

Scott H Young Book Club

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*Sapiens:  
A Brief History of Humankind*

July 2017

Welcome to the July 2017 edition of my book club, this month we read Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens: A Brief History of humankind*.

This is a really interesting book. I picked it because not only is it a history of humankind but it actually tries to purport our earliest beginnings to our modern day. And, it does so in a very idiosyncratic way.

We really get to see not just, this is a list of facts of what happened like in a textbook, but we see a very alternative viewpoint on many of the things we take for granted.

Harari has a knack for taking things that we're familiar with or familiar with having been explained in a particular way, and describing it in a different way.

Even if you disagree with some of his takes on particular ideas, I think it's a very compelling book because he forces you to look at many of the things you consider commonplace and shows how they can be perceived in a different way.

The first one starts with the title itself. The title is "Sapiens" not "Humans". Why is it Sapiens? Well, it's Sapiens because in Harari's mind, "Humans" is everything that belongs to the homogeneous of animals which we tend to have this viewpoint of, it was this linear sequence.

There were cavemen and then they evolved into us. There was a sequence of human begins and we were sort of like this "ultimate product", but this isn't true.

Homo-sapiens co-existed with a number of other human species on the earth for hundreds of thousands of years. It was just our dominance, quite recently, about fifty thousand years ago that allowed us to extinguish all the other competitors, all the other human species.

There is a tendency to say, well, why was this? Why did we dominate? It's easy to think that we we're actually smarter, that they were more ape-like and we possessed more noble qualities.

However, this might not be the case. Harari points out that if you look at the skull of neanderthals, they had large brains than we did. Larger brains don't necessarily mean they're more intelligent (of course we can't give a neanderthals an IQ test!) but it does point out the obvious problem that we tend to view that were the most intelligent simply because we survived but that might not be the case, it might be that some of these other human species were equally or more intelligent. But, they were less able to compete against us.

So why did we survive? Well Harari posits that the reason that Sapiens are the only human species around right now is because we were able to coordinate on larger scales.

Around one hundred thousand to fifty thousand years ago, we entered into what he calls the Cognitive Revolution. The first of three revolutions that he mentions in the book. The Agriculture and Scientific Revolutions I'll talk a bit about later.

This Cognitive Revolution allowed us to form more distant trade networks, it allowed us to create culture, it allowed us to have shared abstract ideas that could coordinate our

behavior. He believes this was our key advantage over these competing species.

Maybe neanderthals were more intelligent individually but because they couldn't coordinate over larger distances, and with strangers and with these shared myths, cultures and traditions, we were able to over a short period of time accumulate the ability to out-compete them.

So this was the first real revolution and for a really long period (the majority of our history, in fact) we existed in this hunter / gatherer state. Again, this is another flip of our intuitions. Many of us have this view of progress: that we started out in this brutish and short existence in nature and through civilization we became more prosperous and we lived better lives. There was this general progress until today where we are living at the zenith of human history.

Harari questions this as well. He says that the second revolution, the Agricultural Revolution, when we stopped becoming nomadic bands of hunters and gatherers and started to settle down and farm and have herds of animals and stay in villages and cities, that this was humanity's biggest fraud. This was something that actually made our lives worse off until very recently.

Look at the evidence of stature. It's clear that agriculturists had malnutrition and they lived worse than hunter / gatherers and they had to work very, very hard. They probably had to work eight to twelve hours that we expect in the field whereas hunter / gatherers probably lived a comfortable existence just working a little bit here and there.

Harari's idea about the myth of progress, well, why would we have voluntarily adopted a worse lifestyle. Why didn't the hunter / gatherers say, "no way, I don't want to do farming! It's easier to hunt and gather and it feeds me better."

But what happens is, because agriculture allows for more food to be produced per unit of area, that once some bands starting switching to agriculture they couldn't go back. They started to have more children, their population expanded, and then it wouldn't be possible to switch back to the previous lifestyle.

As long as some tribes or some bands of people started having agriculture, because they were more productive per unit of area, they were pushing out the hunter / gatherers. So the hunter / gatherers kept living on increasingly marginal areas of land which were less suitable for farming.

And so this is a real interesting idea that progress was inevitable (that we couldn't undo it, that we had to go in this direction) but it also led to us being worse off. This was the real big revolution about ten thousand to twenty thousand years ago. We had the Neolithic Revolution, we had agriculture, but it probably left the majority of people who experienced it worse off rather than the people who lived fifty thousand years earlier.

Agriculture also changed the culture. It changed the myths we had. We developed myths of hierarchy now that you could store resources; there were those that had and those that had not. It was a much less egalitarian society than what existed before. It also became patriarchal. In the early hunter / gatherer society there was more egalitarianism between the genders. Now, in agricultural societies you typically see patriarchy. You see men ruling over

women and Harari brings up some possible explanations of why this might be but ultimately he's unsatisfied that we've found the mode that operated in earlier societies.

We also see religions come up. Religions started to shape these ideas. Harari defines religion as a system of human norms and values that is founded on a belief in a super-human order. So it's basically a way of getting rules, ethics, codes of conduct for coordinating between strangers and larger groups of people and giving them some force and some weight. If you believe that there's some super-natural entity that will evaluate your actions and punish you if you're wicked, that will coerce you into behaving better in a society and being less selfish.

He also talks about how, in this period, we invented money. Money is perhaps the most successful system of mutual trust ever devised. It depends not me believing it has value, but believing that other people will value it. Even if I don't believe that gold is valuable and they have things that I want they would trade for gold, then for me it is valuable. That becomes a stable structure that allows us to get things that we want even if we can't do a one to one bargain.

So if I'm selling deer hides and someone else is selling shovels but let's say I don't want a shovel, money works really well as a medium of exchange. It survives on this system of mutual trust that is essentially a myth or an idea that we collectively imagine.

Another idea that he brings up is the idea of poly-theistic religions (religions that has multiple deities) and we tend to view these as being more primitive. They are associated with paganism and replaced with superior, mono-theistic religions like Christianity, Judaism or Islam. Harari believes that poly-theistic religions were more tolerant than the mono-theistic ones that dominate today. Far from being the primitive and savage, they might have actually been more enlightened by our standards today.

He also points out that, a lot of times, we tend to see ourselves as living in an age of reason, sort of a break from the dark ages that were dominated by superstition and tradition and now we live in this enlightened era. However, Harari believes that these myths, religions, and philosophies continue to dominate today, we just label them differently which gives us a distinction compared to those earlier "false" ones that we tend to discredit.

In Harari's belief, the current religion is Humanism and there are different types of Humanism but they all essentially worship humanity instead of super-natural deities. In Liberalisms we worship the individual. The individual is sacred and has human rights and valued. In Socialist or Communist, it's the worship of the collective class. Think about the struggle of the working class again the ruling class and that it is this class solidarity that matters.

In the Evolutionary (what he calls, or you could also say, Eugenics Version) we worship the "uber-man" which is the idealized version which could be defiled impure races or genetics. These current religions have dominated over the last hundred or so years and led to world wars just as the earlier mono-theistic religions led to the crusades.

This leads us to the third revolution, Science. So this big revolution is that we now had a way of getting the kind of progress that maybe the Agricultural Revolution we saw it as being the beginning but progress only started during the Scientific Revolution.

He thinks that the big invention of the Scientific Revolution was the discovery of ignorance. What dominated this revolution wasn't all this new knowledge, but rather realizing there's so much we don't know.

He points out that you start seeing maps with big blank spots with parts not filled in yet because we know there's something we don't know. That idea that we know there's something we don't know is so powerful. Harari posits that it wasn't something that was properly appreciated until this time. He also talks about the history of science, capitalism, and consumerism. He believes consumerism is the most successful of the philosophies.

He talks about how Buddhists don't live up to Buddhist ideals and how Confucians didn't live up to Confucians ideals and yet, we do live up to our Capitalist / Consumerist ideals. These are that money matters and that the acquisition of "more" (not necessarily more things) it might just be experiences such as more travel, seeing more plays and so on, it's the thing to be striving after, it's the thing to be valued.

I think that's also an interesting critique because very often we're splitting a thread that Harari lumps together. A common theme in the book is that we think people did it "like this" before and now we do it "this way" but Harari merges those together and says, well, it's actually kind of the same, we're all doing it this way.

So this consumerist ethic, many people like to say well it's not that money and possessions matter, it's experiences that matter (watch more movies, read more books, travel more places) but he points out this is another variant of that consumption philosophy to life. That the key to living well is to consume more and more varied experiences.

He goes into talking about Buddhism, Harari is somewhat of a Buddhist, he practices a lot of Buddhist things. It's clear that he gives a special feeling towards Buddhism in his description of philosophies and religions. He talks about how in many cases the way that these Buddhist philosophies have been interpreted in the west have gotten a weird slant; they've been reinterpreted in our current liberal terms. The Buddhist critique of consumerism is that, well, you know it's not the external world that matters it's your internal world that matters. That is to say, if you're happy on the inside that's really what matters. And Harari argues the opposite.

He says that's the complete opposite of what the Buddha said. The Buddha said these feelings that we have are so fleeting and ephemeral that that can't base the thing you base your feelings on. True happiness is to not be swayed by those things.

Here's a quote from Harari: "This idea is so alien to modern liberal culture that when Western new age movements encounter Buddhist insights they translate them into liberal terms thereby turning them on their head. New age cults frequently argue that happiness does not depend on external conditions, it only depends on what we feel inside. People should stop pursuing external achievements such as wealth and status and connect instead with their inner feelings."

He says this is more or less the opposite of what the Buddha actually argued. If you look at this whole history from start to finish, it's a reimagining of a lot of things that we've been taught to believe. For instance, we're taught to believe in the myth of progress, the idea that we're always getting better, that we started in this crude existence and we're now in the

golden era.

Harari suggests that at the very least we're living in a dip, there was a period earlier when we were hunter / gatherer and there was long period of decline or more meager existence as agriculturalists and only now maybe we're surpassing that because of industry. It raises the question what's going to happen in the future and the degree and maybe there will be another inevitable change that will come that will leave us worse off.

The other thing he changes is the idea of myth in a larger term meaning that how much of what we consider to be true or factual are these ideas that don't have a concrete physical existence but exist in our shared collective understanding. He uses them not in a derogatory way, but to point out that we have a lot of ideas that aren't strictly true in an objective sense.

I highly recommend this book; I barely did it justice in this brief summary. Lots of good ideas, especially if you are not aware of some of the things I've mentioned in this summary, it might be something worth reading.

Now I will transition to a conversation I've had with James Clear, author at [jamesclear.com](http://jamesclear.com) where we focus particularly on myths and this idea that we live in a society where a lot of what we take for granted might not be objectively true. Enjoy my conversation with James Clear.

Scott: Well I'm very excited to have James Clear the author on jamesclear.com where he writes about habits and personal development and excellent articles that I highly recommend.

I am really looking forward to having him here to discuss our July Bookclub Book which is Yuval Harari's *Sapiens*. This is a really interesting book and I think a big reason that it was interesting for me is that, even if you've read a lot of history or biology, and you know what he's talking about in the history of humanity, he has a really interesting perspective that he applies to it. He looks at a lot of issues we're conditioned to view in a certain way but then he flips it around and looks at it a different way.

One of the things he talks about is that the title of the book is *Sapiens* and he's using it to distinguish the fact that in our early history there were multiple human species. There were the neanderthals and the Floresiensis there were a lot of human species happening at the same time. Now of course there's only us, the *Sapiens*.

Our whole history is this idea that there were other human-like creatures around in our early period and we often think of them as other or different from ourselves, and he says that maybe we should be considering them as being the same as us and we just happen to surpass them.

What do you think about this idea, James?

James: Thank you Scott for having me! Super excited to join you. I also found the book fascinating. Harari is very interesting in the way that he frames issues and the way that he talks about things. He does a really great job of looking at things from a new angle.

The core idea that he lays out about there being these shared myths that we have, these collective stories and narratives that all agree upon, it was the first time I'd heard it phrased that way.

I thought it was very interesting to talk about how homo-sapiens are perhaps the only species that can talk about things or collaborate around things that we've never held or touched or smelled. We have these religions and capitalism and money and so on, all these myths, in his language, these shared stories that we agree upon.

I love thinking about laws as one example. For example, why do we all stop at a stop sign or a red light? Well we stop there because we've all agreed we've decided that there are certain laws of the road and we'll adhere to those.

Our ability to collectively agree upon this shared myth or story allows us to have roads and cities that function in an orderly fashion. There's nothing fundamental about that in the sense that it's not a fundamental law of the universe (like dropping a ball, it will fall regardless if someone agrees with it or not) and that's just one example of some of the interesting ideas that he shares.

Scott: Well I think to continue that thought, again, and we were talking about this prior to recording the call, that he uses the word "myth" and I think rhetorically this works very well because it highlights the idea that this isn't something that exists in an objective sense.

I will give a good example: the fact that George Washington is the first American president is pretty uncontroversial. There's writing that supports this. But this would be exactly the kind of "myth" that Harari is talking about.

It can sound a little bit inflammatory but it's not to point out the idea that there's some conspiracy but rather to point out the idea that the whole concept of a "president" or a "United States" is a shared, collective idea that there's nothing physical in terms of matter that specifies a "President" or specifies a "United States", rather, they are just shared ideas we have about this.

By calling these myths or these shared collective ideas, he [Harari] is not trying to share that these are superstitious but rather, this is our great strength and that we have the ability to coordinate on all these shared fictions or created realities that are not necessarily tied down to some kind of materialistic account of the world.

James: Yes, I think Harari says something along the lines of an imagined reality is not a lie if the entire group believes it. The concept of a "President" is not true in the fundamental sense of being a physical law of the universe, but it is true if the group agrees upon it.

I actually think this may be one of my little points of contention with the book is the use of the word "myth" in that way. I wish he would have used story, shared narrative, or collective agreement to describe it.

My mom actually was really annoyed when he said the Declaration of Independence was a myth which I think, in his language, is definitely true. He's pointing at how it's untrue in the sense that it doesn't exist in the physical world but rather is a contract we've agreed upon. But she took that to be offensive as if it was like, the Declaration of Independence doesn't exist or people actually did not get together in a room 200 years ago and write it. That's not what he means but I can see where the use of the word myth or fantasy causes some people to question or shy away from his main point simply because of the confusion of the language.

Overall I think that his primary thesis is definitely true and one of the primary things that separates us from all other animals on the planet.

Scott: I completely agree. Again, sometimes, when I'm writing and I'm trying to express a concept that doesn't have a clear predefined word, maybe I am trying to point out an idea that some people haven't thought of before or coin a new term.

Sometimes I'll use a word in a bit of an idiosyncratic way, and someone will say, well, "yes, but this word means X" and I wonder, how am I supposed to talk about this idea if I don't create a word for it?

I think it's important when we talk about myths that Harari's idea of a myth is exactly this: there are objective facts (this could be something like the earth's existence, or the sun, etc.) there are subjective facts (things that are maybe just true to the individual, for example, I like the color green) and then there are inter-subjective facts (for example, facts that are objective to each individual person but they don't reside in a concrete manifestation or

physical reality).

For example, the presidency of the United States, for example, if no one had any concept of a President of the United States it would be meaningless because it wouldn't point to anything physical.

Actually the majority of the facts we talk about are inter-subjective. They don't exist in a way that if there were no human beings on earth that would still be a sensible thing to say.

James: You just mentioned for example perhaps the majority of facts fall into that category. I found myself wondering what the percentage is. Ever since we started creating these shared myths, these stories, ever since the cognitive revolution about 50,000 - 70,000 years ago we've been coming up with regions, politics, capitalism, and agreeing upon how much a piece of paper is worth (for example) and all of these stories they make up a large portion of our lives. So, humans, ever since this storytelling began, have been living in a dual reality.

We live in the physical world: the things we touch, we sit on, we feel, we eat, we see. And then we live in this imagined reality: this reality we share collectively together through these stories.

It's interesting to think about how much of our lives are made up from either. I don't know that anyone could give an exact percentage but as time has gone on, we've continued to shift more and more toward this imagined reality.

There are technologies now that are even getting us closer to that, too. I recently heard about a VR (Virtual Reality) headset where you could see a soccer match, you could wear the VR headset and effectively go on to the field and watch from the field as the players are running around you.

If technology got to that point where it felt so real, I don't know, it's interesting to think about: we have already for tens of thousands of years been blurring the line between physical reality and imagined reality.

The trend, at least historically, is that we're moving more in that direction. It makes you wonder how much of our lives will end up in this imagined reality. And, for something, for a human species, for any living organism, something that is so physical, how much of this can become imagined without us losing the core essence of who we are? I'm not sure what the answers are to those questions but I find myself curious about that.

Scott: Definitely, I think we were talking about the percentage of these "imagined facts", and when I think about it, it's hard for me to think of facts that don't have any dependency on some kind of, as Harari calls them "myths".

However, I would call them inter-subjective facts. I've been talking about highly physical like inter-subjective facts, such as, the ocean or the stars or the sun, and in certain senses, we've clumped some matter that exists under this conceptual header into "this is this main thing."

Not to say that it's not a useful way of categorizing but he does point out that, that's what human brains do: we invent these concepts or ideas that may closely relate to reality, they

may be somewhat representational, or they may not even cue to reality at all — they may be a completely abstract idea — and the shared abstractions are very well coordinated, so good in fact, that even when you point out the Declaration of Independence in reference to the existence of Human Rights, and he says that human rights are not a physical thing, they're just an idea we have. Well people get angry when you point that out.

One thing I thought was great was his section about money. Harari says, "Money is accordingly a system of mutual trust and not just any system of mutual trust. Money is the most universal and most efficient system of mutual trust ever devised."

What I thought was very interesting is that Harari said the power of money is that money works because you believe other people value it. You don't need to value it yourself; you just need to believe other people value it so you can get the things you really want from people.

This is a real turn your head around idea and I remember when I wrote a piece about this and I got some economist who said you've fallen into the trap of thinking that the US dollar is just a thea-currency and you're one of those gold thugs who need to go back to the old days. Really money is based on US debt and securities... but I think that missed my point because those US debt securities are also a sort of an inter-subjective reality. If I didn't believe in the US and the debt that the US holds then of course the money doesn't have any value.

So the thing is, it's not about thinking that these myths are super-fragile or it's just all "pretend" but the idea of how strong a reality that it creates. How almost everything we interact with it based on this reality that exists only as a ledger inside peoples' heads.

You can't point to someone and say this is the President of the United States, you can point to a bag of bio-chemicals and say this is a person. These are all just essentially things that we've agreed on and we've done it so well that's it's hard to avoid.

James: There are two points that you've brought up that I want to touch on. The first is about human rights, for example. I think that's also confusion that gets multiplied or magnified by his use of the word "myth".

I think people naturally assume if it's a myth or if it's untrue in the fundamental sense then that must mean that it's bad because we often talk about myths and lies in the same sentence. But, at least to the best of my knowledge, Harari is not trying to make that argument. He's not saying that the myth or the story of human rights is bad or morally or ethically right or wrong. It's understandable but it makes it a little harder for some people to get on board because they think that he's somehow knocking something. But what he's really just saying is that it's a shared story.

But the money one [sic] is so interesting because it's an incredibly deeply rooted story to the point where if I decide to not believe that a dollar is worth a dollar the rest of you don't care. You're like, fine, whatever, we don't care, we all still agree upon it.

Whereas many other stories that we tell, if one person chooses to check out, it causes you to question it a bit. But there's so much collective cultural evidence that we choose to continue to believe in it even if we start to get a bit of evidence to the contrary. This is so outlandish to

even think of someone thinking that money isn't worth something.

I've actually taken to thinking that, capitalism of which money is of course money a central concept, capitalism is perhaps the most successful religion that the world has ever seen. It's the only religion that everyone agrees upon regardless of what your actual spiritual religion is or is not.

Pretty much everybody agrees that you should work and earn money and have a career and have a job. We've all bought into this shared myth together and it makes up the fabric of our culture. The vast majority of our lives are spent working. If we talk about what percentage of our lives are these imaginary concepts versus these physical realities, it is interesting to see just how much of our time on this planet is spent living out the imagined realities that we've agreed upon like capitalism and money.

Scott: I just recently read this book called *The Tree of Knowledge*, it's a bit of an older book, and it was the first book that introduces the view of cognitive science called "enactivism". I haven't fully wrapped my head around it so maybe there are some philosophical heavy-weights that are listening here who will disagree but, as I understand it, essentially a lot of philosophers had the idea that the human brain is representational.

So it takes stuff from reality and represents it in your brain and that's what thinking is. This enactivist view is that, well, that's wrong. That what is the essential character of the brain is, is not to represent things in the world but to create the world, the enact it.

So to create this world that exists and the reason that it's so stable is a shared hallucination. Again I think this is going to Harari's point that it's very easy to go to the opposite end, so when I say something like, this is a myth, convention, or inter-subjective truth, there is that slippery slope where it's tempting to say well that's just nonsense or that's just fake. I think that's the opposite of the implication you should get.

I think it's more about how do we have such great coordination with reality. Such great abstractions for dealing with things that are so useful, stable and easily agreed upon despite the fact that you can't point to some concrete thing that says this is what encodes that and makes that true regardless of the observer. We've spent a great deal of time talking about this because this is such a deep idea.

James: What you said about so many people agreeing upon these shared stories, it's kind of startling when you think about it. We hear about the news cycles and what's wrong with the world and the disagreements that we have but 99.9999% of things go smoothly and are just fine.

It's actually remarkable that billions of people can collaborate on such a level as we do. You know, that containers of shipments can go across the seas, that thousands of airplanes take off and land every day, that cities of millions of people can function in relative peace and order and harmony day in and day out; it's a testament to how strong these shared stories are.

One of the interesting insights I had while reading about all this is that you naturally think then, that "oh, well, because all of these billions of people are collaborating effectively, that

must mean that we're progressing".

But then Harari actually turns around and talks about how during the Agricultural Revolution... so, let me back up, first we have, about 50,000 - 70,000 years ago we had the Cognitive Revolution and all these stories and myths start and be shared. Humans begin to collaborate and live in large tribes and groups and then the Agricultural Revolution starts so we can finally for the first time start to farm food and live in a collective society and live in larger groups and you would think "oh this is great, this is wonderful, we're moving towards civilization, we're moving towards progress and kingdoms and countries and look at what we have today with technology," but he lays out a very interesting argument that, in fact, the life of the average hunter / gatherer where you forage for berries for an hour or two a day and maybe the men run off and kill an animal and the whole tribe can eat, well, maybe the life in that time period and that lifestyle was perhaps better and more relaxing and less stressful than the back breaking work of plowing a field for eight hours a day and tilling the land and living through winters and trying to save enough grain to save the whole village.

Perhaps agricultural life was worse even though there were more people around. It's an interesting thing to think about. It reminds me about Derek P the philosopher. He has a concept he calls the Repugnant Conclusion It's essentially, say you have 1000 people living at a certain standard of life, the question is what if you could have 1,500 people that live at a slightly lower standard (not much, just say, 90% of what you had before) well most people would think the world would be better (500 more people get to live, have a life, share love, happiness, etc) but of course the Repugnant Conclusion of that is that we should continue that trend until you drive everyone down to zero where you're getting just enough to subsist but the population is massive and in a way that kind of is what Harari is showing with the agriculture revolution. We don't live in these small tribes anymore, maybe we can support more, but the quality of life might decline in certain respects for that large population. It's a fascinating thing to think about; it flies in the face of humanity as it continues to progress.

Scott: That's the essential Malthusian trap: Thomas Malthus has this big idea that people will continue to breed until the resources are all consumed, like rabbits, so the essential human condition is not one of prosperity but one of subsistence. He believed we'll never be able to escape that.

The irony is, that as he was writing these words, shortly after we had the biggest boom, the biggest opposite trend occurred in human history. Suddenly we had this wildly expanding population. We went from less than a billion people to almost eight billion over a few hundred years and everyone's living standards are going up dramatically. Even though there are hiccups along the way (famine, etc.) but this logic that he presented which seemed so ironclad was to be undone so shortly afterwards.

I don't know about the future. I think if we're talking about today, we're definitely more prosperous on objective levels. Whether that makes us more happy is a debatable question. It depends on what you think matters for human thriving. But in terms of how much food we have, our ability to have children, and things like that, we're better off than our fellow pre-agriculture and pre-industrial humans throughout history.

But the idea that there's a one way direction, going from hunter/gatherer to agrarian society wherever that was possible and then that led to an irrevocable change of human society

and made it worse for people, that's very unsettling.

And so it leave the question, whatever age we transcend to, there's a possibility that it will be worse than it is now and it may also be inevitable. Whenever we talk about AI (Artificial Intelligence) or bio-medical research or any technological innovation, there's an implicit assumption that if we can see it coming we can take steps as a society to prevent it.

But if you look at what he talks about in the Agricultural Revolution it would have been almost impossible to stop it. All it takes is one small group starting agriculture and then having a larger population and then you can't go back.

And then that population, even if it's worse off, if it out-competes the hunter/gatherers per unit of area (they've got stronger military power and that type of thing) then the only tribes that are left are where the herdsmen and farmers don't want to be.

I wonder if the next transition in human history will be a positive one. Even if we can detect what's going to happen, are we able to forestall it?

James: It's interesting, I find myself thinking, you know, I've heard that the average American lives at a higher standard than the King of France in the 17th century or something like that. This idea of progress, I think largely many of those statements are true.

I find myself thinking not only today but during this Agricultural Revolution, certainly for this person who was the tribal leader or whoever was in charge of 10, 100, or even 1000 people, life was probably quite good for them. They got to sit around and make decisions instead of having to go hunt and gather food.

For the people on the lower rungs of society, they were the ones who had to do the farming and so on. And I think what has allowed humankind to continue to progress over the following centuries is that we've gradually and increasingly been able to offload more and more of that work onto technology.

Perhaps at some point, right now we have the bottom Billion in the world who live on less than a dollar a day and it actually makes me uncomfortable to think about how much of my lifestyle do I owe to those people. how much of the luxuries that I get, on a daily basis, are actually me getting to live out the productivity and the backbreaking work that somebody else is doing and I'm just removed or separated from, the same way a tribal leader in the Agricultural Revolution was separated from the peasants on the farm.

I'm not sure what the answer is but perhaps there's some hope there that if we can offload as much of that work on to machines as possible and to get technology to do the work without killing ourselves or derailing society in the process, that maybe all humans can not only have a larger society in more of us can live but also at a global higher standard across the board which is incredibly aspirational to think about I'm not sure how practical or feasible it is, in realistic terms, but at least it makes me a little hopeful that we can bypass some of the errors that we've made in the past.

Scott: This is something we should talk about. Taking again the idea from Harari's book which is illustrating this myth of progress. It's very much a part of how we think about things.

There are two points you raise that I want to address. The first point: do we know what is the ingredient for human flourishing? There are two perspectives. One of them is that we obviously do.

It's just some post-modern folks who would deny otherwise. That it's better to not starve, to live without cohesion, and these things are obviously good. It's better to have people who love you and these kinds of things in your life. So the whole scorn on modern society is perhaps ill-placed.

The other view is that we have all of these ideas about what is the central idea in human flourishing. You said yourself that Capitalism or economics or economic thinking is one of these big abstract shared realities that we have. We are a lot richer and we have more access to things but maybe that turns out to be the thing that doesn't matter for people to be happy. We don't know what that is. We're building ourselves based on this philosophy that might turn out to be empty.

The other idea you were talking about was asking how we feel about the future. I have two thoughts on that. In the short term I'm actually quite optimistic, as you said, there's the worry that living in a developed country, you are living your luxurious life on the backs of the people who are doing hard labor and I do think that may be partially true but there's also a real truth that much of our prosperity has not come from the feudalistic notion of mobilizing labor but through technology.

China becoming a much richer country hasn't directly impoverished the majority of Americans. Maybe some Americans that worked in manufacturing were out-competed by China but China becoming a richer country also means that they're buying iPhones and employing people in Silicon Valley.

That makes me optimistic. What makes me agnostic is that, we're in this industrial or information era, you can't really carve out the eras when you're in one, but there will be one that comes after this. It could be because of AI (Artificial Intelligence) or genetic engineering, it could be because it creates a fundamental different economic system, it could be because of crisis, global warming, or nuclear war, some sort of catastrophe that we have to live through, but I think what interested me about this book is the idea that we may be inevitably heading into whatever phase comes next and it's not true that just because it's inevitable it's positive. We may be going into a phase that leaves everyone worse off and there's no way to stop it.

It was probably the same for hunter/gatherers because they didn't want to sit around and farm and eat the same mono-crop and worry about famine. They wanted to work a couple hours a day, do some hunting, play some music, have some rituals, but once you have a population that requires fixed agriculture they didn't have a choice. And, if they decided not to do that, the neighboring communities would have hunted them down or taken their land.

So, I wonder about the future, what's going to happen and whether it's going to be positive or negative.

James: It's not the most uplifting part of the book to think about but it's interesting. Largely

at least, we're able to have this conversation on wonderful technology and live with a lot of privileges in our life but it makes me wonder how adept we are at assessing our current situation.

But leaving that aside we can look at the historical trend and say, that as history has gone on, I don't necessarily think that wellbeing has increased for everyone. It's definitely increased for the victors of any given war or political battle or revolution, but is better for everyone? I am not sure.

I think there are many measures that would say, yes, there's less violence in the world, the GDP is increasing, people have access to more resources than ever before, productivity is going up. So in a lot of ways it would seem so.

The large question, and Harari raises this as well, is that we don't know what leads to happiness and we don't know what leads to human thriving, but I think a lot of it is that happiness is relative to the people around you.

There are a variety of psychological studies that have looked at this but even if all those markers of productivity and wellbeing have increased for centuries and we're living in the most prosperous time in history, we're also surrounded by peers who are living in the most prosperous time in history.

Much of our happiness is judged relative to our neighbors next door and the people that we work with each day and those that we watch online and get our information from. So we judge our happiness in comparison to theirs rather than in comparison to our ancestors one hundred or five hundred or even a thousand years ago.

If that is true that happiness has a large relative component then human beings might be able to progress infinitely but never progress substantially in their levels of happiness. Who is to say what percentage that relative comparison makes up of happiness and many different philosophies subscribe to this idea that happiness is something that should be internal and we should leave comparison aside but I think we all know that's easier said than done.

But I do find myself thinking about how we can progress so rapidly and so exponentially across one variable but the growth of happiness is on a completely different set of axis.

Scott: I was looking for a quote that I couldn't find where Harari was talking a bit about Buddhism in this context and particularly in the Western interpretation. Interestingly enough, I did a bit of research on Harari before I read the book and it turns out, I don't know how many people who are listening have heard about this before, but there are meditation retreats that are associated with Buddhism called Vipassana Retreats.

During them, people are taught a particular kind of mediation. It's not particularly religious; Buddhism is unique in the religions in that it's more philosophical in the way it's practiced. But what I think is interesting is that people who do these ten day retreats sit in silence and are taught how to mediate and just breathe and observe.

Harari, I've been told, every year does a two month Vipassana retreat. So he's going out and going two months not talking to anyone, it's just silent reflection. That plays into his

viewpoint; not only the fact that he spends so much time in this meditative state which forces you to look at things in a non-conventional way and second, his affinity for Buddhism.

One of the things I found interesting was a quote about Buddhism; a lot of people have taken this idea that money is what matters, same with social status, all these things that are part of this inter-subjective truth, and they've replaced them with the idea that well, what matters is your internal wellbeing, your happiness. This is what you were talking about.

Harari said the insight of Buddhism wasn't that your material wellbeing isn't what matters, your happiness is what matters, but also he says also your happiness isn't what matters.

If you talk to a lot of people who say money doesn't matter, that's a classic thing to say. And those people would agree with you. But if you were to say to the same people that happiness is what's important and happiness is the most important thing you'd be hard pressed to find some who's not an extreme nihilist or someone who has a worship of some other object (maybe they don't think happiness matters but they think doing good matters) and to hear that being said, that the thing that seems most precious to you is itself is a shared delusion. Happiness is an intelligible concept that we've created. It's something very interesting.

You were talking about relative happiness. I think that we probably don't have a good understanding of what happiness is and as psychology progresses it's likely we'll get to a point where this idea of happiness is actually five really distinct things that have nothing to do with each other. Or maybe something like that. They may be caused by completely different things and we've been lumping them together as some category. You're moment to moment experience of pleasure or your assessment of your life and these things might have nothing to do with each other.

There's the possibility that our nature and how we think about ourselves may be off in someway. Harari pointing out the shared inter-subjective realities that feel concrete and real to us, they may actual be a shared idea, they may not have a concrete existence.

James: What we're talking about here is this Buddhist philosophy, the core of the idea is that you're not the events that happen to you, you're not the things that happen to you (good for bad) but you're also not your feelings.

They're just these feelings that you have that you can release. Harari says you can release the need to chase, feel happy, angry, sad or depressed. They're just feelings.

To me this seems very useful when we're talking about (for example) "I'm feeling depressed" or "I'm feeling sad". It seems very useful when the feelings are negative.

But when I think about the very best moments of my life, they're often the ones that I have the most vivid memories of, the ones that seem so special to me, the ones that I have such strong emotions about, the ones where I felt very surprised and incredibly emotionally engaged. There was this spike, this wave of emotion during that moment or memory that made it so memorable and unique amongst all the other moments that I've experienced in my life.

Recently I've found myself thinking, you know, I think a lot about what is the work that I'm doing, how can it be useful, how I leave some kind of mark, some small dent in my corner of the universe, and I have been thinking recently that the way to be valuable is to make people feel things.

It has to do with the level of emotion that someone can get from your work because it is that emotion that makes it memorable, that makes it unique, that makes it worthy of remembering throughout the rest of your life.

If that is true, then that means that perhaps your feelings are just feelings in the Buddhist sense but they are also the thing that ascribes meaning to our lives or sense of purpose to a given moment. I find myself, on the negative side, I agree with this Buddhist and stoic philosophy that your feelings are just feelings and that you can release them. You are not your feelings.

But on the positive side, I really want to embrace those emotions. I think perhaps that that is what makes a moment meaningful. I don't know, I haven't thought through it that deeply or re-read Harari's passage on that in that context but I find myself feeling torn between the positive and the negative side of those two things.

Scott: I don't remember whether Harari in this book makes this specific claim because I've also read other books on this topic so I might be blending together here in the thesis but I think we've been talking, this whole theme of our discussion, is the idea of "sharedness" or inter-subjective truths or as you prefer them "stories". Your sense of personal identity. Your sense of who you are.

That doesn't mean that I think therefore I am isn't true but the idea that you're persisting through time and having a stable identity and a name and background, a job, and credentials, a religion and all these things that we attribute to personal identity are the myths Harari is talking about. They are persistent collective ideas.

This enactivist idea (The Tree of Knowledge book) they make the case that that is the only reality we have, is this created one. It's not created in the sense that it's false or superstition because it does hue closely to reality, it does make us effective creatures to operate in this physical world, but that it's not representational in the sense that it's not taking things from the outside and representing them in an objective way, rather it's a created idea that works really well.

I think about that when I'm hearing him talk about myths in a constructive light, these shared social ideas are maybe our most powerful tool. Another book is Joseph Heinrich's *The Secret of Our Success*. He takes an anthropological view of things. He's a bit less radical than Harari but he makes the argument that human beings have triumphed over the animals not because of our intelligence (although we like to think ourselves as vastly more intelligent as the other animals) but because we have culture and other animals don't. We're able to learn and coordinate on these abstract ideas. We have social learning.

The idea that you can learn something and that I can easily copy that idea from you, rather than having to discover it on my own. This is what separates us from chimps and monkeys and other animals. From a purely individual standpoint we're not actually that superior to

animals.

That's an I think another humbling idea. You know that Harari is (I am pretty confident) that he is vegan and he talks a little bit about animal welfare. He himself is skeptical that humans are the victors of the planet and that actually, we may be closer in our gifts and consciousness than might be first seen.

James: That actually makes sense to me and I mean from an evolutionary standpoint, I agree. *The Secret to Our Success* is a great book. Heinrich is a very big on cultural revolution that's basically what the whole book is about.

It makes sense to me that we wouldn't have had some massive genetic evolutionary shift from this species us that came before us. It doesn't make sense that for all of history evolution has been a gradual and incremental process and then suddenly homo-sapiens come along and it's a quantum leap. But, perhaps there was a tool for lack of a better word, or an ability, that we evolved this sharing of cultural knowledge, this ability to imitate and share knowledge quickly, that that was some kind of master key that even though it only took small genetic shift, it allowed us to make a rapid and massive cognitive shift. That seems like a decent argument to me. Who's to say if that is actually true but it makes sense on a variety of fronts.

Scott: Well on that note I'd like to conclude our discussion on this book. Honestly, *Sapiens*, we've barely scratched the surface. We just talked about one particular theme in the book. It really covers a great deal.

Yuval Harari is definitely a very interesting thinker and he'll challenge a lot of your preconceptions about how the world works.

I'd also like to thank James Clear, he is the author at [jamesclear.com](http://jamesclear.com) it is an excellent website, it has tons of articles, it's like my website but just better so you should go there and get all your reading done and just skip over me.

James: Thanks Scott, I really appreciate it. Thanks for having me on.