

SAPIENS: A BRIEF HISTORY OF HUMANKIND

Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind, by Yuval Noah Harari, New York: Harper Collins, 2015, vii+464. ISBN: 0062316095

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“Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind” by Yuval Noah Harari is engaging, thought-provoking, and a good read. The book takes its readers on the historical journey of one of the human species - the Homo Sapiens - the only species of humankind that exists currently. A recurring and binding idea of the book is the very idea of ideas; ‘imagined realities’ (p. 32) that govern the way humans think and behave. Everything from religion to limited liability companies are stories woven by humankind that enables us to survive and to cooperate in larger numbers than any other known living being. This ability of ‘myth-making’ is the very reason, according to Harari, that humans are able to dominate the Earth instead of any of the other species.

Harari divides the history of Homo Sapiens into three main revolutions: The Cognitive Revolution; The Agricultural Revolution; and The Scientific Revolution. The Cognitive Revolution began around 70,000 years ago and with it began a new way of thinking. Homo Sapiens gained the ability to create myths - stories about things that did not actually exist in the natural world. These myths served a purpose, which was allowing humans to cooperate in larger and more cohesive groups, different from any other animals on earth. Sharing common myths and believing in the same “imagined realities” created trust amongst the people. During this period, humans were able to spread rapidly, wandering and settling in new ecosystems which would sometimes result in the extinction of some animal species that had been living there. Harari refers to this as ‘the First Wave Extinction’ (p. 82).

Around 10,000 years ago, the Agricultural Revolution began and somehow sprung up independently in all parts of the world. Harari bravely goes on to state that ‘The Agricultural Revolution was history’s biggest fraud’ (p. 90), which might seem overtly sensationalistic. Harari does tend to romanticize the lives of the hunter-gatherers to prove his point and does not acknowledge that though hunter-gatherers did not face the

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same problems as farmers, it did not mean they did not face problems of their own. But his argument is nonetheless convincing. Permanent settlements allowed humans to increase their population by leaps and bounds but it also caused suffering for humankind at the individual level. He points out that the practice of farming brought with it longer, harder working hours, and malnutrition paired with increased risk of contracting infectious diseases. He states that humans were not the domesticators of plants; it was the other way around as plants benefited more greatly from the revolution than did humans. With humans permanently settling in large groups, culture and imagined realities became stronger, especially ideas of money, politics, and religion. Politics meant power and the pursuit of that power led to much of what is known as human history. According to Harari, empire is the most stable form of political organization and also the most common form of it for the last 2,500 years. Empires united cultures and sometimes formed new ones. Much of the cultures in the world today are the ones formed by the empires of yesterday. Harari believes that with globalization, humankind is once again moving towards becoming a single global empire. The idea of money helped smoothen transactions and it solved problems associated with barter. Although it started as something that had value, like Sumerian barley money, it developed into something that did not have much intrinsic value but was easier to transport and store, like the silver shekel. This worked because of the shared trust of the people on the imagined value of money. Religion acted as both the unifier and the divider of men. People believed in a religion and this belief comforted them and gave meaning to their lives, providing them with what they believed was the absolute truth. It also sowed the seeds of resentment between people who believed in different religions, however.

Then came science, and humans started to accept their previous ignorance. The Scientific Revolution began 500 years ago and with it came unprecedented leaps in technology and the thought patterns of humankind. With the advent of genetic engineering, humans may well be able to overcome the laws of nature. Here Harari brings up the theme of happiness. Has technology and all the changes we have been through so far really made us happier? Are humans really doing better now than our hunter-gatherer ancestors? With the ability to manipulate the environment in unimaginable ways, humankind may well be on the path to becoming gods themselves yet we are still unhappy and indecisive about what we desire. Even if we were able to achieve eternal life, would that be enough to bring us happiness?

Harari tends to make sweeping generalizations at times and make exaggerations that connect his ideas of the cause-effect relations of events all too well, making one to

wonder about the extent and usefulness of his simplifications. As vast and complex as some topics were, Harari moves quite quickly past them, leaving one with the desire for just a bit more detail. This can, however, be accounted by the fact that the book is barely 464 pages long, while it tries to cover 13.5 billion years worth of history.

The book tackles many riddles of human history and one of the most intriguing questions Harari asked was why patriarchy is almost universal. He discusses some common theories, such as male strength, male aggression, and male ambitiousness as possible reasons explaining how the male species of humans were able to oppress and dominate the female species. Harari explains how none of these theories are convincing enough. He remarks that these supposed male traits do not make much of a leader and that traits associated with females - superior social skills, ability to cooperate and manipulate - are much more suited for leadership. This question is left unanswered, making this one of the most memorable questions asked by the book.

Harari does an overall impressive job at explaining history and evolution in a way that is not only interesting but also comprehensible for a more general and broader audience. For anyone who wants to learn about the long journey humankind has taken thus far, this book is highly recommended.