

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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The Coming Dystopia: Technology and Human Obsolescence

This summer I have read two books which present an overview of humanity that is both enlightening and shocking. Written by Yuval Noah Harari, whose Ph.D. is from Oxford and who now teaches at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the books have profoundly affected me: *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (2015) and *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (2017). Harari combines insights from genetics, anthropology, cultural studies, as well as social and epistemological history in his two books. In his first book Harari argues for three broad “revolutions” in the history of humankind: [1] The “cognitive revolution,” which gives focus to the distinctive attributes that separate humanity from others in the animal kingdom: The capacity to think, learn and communicate information in an unprecedented manner when compared with other creatures. [2] The “agricultural revolution,” which gives focus to humanity’s domestication of crops and animals, which produced stable societies and deepened the flow of information within society and culture. [3] The “scientific revolution,” which gives focus to humanity’s “capacity to interrogate and manipulate the physical, chemical and biological worlds, resulting in even more potent technological advances that surround us today.” Harari’s second book looks to the future and Harari sees basically a dystopian future, which is what I am most interested in for this *Perspective*.

Harari argues that “Having raised humanity above the beastly level of survival struggles, we will now aim to upgrade humans into gods, and turn Homo sapiens into Homo deus.” In Harari’s world, what makes humans unique? Humans have the capacity to encode complex algorithms, “a methodological set of steps that can be used to make calculations, resolve problems and reach decisions.” In the words of reviewer Siddhartha Mukherjee, Harari envisions the march toward Homo deus as a time “where technology overtakes religion; the fear of nature transmutes into an unprecedented capacity to control nature . . . Our capacity to manipulate two fundamental forms of information—the biological and the computational, the byte and the gene—will thus result in the birth of superior beings who will ultimately overrun the world. They will take over our jobs, infiltrate lives and control our emotions and fates as easily as they control our traffic and taxis today. They will write poetry, make love, create art and look, feel and behave like us—only better.”

In this frightening scenario painted by Harari, he offers a superb and brilliant insight into an intellectual shift that occurred in the last several decades. Harari argues that for the past several hundred years, there has been a successful and productive alliance between scientific thought and humanism—“a philosophy placing human feelings, happiness and choice at the center of the ethical universe.” Michel Gerson observes in a review of Harari’s books: “With

the death of God and the denial of transcendent rules, some predicted social chaos and collapse. Instead, science and humanism (with the assist from capitalism) delivered unprecedented health and comfort. And now they promise immortality and bliss.” Harari powerfully argues that “in exchange for power, the modern deal expects us to give up meaning.” The “deal” was based on this alliance between science and humanism, which is now breaking down; indeed, science is now consuming humanism. “Science, argues Harari, revealed humans as animals on the mental spectrum, then as biochemical processes and now as outdated organic algorithms. We have ‘opened up the Sapiens black box’ and ‘discovered there neither soul, nor free will, nor self’—but only genes, hormones and neurons.” For Harari, values and virtues such as “individualism, equality, democracy and human rights—even human imagination” are irrelevant. He writes, “Yes, God is a product of the human imagination, but human imagination in turn is the product of biochemical algorithms.” The end result is the complete devaluation of the human being: “Omnipotence is in front of us, almost within our reach, but below us yawns the abyss of complete nothingness.” What (or who) can bridge this terrifying chasm that Harari constructs?

Reading Harari reminds me of one of the most famous atheists of the 20th century—Bertrand Russell. Along with A. N. Whitehead, Russell was the founder of analytic philosophy. He stressed the absolute nature of impersonal, physical matter. There is no God, only matter; He advocated for the eternity of the material universe. The result was a bleak view of human life, its meaning and its purpose. Consider this extended quotation:

That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man’s achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of the universe in ruins. . . . Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul’s habitation henceforth be safely built (Why I Am Not a Christian, editor Paul Edwards [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957], p. 107).

There are several interesting observations about Russell’s “world which science built for our belief.”

1. To Russell, humans are “accidental collocations of atoms,” while to Harari we are “algorithms.” Yet, Russell uses terms not associated with accidents: “loves,” “beliefs,” “despair” and “soul.” These words do not fit with his worldview. As John Piper argues, he borrows these terms from another worldview. He is using language beyond physical matter, an odd thing for a materialist to do.

2. Piper asks, did Russell live “his philosophy?” How did he talk to his three children about their hurts, their pains, their sorrows, for after all his three children were merely “an accidental collocation of atoms.” How did he talk with his three wives? Did he speak of them or to them as “accidental collocations of atoms?” Could he, did he, tell them he loved them? As a rabid materialist, what did love actually mean to him?
3. Russell’s self-annihilating worldview concludes that “only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair can the soul’s habitation henceforth be safely built.” In other words, the soul’s habitation is built upon nothing, for humanity can only look forward to “extinction in the vast death of the solar system.” The dystopia envisioned by Harari yields the same despair.

Yet, the Bible affirms the reality of death, sorrow and despair, but it identifies the cause—sin. And it identifies the solution to this cause, namely the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Easter Sunday is the triumph over the tragic, desperate, unfounded worldview of ardent secular materialists such as Bertrand Russell and the dystopia envisioned by Harari. ¹ Corinthians 15:17-20 makes the strong case for hope not despair, for triumph not defeat, and for a foundation that cannot be shaken:

¹⁷ **And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.**

¹⁸ **Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.**

¹⁹ **If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.**

²⁰ **But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead. . . . [ESV]**

As we move forward in this confusing culture, we who love the Lord and love His Word, let’s covenant together to start talking more about what we believe than about politics. Let’s start talking more about the sound doctrine that produces godly living than the political culture. Let’s watch less Fox News and read more of the Bible. When someone asks about our beliefs, let’s direct the conversation to Jesus, who He is and what He has done. Let’s disassociate ourselves from the political illusion and embrace and proclaim Jesus as the solution to the challenges of the human condition. Jesus offers us eternal life with Him, not the despair of Bertrand Russell or the dystopia of Harari.

See Siddhartha Mukherjee’s review of Harari’s book in the *New York Times Book Review* (19 March 2017), p. 12; Michael Gerson in the *Washington Post* (26 June 2017); and John Piper, “Strange Collocation” in *World* (24 October 2009), p. 46.