

Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow (2017) by Yuval Noah Harari Quotes

Many thinkers and prophets concluded that famine, plague and war must be an integral part of God's cosmic plan or of our imperfect nature, and nothing short of the end of time would free us from them. Yet at the dawn of the third millennium, humanity wakes up to an amazing realisation. Most people rarely think about it, but in the last few decades we have managed to rein in famine, plague and war. Of course, these problems have not been completely solved, but they have been transformed from incomprehensible and uncontrollable forces of nature into manageable challenges. We don't need to pray to any god or saint to rescue us from them. We know quite well what needs to be done in order to prevent famine, plague and war – and we usually succeed in doing it. True, there are still notable failures; but when faced with such failures we no longer shrug our shoulders and say, 'Well, that's the way things work in our imperfect world' or 'God's will be done'. Rather, when famine, plague or war break out of our control, we feel that somebody must have screwed up, we set up a commission of inquiry, and promise ourselves that next time we'll do better. And it actually works.

The following year, 1695, famine struck Estonia, killing a fifth of the population. In 1696 it was the turn of Finland, where a quarter to a third of people died. Scotland suffered from severe famine between 1695 and 1698, some districts losing up to 20 per cent of their inhabitants. ² Most readers probably know how it feels when you miss lunch, when you fast on some religious holiday, or when you live for a few days on vegetable shakes as part of a new wonder diet. But how does it feel when you haven't eaten for days on end and you have no clue where to get the next morsel of food? Most people today have never experienced this excruciating torment. Our ancestors, alas, knew it only too well. When they cried to God, 'Deliver us from famine!', this is what they had in mind.

Throughout history numerous thinkers, prophets and ordinary people defined happiness rather than life itself as the supreme good. In ancient Greece the philosopher Epicurus explained that worshipping gods is a waste of time, that there is no existence after death, and that happiness is the sole purpose of life. Most people in ancient times rejected Epicureanism, but today it has become the default view. Scepticism about the afterlife drives humankind to seek not only immortality, but also earthly happiness. For who would like to live for ever in eternal misery?

No need to panic, though. At least not immediately. Upgrading Sapiens will be a gradual historical process rather than a Hollywood apocalypse. Homo sapiens is not going to be exterminated by a robot revolt. Rather, Homo sapiens is likely to upgrade itself step by step, merging with robots and computers in the process, until our descendants will look back and realise that they are no longer the kind of animal that wrote the Bible, built the Great Wall of China and laughed at Charlie Chaplin's antics. This will not happen in a day, or a year. Indeed, it is already happening right now, through innumerable mundane actions. Every day millions of people decide to grant their smartphone a bit more control over their lives or try a new and more effective antidepressant drug. In pursuit of health, happiness and power, humans will gradually change first one of their features and then another, and another, until they will no longer be human.

Other religions, particularly Jainism, Buddhism and Hinduism, have demonstrated even greater empathy to animals. They emphasise the connection between humans and the rest of the ecosystem, and their foremost ethical commandment has been to avoid killing any living being. Whereas the biblical 'Thou shalt not kill' covered only humans, the ancient Indian principle of ahimsa (non-violence) extends to every sentient being. Jain monks are particularly careful in this regard. They always cover their mouths with a white cloth, lest they inhale an insect, and whenever they walk they carry a broom to gently sweep any ant or beetle from their path.

True, laboratory experiments confirm the accuracy of one part of the myth: just as monotheist religions say, animals have no souls. All the careful studies and painstaking examinations have failed to discover any trace of a soul in pigs, rats or rhesus monkeys. Alas, the same laboratory experiments undermine the second and far more important part of the monotheist myth, namely, that humans do have a soul. Scientists have subjected Homo sapiens to tens of thousands of bizarre experiments, and looked into every nook in our hearts and every cranny in our brains. But they have so far discovered no magical spark. There is zero scientific evidence that in contrast to pigs, Sapiens have souls. If that were all, we could well argue that scientists just need to keep looking. If they haven't found the soul yet, it is because they haven't looked carefully enough. Yet the life sciences doubt the existence of soul not just due to lack of evidence, but rather because the very idea of soul contradicts the most fundamental principles of evolution. This contradiction is responsible for the unbridled hatred that the theory of evolution inspires among devout monotheists.

Every human that ever existed came into being as a result of male sperm inseminating a female egg.

Bashing free-market capitalism is high on the intellectual agenda nowadays. Since capitalism dominates our world, we should indeed make every effort to understand its shortcomings, before they cause apocalyptic catastrophes. Yet criticising capitalism should not blind us to its advantages and attainments. So far, it's been an amazing success – at least if you ignore the potential for future ecological meltdown, and if you measure success by the yardstick of production and growth. In 2016 we may be living in a stressful and chaotic world, but the doomsday prophecies of collapse and violence have not materialised, whereas the scandalous promises of perpetual growth and global cooperation are fulfilled. Although we experience occasional economic crises and international wars, in the long run capitalism has not only managed to prevail, but also to overcome famine, plague and war. For thousands of years priests, rabbis and muftis explained that humans cannot overcome famine, plague and war by their own efforts. Then along came the bankers, investors and industrialists, and within 200 years managed to do exactly that.

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