

BOOK REVIEW

HOMO DEU *'The History of* *Tomorrow'*

by
Yuval Noah Harari

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Alvin Toffler (1928 – 2016), the futurist, author, journalist, educator, wrote a series of books on the pace and quality of change in the modern world and its impact on our life. The first was "Future Shock" – 1970, published after five years of research, and was bound to become

the best seller, as it analysed the 'future shock' that jolts a society when change happens too fast, resulting in confusion and breaking down of normal decision-making processes. In Toffler's words- "We must search over totally new ways to anchor ourselves, for all old roots – religion, nation, community, family or profession are now shaking under the hurricane impact of accelerative thrust'. The second book 'The Third Wave' – 1980, the term refers to the post- industrialist society, the first wave being the agrarian revolution and second wave was the industrial society based on mass production, mass distribution, mass consumption, mass education, mass media and weapons of mass destruction. The post industrial society that began in late 50's, highlighted scientific – technological revolution and was in tune with the ideas about space age, electronic era, global village etc. The third book in the series "Power Shift"- 1990 discussed the increasing power of 21st century military hardware and proliferation of new technologies. Toffler had forecast the spread of internet and email, interactive media,

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cable television and cloning. Toffler (his wife Haidi co-authored some of his writings) claimed to have predicted a number of geopolitical events, such as collapse of Soviet Union, fall of Berlin Wall, and future economic growth in Asia – Pacific region.

Taking the cue, Prof. Yuval Noah Harari, of Hebrew University, Jerusalem, has come out with a book in the same strain. "HOMO DEUS – A BRIEF HISTORY OF TOMORROW". His contention is that we are passing to the next stage of evolution and twenty first century human kind is likely to aim for immortality, bliss and divinity. The upgrading of humans into gods may follow any of these paths, biological engineering, cyber engineering, engineering of non- organic beings. To ensure global happiness will involve re-engineering Homo Sapiens. But Harari has a problem with the word prediction, that is why he says these are possibilities. The reason, Harari says is the paradox of knowledge – that is increasing at break-neck speed. Theoretically, we should understand the world better, but the very opposite is happening. The more we know, the less we can predict. The speed of change is there, but since no one understands the system, no one can stop it. In his words, "we don't know where we are

going". Having explained the new human agenda, he sets to lay out the theme in three parts. The first part looks at the relationship between Homo Sapiens and other animals-to comprehend what makes our species special. The second part examines the bizarre world Homo Sapiens has created in the last millennia, and third part describes the current predicament and the possible futures. The author prefers to call the last 70,000 years the Anthropocene epoch – the epoch of humanity. Though officially we live in Holocene epoch, because during the millennia Homo Sapiens became the most important agent of change in global ecology, that is an unprecedented phenomenon. Now, human kind is poised to replace natural selection with intelligent design and extend life from organic realm into the inorganic. Agricultural revolution gave rise to theist religion, the scientific revolution gave birth to humanistic religion. Most studies cite tool production and intelligence as particularly important for ascent of mankind. Yet another story employed to justify human superiority says that of all the animals on earth only Homo Sapiens has a consciousness. It is not an organ, but a flow of subjective experiences such as pain, pleasure, anger, love. The mental experiences are made of interlinked sensations, emotions and

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thoughts. Every subjective experience has two fundamental characteristics – sensation and desire. The up to date theory maintains that sensations and emotions are biochemical data processing algorithms. The people generally believe that there are only two types of reality – objective and subjective. In objective reality things exist independently of our beliefs and feelings. But actually there is a third kind of reality, - the inter subjective level – the inter subjective entities depend upon communications among many humans rather on beliefs and feelings of individuals. Many of the most important agents of history are inter-subjective. Prof. Harari says that during 21st century, the border between history and biology is likely to blur, not because we will discover biological explanations to historical events, but rather because ideological fictions will rewrite DNA strands, political and economic interests will redesign the climate, and geography of mountains and rivers will give way to cyber space. As human fictions are translated into genetic and electronic codes, the inter subjective reality will swallow the objective reality and biology will merge with history.

Moving on to the second part 'Homo Sapiens give meaning to the world', the writer asserts that the

basic abilities of individual humans have not changed much since the stone age, but the web of stories has grown from strength to strength, thereby pushing history from stone age to silicon age. Agriculture revolution that happened, began 2000 years ago, provided necessary material base for enlarging and strengthening inter subjective network. But there were no huge kingdoms, no extensive tool network and no universal religions. But some 5000 years ago, when Sumerians invented both writing and money, the onward progress was assured – the twins broke data processing limitations of human brain. It became possible to collect taxes from hundreds and thousands of people and to organize complex bureaucracies and establish vast kingdoms. Writing enabled humans to organize entire societies in an algorithmic fashion. It habituated people of experiencing reality through the mediation of abstract symbols. Modern science certainly changed rules of the game, but it didn't simply replace myth with facts. Myth continues to dominate humankind. Science only makes these myths stronger. Instead of destroying inter subjective reality, science will enable it to control objective and subjective realities more completely than even before. Thanks to computers and, bio-

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engineering, the difference between fiction and reality will blur. In the context of viewing modernity as a struggle between science and religion, it is better to say that since both are interested in truth, and instead of a clash, both can easily compromise, co-exist and even cooperate. Harari says that it would be more correct to view modern history as the process of formulating a deal between science and one particular religion – namely – humanism. Modern society believes in humanist dogmas and uses science, not to question these dogmas, but rather in order to implement them. But the covenant linking science and humanism may crumble and give way to a different kind of deal between science and some new post-humanist religion. To Harari modernity looks like an extremely complicated deal – the entire contract can be summarized in a single phrase – humans agree to give up meaning in exchange of power.

In the next section of his book, Harari deals with three questions :-

- a) Can humans go on running the world?
- b) how do biotechnology and artificial intelligence threaten humanism?
- c) who might inherit human kind and

what religion might replace humanism?

The writer analyses many basic assumptions about human mind and consciousness. He asserts that concepts of free will and belief in individualism have undergone drastic change. The decisions taken by an individual can be not necessarily cut of free will, but deterministic and even random. There is nothing like a permanent self, but a stream of consciousness. Humans are no 'individuals', but 'dividuals' – i.e. an assemblage of many different algorithms, lacking a single self and humans can be manipulated. Humans will no longer be autonomous entities, but they will be integral parts of a huge global network. Humans will lose their economic and military usefulness, but economic and political system will find value in humans collectively and in some unique individuals – the upgraded super humans. That is why the author says, 'equality is out, but immortality is in'. We are witnessing the progress of robotics and automation – that have caused loss of jobs. In military activities or warfare, use of sophisticated weapons and technologies, reduce the need for human component. In twentyfirst century, we might witness the creation of a new massive class – people devoid of any

economic, political or artistic value, who contribute nothing to prosperity, power and glory of society. The crucial problem will be creating new jobs that humans perform better than algorithms.

Harari envisages or talks about emergence of two main types of religion – techno-humanism and data religion. Techno-humanism that still sees humans as the apex of creation and clings to traditional humanist values. But it agrees that Homo Sapiens has run its historical course and will no longer be relevant in future, and as such concludes that we should therefore, use technology in order to create-HOMO DEUS – a much superior human model. Homo Deus retains some essential human features, that will enjoy upgraded physical and mental abilities, that will enable it to hold its own against most sophisticated non-conscious algorithms. The twenty first century techno-humanism hopes to reach the goal with the help of genetic engineering, nano technology and brain computer interface. Since intelligence is decoupling from consciousness, and since non-conscious intelligence is developing at breath taking speed, humans must actively upgrade their minds. Dataism began as a neutral scientific theory, but is now mutating into a religion that claims to determine right

and wrong. The supreme value of new religious is information flow. Dataism believes that all good things including economic growth depend on freedom of information. Dataism is neither liberal nor humanist, but it is not anti-human. It adopts a strictly functional approach to humanity, appraising the value of human experiences according to their function in data processing mechanism. Dataism spreads itself by promising to fulfil three human aspirations – pursuit of health, happiness and power. But in order to gain ‘immortality, bliss and divine powers of creation,’ we need to process immense amount of data.

The writer concludes that we can not really predict future. But all the scenarios described should be understood as possibilities rather than prophecies. It needs to be mentioned that the use of expression ‘A brief history of tomorrow’ in the sub-title is deliberate to stress that this is not ‘history’ of tomorrow, because history is written after the events, but only an account of the possibilities of tomorrow. The writer says that if we take grand view of life, all other problems and developments are over-shadowed by three inter-linked processes –

- a) Science is converging on an all encompassing dogma, which says

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organisms are algorithms and life is data processing.

- b) Intelligence is decoupling from consciousness.
- c) Non-conscious but highly intelligent algorithms may soon know us better than we know ourselves.

But at the end of the day, some pertinent questions are raised-

One, Are organisms really just algorithms and is life really data processing?

Two, What is more valuable –

intelligence or consciousness?

Three, What will happen to society, politics and daily life, when non-conscious but highly intelligent algorithms know us better than we know ourselves?

The fact that the author's presentation of material, facts, process, events makes you to think over the happenings around you and seek answers to relevant questions point towards the author's success in his endeavour. Nothing more need to be said about the readability and significance of the book. ■