

AN INTERVIEW WITH YUVAL NOAH HARARI

Sun Yue

[Yuval Noah Harari is an Israeli historian and author of the books, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (2014) and *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (2016), which have become worldwide bestsellers. They were almost immediately translated and published in Chinese, becoming very popular throughout Asia.¹ In 2017, Professor Sun Yue of Capitol Normal University in Beijing had an interview with the author, which was published in *Xin Jing Bao* (The Beijing News).² The interview follows, below, in English. It is the first dialogue conducted by a big historian and Yuval Harari.]

Sun: I am a student of Big History, and my questions are related to this new field. As your two books are also considered ‘big history’, or are at least parallel to it, I would like to raise these questions.

Question 1: As you may know, big historians like David Christian and Fred Spier are also crazy about using modern (Western) sciences,

1 Yuval Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, London: Harvill Secker, 2014; idem, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, London: Harvill Secker, 2016.

2 Sun Yue, ‘Human Civilization Cries for a New Story to Bolster It,’ *Xin jing bao* (The Beijing News), 13 May 2017, p. B 5.

or what they call ‘the best available knowledge’, to construct a ‘modern creation myth’ to help ‘unify’ the world’s peoples. But the end result of this is a rather materialistic account foisted on such ‘scientific’ concepts as ‘matter’, ‘energy’, ‘complexity’, ‘increasing complexity’ etc., such that nothing like *meaning* or *morality* is allowed to enter the picture or can be derived from it. Certainly, by putting humanity in its largest possible evolutionary context helps one to locate where humanity is, but it hardly answers the question of who we really are, or where we should be going. Do you have any comment on this?

Harari: You are right. Most big history books are too materialistic, and ignore ethics. What is missing from them is a deeper appreciation of happiness and misery. You cannot understand who we are and where we should be going if you ignore suffering and happiness. That is what I tried to do in Sapiens and Homo Deus – to give an account of human history, and of the human future, which relies on the latest scientific findings, but still tries to understand how material changes influence happiness and suffering. Did the agricultural revolution and the industrial revolution make humans happier? Can technology alone overcome suffering? Will the technological developments of the twenty-first century make us happy?

Question 2: Related to the first question, I do agree with you that human civilization(s) is story-bolstered. But since all previous stories, or at least the liberalist story, seem to have lost their credibility, we’ve got to use our ‘science’ (in the sense of knowledge instead of the modern Western reductionist body of knowledge alone) and imagination (based on who-we-really-are sort of fundamental questions) to invent another story for our globalized humanity. Do you have any clues as to what sort of a story this will be? Or at least give me a reason for loving the world.

Harari: Humankind certainly needs a new story in order to confront the big problems of the twenty-first century. I don’t know what this story will be. Nobody as yet knows. But I can say that this story should be a global story, it should be an ecological story, it should deal with questions of

happiness and suffering, and it should leave room for further elaboration.

It should be global, because all our big problems are global in nature, and can be solved only through global cooperation.

It should be ecological, because one of the biggest problems we face is climate change, and unless we take into account the ecological context, we cannot save human civilization and the planet as a whole from ecological catastrophe.

It should deal with questions of happiness and suffering, because this is the basis for all true morality. Morality is not about obeying some imaginary god in heaven. Morality is about reducing suffering.

And it should leave room for further elaboration, because we still know very little about the world and about ourselves, and any story we create today is bound to be only partially true. We must acknowledge our ignorance.

Question 3: My own idea of big history can be summarized in one sentence: For humanity in the universe, history is nothing but the playing out of a few essential ideas, i.e., science, love, law, and order. As you can see, this is also related to the first two questions. Science means genuine knowledge of the world and being human; love is where the meaning of being human resides (formerly administered successfully by traditional religions for longer periods that we can imagine); obeying laws derived from the above (science and love) or even formulating rituals to facilitate law-abiding abilities naturally follows; and the end result of all this is order, a humane scheme in conformity with our perceived natural order, this last one coming very close to the traditional Chinese concept of ‘unity of Heaven and humanity’. I wish you might give a brief comment on this as well, or at least give it ridicule, as humour transforms people quickly and effectively.

Harari: The devil is in the details. What is knowledge? What is love? Who derives the laws? Everybody agree that knowledge and love are important, but different people define

knowledge and love in very different ways. Christianity for example sees itself as ‘the religion of love’, yet it has led to more violence and oppression than any other religion in history. In the name of love, Christians have killed and enslaved hundreds of millions of people all over the world. So we need to be very careful about putting our trust in abstractions such as ‘love’.

Question 4: Related to the ‘unity of Heaven and humanity’ thesis, the highest ideal that the Chinese hold for this world is a state of ‘Grand Harmony’, as articulated by Confucius through philosopher Fung Yu-lan:

When the great Tao was in practice, the world was common to all; men of talents, virtue and ability were selected; sincerity was emphasized and friendship was cultivated. Therefore, men did not love only their own parents, nor did they treat as children only their own sons. A competent provision was secured for the aged til their death, employment was given to the able-bodied, and a means was provided for the upbringing of the young. Kindness and compassion were shown to widows, orphans, childless men and those who were disabled by disease, so that they all had the wherewithal for support. Men had their proper work and women their homes. They hated to see the wealth of natural resources undeveloped, [so they developed it, but this development] was not for their own use. They hated not to exert themselves, [so they worked, but their work] was not for their own profit This was called the great unity.³

And the highest aspiration for any genuinely serious scholar, in the words of China’s Song Dynasty gentry-scholar Zhang Zai (1020–1077), is to help facilitate ‘establishing the mind of Heaven and Earth, determining the destiny of human lives, restoring discontinued traditions of learning from the past, and commencing a period of supreme peace for one’s descendants’.⁴ I am curious to know if ideas like these can help with inventing the story for our time.

3 Yu-lan Fung, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Derk Bodde, New York: Macmillan, 1948, pp. 202–203.

4 Zhang Zai, in Zhang Liwen, ‘Establishing the Mind of Heaven and Earth’, *Guangming ribao* (Guangming Daily), 19 December 2016, p. 2. The pithy insights of Zhang Zai have been shared by later generations of Chinese scholars and civil servants, including President Xi Jinping.

Harari: These are very inspiring ideals, but we should beware of downplaying the difficulties we face, and should beware of fantasies about a past that never existed. China in the time of Confucius was full of military conflicts, economic exploitation and social inequality. Confucius himself talked about a golden era in the more distant past, when things were far better than in his days, but as far as we can tell from archaeological evidence, such a golden era never existed.

Nostalgia can be a very dangerous thing. Today, all over the world, people are nostalgic for some imaginary golden era. Trump promises his voters 'to make America great again' – as if the USA of the 1980s or 1950s was a perfect society. ISIS promises its followers to re-establish the Islamic Caliphate of the 7th century. In Israel fanatic Jews dream of going back even further, to the times of the Bible. These are extremely dangerous fantasies. Humankind faces unprecedented challenges in the 21st century, and in order to deal with these challenges we need to grasp the realities of the 21st century rather than to dream about some past golden age. We can certainly gain inspiration and wisdom from Confucius and other ancient sages, but we should be very careful not to fall prey to nostalgic delusions.

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