. Harari's suggestion that humanity is yet again trying to innovate its way to divinity should cause us to pause. If what he suggests is true, what do we do? How do we find a balance between defeatism and an arrogant Tower of Babel-esque pursuit of solutions to the world's problems?

Harari does not offer answers to all the questions he raises, and he certainly does not offer overmuch hope for the future. *Homo Deus* is well written (and studded with interesting pictures at regular intervals), but the weighty (and sometimes hostile) content may be a bit much to take if you are not mentally prepared for that sort of thing.¹ But, there is hope to be had.

Footnotes

1. If you are interested in reading *Homo Deus* with a small group, I can give you a study guide with questions that can help guide your discussion. [↩](#)