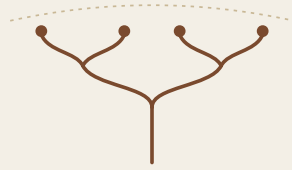


MY OWN READING OF SAPIENS · IN ELEVEN PARTS

SAPIENS

A Brief History of Humankind

Yuval Noah Harari — first published 2011



PART ELEVEN OF ELEVEN · THE LAST ONE

The Animal That Became a God

*Chapters 18, 19 & 20 · The Afterword
and what I actually think, now that I have finished it*

“Is there anything more dangerous than dissatisfied and irresponsible gods who don't know what they want?”

Harari, Sapiens — the last line of the book

READ AND EXPLAINED BY LOVEPREET SINGH

I read the whole book myself. This is what I understood,
written the way I'd explain it to a friend.

Part Ten, in four paragraphs

So this part stands on its own, even if you have not read the last one.

Part Ten was the money and the machines. For most of history people believed the total amount of wealth was **fixed**, so trade looked like theft and credit barely existed. Then one belief changed — the pie can grow — and that single idea creates modern credit, which is trust in the future converted into money in the present, and which makes itself true by being believed.

Adam Smith's radical move was moral rather than economic: pursuing your own profit produces collective benefit. But that argument depends entirely on a commandment people forget — **reinvest**. Hoarded profits deliver none of the promised good.

Then the bloody part. Companies with armies governing countries. Two wars fought for the freedom to sell opium, conducted in the vocabulary of free trade. And the Atlantic slave trade, which no government ordered — a market outcome, funded by shares, insured by underwriters, paying dividends to people who never saw a ship.

And Chapter 17 reframed industry as a revolution in **converting energy**: heat into motion into electricity, so that anything which burns can become anything that moves. Applied to living animals, it produced the two scoreboards at their widest — the most numerous large animals on Earth, living the worst lives on Earth. And it produced consumerism, the first religion whose followers actually do what they are told.

WHERE THIS PART FITS — AND WHAT ELSE IS IN IT

This is the last part, and it does four things.

Chapters 18, 19 and 20 finish the book. What industry did to family and community; whether any of it made anybody happier; and what happens now that we can redesign ourselves.

The Afterword, which is two pages long and does more damage than most whole books.

Section Ten, where I step back and say where I think Harari is wrong across all twenty chapters rather than one at a time.

And then my own afterword — the part where I stop explaining him and tell you what reading him actually did to me. That includes turning one of my own tools on this series, which I have been putting off for ten parts.

The clock got inside you

The most invisible change in the book, because it has already happened to your body.

Before industry, time was local and loose. You woke with the light. You worked with the season. Every town kept its own time, set by the sun standing overhead, and a town fifty miles east was a few minutes ahead — and nobody cared, because nothing depended on the difference.

Factories broke that immediately. A production line needs everybody present at the same moment; one worker arriving late stops the whole line. So you get shifts, whistles, clocks on walls, and the timetable. Railways finished the job. A train timetable is impossible when every station keeps its own time, and if two trains share a track and disagree about what time it is, people die. So in 1847 British railway companies adopted a single standard — Greenwich time — across the entire network, and eventually the country and then most of the world followed.

Time zones exist because of trains.

IN REAL TERMS — LOOK AT YOUR OWN DAY

An alarm, set to a number. A start time somebody else decided. A meeting at three, agreed with people in another city. A deadline on Friday. A train that leaves at 07:42 and means it.

Every one of those is a synchronisation with strangers you will never meet, to a precision no farmer in history ever needed or could have achieved.

Industrial time is not a convenience laid over natural life. It **replaced** natural life, and it is now inside you — which is why a day with no fixed times in it feels, to most of us, faintly like being unwell.

Who took the family's job

The biggest social change in the book, and Harari makes the case very well.

For almost all of history, your family and your local community were everything. Not sentimentally. Structurally.

WHAT YOU NEEDED

WHO PROVIDED IT, FOR MOST OF HISTORY

IF YOU FELL ILL

The family nursed you. There was nobody else.

IF YOU GREW OLD

Your children fed you. That was the pension.

IF YOU NEEDED MONEY

You borrowed from kin, and repaid in obligation.

IF YOU NEEDED WORK

The family trade, or the village.

IF YOU WERE WRONGED

The community judged it, or your relatives handled it.

IF YOU NEEDED A SPOUSE

The family arranged it.

IF YOU NEEDED TEACHING

Whoever in the household knew how.

There was no alternative supplier. And that is exactly why families and communities held such enormous power over individuals — not because people then were more obedient by nature, but because **being thrown out was the end of you**.

Then, over roughly two centuries, the **state** and the **market** took all of it.

The state took welfare, schooling, healthcare, policing, courts, pensions, registration of birth and death. The market took employment, credit, insurance, food, housing, entertainment, and eventually companionship.

And both of them actively encouraged people to break free of family and community obligation. The state wanted citizens who obeyed the state rather than the clan. The market wanted workers and consumers who could move to where the jobs were.

HIS SHARPEST FORMULATION

The state and the market are the new father and mother of the individual.

Everything you actually need now comes from one or the other. The family has been left with the emotional part — which is real and matters enormously, and is also what is left after the structural part was taken away.

And here is the clever bit

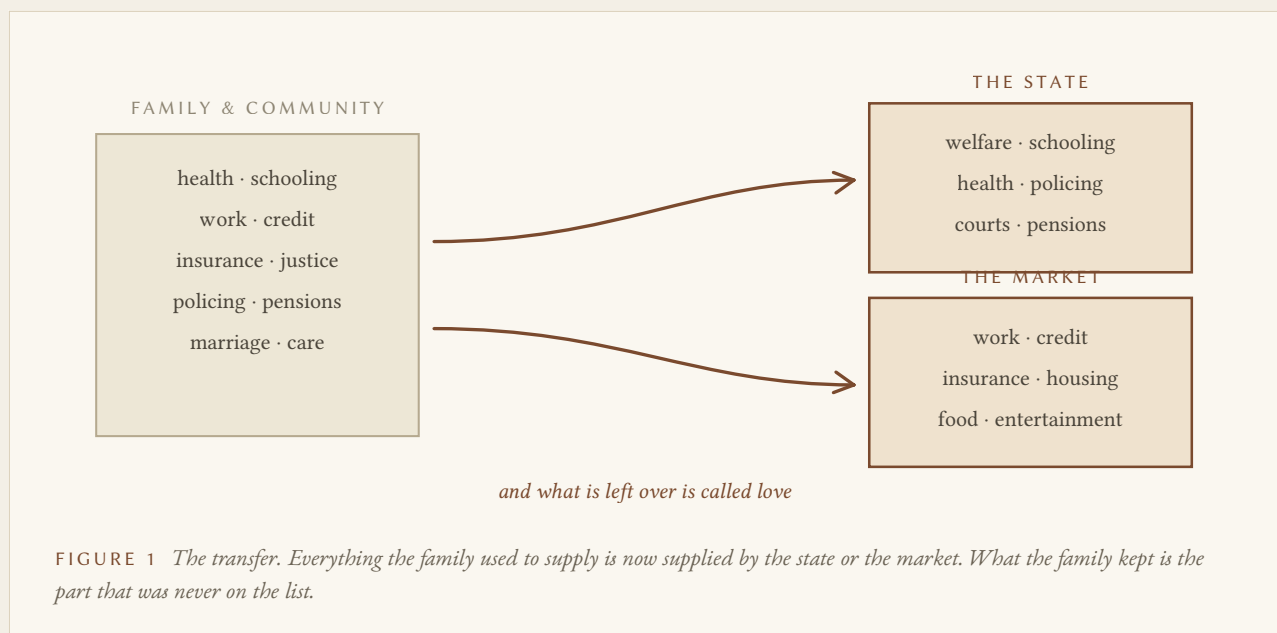
Modern culture tells you to **be yourself**. Follow your own path. Do not be bound by tradition. Make your own choices about work, marriage, belief and where to live.

That feels like liberation from the family and the village, and in real ways it is.

But it is only possible **because** the state and the market took over the functions the family used to provide.

You can move a thousand kilometres from everyone you are related to because wherever you land there is a hospital, a police force, a bank, a school and a shop.

The individual did not defeat the community. The individual was released by two much larger institutions, which now stand exactly where the community used to stand — and which are considerably harder to argue with, because they do not know your name.



Strangers who feel like family, and the quietest era in history

What filled the gap, and the most optimistic passage in the book — which has aged awkwardly.

What replaced the village? **Imagined communities** — a term from the scholar Benedict Anderson. A nation is an imagined community: millions of people who will never meet, feeling a real bond, willing to pay taxes for each other and occasionally to die for each other.

So is a consumer tribe — supporters of a team, followers of a brand, people who share a diet or a subculture and feel genuine kinship with strangers who share it.

These are Part Two's fictions doing emotional work rather than administrative work. The feelings are entirely real. They are also not the village that actually fed you when you were ill.

And then the surprise

Chapter 18 ends with the most optimistic passage in the book, and it caught me off guard.

The world has become extraordinarily peaceful.

That sounds absurd immediately after the twentieth century, which produced two world wars, the Holocaust, and industrialised killing at a scale never previously possible. But look at what has happened since roughly 1945, and especially in recent decades. Great powers have not fought each other directly. Wars between states have become rare compared with any earlier era. Empires mostly dissolved without the succession wars that historically followed. Borders are changed by force far less often than at any comparable time.

In the year 2000, war and violent crime together accounted for something in the region of **one and a half per cent** of deaths worldwide.

More people killed themselves than were killed by soldiers and criminals combined.

And more people died of obesity-related causes than died of violence of any kind.

Sugar had overtaken gunpowder.

Of all the facts in this book, that is the one I have repeated most often, and the one people find hardest to believe.

Why did it happen? Several reasons that reinforce each other:

Nuclear weapons made major war suicidal. Between the largest powers, victory stopped being a possible outcome. That is genuinely new in human history.

The price of war went up and the profit went down. For most of history you got rich by conquest: seize land, take gold, capture people. Today the main sources of wealth are knowledge, institutions, skilled people and complex organisations — **and none of those can be looted.** Invading a rich country does not transfer its wealth to you, because the wealth is not in the ground; it is in the arrangements, and invasion destroys them.

Peace became more profitable than war. Trade generates more than conquest, which changes the incentives of exactly the people who decide.

And a genuinely international elite emerged — officials, executives, academics and experts who know each other, share institutions, and increasingly think in global terms.

Harari draws a distinction worth keeping. The old kind of peace was **the absence of war** — a gap between fights, with everybody rearming. The new kind is **the implausibility of war** — a situation where major powers fighting has become genuinely difficult to imagine. Between France and Germany today, war is not merely unlikely; the idea barely computes. Given what those two countries spent the previous century doing to each other, that is close to miraculous.

AND HOW IT LOOKS FROM HERE

He wrote this in 2011, and I am reading it a long time later.

Since then: a major land war in Europe, several serious regional wars, broad rearmament across many countries, and open great-power confrontation.

The underlying logic still holds — you genuinely cannot loot a knowledge economy, and that has not changed. What has not held is the confidence.

I am not going to pretend the chapter reads the way it did when it was written. It does not, and a reading that pretended otherwise would be useless to you.

Nobody checked

The question the whole book has been walking towards, and the discipline of history has barely asked it.

Chapter 19 opens by pointing at something genuinely odd about history as a subject. Historians study wars, kings, economies, technologies, revolutions and ideas. What they almost never study is whether people were **happy**.

That is a strange gap. If history is the story of human beings, and human beings mostly want to have decent lives, then *did any of this make life better for the people living it* ought to be the central question. Instead it is barely asked.

The last five hundred years have been an unprecedented explosion of human capability. **Nobody has seriously checked whether it worked.**

So he checks. Or rather, he lays out every available way of answering and refuses to pretend any of them settles it.

The obvious answer, and the obvious objection

The obvious answer: we live longer. Far fewer of our children die — for most of history somewhere between a third and a half of children died before adulthood, and it is worth stopping to imagine what that does to a life and to a marriage. We have medicine, food, warmth, entertainment, freedom of movement and vastly more choice than anybody before us. Surely that is better.

The obvious objection is Chapter 5. He already showed a case where a massive increase in a society's power and population went together with a decline in the quality of individual life. If it happened once, "more capability equals more happiness" is not a law.

What the research suggests, which is unhelpful in an interesting way

Money helps, but only up to a point. Below a threshold, more money means substantially more wellbeing, because it means food, shelter, medicine and safety. Above that threshold the effect flattens hard. Going from poor to comfortable is transformative. Going from comfortable to rich barely registers.

Illness reduces happiness, but mostly temporarily. People adapt to changed circumstances far more than they expect to. Somebody told they will have a permanent disability predicts devastation and typically, over time, returns much closer to their previous baseline than they would have believed possible. Acute pain and degenerative decline are real exceptions. But the general pattern is that humans absorb and carry on.

Family and community matter more than almost anything else. Strong relationships and a sense of belonging are among the strongest predictors of wellbeing anybody has found.

Which points at something uncomfortable, given the chapter immediately before it. **Those are precisely the things modern life weakened.** We optimised hard for the measurable things and quietly traded away the one with the largest effect.

The gap, the chemistry, and the story

Three deeper answers, each more deflating than the last.

One: happiness is a gap, not a level

This is the finding that reorganises the whole question, and it is the most useful thing in the chapter for an actual life.

Happiness depends on the gap between expectations and reality — not on conditions themselves.

Not what you have. The distance between what you have and what you expected to have.

Which means improving conditions does not reliably improve happiness, because expectations rise alongside them.

IN REAL TERMS — WHY NOTHING EVER FEELS LIKE ENOUGH

A medieval peasant with enough grain to get through the winter might have felt genuine relief and satisfaction — because winter starvation was the standard he was measuring against.

A modern person with a fridge, a scooter and a flat can feel like a failure, because he is measuring against people with more.

And here is where the modern world does something specific. Advertising raises expectations continuously and deliberately — every advert works by making your present life feel slightly insufficient. Every feed shows you the edited highlights of thousands of strangers' best days.

So your conditions can improve steadily for a decade while the **gap** widens the entire time.

Which means a society can get objectively better and subjectively worse at the same time. That is not a paradox. It is the predictable output of the machinery.

Two: the chemistry, which is the deflating one

Happiness as we experience it is produced by biochemistry — a system of neurotransmitters and hormones. And a person's baseline level appears to be substantially set by their biology, returning towards that baseline after events, good and bad.

If that is right, then a person with naturally cheerful chemistry living in medieval poverty may well have been happier than a person with naturally gloomy chemistry living in a penthouse. Circumstances push you up and down; the set-point pulls you back.

And history has barely touched our biochemistry. Which would mean the whole story — agriculture, empires, science, industry, medicine, democracy — has been happening on top of a system that adjusts back to roughly where it started.

Enormous change in conditions. Very little change in felt experience.

AND WHERE THAT LOGIC LEADS

If happiness is fundamentally biochemical, then the only real route to more of it is **biochemical intervention** — changing the system directly rather than changing circumstances.

Harari raises the obvious comparison, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, where everybody is chemically content and nobody is troubled by anything. And he asks why exactly we recoil from it.

If happiness is the goal, and chemistry is what produces happiness, what is the objection?

He does not answer. He leaves it sitting there, and I found it a genuinely hard question to put down — because the honest answer, I think, is that **most of us do not actually believe happiness is the only goal**, and we have never made explicit what else we want. Truth, maybe. Or struggle. Or being the one who did it.

We have not said, so we cannot defend it.

Three: meaning, which is also a story

Maybe happiness is not about feeling good at all. Maybe it is about whether your life feels **meaningful** — whether what you do matters, connects to something larger, and will still have counted after you are gone. By that measure modern people may be doing badly. A medieval crusader had a story that placed his life inside a cosmic drama with eternal stakes. A modern professional often has a job whose purpose is unclear even to the people running it, no shared story about what any of it is for, and no confident belief that any of it matters beyond a lifetime.

But — and this is the move that makes it properly his — **meaning is itself an imagined reality**. The crusader's meaning was entirely real to him and rested on beliefs about the universe that were, as far as we can tell, not true.

So "he had more meaning" really means "he had a more convincing story." Which leaves a genuine dilemma: **is a satisfying delusion better than an unsatisfying accuracy?**

He does not answer that either.

And the answer he treats with the most respect

Finally he brings back the Buddhist position from Part Eight, and it is the only one he handles with real sympathy.

That tradition says the whole question is malformed. Chasing pleasant feelings is the *source* of the problem, not the solution, because pleasant feelings are temporary by nature and pursuing them is a treadmill. The suffering is not caused by what you feel. It is caused by the wanting.

So the route is not better circumstances and not better chemistry. It is understanding your own mind well enough to stop demanding that this moment be different from what it is.

That sits oddly against everything else in the chapter, which is exactly why he includes it. Every other approach is trying to raise a number. This one says the number was never the point.

A NOTE FROM ME, BRIEFLY

This chapter treats wellbeing as a puzzle to think about, which is the right register for a book.

If any of it lands closer to home than that — if the gap between expectations and reality is something you are living inside rather than reading about — the useful move is talking to somebody you trust, not solving it as an intellectual problem.

Harari's framework is a good lens and a bad substitute. I say that as somebody who found this chapter more personally uncomfortable than any other in the book.

His conclusion is a shrug with teeth. **We do not know whether history has made us happier, and it is a scandal that we have barely tried to find out.** We have measured economic output, life expectancy, calorie intake, literacy and infant mortality with enormous care. We have measured whether any of it worked with almost none.

Four billion years, ending

The chapter that turns a history book into a warning. And none of it is science fiction.

Here is the frame. For about four billion years, every living thing on Earth was shaped by one process: **natural selection**. Random variation, differential survival, slow change across generations. No aim, no designer, no plan. And everything alive was **organic** — carbon chemistry, cells, DNA — obeying the same rules.

That era is ending. Not in some imagined future. In laboratories with budgets, now.

Humans are beginning to replace natural selection with **intelligent design** — our own. Harari gives three routes out, in increasing order of strangeness.

Route one: biological engineering

This is not new in principle. Humans have deliberately altered bodies for millennia — castration to produce eunuchs and castrati, and thousands of years of selective breeding that turned wolves into pugs and wild grass into wheat.

What is new is **precision**. We can now edit genes directly.

THE EXAMPLES THAT MADE THE POINT

The earmouse: a laboratory mouse grown with an ear-shaped cartilage structure on its back — an image that went around the world in the 1990s and made the abstract argument suddenly physical.

Alba: a rabbit engineered with a jellyfish gene so that she fluoresced green under the right light. Made, notably, at the request of an artist.

And the resurrection proposals: serious discussion of reconstructing extinct species from recovered DNA, including mammoths, and — this is where it stops being charming — Neanderthals.

That last one opens the door properly. If we could bring back a Neanderthal, should we? What rights would that person have? What would we owe them? Who decides?

Nobody has an answer, and the technology is not waiting for one.

And then the point that actually matters: **the same tools apply to us**. Not only curing genetic disease — enhancing. Memory, lifespan, intelligence, mood, physical capability. Once a technique works, the line between fixing and improving is a matter of opinion, and opinions are not a strong barrier.

Route two: cyborg engineering

Merging organic with inorganic. Also already happening, and mostly uncontroversially.

Cochlear implants let deaf people hear by feeding signals directly to the auditory nerve. Retinal implants restore limited vision. Prosthetic limbs can be wired into nerves so they respond to the intention to move — **Jesse Sullivan**, an amputee fitted with bionic arms he controlled with his thoughts, is the case that appears everywhere in this discussion.

Every one of those is a straightforward good, and that is exactly Harari's point. **The path into the strange future is paved with medicine nobody would want to refuse.**

But the direction runs further. Brain-computer interfaces are being built. Work has gone into chips that could stand in for damaged memory function. And if a brain can send and receive signals through a device, the possibility opens of connecting brains to each other directly — shared memory, shared experience, minds that are not separate in the way every mind so far has been.

At which point the concept "individual" starts coming apart. And almost every idea in this book — liberal humanism, rights, consent, responsibility, identity — was built assuming individuals.

Route three: inorganic life

The furthest step. Not modified organisms, not organisms fused with machines, but things that replicate, mutate, compete and evolve with **no organic component at all.**

Primitive versions exist. Computer viruses replicate and mutate. Genetic algorithms evolve solutions nobody designed. And there are serious, funded efforts to model brains computationally at increasing scale.

His point is not that any specific project will succeed on schedule. It is that for four billion years, *life* meant organic chemistry — and that restriction is now being tested deliberately, by people with funding.



FIGURE 2 Three doors out of natural selection. The first two are already open and the traffic through them is mostly medicine. That is what makes them difficult: there is no point on the path where a reasonable person says stop.

The Gilgamesh Project, seriously

Not immortality. Something stranger, and considerably more frightening.

Underneath all three routes sits one motivation: the attempt to defeat death. Harari is precise about the goal, and the precision matters.

A WORD YOU WILL NEED — A-MORTALITY

Not **immortality** — nobody serious claims a body cannot be destroyed.

A-mortality: not dying of ageing or disease, while remaining perfectly capable of dying in a car crash.

A life with no expiry date and no guarantee.

Why it matters: every religion, every philosophy, every legal system, every idea of inheritance, family, career and generation assumes a life of roughly fixed length. Remove that and none of the arrangements hold. "Till death do us part" means something else when death is optional. So does a pension, a career, a will, and the decision to have children.

And he makes an observation that is small, sharp, and has stayed with me.

A-mortal people would probably be the most anxious human beings who ever lived.

When death is certain, you make some kind of peace with it. Every culture in this book has built machinery for exactly that.

When death is merely **possible** — avoidable, if you are careful enough — every risk becomes a potential loss of infinite value. A-mortals would not cross roads. They would not fly. They would not take the job in the other city.

The thing we want most might turn out to be the thing that makes us permanently afraid, and that is a very Harari sentence: the wish granted exactly as asked, and ruinous.

What do we want to want?

The last and best idea in the book, and no philosophy in human history was built to answer it.

Everybody discussing this asks: **what do we want to become?** More intelligent? Longer-lived? Stronger? Happier?

Harari says that is the wrong question — because our desires are themselves products of biology and culture, and both are becoming engineerable.

So the real question is:

What do we want to want?

WHY THAT QUESTION IS DIFFERENT FROM EVERY OTHER ONE

If you can design your own preferences, then "what do I want?" stops being a fixed starting point that you reason **from**. It becomes another variable you are choosing.

And nothing in our entire moral inheritance was built for that. **Every ethical system in history takes human desires as given** and argues about how to satisfy them fairly, or which to restrain, or how to rank them.

Not one of them tells you which desires to **install**.

That is genuinely new. It is not a harder version of an old question. It is a question that could not previously be asked, because the thing it asks about was not adjustable.

THE THING NOBODY QUESTIONS

The question "what do we want to want?" contains a word doing enormous unexamined work, and it is **we**.

There is no we. There is no committee. Nobody is going to convene humanity and take a decision.

What actually exists is a few dozen companies with research budgets, a handful of states with strategic interests, several thousand laboratories with funding cycles, a regulatory patchwork that varies by country, and eight billion people who will be offered products.

So the honest version of the question is not *what do we want to want*. It is **who will decide what people want, and what will they be optimising for?**

And Chapter 14 already answered that, and Harari never joins the two up. **Science does not fund itself. The payer chooses the questions.** Apply that to human enhancement and you do not get a species-level deliberation about our future. You get whatever is profitable, plus whatever is militarily useful, arriving as consumer products and national programmes, one improvement at a time, each individually reasonable.

Which is the luxury trap from Part Four, pointed at the human being rather than at the field.

That is the single most important connection in this book, and it is not made. I think it is the most useful thing I found by reading the whole thing slowly.

And the wrong fear

He closes with a warning about which fear is the right one.

The **Frankenstein** story teaches us to fear the monster turning on its creator — the machine rebelling, the experiment escaping the laboratory.

Harari thinks that is the comfortable fear, because it assumes we stay ourselves and something else goes wrong.

The real risk is the opposite. **That we succeed.** That everything works exactly as intended, and the beings that result are so altered — in body, in mind, in what they want — that they no longer share our values, our concerns, or anything we would recognise as our point of view.

Not a monster destroying us. Us, deliberately and gradually, becoming something that would not have wanted to be us.

The animal that became a god

Two pages long, and it does more damage than most whole books.

He recaps the arc. Seventy thousand years ago, *Homo sapiens* was an unremarkable animal minding its own business in a corner of Africa. Middle of the food chain. Bones cracked for marrow after the lions had finished.

No reason whatever to think it would matter.

Today that animal has spread to every continent, walked on the Moon, read its own genetic code, split the atom, and started designing its own successors. It has driven a large share of the planet's other large animals to extinction, altered the atmosphere, and holds the ability to end most complex life in an afternoon.

By any reasonable measure, we have acquired the powers that every mythology in this book reserved for gods. We create life. We reshape species. We alter the weather. We are working on abolishing death.

And then the turn, which is the whole point of the afterword.

We are more powerful than ever before, and we have very little idea what to do with that power.

Every other achievement in the book had a purpose behind it, even a bad one. Farmers wanted food. Empires wanted territory. Capitalists wanted returns. But the question of what all of it is *for* — what we are trying to arrive at — has never been answered. And Chapter 19 showed we have not even seriously asked whether the last five hundred years made anybody happier.

He adds one more thing: we seem to be more **irresponsible** than ever. Godlike capability, answerable to nothing above ourselves, accountable to no larger order, and not sure what we want.

And then the final line, which is a question and not a conclusion.

IN HARARI'S OWN WORDS

Is there anything more dangerous than dissatisfied and irresponsible gods who don't know what they want?

What he means That is the end of the book. No solution, no programme, no five-point plan. He spends four hundred pages showing you how a frightened scavenger became the most powerful thing on this planet, and then hands you the question of what that thing should do next.

Where I think he is wrong — across all twenty chapters

I have done this chapter by chapter for ten parts. Here is the pattern, in one place.

Five things, and they are the same five things every time.

1. He is too confident, in a very specific way

Over and over, he takes a genuine scholarly fight and presents the tidiest side of it as settled.

The Cognitive Revolution as one sudden mutation. Dunbar's 150 as a constant. Barter before money. Europe suddenly admitting ignorance in 1500. A happiness set-point that circumstances cannot move. Farming causing population growth rather than the reverse.

None of those is consensus. All of them are delivered in the same smooth, certain voice as the things that are, and nothing in the prose tells you which is which. That is the single reason this series exists.

2. The tidiness is the technique, not a lapse

His sentences are beautiful, and beautiful sentences are how you get twenty-five million people to finish a history book.

But the same quality that makes it readable is what makes it unreliable. A messy claim does not fit inside an elegant line, so the mess gets trimmed. You are reading the trimmed version throughout, and the trimming is not visible from inside the prose.

3. He has a mood, and the mood argues

The book leans pessimistic. Progress is a trap. Success is empty. The winners did not deserve it. Nobody got happier.

Sometimes that is the evidence talking. Often it is a temperament doing work the evidence has not earned — and the clearest tell is Chapter 19, where he argues we cannot know whether history made us happier and then spends the chapter implying it did not.

4. He changes his mind about whether history has a direction

Part Three of the book says history has a clear arrow, towards unity, and spends five chapters describing the mechanisms delivering it.

Chapter 13 says history is chaotic, undirected, unpredictable in principle, with nothing selecting for anything except spreadability.

Both arguments are good. They cannot both be doing the work he asks of them, and he never reconciles them or acknowledges the tension.

5. And "imagined" keeps doing the work of "arbitrary"

He establishes brilliantly that money, nations, rights and laws are not found in nature. He then structures several chapters so that readers conclude they are therefore all equivalent — and he never argues for that step, because it cannot be argued for.

You can hold both: that human rights are a story we tell, and that it is a far better story than Hammurabi's. That is what most moral philosophy since the eighteenth century is about. He gestures at the gap and walks past it, and it is the weakest joint in the book, and it is load-bearing.

What I actually think, now that I have finished it

The part where I stop explaining Harari and tell you what reading him did to me.

I said at the start of Part One that almost nobody who quotes this book has read all of it. Having now done it slowly, with a pen, I can say why that matters.

It is not a difficult book. It is a **persuasive** one, and persuasive is the harder thing to read well. Darwin makes you work and rewards the work. Harari does the work for you, hands you the conclusion beautifully phrased, and the danger is not that you will fail to understand him — it is that you will agree before you have noticed you were asked.

Three things surprised me, and they are not the three I expected.

How much of it survives the checking. I went into this expecting to find a popular book that falls apart under pressure. It does not. Strip out the crisp dates, the named mutations, the precise numbers and the single causes, and the core is still standing: humans cooperate flexibly in enormous numbers because we can invent things that are not there and agree to act as if they are. That is not contested. It explains an extraordinary amount, and I use it constantly now.

How much of the best material is in the machinery rather than the headlines. The famous lines — farming was a fraud, we are becoming gods — are the weakest parts. The genuinely valuable things are quieter: the two scoreboards, the luxury trap, the vicious circle, *biology enables and culture forbids*, expectations rather than conditions, and the observation that nobody bans the impossible. None of those made a magazine headline and all of them changed how I think.

And how badly it needed somebody to argue with it. Not because Harari is dishonest — I do not think he is — but because a book this smooth, read at speed, by this many people, produces a very large number of confident opinions built on contested foundations. I have met several of those opinions. Some of them were mine before I started.

THE THING I DID NOT EXPECT TO TAKE AWAY

I came in expecting to learn history. What I actually took was a habit, and it is the same habit I took from Darwin, arrived at from the opposite direction.

Darwin taught me to state the strongest version of the case against myself, in my own words, before anybody else has to.

Harari taught me the other half: **notice how a sentence is making you feel, and check whether the feeling came from the evidence or from the writing.**

Those are the two halves of reading anything properly, and I did not have the second one before this.

I have spent eleven parts turning this box on Harari. It would be cowardly to finish without turning it on myself, so here it is.

This entire series assumes that accuracy is what a reader owes a book.

Everything I have done here — checking his claims, giving specialists their strongest case, flagging the soft ground — rests on the unexamined premise that the point of reading *Sapiens* is to end up with correct beliefs about the past.

But that is probably not why most people read it, and it may not be why they should.

Most readers are not trying to become reliable about the Neolithic. They are trying to **think at a different size** — to get out of the news cycle, out of their own century, and look at the species from outside for a few hundred pages. On that measure, a slightly wrong date for the Cognitive Revolution costs them nothing, and my careful footnoting of it may cost them the very thing they came for.

Which raises a real possibility I cannot dismiss: that Harari's inaccuracies are the **price** of the effect, not a flaw in it. That the smoothness which makes him unreliable is the same smoothness that carries twenty-five million people all the way to the last page — and that a scrupulous version of this book would be correct, unread, and therefore useless.

I do not think that fully excuses him. Precision and reach are not as opposed as popular writers like to claim, and he had the space to flag his own uncertainties and mostly did not.

But I have to admit that my whole method here assumes a purpose the book may not have had, and that if you finished *Sapiens* with a permanently larger sense of what a human being is, you got what it was for — and my eleven parts of corrections are a second, smaller thing sitting on top of a first, larger one.

If you have read all eleven of these, thank you. That is a real amount of your time and I have tried not to waste it. And if they have done what I wanted, they have made you slightly **less** likely to take my word for any of it — because the whole point of the exercise was to show you where the ground is soft, and my ground is soft in exactly the same places as everybody else's.

The book is easy to find, it is not expensive, and it is shorter than you think.

Go and argue with it yourself.

The ten ideas worth keeping

If you forget everything else in these eleven parts, keep these.

THE IDEA

WHERE IT CAME FROM

1 · FICTION IS THE SUPERPOWER

We run the world because we can invent things that do not exist and get millions of strangers to cooperate around them. **Part 2**

2 · IMAGINED IS NOT FAKE

Money and nations are real because we jointly believe them — a different kind of real from a rock, and one that can be rewritten. **Parts 2 and 5**

3 · THE TWO SCOREBOARDS

A species can be thriving while every individual in it is worse off. Always ask which number is being counted. **Part 4**

4 · THE LUXURY TRAP

Ten small sensible steps, and a cage at the end that everybody now depends on. **Part 4**

5 · EVERY ORDER HIDES THAT IT IS A STORY

When a system says its arrangement is simply natural, ask who benefits from that not being examined. **Part 5**

6 · THE VICIOUS CIRCLE

The myth creates the disadvantage, the disadvantage looks like proof of the myth. The evidence is real and the system made it. **Part 6**

7 · BIOLOGY ENABLES, CULTURE FORBIDS

Nobody bans the impossible, so every prohibition is proof the thing can be done. **Part 6**

8 · IDEAS SPREAD BY BEING CONTAGIOUS, NOT BY BEING GOOD

The world we live in is the one that persisted, not the one that worked. **Part 8**

9 · ASK WHO PAID

Science is a method aimed by whoever funds it. Both halves matter. **Part 9**

10 · WHAT DO WE WANT TO WANT?

And the question underneath it: who is actually deciding, and what are they optimising for? **Part 11**

The timeline, complete

The whole book, in one table. This is the last version of it.

WHEN	WHAT
13.5 bn years ago	Matter and energy. Physics, then chemistry.
3.8 bn years ago	Molecules start copying themselves. Biology.
2.5 m years ago	The genus <i>Homo</i> in East Africa. Stone tools.
300,000 years ago	<i>Homo sapiens</i> appears. Daily fire across several human species.
70,000 years ago	The Cognitive Revolution. Second exit from Africa.
45,000 years ago	Australia. Twenty-three of twenty-four large species gone.
16,000 years ago	The Americas. The same again.
9500 BC	Göbekli Tepe. Farming begins. The luxury trap closes.
3500 BC	Cities in Sumer. Writing — invented for barley receipts.
1776 BC	The Code of Hammurabi.
1st millennium BC	Money, empire, universal religion — the three glues.
640 BC	The first coins, in Lydia.
380 AD	Christianity becomes Rome's official religion. Nobody predicted it.
c. 1500 AD	Blank spaces appear on European maps. The Scientific Revolution.
1757–1858	A company governs much of India.
1776	The Wealth of Nations. The Declaration of Independence.
c. 1712 onward	Heat becomes motion. Industry.
1945 onward	The most peaceful era in recorded history, and the first with the means to end itself.
Now	Natural selection begins to be replaced by design. The book stops here. We do not.



End of Part Eleven of Eleven · The Animal That Became a God

End of the series. My own reading of Sapiens — Lovepreet Singh

Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind, Yuval Noah Harari, 2011