

3. Homo Deus: Man/Humanity as God: January 3-8, 2017

I have let my essay writing slide for several weeks now, and I feel somewhat guilty about it. I have let a few subjects float through my mind and even let my thinking here and there coalesce into an occasional semi-articulated general observation, such as the new 21st century relevance of what might be termed the curmudgeonly Luddism, in relation to modern technology, of the French philosopher, theologian, and social critic Jacques Ellul, or the radically new ways humans have been able since view and engage with the past since the invention of photography and film. On both subjects, sufficient glimmerings of insight were present (unless I am flattering myself) which should have impelled my thinking to take shape in two respectably crafted essays. However, distractions were provided by my eight-day trip to Boston and Toronto and by the crescendo of the Christmas season which followed. I have always cherished the season, despite my ambivalence, as alluded to in the previous essay, about the rampant commercialization and the forced euphoria, for the leisure it affords me to immerse myself in some truly satisfying deep thinking, but only since New Year's Day have I been able to shake off my apparent lassitude and lack of motivation. I'll let the two subjects I just noted rest for a while and, instead, set out my reflections on the recent book with the provocative title of *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* written by the Israeli scholar Yuval Noah Harari, which I have just finished reading.

Basically, future-oriented though his book clearly is, Harari offers a far-reaching critique of what he does not hesitate to call the “religion” of humanism which has become the dominant worldview since the eighteenth century. It had its beginnings in the West but in the following three centuries it has taken hold throughout the entire world, certainly among the elite classes, notwithstanding the current aggressive push of religious, especially Christian and Islamic, fundamentalism. Because of the massive and still accelerating scientific and technological breakthroughs since the early 20th century—in the past few decades in particular with the so-called digital revolution—the old humanism, which, whether in its liberal or its socialist form, was predicated on confidence in absolute human autonomy not beholden to any higher power, has now exhausted itself, unable to take control of the ongoing transformation of human existence as this is now taking place at both the individual and the collective level.

At this point in the history of the planet and of human life, the author detects two post-humanist worldviews that are gaining prominence; the less revolutionary of the two is what he calls “techno-humanism.” This actually represents a further, albeit technologically and scientifically far more thoroughgoing and refined, development of a third branch of the old humanism which originated in the 19th century and which envisaged a continuing perfecting of the human potential through natural selection assisted as much as possible by eugenic practices: Nazi racism represents the perverse nadir of this view of the perfectibility of man. I would suggest in addition that Marxist-Leninism, especially in its most brutal Stalinist variety, also aimed at a sort of human perfectibility, this to be achieved through ruthless social engineering. The current mentality of techno-humanism aims at a human perfectibility which draws fully on all the resources of science and technology. Thus, it will, for instance, make possible a greatly

increased human longevity in good health—say, of well over a hundred years—achievable for many; the quasi-immortality of a human lifespan of many hundreds of years is indeed its most audacious dream. All the same, however, techno-humanism still has the colouring of the old humanism with its general respect for the rights of the individual. We are still well away from George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Equally important, intelligence has not been decoupled as yet from mind or consciousness, although the concept of “artificial intelligence” so much in use now hints at what might be coming.

The second and far more ominous form taken by the post-humanist worldview is what Harari calls “dataism” or, more bluntly, the “data religion.” Unchecked revolutionary developments in artificial intelligence and biotechnology—with these two ever more reciprocally impacting on each other—are creating a mentality and praxis where an otherwise unmanageable data processing is entrusted to automatically functioning digital algorithms so that data processing becomes an end in its self and no longer serves the *telos* or ultimate goal of knowledge leading to wisdom. Ironically, therefore, this *acme*, this would-be proud summit, of science and technology in the long run feeds the malaise of mindlessness. I myself see it already almost unbounded in the idiocy of consumerism which pervades so much of our world. Harari makes it clear we haven't reached this stage as yet and we do not have to be fatalistic about it as though this looming transformation of humankind and our planet is utterly uncontrollable and inevitable: both individually and even collectively, we can still listen to, metaphorically speaking, the better angels of our nature and step back from the abyss.

The innumerable sacred vessels of the data religion, namely “data,” are terribly misunderstood and therefore misused. The Latin etymology of the word is helpful towards a correct understanding. “Data” is actually a plural word, although in almost universal usage nowadays it is used as singular: “This data is very important”—even many classicists seem to have given up the struggle for correct usage. “Data” is the plural neuter-gender form of the perfect participle passive (to use the technical grammatical term) of the Latin verb *dare*, “to give.” The singular form is *datum*, meaning “having been given” or simply “given.” It can be easily used as a noun, “the given,” “a given.” So what is this “given” and who or what is doing the 'giving'? A *datum* is not like some kind of physical entity that exists apart from the human mind and must therefore be extracted by a researcher in his or her mind from the endless welter of such bits. Instead, it points to a specific act of cognition by which we select for ourselves the percepts (as I would call them) which we hope to order and combine into a meaningful piece of information towards, we hope, the construction of authentic knowledge. We might speak here, perhaps, of two 'givers': first of all, we ourselves as we give to ourselves “a given” towards the building up of knowledge; here, of course, we must trust ourselves as being capable of performing such 'giving.' But equally important, we may also say, despite the anthropomorphism involved, that reality (or we might say, creation) is the 'giver,' on the assumption that reality is ordered and meaningful and therefore, if we search carefully and systematically, can provide us with meaningful data, again towards the construction of meaningful knowledge.

Harari picks up on a thesis already fully explored in Steven Pinker's 2011 book, *The Angels of Our Better Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, namely that since the beginning of the 20th century and despite the horrors of two world wars and other major conflicts, life has dramatically improved for humans in both the developed and developing world; famines and epidemics that occurred regularly in the pre-20th century past and took the lives of millions, even tens of millions (as, for instance, in the so-called Black Plague which swept across Eurasia in the 14th century) are extremely rare now as institutions and measures are in place now to prevent these from happening at all or from morphing into mega-scale calamities. Infant mortality has vastly decreased around the world even in the developing, less wealthy countries, and average life-spans have shot up remarkably; in most developing countries they run in the 60's and in the wealthier countries lifespans in the 90's are no longer very rare. Death by violence or ultimately attributable to violent conflict takes the lives of much smaller proportions of populations than was the case in the small, primitive societies of thousands of years ago. The Thirty Years War (1618-1648), which raged across large portions of western and central Europe, probably took the lives of one-third of the population of Germany; even the horrendous losses in human lives suffered by the Soviet Union in the Second World War, which came to at least 25 million, were, proportionately speaking, not as high, and nothing on this scale has occurred since 1945.

All of this was, of course, of no comfort to the many millions who have suffered and died in the worst human killing fields since the end of World War II—here I am thinking in particular of the genocides in Cambodia and Rwanda. At the present, too, with the horror of Aleppo fresh in our minds, we have no reason to be complacent, let alone self-congratulatory. The United Nations, founded specifically to prevent such monstrous man-wrought tragedies from ever being inflicted again on humankind, has proved itself to be impotent at crucial times, nor has the performance of the United States, the one-only superpower left after the collapse of Soviet Union, been much better. The spectacular rise in standards of living nearly everywhere across the planet made possible, above all, by the revolutionary advances in medical science and health care, is in great peril now because of climate change and the growing inequality between rich and poor.

Given these facts, it strikes me as questionable and even delusional to speculate about the quasi-immortality—as I have already called it—some technologically besotted dreamers believe lies within reach of the human race, at least for that very tiny minority which has the resources, above all the wealth, to avail themselves of it. *Homo* will never be *deus*: man will always be mortal and vulnerable. With a healthy sense of our existential limitations and boundaries with which we are always confronted as human beings, we will in fact make much better use of the marvelous potentials of science and technology. What will be it be, for instance: ever more new techno-gadgets in our possession for our ephemeral amusement or a determined collective effort to eradicate poverty everywhere? (This thought was inspired by a television report I just watched on a current fair in Las Vegas where the latest electronic gizmos were being touted.)