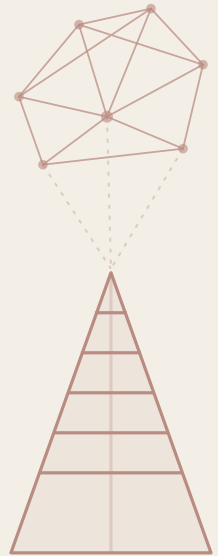


YUVAL NOAH HARARI · SAPIENS, CHAPTERS 2 & 6

The Imagined Order

Taking apart the claim that nothing social is real — axiom by axiom, in the simplest English possible.



“There are no gods in the universe, no nations, no money, no human rights, no laws, and no justice outside the common imagination of human beings.”

SAPIENS: A BRIEF HISTORY OF HUMANKIND, 2011

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- 01 Twelve hidden axioms, dug out and tested one by one
 - 02 The argument steelmanned — and then steelmanned again
 - 03 The one word doing all the work, and the category error under it
 - 04 Yap, Ireland, Zimbabwe, Yugoslavia, Salomon, Nuremberg
-

How to read this document

Everything here is written in short, plain sentences. No jargon is used without being explained on the spot. If you can read a newspaper, you can read this.

This is a study of **one sentence**. Not a book review. Not a summary of *Sapiens*. One sentence, pulled apart until nothing is left hidden inside it.

The sentence is: “*There are no gods in the universe, no nations, no money, no human rights, no laws, and no justice outside the common imagination of human beings.*” It is probably the most quoted line Harari ever wrote. It gets repeated in boardrooms, in podcasts, in student essays and in arguments about politics, usually in a shortened form: *money is just a story we tell each other.*

It sounds simple. It is not. Buried inside it are about twelve separate assumptions. Each one has to hold for the sentence to work. Most readers swallow all twelve at once without noticing. This document digs each one out, holds it up to the light, and asks: is this true?

Then it does something harder. It builds the **strongest possible version** of Harari’s argument — stronger than the version he actually wrote. That is called a *steelman* (the opposite of a strawman, where you attack a weak fake version of someone’s view). Then it takes that strong version and makes it stronger again. Only after the argument is at its absolute best does it get attacked.

THE FOUR BOXES YOU WILL KEEP SEEING

IN ONE LINE — the point, stripped to a single sentence.

SAY IT SIMPLE — the same idea with an everyday example.

STEELMAN — the best case for the argument.

WHERE IT CRACKS — the honest weaknesses, including ones fans of the book usually skip.

A warning about honesty. This document does not decide for you. By the end you will find that part of Harari’s claim is solidly, boringly true and has been known for a century; part of it is a serious philosophical position that he states as though it were a finding; and part of it is a word trick. All three parts are labelled.

One more thing, and it is the most important thing here. Harari’s sentence rests on a single word: **imagination**. Everywhere else in the book he calls the same things *fictions*. In ordinary English, a fiction is something that is not true — Sherlock Holmes, the tooth fairy, a lie on a form. But the things on Harari’s list are not untrue in that way. A ten-rupee note in your hand really does buy tea. That gap — between “depends on people” and “is not true” — is where nearly every argument about this sentence actually happens. Keep it in view and the whole debate becomes readable.

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IF YOU READ NOTHING ELSE

Harari is right that money, nations, laws and rights exist only because enough people treat them as existing. He is wrong that this makes them fiction. There is a third category between “rock” and “unicorn” — the category of things that are made real by agreement and are then perfectly, checkably objective. Every serious thinker on this subject for the last hundred and thirty years has had a name for that third box. Harari’s sentence works by leaving it out.

PART 00

The sentence itself, and what it actually says

Before you can judge a claim, you have to know exactly what was claimed. Most fights about this sentence are fights about one word nobody stopped to define.

Where the sentence sits

The line comes early — Chapter 2 of *Sapiens*, “The Tree of Knowledge”, around page 31 of the standard English edition. That matters, because at that point in the book Harari has not yet built the apparatus that makes the claim defensible. He builds it four chapters later, in Chapter 6, “Building Pyramids”, where he introduces the idea of the **imagined order** and, crucially, a three-way distinction between the objective, the subjective and the inter-subjective.

So the famous sentence is the trailer. The film is Chapter 6. Almost everybody has seen the trailer. Rather fewer have sat through the film. This document is about both, because the gap between them is the whole story: **the sentence has two boxes in it, and the chapter has three.**

The exact words, taken slowly

THE SENTENCE

“There are no gods in the universe, no nations, no money, no human rights, no laws, and no justice outside the common imagination of human beings.”

Six items are listed. They are not six of a kind, and the reader is being asked to accept that they are. Look at them separately:

- **Gods.** Whether a god exists is a claim about the universe. Believers say a god exists whether or not anybody believes in it. That is the entire content of the belief.
- **Nations.** A nation is a very large group of people who treat each other as fellow members. Nobody claims a nation exists in the absence of people.
- **Money.** A thing that people accept in exchange for other things. Its whole job is to be accepted.
- **Human rights.** Claims about what may not be done to a person. Some people think these are discovered; others think they are declared.
- **Laws.** Rules issued by an authority and enforced by penalties.
- **Justice.** A standard for judging whether an arrangement is right.

Now the second half: *outside the common imagination of human beings*. This is the test being applied. It says: if you removed all human minds from the universe, would this thing still be there? For a mountain, yes. For the rupee, no. Harari puts all six items on the “no” side and concludes that they therefore do not exist.

SAY IT SIMPLE

Imagine every human being vanished tonight. Tomorrow the Himalayas are still there. The Pacific is still there. But there is no India, no rupee, no United Nations, no law against theft, and nobody to be wronged. Harari's point is that the second list was never anywhere except inside us. That part is not controversial. What he does with it is.

The three boxes, and why the sentence only has two

In Chapter 6, Harari sorts things into three kinds. It is worth setting out carefully, because it is the strongest thing in the chapter and the sentence on the cover of this document contradicts it.

KIND OF THING	WHAT IT DEPENDS ON	EXAMPLES
Objective	Nothing. It is there whether or not anybody knows.	Radioactivity. Gravity. The Pacific Ocean.
Subjective	One person's mind. If that person stops, it stops.	Your headache. Your fear of dogs. A child's imaginary friend.
Inter-subjective	A network of many minds. One person leaving changes nothing. Everybody leaving ends it.	Money. Nations. Law. Companies. Human rights.

That third box is a real intellectual achievement to have put in a popular book, and Harari deserves the credit. It is also, precisely, the thing the famous sentence deletes. The sentence says the six items are “nowhere but in the imagination”, which files them under *subjective* — the imaginary-friend box. The chapter says they are *inter-subjective* — a completely different box, with completely different properties.

THE DIFFERENCE, IN ONE EXAMPLE

If you stop believing in your imaginary friend, your imaginary friend is gone. If you stop believing in the rupee, you go hungry. That asymmetry is the whole ball game. Subjective things obey you. Inter-subjective things do not.

Four different claims are wearing one coat

Unpack the sentence and it is doing at least four separate jobs at once. Nearly all the confusion in public argument about it comes from people replying to one of these while the speaker meant another.

1. **An atheist claim.** There are no gods. This is a claim about what the universe contains. It stands or falls on its own and has nothing to do with money.

2. **A constitution claim.** Money, nations and companies are *made of* collective acceptance. Take away the acceptance and there is nothing left over. This is almost certainly true and is not remotely new.
3. **A moral claim.** Human rights and justice are not discovered facts about the world; they are things we made up. This is a live, respectable, heavily contested position in philosophy — not a result from history.
4. **A rhetorical claim.** All four of the above belong in the same bin, and the name of the bin is *fiction*. This is the part that does the emotional work, and it is the part with the least support.

IN ONE LINE

Harari's sentence is one true observation, one contested philosophical position, one ordinary atheism, and one word trick, tied together with a comma.

What is not being claimed

Two misreadings need clearing away now, because they waste enormous amounts of argument.

He is not saying money does not work. Harari is explicit that these things are extremely powerful — more powerful, in his telling, than most physical facts. He calls money the most successful story ever told. Anyone who replies “but I bought a sandwich with it yesterday” has not touched the argument.

He is not saying somebody sat down and invented them. Some imagined orders were consciously designed. Most were not. Harari knows this. Critics who accuse him of a conspiracy theory of institutions are attacking the wrong book — although, as Part 05 shows, his own imagery about lawyers as “sorcerers” invites exactly that misreading.

6

items listed in the sentence, of at least three different kinds

3

boxes in Harari's own system, one of which the sentence omits

1

word — “imagination” — carrying the entire argument

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PART 01

The twelve axioms hidden inside the claim

An axiom is a thing you have to assume before your argument can even start. It is the floor you stand on. Harari's one sentence stands on twelve floors. Some of them are solid stone. Some are painted canvas.

Axiom 1 There are only two kinds of things: mind-independent, and made up

IN ONE LINE

Everything is either out there without us, or invented by us — and there is no third option.

This is the foundation stone. Without it, the whole sentence collapses in the first second, because the six items would simply go into the third box and stop being scandalous.

The two-box picture is very old and very intuitive. Rocks are real. Dragons are made up. Sort the world accordingly. Harari's sentence takes the six most important things in social life and drops them, with a flourish, into the dragon box.

SAY IT SIMPLE

Ask whether a chess bishop can move sideways. The answer is no. That is not a matter of opinion, and you cannot make it true by feeling strongly. Yet chess is entirely made up by humans. So “made up by humans” and “there is a right answer” are not opposites. The two-box picture has no room for chess, and most of social life is chess.

Why he needs it: without a two-box world, “there are no nations” becomes “nations are in the third box”, which nobody would put on a poster.

What would break it: a workable third category. It exists, it is well established, and it is the subject of Part 05.

Axiom 2 “Would it survive without minds?” is the correct test for whether something exists

IN ONE LINE

If it disappears when people disappear, it was never really there.

This test sounds rigorous. Notice what else it deletes. Language does not survive the disappearance of minds. Neither does the number seven, arguably. Neither does a promise, a marriage, a language's grammar, a chess opening, a debt, a translation, or the meaning of the word “test”. If the criterion is

applied evenly, almost everything a human being cares about becomes fiction, and the word stops doing any work at all.

The anthropologist C. R. Hallpike put the objection bluntly in his 2017 review of the book: we cannot see, touch or smell truth either, and that does not make truth fictitious. *Immaterial* and *unreal* are not the same word.

What would break it: any case where something is obviously mind-dependent and obviously has a right answer. There are thousands. Every game, every language, every contract.

Axiom 3 The six things on the list are the same kind of thing

IN ONE LINE

Gods, nations, money, rights, laws and justice can be handled with one argument.

This is the quietest assumption in the sentence and possibly the most damaging. Put two of the items side by side:

- **Money.** If everyone stops accepting the rupee, the rupee stops existing. Belief is not evidence for money; belief is what money is *made of*.
- **Gods.** If everyone stops believing in Shiva, the believer's claim is not that Shiva stops existing. The believer's claim is precisely that Shiva's existence has nothing to do with the believing. Belief is not what a god is made of; belief is a response to a claim about the universe.

These are opposite structures. To say “there is no money outside our imagination” is a description of how money works, and every economist would nod. To say “there is no god outside our imagination” is to deny a claim about the universe, which is atheism — a defensible position, but a completely different kind of statement, requiring completely different arguments.

WHERE IT CRACKS

Putting gods first in the list lets the certainty of the money case flow backwards into the god case, and the emotional charge of the god case flow forwards into the rights case. The reader feels one argument has been made. Three have been asserted.

What would break it: it is already broken as an argument; it survives as rhetoric. The honest version of the sentence would need three sentences and would not be quotable.

Axiom 4 Belief is the mechanism — these things run on believing

IN ONE LINE

What holds up money, law and nations is that people believe in them.

Partly true, and importantly incomplete. Consider what actually makes you accept the note in your pocket. You may have no faith in it whatsoever. You may think the whole monetary system is a swindle. You will still take the note, for two hard reasons: your landlord will take it, and the state will take it — in fact the state *demand*s it, in tax, and will use force if you decline. That is not belief. That is a coordination problem plus a man with a gun.

The German economist Georg Friedrich Knapp made the point in 1905: money is a creature of law. What makes a currency stick is very often that taxes must be paid in it. The philosopher David Lewis made the other half of the point in 1969: a convention is what happens when everyone does X because everyone else does X, and nobody needs to believe anything about X at all except that others will keep doing it.

SAY IT SIMPLE

Nobody in Britain *believes* in driving on the left. They just do it, because everybody else does, and because swerving right is fatal. You do not need faith to keep a convention. You need other people and consequences.

What would break it: it is already qualified. Belief matters most for religion and for legitimacy, least for currency and traffic. Harari applies one word to all of them.

Axiom 5 “Fiction” and “imagination” are the right words for all of it

IN ONE LINE

A limited company and a tribal spirit are the same sort of thing, and the word for both is myth.

This is the axiom most readers absorb without noticing, because it arrives as vocabulary rather than as an argument. Hallpike’s objection is the sharpest one in print: Harari cannot distinguish a **belief** from a **convention**, apparently because neither is a physical object.

They are different in almost every respect. Nobody sat down and decided to believe in ghosts; beliefs grow out of experience and inherited ways of thinking, and the believer takes them to be true. A convention is the opposite: a deliberate or gradual coordination, adopted for a purpose, which nobody takes to be a description of anything. The rule that a company is liable for its own debts is not something anyone believes in the way a person believes in an afterlife. It is a device, and everyone using it knows it is a device.

WHERE IT CRACKS

Harari's own example makes the problem visible. He describes the lawyer who incorporates Peugeot as a sorcerer performing a ritual with spells on decorated paper. It is a wonderful image. It is also exactly backwards: the ritual works *because everyone knows it is a ritual*. A spell that announces itself as a spell, and depends on nobody being fooled, is not a spell. It is a procedure.

What would break it: nothing can rescue the word choice. What can be rescued is the underlying claim, once “fiction” is replaced by “convention” — which is what Part 04 does.

Axiom 6 What is imagined could have been imagined any other way**IN ONE LINE**

Because we made it up, it is arbitrary, and any other arrangement would have worked just as well.

Harari does not state this outright, and in places he denies it. But the sentence carries it, and readers reliably take it away. If nations are stories, why not tell a better one tomorrow?

The answer is that imagined orders are under selection pressure. Most fail. A currency that inflates to nothing is abandoned within months, as Zimbabwe's was in 2009. A nation whose members stop recognising each other dissolves, as Yugoslavia did between June 1991 and April 1992. A legal rule that produces outcomes people will not tolerate gets amended or ignored. The space of stories humans can actually run at scale is narrow, and it is bounded by things that are not stories at all: food supply, geography, violence, arithmetic, and what human beings can be got to do.

What would break it: nothing — this one is simply false as stated, and Harari's better passages agree.

Axiom 7 If something is imagined, it is not binding**IN ONE LINE**

Made-up rules have no real authority over anyone.

This is the silent slide from *is* to *ought*, and it is where the sentence gets its subversive charge. If your rights are a story, why should anyone respect them? If the law is a story, why obey it?

But the inference does not go through. Chess is made up; you still cannot move the bishop sideways. Promises are made up; breaking one is still a wrong. The rules of arithmetic notation are made up; two plus two is still not five. “We invented it” tells you where a rule came from. It tells you nothing about whether it binds.

SAY IT SIMPLE

A football referee's authority is entirely invented. Try telling him that during the match. Invented authority is still authority, for exactly as long as the game is being played — and you are always in some game.

What would break it: nothing needs to. Harari would probably disown it. His readers rarely do.

Axiom 8 The author can stand outside the imagination and report on it**IN ONE LINE**

There is a place to stand from which all this can be seen as fiction, and Harari is standing on it.

Every debunking argument owes an account of its own ground. Harari writes in a language he did not invent, under a copyright that is a legal fiction, sold for money he says does not exist, drawing a salary from a university whose degrees are pure status-assignment. None of that is a knockdown objection — a person can describe a system while inside it. But the sentence is written in the voice of someone outside, and the confident tone is doing work the argument has not paid for.

The sharper version of the problem is moral. Harari argues, in this book and later ones, that suffering is bad — that our treatment of farmed animals is one of the worst crimes in history. That is a value judgement of exactly the kind he has just filed under fiction. He is aware of this and answers it, in effect, by grounding ethics in suffering rather than in rights: pain is not inter-subjective, pain is felt. It is a serious answer. It is also a concession that the six-item list was too long.

What would break it: nothing, if he restricts the claim to institutions. Everything, if he keeps applying it to values while continuing to make moral demands.

Axiom 9 Only humans do this**IN ONE LINE**

No other animal can build a shared imagined order, and this is why we run the planet.

This one largely holds, and it is the most empirically supported claim in the vicinity. Michael Tomasello's comparative work with human infants and chimpanzees is the strongest evidence: pre-verbal human children help strangers spontaneously, point to inform others, and — most tellingly — treat the rules of a made-up game as binding on third parties. Shown a puppet doing it "wrong", three-year-olds protest, correct and teach. Chimpanzees do none of this. Tomasello's summary is that no other species has anything even vaguely resembling a social institution.

STEELMAN

This is Harari's claim, confirmed by the laboratory, and it is not trivial. A three-year-old enforcing the rules of a game invented ten minutes ago is doing the thing that scales up into constitutions. Whatever we call it, we are the only animal that has it.

What would break it: very little. Note, though, what the same evidence does to the vocabulary: children are not *believing a myth*. They are grasping a rule. Tomasello's findings support Harari's thesis and undercut his word choice at the same time.

Axiom 10 Large-scale cooperation is impossible without shared fictions

IN ONE LINE

Above roughly 150 people, you cannot cooperate on personal knowledge alone, so you need a shared story.

The number comes from Robin Dunbar's work relating primate group size to brain size. Harari leans on it hard. It is far shakier than popular writing suggests. A 2021 reanalysis in *Biology Letters* redid the extrapolation with modern statistical methods and got central estimates between 16 and 109 depending on the method — with 95 per cent confidence intervals running from 2 to 520. The authors' conclusion was blunt: specifying any one number is futile, and a cognitive limit on human group size cannot be derived this way at all.

More importantly, "shared story" is not the only route above the ceiling. Trade networks scale through reputation. Kinship systems scale through chains of obligation. Empires scale through force. Markets scale through prices, which transmit information nobody has to share a belief about. Shared stories are one solution to the scaling problem. Harari presents them as the solution.

What would break it: any large-scale cooperation running on incentives rather than shared belief. International shipping is a decent candidate.

Axiom 11 Withdraw the belief and the thing vanishes

IN ONE LINE

These things exist only while we keep believing, and stop the moment we stop.

True in the limit, misleading in practice, and the difference is where most of the interesting history lives. Imagined orders have inertia, infrastructure and enforcement. They do not switch off when opinion changes; they switch off when behaviour changes, and behaviour is sticky.

Two real cases, both in Part 07. When Ireland's banks shut for six and a half months in 1970, roughly 85 per cent of the money supply became inaccessible — and the currency kept working, because people wrote each other cheques that could not be cleared and pubs vouched for who was good for it. Belief in the banking institution was irrelevant; the trust network underneath was real, and it was

made of actual knowledge about actual neighbours. Conversely, Zimbabwe's currency did not die when people stopped believing in it — people stopped believing in it because it lost 89.7 sextillion per cent of its value in a year. The belief followed the arithmetic, not the other way round.

What would break it: nothing fatal. But the arrow of causation runs both ways, and Harari's sentence only draws one of them.

Axiom 12 Justice and human rights belong in the same box as money

IN ONE LINE

Whether something is right is as much a human invention as whether a note is worth ten rupees.

This is the largest philosophical claim in the sentence, and it is smuggled in as the last two items on a list. It has a name — moral anti-realism — and its most famous defence is J. L. Mackie's *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (1977). Mackie argued that objective values, if they existed, would be very strange entities unlike anything else in the universe, and that we would need a special faculty to detect them. Harari's position is close to this, and it is entirely respectable.

It is also disputed by serious philosophers — Derek Parfit's three volumes of *On What Matters* are essentially a book-length argument that some things are simply wrong, full stop. The point is not who wins. The point is that this is an open question in a live field, and the sentence presents it as though it had been settled by looking at history.

WHERE IT CRACKS

History cannot settle it. Showing that people invented the *idea* of human rights in a particular century tells you nothing about whether torture is wrong, any more than showing that people invented the idea of the number zero in a particular century tells you whether arithmetic is right. Origin is not validity. This confusion has a name — the genetic fallacy — and the sentence runs on it.

What would break it: nothing decisive either way. That is precisely the problem with asserting it in nine words.

. . .

WHERE WE ARE SO FAR

Of the twelve, three look solid (9, and the descriptive cores of 4 and 11). Two are true but far weaker than stated (6, 10). Four are word choices rather than findings (1, 2, 5, 7). Two are contested philosophy presented as history (8, 12). One is a category error (3).

That sounds devastating. It is not, and the next three parts explain why: the argument that survives all twelve objections is stronger and stranger than the one on the cover. Harari is not

wrong about the world. He is wrong about the vocabulary — and the vocabulary is what made him famous.

PART 02

Why Harari said it — motive, lineage, and the long game

Nobody writes a sentence like that by accident. It is aimed at something. Understanding what it is aimed at explains most of its shape — including its exaggerations.

The idea is a hundred and thirty years old

The single most useful thing to know about this sentence is that its content is not new, not controversial, and not Harari's. The claim that social things are made of collective human activity has been the mainstream position in the social sciences since the 1890s. A short lineage:

WHO AND WHEN	WHAT THEY SAID	WHAT IT ADDED
David Hume 1740	Property, promises and money rest on convention, not on nature.	The first clear statement that a rule can bind without being handed down from anywhere.
Émile Durkheim 1895	Social facts are real things, external to the individual and exerting force on him.	Insisted they be studied as facts, not as illusions. The opposite emphasis to Harari's.
Georg Friedrich Knapp 1905	Money is a creature of law; the state defines it by what it accepts in tax.	Located money's power in institutions and force, not belief.
Peter Berger & Thomas Luckmann 1966	Society is built by human activity, then experienced by its builders as an objective given.	Named the crucial move: we forget we made it. This is Harari's thesis, forty-five years earlier.
David Lewis 1969	A convention is a solution to a coordination problem, held in place by expectation.	Showed the whole thing works without anyone believing anything.
Benedict Anderson 1983	A nation is an imagined community — its members will never meet, yet hold each other in mind.	Harari's word, and Anderson's explicit warning against exactly Harari's use of it.
Eric Hobsbawm & Terence Ranger 1983	Many "ancient" traditions were manufactured recently, often deliberately.	The evidence base for the debunking move.
John Searle 1995	Institutional facts are created by collective acceptance and are then fully objective.	The third box, worked out in detail. The direct answer to the sentence.

WHO AND WHEN	WHAT THEY SAID	WHAT IT ADDED
Ian Hacking 1999	Social categories loop: naming a kind of person changes the people named.	Why imagined orders are self-reinforcing rather than merely believed.

Harari's contribution is not the idea. It is the **scale and the compression** — putting a century of social theory into a single sentence a reader can carry out of the book, and attaching it to a deep-history story that runs from the savannah to artificial intelligence. That is a real achievement of popularisation and should not be sneered at. It is also why the sentence is over-tightened: compression is exactly the process that squeezed out the third box.

THE BORROWED WORD, AND THE RETURNED WARNING

Anderson chose “imagined” with care and spent a paragraph guarding it. He criticised Ernest Gellner for treating *invention* as equivalent to *fabrication* and *falsity*, and insisted that communities be distinguished “not by their falsity or genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined”. Harari takes the word and drops the guard.

What the sentence is aimed at

Every debunking has a target. This one has three, in increasing order of ambition.

Target one: the naturalness of the present. The most reliable illusion in any society is that its arrangements are simply how things are. Harari's whole method — the reversal, the flip, the “you thought this was progress” move — is a machine for breaking that illusion. The sentence is the machine's loudest output. It works. Readers really do come away seeing the present as one arrangement among many.

Target two: the exceptionalism of the modern West. Harari is explicit that the point of comparing a lawyer to a sorcerer is to deny modern institutions their special status. “Primitives” have myths; we have corporations; his claim is that these are the same operation. Whatever one thinks of the argument, the intent is levelling, and it is a respectable intellectual tradition.

Target three: humanism itself. This is the ambitious one, and it is where the later books go. If human rights are a story, then the secular liberal order is not the end of history but one more temporary arrangement, and its collapse is not unthinkable. *Homo Deus* (2015) turns on exactly this pivot: an order run by algorithms is not categorically different from an order run by rights, only newer.

STEELMAN OF THE MOTIVE

There is nothing cynical here. Harari's stated aim is to make readers able to see the water they swim in, so that they can ask whether they want it. That is a defensible reason to overstate a case. A sentence that said “social institutions are inter-subjective phenomena constituted by collective acceptance” would be more accurate and would change nobody's mind about anything.

The timing, which is not an accident

Sapiens appeared in Hebrew in 2011 and in English in 2014 — that is, in the trough after the 2008 financial crisis, at the moment when the largest institutions in the world had just been revealed to be running on confidence and nothing else. “Money is a story we agree to believe” was not a difficult sell in 2011. It was an explanation people were already reaching for.

This is diagnosis, not motive-hunting, and it is kept separate from whether the claim is true. A book can be perfectly right and perfectly timed. But it explains the reception: the sentence spread because it named something readers had just watched happen.

The cost of the compression

Two things were lost when a century of theory was squeezed into nine words.

The first is Durkheim’s emphasis. Durkheim’s whole point in 1895 was that social facts should be treated as *things* — hard, external, resistant, worth studying with the seriousness of a natural scientist. Harari inherits the finding and reverses the mood: what Durkheim called a fact, Harari calls a fiction. Same referent, opposite instruction to the reader.

The second is Searle’s third box, which is not a nuance but the entire architecture. Once it is gone, the sentence has nowhere to put a promise, a chess rule, a border or a debt except in with the tooth fairy — and the reader, who knows perfectly well that debts are not like the tooth fairy, either rejects the sentence or, more often, accepts it in a vague way that does not survive contact with anything specific.

IN ONE LINE

Harari did not discover that society is made by people. He found the one phrasing of it that a hundred million readers would remember — and the phrasing is the part that is wrong.

PART 03

Steelman, level one: the strongest honest case

Here the argument is built at its best, using the best evidence available, with no cheap shots. A steelman means: if you are going to disagree, disagree with this version – not with a weaker one you invented.

The case in one paragraph

Human beings cooperate in millions, with strangers they will never meet, on projects none of them can see the whole of. No other animal does this. It cannot run on personal knowledge, because there is not enough of it, and it cannot run on instinct, because it changes far too fast – an empire can become a republic in a year, which is a thousand times quicker than any genetic change. So it must run on something shared, learned, and not given by nature. Whatever that thing is, it is not part of the physical furniture of the universe, and if all the humans went away it would go with them. Harari's six items are instances of it.

The strongest evidence: things you can create and destroy by procedure

Here is the sharpest form of the argument, and it does not depend on the word “fiction” at all.

Consider what it takes to make a new mountain. Now consider what it takes to make a new company: a form, a fee, a registry entry. Twenty minutes. Consider what it takes to end one: a different form. Consider what it takes to make a new legal duty: a majority in a chamber, on a Tuesday. Consider what it takes to make a piece of paper worth a thousand rupees: a printing decision. Consider what it takes to make it worth nothing: an announcement.

STEELMAN

Nothing objective behaves like this. Radioactivity cannot be repealed. The Pacific cannot be dissolved by filing. The six items on Harari's list share a property no physical thing has: **they can be created and destroyed by declaration, provided the declaration is made in the right way by the right people and enough others go along.** That is a real and deep difference in kind, and naming it is worth doing.

Money: the substance never mattered

The history of money is the single best exhibit, because it is a controlled experiment run over four thousand years. Money has been barley, cowrie shells, cattle, silver, tobacco, cigarettes, paper, and a number in a database. There is no physical property common to that list. Barley is edible; silver is not. Cowries are portable; the giant limestone discs of Yap are not – some weigh several tonnes and were never moved at all.

The Yap case is the cleanest. Ownership of a stone could transfer without the stone going anywhere. In the most quoted instance, a stone was lost overboard on the voyage home and sank; the com-

munity agreed it still counted, and it went on changing owners at the bottom of the sea. Milton Friedman's point about this is the one that stings: when the Bank of France wanted gold in 1932, the New York Fed did not ship any; it moved the bars to a different drawer and wrote a label. Same operation. Different island.

SAY IT SIMPLE

If a coin at the bottom of the ocean and a number in a bank's database can both be money, then money was never the object. It was the agreement about the object. Remove the agreement and you have a stone.

Companies: a person who has never existed

In 1897 the House of Lords decided *Salomon v A Salomon & Co Ltd*. Aron Salomon had turned his boot business into a company and kept almost all the shares. When it failed, the creditors argued the company was really just Salomon and he should pay. The Lords said no: once incorporated, the company must be treated as a distinct person, with its own rights and its own debts.

That decision is the foundation of the modern corporate world. And what it announced was that a thing with no body, no mind and no location is a person for the purposes that matter, and that its debts are not yours. Harari's comparison to a totem is not silly. Something was brought into being that day which had not existed before, and the only raw material was words.

Nations: watch one dissolve

Between June 1991 and April 1992, Yugoslavia stopped existing. No continent moved. Every mountain, river, factory and person stayed exactly where they were. What changed was who people took themselves and each other to be — and the census tracked it: those declaring themselves “Yugoslav” had risen through the post-war decades and then collapsed to around three per cent by the 1991 count. When enough people stopped holding the community in mind, the community ended, and the war that followed was fought over which of the replacement imaginings would get the ground.

Rights: they had to be voted on

On 10 December 1948, the UN General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Of 58 members, 48 voted in favour, none against, eight abstained and two did not vote. Saudi Arabia abstained over the right to change religion. South Africa abstained because racial equality was incompatible with the system it was building. The Soviet bloc abstained over the strength of the individual guarantees.

STEELMAN

Nobody holds a vote on the boiling point of water. The most important statement of human rights in history came into force by a show of hands, with recorded objections, and its authority since has come from the fact that states keep acting as if it binds them. That is exactly the structure Harari describes. Whatever else is true, rights entered the world through a procedure.

And the laboratory agrees about the capacity

Michael Tomasello's comparative experiments are the empirical backbone. A child of three watches an adult play a made-up game for two minutes. A puppet then joins and does it wrong. The child protests — not because she is harmed, but because *that is not how it is done*. She has, in two minutes, acquired a rule, generalised it to a third party, and taken on the job of enforcing it. Chimpanzees raised in the same lab do not do this at any age.

That reflex, appearing before a child can read, is the smallest visible unit of everything on Harari's list. Scale it up and you get referees, registrars, judges, central banks and constitutions.

LEVEL ONE, SUMMARISED

Six things that can be made by declaration, unmade by declaration, carried by any physical substance or none, and enforced by three-year-olds. They are not part of the universe's furniture. Harari is right about all of this, and it is not a small thing to be right about.

PART 04

Steelman, level two: the argument that survives every attack

Now the hard part. We hand every good objection to Harari's side and let them rebuild. What comes out is a stronger argument than the one in the book — and a more disturbing one, because it no longer depends on whether any of it is real.

Everything is conceded

Give the critics all of it. Concede that “fiction” is the wrong word and “convention” is right. Concede Searle's third box: money is epistemically objective, and the person who says a ten-rupee note is worth a thousand is simply mistaken. Concede that a belief and a convention are different animals. Concede that human rights might be objectively real and that Mackie might be wrong. Concede that gods do not belong on the list.

Now watch what is left, because the surviving argument is the one worth being frightened of.

STEELMAN, LEVEL TWO — THE LOAD-BEARING FICTION

The interesting claim was never that these things are unreal. It is this: **an order that holds a society together only works to the extent that the people inside it do not experience it as an order.**

Not “they believe a false thing”. Something narrower and worse: they experience an arrangement that could be otherwise as an arrangement that could not be otherwise. The fiction is not the content. The fiction is the *necessity*.

Why this version is stronger

Because it is now indifferent to the metaphysics. It does not matter whether human rights are objectively true. Even if they are — even if torture is wrong in the way that two plus two is four — it remains the case that the particular list of rights adopted in Paris in 1948, in that wording, with those omissions, is one arrangement among many, and that the people living under it experience it as simply what a decent society is. The claim survives being wrong about everything else.

It also stops being a debunking and becomes a description of a mechanism. And the mechanism has three legs, each of which is independently evidenced.

Leg one: the order is invisible in proportion to its depth

The rules people can state are the shallow ones. Ask someone why the tax year ends when it does and they will shrug: an arbitrary convention, obviously. Ask why a person's debts do not pass to their children, or why land can be owned at all, or why a promise made in words binds and one made in

thought does not, and something different happens — the question stops sounding like a question. That resistance is the signature of a load-bearing rule.

Berger and Luckmann named this in 1966: the process by which a human product comes to be experienced as an objective given, with the making forgotten. Harari's contribution is to have made a hundred million people feel it.

Leg two: the order reshapes the people who might change it

This is the leg Harari half-states and Ian Hacking made precise. Categories in the human world *loop*. Name a kind of person — a delinquent, a consumer, a talent, a caste, a demographic — and the people so named come to know they are so named, adjust, resist, perform or internalise, and the category then has to be revised to fit the people it changed.

Nothing in physics does this. Uranium does not read the paper about uranium. The consequence is that an imagined order is not a coat you wear over a fixed self; it is partly the machine that makes the self that would have to want to take the coat off.

SAY IT SIMPLE

A rulebook that quietly edits the players is much harder to overturn than a rulebook that does not. By the time you are old enough to object to how you were raised, the objection is being made by someone that upbringing produced.

Leg three: there is no exit, only transfer

The last leg is the one that turns the argument from interesting to inescapable. You can leave any particular imagined order. You cannot leave imagined order as such. Reject your nation and you join a diaspora, a movement, a faith or a market — each with its own membership rules, its own sacred objects and its own enforcement. Refuse money and you are on barter, which is a convention. Refuse law and you are under the convention of whoever has the most force nearby.

Harari's Chapter 6 makes this point and then does something rare in popular writing: he applies it to the escape route itself. The person who declares that all orders are fictions and lives by their own values is not standing outside. They are standing in one more imagined order — the modern one, in which having your own values is the correct thing to have.

STEELMAN

This is the passage that makes the chapter worth its flaws. Escaping an imagined order requires imagining an alternative order at least as powerful, and getting enough others to hold it too. That is not a mental act. It is a political one, and it usually takes a generation or a war. The person who has “seen through it all” has done the easiest part and is now the most confident and least useful person in the room.

The prediction this version makes

A rebuilt argument is worth having only if it can be checked. This one makes a testable claim, and it is the reason the whole exercise is not just word-play:

In any society, the load-bearing parts of the order will be the ones its members find hardest to state, easiest to feel, and most surprising to be asked about — and they will be defended not with arguments but with the assertion that no argument is needed.

That is checkable, and it checks out. Try it on any society, including your own. The propositions people will happily debate all evening are the light ones. The ones that produce a blank look, a laugh, or anger are holding up the roof. This is a genuinely useful instrument, and it works whether or not a single thing on Harari's list is fictional.

LEVEL TWO, SUMMARISED

Drop “fiction”. Drop “unreal”. Keep this: whatever is true about money and rights in the abstract, your particular sense of what is obvious, natural and not-up-for-discussion was manufactured, is maintained, edits you while you use it, and cannot be exited except into another one. That claim survives every objection in the next part.

PART 05

Where it cracks — the category error and the missing third box

Now the attack. Some of these are problems with the reasoning. Some are problems with the evidence. And some are things almost never mentioned in popular discussion of this chapter, because they are inconvenient for both the fans and the critics.

5.1 The third box exists, and it has been worked out in detail

This is the central crack, and everything else follows from it.

In 1995 the philosopher John Searle published *The Construction of Social Reality*, which is the standard modern treatment of exactly Harari’s question. Its core formula is three words long: **X counts as Y in context C**. This piece of paper (X) counts as money (Y) in India (C). This person (X) counts as a judge (Y) in this courtroom (C). This line on the ground (X) counts as a border (Y) between these states (C).

Searle then makes the distinction that dismantles the sentence on our cover. He separates two senses of “objective”:

SENSE	QUESTION IT ANSWERS	MONEY’S ANSWER
Ontologically subjective	Does its existence depend on minds?	Yes. No people, no money.
Epistemically objective	Can you be simply wrong about it?	Yes. “This note is worth a lakh” is false, and no amount of sincerity fixes it.

Both at once. That combination is the third box, and it is not a fudge or a compromise — it is the ordinary condition of most of human life. Chess, grammar, debts, marriages, offside, degrees, borders, promises, prices and passports all live there.

WHERE IT CRACKS

Harari has this box. He calls it the inter-subjective and describes it well in Chapter 6. The famous sentence then talks as though it were not there. “No money outside the common imagination” is only shocking if the alternatives are rock and unicorn. Once the third box is on the table, the sentence reduces to: *money is an institutional fact* — which is true, and which nobody would quote.

5.2 A convention is not a belief, and the whole argument turns on the difference

Hallpike's objection, from his 2017 review, is the most damaging single paragraph written about this chapter. Harari, he says, cannot tell a belief from a convention, apparently because neither is a material object.

Set them side by side:

	A BELIEF	A CONVENTION
How it arises	Grows out of experience and inherited ways of thinking. Nobody decides to have one.	Adopted, sometimes deliberately, sometimes by drift, to solve a problem.
What the holder thinks	That it is true.	That it is useful, and could have been otherwise.
Does knowing it is made up destroy it?	Usually yes.	No. Everyone already knows.
Example	Ancestors watch over the household.	Drive on the left. A company owes its own debts.

The test in the third row is decisive. A myth that announces itself as a myth stops working. A convention that announces itself as a convention works exactly as well as before. Every registrar, judge and central banker knows the corporate form is a device, and the device does not weaken by one gram for their knowing it.

So when Harari describes the incorporating lawyer as a sorcerer writing spells on decorated paper, the image is memorable and the analysis is inverted. Sorcery requires that the audience not know. Incorporation requires that everyone knows.

5.3 Three different kinds of claim, wearing one list

Return to Axiom 3, because it deserves the full treatment. The six items divide into three structures:

- **Constituted by acceptance** — money, nations, laws, companies. Belief is the material. “Exists only in the common imagination” is a correct description of their nature.
- **Claimed to be independent of acceptance** — gods. The believer's claim is that this exists whether or not anyone believes. Denying it is atheism, and requires the arguments of atheism, not the arguments about money.
- **Disputed either way** — human rights, justice. Whether these are made or found is one of the oldest open questions in philosophy.

One sentence, three logics. The reader who nods at “no money outside our imagination” — correctly — has been manoeuvred into nodding at two other claims that were never argued.

SAY IT SIMPLE

“There are no unicorns, no ghosts, no money, and no wrongness in torturing children, outside the human imagination.” The list makes each item borrow the plausibility of its neighbours. Take any one out and put it alone on a page and you have to argue for it.

5.4 “Fiction” is doing three jobs and admitting to one

Track the word through the book and it shifts meaning under load:

1. **Fiction as “not physical”.** Harmless, and applies to truth, grammar, numbers and mercy. If this is the meaning, the sentence is trivial.
2. **Fiction as “depends on us”.** Also fine, and the correct description of institutions. If this is the meaning, the sentence is true and unremarkable.
3. **Fiction as “made up, therefore false, therefore not to be taken seriously”.** This is what supplies the sentence’s power. It is also the meaning that is not supported by anything in the book.

An argument that is trivially true in two readings and thrilling in a third, unsupported reading is not an argument. It is an equivocation — the oldest fault in the manual, and the hardest to see when the sentence is beautiful.

5.5 Where something came from is not whether it is true

The historical debunking move has a structural limit, and it applies to the last two items on the list.

Suppose it is established beyond doubt that the idea of universal human rights emerged from a particular tangle of Stoic philosophy, Christian theology, Enlightenment argument and post-war horror, and that no society before a certain date held it. What follows about whether torture is wrong? Nothing. Zero as a number has a traceable history, running through Indian mathematics and reaching Europe late; the history is fascinating and tells you nothing about whether zero works.

This is the genetic fallacy: judging a claim by its origin. It is the engine of the whole debunking genre, and it is invalid every time. Harari does not commit it explicitly. The sentence commits it for him, and the reader completes the move.

5.6 The guns are not imaginary

“Exists only in the common imagination” makes an order sound like a mood. Try withdrawing from it.

Stop paying tax and the imaginary state sends real people to take real property. Ignore a border and armed men who are not metaphors will detain you. Trade in a currency the state has banned and the penalty is a cell. Every imagined order sits on a floor of enforcement, and the enforcement is made of steel, buildings, salaries and bodies.

This matters for the causal story. Harari’s account is belief-first: the story spreads, and cooperation follows. Knapp’s account, from 1905, runs the other way for money: the state demands payment in a token, and demand for the token follows. Both mechanisms are real. A theory with only the first one

predicts that currencies collapse when confidence goes; the historical record shows currencies also stay up on nothing but tax obligation and force, for years, in societies where nobody believes a word of it.

5.7 The problem of the author's own chair

If everything social is fiction, what is the status of the sentence?

It is written in a language, published under copyright, sold for money, credentialled by a university post – every one of them, on the sentence's own account, a fiction. That is not fatal on its own; a person can describe a system truthfully from inside it. But the sentence is delivered in the voice of someone reporting from outside, and that voice is not available.

The sharper version is moral. Harari asks readers to care about the suffering of farmed animals – a demand that only makes sense if some values are more than local conventions. His answer is that suffering is not inter-subjective: pain is felt by a creature, not agreed by a network. It is a good answer. It also amounts to admitting that at least one item was wrongly filed, and once one is out, the sentence needs re-writing rather than defending.

WHERE IT CRACKS – THE REVIEWER'S VERSION

John Sexton, reviewing *Sapiens* in *The New Atlantis* in 2015, put it as sharply as anyone: treating culture and ethical norms as fundamentally fictional makes it impossible to build any coherent moral framework for thinking about the future – while the book's closing chapters are precisely a plea about the future.

5.8 The soft empirical spots

Three factual load-points are weaker than the confident prose suggests.

The Cognitive Revolution. Harari dates the arrival of fiction-capacity to a cognitive change roughly 70,000 years ago. This is a reasonable hypothesis and a contested one; there is no agreed genetic marker, the archaeological signal is gradual rather than sudden in Africa, and the date functions in the book as a fixed point rather than as an open question.

Dunbar's number. The 150-person ceiling is treated as a hard constraint. It comes from a correlation between primate neocortex size and group size, extrapolated to humans. Later statistical reanalyses have produced confidence intervals so wide that some researchers regard any specific number as unsupported. The general point – that personal acquaintance does not scale – is safe. The specific figure is a prop.

Did the big gods build the big societies? The Harari-adjacent story is that shared religious myth enabled large-scale cooperation. This has been tested. In 2019 a team led by Harvey Whitehouse published an analysis of a large historical database in *Nature* finding that moralising gods generally followed increases in social complexity rather than preceding them. The paper was later retracted in response to a methodological critique of the historical coding – and the authors' subsequent reanalysis, with the errors corrected and the database expanded, reported the same direction of result.

The honest summary: the evidence currently does not support religion as the driver of scale, and the question is unsettled enough that nobody should be quoting it as settled in either direction.

5.9 The hidden side: what the framing licenses

This is the part usually skipped, because it is uncomfortable for admirers and critics alike.

A sentence that files rights, laws and justice under fiction is available to anybody. It is as useful to a government dismantling a protection as to a citizen resisting one. “Human rights are a Western story” is a real argument made by real states about real prisoners, and the sentence supplies its most quotable form. Harari is not responsible for every use of his words. But an author who writes for a hundred million readers is responsible for noticing what the words hand out.

The reply available to him is good, and he makes it: knowing an order is constructed is the precondition of changing it deliberately rather than being changed by it. The 1948 Declaration was written by people who knew perfectly well they were declaring rather than discovering, and they wrote it three years after the world had seen what happens when a legal order is followed to the letter with nothing above it. Radbruch, the German jurist who had been a positivist before the war, published his answer in 1946: where a statute’s conflict with justice reaches an intolerable degree, the statute is not law. That is a construction being consciously overruled by another construction. It is also the strongest reason not to end the sentence at the word “imagination”.

IN ONE LINE

The crack is not that Harari is wrong about how institutions work. He is right about that. The crack is that the sentence describes correctly-functioning institutions in the vocabulary of delusion, and vocabulary is what readers keep.

PART 06

What every field of study says about it

One sentence, eighteen departments. Each one has looked at this question with its own tools and reached its own verdict. Read together, they are more informative than any single field — and they do not agree.

6.1 Social ontology and analytic philosophy

The field built specifically for this question, and the least sympathetic to the sentence. Searle's answer is that institutional facts are created by collective acceptance and are then as checkable as any other fact. **Verdict: right about dependence, wrong about the conclusion.**

6.2 Anthropology

Culture is a system of shared ideas, roles and norms. Calling it fiction, on Hallpike's account, is "about as useful as a rubber nail": it flattens the distinction between a spirit belief and a traffic rule, which is the distinction anthropology exists to draw. **Verdict: the substance is old news; the word is a step backwards.**

6.3 Sociology

Durkheim in 1895 insisted social facts be treated as things, precisely because they resist the individual will. Berger and Luckmann in 1966 explained how a human product comes to feel like a natural given. Sociology agrees with the mechanism and objects to the mood. **Verdict: correct, and a century old.**

6.4 Monetary economics

Money as a self-fulfilling equilibrium — you accept it because others will — is standard theory. So is the chartalist correction: the state's demand for tax in a token creates baseline demand for the token. Belief matters; so does the tax office. **Verdict: half the mechanism.**

6.5 Game theory

Lewis and Schelling showed that conventions need no beliefs about truth at all — only expectations about others, and a salient option to converge on. This is a cleaner account of money and law than "shared myth" and requires nothing imaginary. **Verdict: same phenomenon, better machinery.**

6.6 Law and jurisprudence

"No laws outside the common imagination" is legal positivism — law is whatever the recognised procedure produces. It is a major and respectable position. It is also the position that lost ground after 1945, when the Nuremberg trials and Radbruch's formula reopened the question of whether an intolerably unjust statute is law at all. **Verdict: one side of an unresolved argument, stated as a fact.**

6.7 Nationalism studies

The modernists — Gellner, Hobsbawm — broadly agree that nations are modern constructions. Anderson supplied the word “imagined” and the warning against reading it as “false”. Anthony Smith’s ethno-symbolism supplies the qualification: modern nations are usually built on older ethnic material, not from nothing. **Verdict: right, with the qualification that not any story will do.**

6.8 History

Historians’ complaint is not about the thesis but about the compression. Hallpike notes that the book’s account of the rise of universal religions does not engage with the Axial Age — the first-millennium-BC transformation across Eurasia in which the idea of a universal moral order appeared more or less simultaneously in Greece, India, Israel and China. That convergence is hard to explain if myths are arbitrary. **Verdict: the mechanism is under-specified.**

6.9 Developmental psychology

Rakoczy, Warneken and Tomasello: three-year-olds infer a rule from two minutes of demonstration and then enforce it against a third party. Institution-building is not learned late from culture; it is running before literacy. **Verdict: strongly supports the capacity claim, undercuts the word “myth”.**

6.10 Primatology and comparative cognition

Chimpanzees cooperate, deceive, and maintain dominance hierarchies. They do not point to inform, do not teach, and do not enforce arbitrary rules on others. Tomasello’s verdict is that no other species has anything vaguely resembling a social institution. **Verdict: the uniqueness claim holds.**

6.11 Cognitive science of religion

Two live programmes: religion as costly signalling that makes commitment credible, and the “big gods” hypothesis that moralising deities enabled scale. The second has taken a serious empirical knock, with the best available historical database pointing to gods following complexity rather than causing it. **Verdict: the functional story is plausible and not established.**

6.12 Theology and philosophy of religion

The objection here is structural, not devotional. Whatever one concludes about gods, the claim “X exists only because people believe in X” is a claim theism explicitly denies, whereas it is a claim monetary economics explicitly asserts. Putting both in one clause is a category error regardless of who is right about God. **Verdict: the first item does not belong on the list.**

6.13 Moral philosophy

Mackie’s error theory is the sophisticated version of Harari’s last two items and is taken seriously by everyone in the field. So is its denial. The discipline’s complaint is not the position but the delivery: a live two-hundred-year dispute compressed into two words on a list. **Verdict: a legitimate position presented as a finding.**

6.14 Mathematics and philosophy of science

Apply the sentence's test to mathematics. Zero, negative numbers, irrationals and imaginary numbers cannot be seen, touched or smelled, and arguably do not survive the disappearance of minds. If that makes them fiction, then so is every physical theory expressed in them — including the science Harari admires. **Verdict: the test proves far too much.**

6.15 Linguistics and philosophy of language

J. L. Austin showed in 1955 that some utterances do not describe the world but change it: “I promise”, “I name this ship”, “I find the defendant guilty”. These are neither true nor false; they either work or misfire, depending on whether the speaker has standing. Harari's sorcery is Austin's performative, minus the sixty years of analysis. **Verdict: the phenomenon is real and long since named.**

6.16 Experimental and behavioural economics

Trust games show that cooperation among strangers is built and destroyed by reputation and enforcement, not by shared narrative. Groups sustain public goods when they can punish defectors, largely independent of what they believe. **Verdict: cooperation is cheaper to explain than the book suggests.**

6.17 Accounting and finance

A balance sheet is a formal system for recording claims that exist nowhere but in the network of claimants — and it is audited, litigated and enforced. The 2008 crisis was a live demonstration that an inter-subjective valuation can vanish in a week while the buildings stay up. **Verdict: agrees entirely, and calls it accounting.**

6.18 Computer science and cryptography

Bitcoin, launched in 2009, is the closest thing to a deliberate experiment on Harari's thesis: an attempt to build money with no state, no institution and no trusted party. The mechanism that replaces them is called, without irony, *consensus*. Whether it succeeded is contested; what it demonstrated is that when you try to remove the shared agreement, you have to rebuild something that does the same job. **Verdict: strong support, with a twist — the fiction turned out to be the hard part to replace.**

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READING THE EIGHTEEN TOGETHER

Nothing here overturns Harari's underlying observation. Almost every field confirms that the six items depend on collective human activity. That is the consensus, and it is a hundred years old.

What the fields divide on is the conclusion. The disciplines that study these things closely — social ontology, law, sociology, anthropology — all reach for a third category and refuse the

word fiction. The disciplines that study the capacity — developmental psychology, primatology — confirm Harari and quietly change his vocabulary. And the two disciplines with the largest stake in the last items on his list — moral philosophy and theology — both say the same thing: that is not a finding, that is a position.

PART 07

The argument tested against six real events

A claim about how the world works has to survive the world. These are six occasions when one of Harari's six items was switched on, switched off, or lost its institution while everyone watched. Two of them make him look right. Two complicate him. Two are the hardest cases he has.

7.1 Yap: the money at the bottom of the sea

On the island of Yap in the western Pacific, large carved limestone discs called *rai* served as the highest form of wealth. The largest weigh several tonnes and were quarried on another island hundreds of kilometres away. Because moving them was impractical, ownership transferred without the stone going anywhere: everyone simply knew whose it now was.

The famous case is the stone that never arrived. It was lost from a canoe on the voyage home and sank in deep water. The islanders agreed the stone was as good as if it were standing in the village, and it continued to change hands where it lay, unseen, for generations.

WHAT IT SHOWS

Harari is right, in the strongest possible form. A thing nobody has seen, that nobody can move, that may or may not still exist, functioned as wealth because the community kept a record in its collective head. And before anyone treats this as exotic: when the Bank of France wanted gold from New York in 1932, the Federal Reserve moved no gold. It relabelled some drawers. Same operation, better filing.

7.2 Ireland, 1970: six and a half months with no banks

From 1 May to 17 November 1970, an industrial dispute closed all of Ireland's associated banks. The public lost direct access to roughly 85 per cent of the money supply. Every forecast said the economy would seize.

It did not. People went on writing cheques on accounts that could not be cleared, and when the printed cheques ran out they wrote IOUs on whatever was to hand. Pubs and shops became the clearing system, because a publican knows who is good for forty pounds. The economist Antoin Murphy, who studied it, described a highly personalised credit system substituting for the institutional one, resting on a vast pool of local information about who could be trusted.

WHERE IT COMPLICATES THE SENTENCE

Money survived the destruction of the institution — which is Harari's point. But look at what it survived on. Not a myth, not a shared story, not belief in anything. It ran on concrete, checkable, local knowledge about specific human beings, held by people who had every commercial reason to get it right. The publican was not imagining. He was underwriting. When you strip an imagined order back to its foundations, what you find is not more imagination. It is information.

7.3 Zimbabwe, 2008: which way does the arrow point?

Zimbabwe's inflation peaked in November 2008 at an annual rate estimated at 89.7 sextillion per cent — that is 89.7 followed by twenty-one zeroes. Notes were issued in denominations of one hundred trillion. In April 2009 the government stopped printing the currency altogether and the economy dollarised: people used American dollars, South African rand, anything that held still.

On a pure belief account, this is a story about people ceasing to believe. But the sequence runs the other way. The government printed; prices rose; people watched their savings evaporate in real time; and only then did they abandon the currency. Belief was the last domino, not the first.

WHERE IT COMPLICATES THE SENTENCE

If money were purely a shared story, a currency would die when the story lost its charm. In practice currencies die from arithmetic: too many units chasing too few goods. And the reverse also holds — currencies survive long after everyone has stopped respecting them, provided the tax office keeps demanding them. The imagination is real, but it is downstream of something that is not imaginary at all.

7.4 London, 1897: a person made of words

Aron Salomon, a leather merchant, incorporated his business and took nearly all the shares. It failed. The creditors argued that the company was a sham — that it was simply Salomon under another name, and he should pay its debts.

The House of Lords disagreed, unanimously. Once properly incorporated, the company must be treated as a distinct legal person, with its own rights and its own liabilities. Lord Halsbury said it was to be treated like any other person. The creditors went unpaid.

Almost every large enterprise on earth now stands on that decision. And it is exactly what Harari describes: a new person entered the world with no body and no mind, brought into being by a document, and the courts have treated it as real ever since.

WHAT IT SHOWS – AND THE STING IN THE TAIL

Harari is right that something was conjured. But notice: the Lords were not fooled and did not pretend to be. They knew precisely that they were adopting a legal device for a policy reason — that limited liability lets ordinary people risk capital without risking everything. The “spell” is printed in the statute book, and it has worked for a hundred and thirty years with nobody deceived for a second. That is not sorcery. It is engineering.

7.5 Yugoslavia, 1991–92: a nation switched off

Between June 1991 and April 1992, a country of some twenty-three million people ceased to exist. Nothing physical was subtracted. The mountains, the factories, the roads and the people all stayed. What ended was a way of holding one another in mind.

The census caught it. The number of people declaring their nationality as “Yugoslav” — rather than Serb, Croat, Bosniak or Slovene — had grown across the post-war decades to about one in twenty by 1981, then fell to roughly three per cent by the 1991 count. The category emptied before the state did. What replaced it were other imagined communities, and they went to war over the ground.

WHAT IT SHOWS

The clearest confirmation Harari has. A nation is not a place; it is a shared act of recognition, and when enough people withdraw the recognition it stops, quickly. Anderson’s caveat still stands: those people were not waking up from a fiction into reality. They were moving from one imagined community into another, and the new ones felt to their members exactly as ancient and unquestionable as the old one had.

7.6 Nuremberg and Paris, 1945–48: the hardest case

This is the event the sentence handles worst, and it is worth going slowly.

Between 1933 and 1945 the German state produced, through impeccable procedure, a legal order under which mass murder was lawful. Everything about it satisfied the positivist test: enacted by the recognised authority, published, applied by trained judges. If law is simply what the procedure produces — if there is no law outside the common imagination — then those statutes were law, and the men who followed them broke none.

The world declined to accept that. The Nuremberg trials, from 1945, held state officials responsible for acts that had been lawful under their own domestic law. In 1946 Gustav Radbruch — a jurist who had been a positivist before the war — published the formula that German courts then used: positive law prevails even when it is unjust, *unless* the conflict between statute and justice becomes intolerable, at which point the statute yields. In December 1948, forty-eight states declared a list of rights that no procedure may remove.

WHY THIS IS THE HARD CASE

On Harari's sentence, this is one fiction overruling another fiction, and there is no fact of the matter about which was better — only which had more people behind it. That is a coherent position and a chilling one. It is also not what the participants thought they were doing, not what the judgments say, and not the ground anyone stood on. Every one of those people believed they had found something above the statute book. They may have been wrong. But the sentence does not show they were wrong; it simply assumes it, and then the twentieth century's most consequential legal act becomes a change of story.

The honest thing to add is that the Declaration was also, visibly, a construction. It needed a vote. Eight states abstained, each for a reason that told you what it was building at home. Its authority since has come from states behaving as though it binds them. Both things are true at once, and this is precisely why the third box matters: the Declaration is a human construction and a standard you can be objectively in breach of.

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THE SIX, SCORED

Yap and Yugoslavia: Harari right, cleanly. Salomon: right about the mechanism, wrong about the sorcery. Ireland and Zimbabwe: right that money is agreement, wrong that agreement floats free — underneath it sits information, arithmetic and tax. Nuremberg: the sentence gives an answer, and it is an answer most people, on reflection, do not want to give.

PART 08

The imagined order you are standing in right now

If the mechanism is real, it did not stop in the ancient world. This part is a practical tool: how to work out which rules you are living under, which kind each one is, and what actually changes them – because it is not seeing through them.

Step one: sort what you are dealing with

Harari has one word for everything. That is what makes the sentence memorable and what makes it useless the moment you try to do anything with it. In practice there are three kinds of rule in your life, they behave completely differently, and confusing them is the most common mistake people make after reading this chapter.

KIND	HOW TO RECOGNISE IT	WHAT ACTUALLY SHIFTS IT
Belief	People hold it to be true. Saying “this is made up” is felt as an attack.	Evidence, experience, conversion, generational turnover. Slow. Often never.
Convention	Everyone knows it is arbitrary and follows it anyway, because everyone else does.	A coordinated switch. Nobody moves first alone; everyone can move together at once.
Coercion	You would stop tomorrow if the penalty vanished.	Changing the penalty, or the people who apply it. Belief is irrelevant.

SAY IT SIMPLE

Arguing a convention is a waste of breath – nobody disagrees with you, they just cannot move alone. Arguing a coercion is worse than useless – the enforcer does not need your agreement. Only a belief can be argued with, and it is the slowest of the three.

Step two: find the load-bearing ones

Most rules you live under are trivial. A few are holding up the roof. The test from Part 04 is the fastest way to tell them apart, and it costs nothing:

THE BLANK-LOOK TEST

State the rule out loud as if it were optional, and watch the reaction. Mild interest means it is decorative. A puzzled look — as though you had asked why water is wet — means you have found something load-bearing. Irritation means you have found something load-bearing that someone is currently benefiting from.

The reason this works is the mechanism in Part 04. Rules that are still argued about are still visible, and visible rules are weak. The ones that have stopped being questions are the ones doing the structural work, and they have stopped being questions precisely because everyone around you was also raised inside them.

Step three: know what actually changes an order

Here is the practical heart of it, and it is the opposite of what the sentence suggests. Realising that something is constructed changes nothing whatsoever. Everyone in Zimbabwe knew the currency was paper. It did not help. The publicans in Ireland knew a cheque was a promise. They cashed it anyway.

An imagined order changes by exactly four routes, and only four:

1. **A coordinated minority.** Not a majority — a bloc large enough and visible enough that others expect it to hold. Conventions turn over fast once people believe others are turning too. This is the only route that is quick.
2. **A new focal point.** Somebody supplies an alternative that is obvious enough for strangers to converge on without negotiating. Most attempted changes fail here: they have a critique and no alternative, so there is nothing for people to coordinate onto.
3. **A change in enforcement.** Where the rule is coercion, argument is decoration. What matters is who holds the penalty. This route is slow, institutional, and the one most reformers avoid because it is boring.
4. **Generational replacement.** Where the rule is belief, it usually does not change; the holders are replaced by people raised under different conditions. Nobody enjoys this answer. It is the historically dominant one.

Notice that “realising it is a fiction” is not on the list. It is a precondition for route two at best, and on its own it produces nothing but a person who is annoyed at parties.

The two traps to avoid

The cynic’s trap. The sentence is very easy to convert into a general permission to disengage. If it is all made up, nothing merits effort. This is the most common outcome of reading the chapter and the most useless. The correct inference from “this is constructed” is that it can be constructed differently — which is a call to work, not a release from it.

The fresh-start fallacy. The belief that an order can be cleared away and replaced with something rational and unencumbered. Every attempt in the historical record produces a new order, usually with

more coercion than the one it replaced, because the coordination the old order supplied for free has to be manufactured at speed. You are never choosing between an imagined order and no imagined order. You are choosing between this one and the next one, and the next one has to be built before this one is dismantled.

THE VERSION WORTH KEEPING

You cannot step outside. You can, with effort, notice the outline of the thing you are inside, name one or two of its load-bearing rules, work out which of the three kinds each one is, and then apply the route that matches. That is a small, unglamorous, genuinely available power. It is also the only one on offer.

Four questions, for anything you are inside

1. What is the rule here that nobody states, because everyone assumes it?
2. Is it a belief, a convention, or a coercion? (Test: would it survive if the penalty vanished? Would it survive if everyone admitted it was arbitrary?)
3. Who is currently better off because it stands, and what would they do if it moved?
4. If I wanted it changed — what is the alternative concrete enough for strangers to coordinate on tomorrow, without meeting me?

The fourth question is the real one. Without an answer to it you do not have a plan. You have a critique, and critiques do not move orders. Other orders move orders.

PART 09

The scorecard, and the sentence rewritten

Twelve axioms went in. Here is what came out, with each one marked honestly, including the ones that did not survive.

#	AXIOM	VERDICT	WHY
1	Only two kinds of things: mind-independent, or made up	Fails	The third box — made by agreement, then fully checkable — is standard, worked out in detail, and present in Harari's own Chapter 6.
2	"Would it survive without minds?" is the test of existence	Fails	Applied evenly it deletes mathematics, language, promises and truth. A test that proves too much proves nothing.
3	The six listed items are one kind of thing	Category error	Money is constituted by belief; a god is claimed to be independent of it; rights are disputed. Three logics, one clause.
4	Belief is the mechanism	Partly	Real for legitimacy and religion. Currencies and traffic rules run on co-ordination and enforcement, with belief optional.
5	"Fiction" is the right word for all of it	Fails	A belief collapses when exposed as invented; a convention does not. That difference is the entire subject.
6	Imagined means arbitrary	Fails	Orders are under constant selection. Most die. The space of workable arrangements is narrow and bounded by non-imagined things.
7	Imagined means not binding	Does not follow	Chess is invented and the bishop still cannot move sideways. Origin says nothing about authority.
8	The author can stand outside it	Not available	He half-concedes it, grounding ethics in felt suffering rather than in rights — which quietly removes an item from his own list.
9	Only humans do this	Holds	The best-supported claim in the vicinity. Three-year-olds enforce invented rules on third parties; no other species does anything comparable.

#	AXIOM	VERDICT	WHY
10	No large-scale cooperation without shared fiction	Overstated	The ceiling on personal acquaintance is real; the figure of 150 is a prop; and prices, kinship and force scale without shared belief.
11	Withdraw the belief and the thing vanishes	Holds, with a caveat	True in the limit. In practice belief is usually the last domino, not the first — Zimbabwe's currency died of arithmetic.
12	Justice and human rights belong with money	Values, not facts	A serious philosophical position with serious opponents, presented as though history had settled it. History cannot settle it.

. . .

The sentence, rewritten honestly

Harari wrote: “There are no gods in the universe, no nations, no money, no human rights, no laws, and no justice outside the common imagination of human beings.” After all of the above, here is the version that survives every objection in this document:

Nations, money, laws and companies are not part of the universe. They are made entirely of what enough people keep doing, they can be created and ended by procedure, and no other large thing in the world has that property. This does not make them fictions. It makes them the one class of enormous, powerful, unforgiving objects for which human beings are wholly answerable. Whether justice and human rights belong on that list is among the oldest open questions there is — and putting them there is a decision, not a discovery.

That version is less quotable. It is also true, and it does the same work: it strips the naturalness out of the arrangement you are standing in without pretending that the arrangement is a dream you can wake from.

What Harari got right, stated plainly

It would be dishonest to end on the objections, because the core observation is correct and most people genuinely have not had it.

- The largest structures in human life have no physical existence and are held up by nothing but continued human behaviour.
- They can be created and destroyed by declaration, which nothing physical can.

- They are experienced from inside as natural and inevitable, which is the condition of their working.
- You cannot leave them — only move between them.
- Humans are the only animal that does any of this, and the capacity is running by age three.

Five true things, in a book read by a hundred million people. That is a real public service, and the errors in the sentence do not cancel it.

The last thing worth saying

People argue about this chapter as though the question were whether money is real. It is not. Money is real in the only sense that matters, which is that you cannot eat without it.

The question the chapter actually poses is about **answerability**. If nations, laws and markets were features of the universe — like weather, like gravity — then nobody would be responsible for them, and the only sensible response would be to adapt. If they are made of what people keep doing, then somebody is responsible, and the responsibility does not sit only with whoever designed them. It sits with everyone still doing the thing.

That is the reason the vocabulary matters so much, and why a single word is worth this many pages. Call these things *fictions* and the natural response is to feel clever and step back. Call them what they are — constructions, conventions, institutional facts, the load-bearing walls of the only building available — and the natural response is to ask who maintains them, and on what terms, and whether you are one of the maintainers.

THE POINT OF THE WHOLE THING

An order you cannot name is one you cannot be answerable for. Harari's chapter is worth its flaws because it makes the order visible. Keep that, and drop the word *fiction* — because the moment these things become fictions, nobody has to hold them up, and they are being held up by you.

APPENDIX

Glossary, timeline and sources

Every term used in this document, explained in one line. Then the dates, then where all of it comes from.

Glossary

TERM	PLAIN MEANING
Axiom	Something you must assume before an argument can start. The floor under the argument.
Steelman	The strongest possible version of an argument you may disagree with. The opposite of a strawman.
Imagined order	Harari's term for a shared arrangement — laws, money, hierarchy — that exists because enough people act as though it does.
Inter-subjective	Existing in a network of many minds. Not in one head (that is subjective), not independent of heads (that is objective).
Institutional fact	Searle's term for the same thing: a fact created by collective acceptance, such as "this is a ten-rupee note".
Status function	A job a thing can only do because people agree it does — paper being money, a person being a judge.
Ontologically subjective	Depends on minds for its existence.
Epistemically objective	You can be simply right or wrong about it, regardless of how you feel.
Convention	A rule everyone follows because everyone else does. Nobody thinks it describes anything.
Belief	Something held to be true about the world. Usually collapses when the holder accepts it was invented.
Coordination problem	A situation where what you should do depends entirely on what others do. Which side of the road; which currency.
Focal point	The option people converge on without discussing it, because it stands out. Schelling's term.
Performative utterance	Words that do something rather than describe something: "I promise", "I name this ship", "guilty". Austin's term.
Social fact	Durkheim's term for a way of acting that exists outside any individual and exerts force on them.

TERM	PLAIN MEANING
Looping effect	Hacking's term for the way naming a kind of person changes the people named, forcing the name to be revised.
Genetic fallacy	Judging whether a claim is true by where it came from. Always invalid.
Equivocation	Using one word in two different senses inside one argument, so that a weak claim borrows the strength of a strong one.
Legal positivism	The view that law is whatever the recognised procedure produces, with morality a separate question.
Natural law	The view that there is a standard above enacted law, against which enacted law can be judged invalid.
Radbruch formula	The 1946 rule that an enacted statute yields to justice when the conflict becomes intolerable.
Moral realism	The view that some things are right or wrong independently of what anyone thinks.
Error theory	Mackie's view that moral statements are all sincerely meant and all false, because there are no objective values to make them true.
Chartalism	The view that money's value comes from the state accepting it in payment of taxes.
Corporate personality	The legal rule that a registered company is a person distinct from its owners, with its own debts.
Shared intentionality	Tomasello's term for the human ability to hold a goal jointly with someone else – the root of institutions.
Dunbar's number	The proposed ceiling of about 150 stable personal relationships. Widely cited, statistically contested.
Ethno-symbolism	Anthony Smith's position that modern nations are constructed, but usually out of older ethnic material rather than nothing.
Rai	The large carved limestone discs used as wealth on Yap.

Timeline

DATE	EVENT
c. 1740	Hume argues that property, promises and money rest on convention rather than nature.
1895	Durkheim publishes <i>The Rules of Sociological Method</i> : social facts are things.

DATE	EVENT
1897	<i>Salomon v A Salomon & Co Ltd</i> – the House of Lords establishes separate corporate personality.
1905	Knapp's <i>State Theory of Money</i> : money is a creature of law.
1932	The New York Fed transfers gold to the Bank of France by relabelling it in the vault.
1945	Radford publishes his study of cigarettes as currency in a prisoner-of-war camp. The Nuremberg trials open.
1946	Radbruch publishes "Statutory Lawlessness and Supra-Statutory Law".
10 Dec 1948	The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is adopted: 48 in favour, none against, 8 abstentions.
1955 / 1962	Austin's lectures on performative utterances, published as <i>How to Do Things with Words</i> .
1960	Schelling's <i>The Strategy of Conflict</i> introduces focal points.
1966	Berger and Luckmann, <i>The Social Construction of Reality</i> .
1969	Lewis, <i>Convention</i> : coordination without belief.
1 May – 17 Nov 1970	Irish bank closure. About 85 per cent of the money supply becomes inaccessible; the economy continues on cheques and IOUs.
1977	Mackie, <i>Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong</i> .
1983	Anderson's <i>Imagined Communities</i> ; Hobsbawm and Ranger's <i>The Invention of Tradition</i> .
Jun 1991 – Apr 1992	Yugoslavia dissolves. Those declaring themselves "Yugoslav" had already fallen to about 3 per cent.
1995	Searle, <i>The Construction of Social Reality</i> : X counts as Y in C.
1999	Hacking, <i>The Social Construction of What?</i> : interactive kinds and looping effects.
Nov 2008	Zimbabwe's annual inflation peaks at an estimated 89.7 sextillion per cent.
2009	Zimbabwe abandons its currency and dollarises. Bitcoin launches.
2011 / 2014	<i>Sapiens</i> published in Hebrew, then in English.
2015	Sexton's review in <i>The New Atlantis</i> ; <i>Homo Deus</i> published in Hebrew (English 2016).
2017	Hallpike's review of <i>Sapiens</i> .
2019–2022	Whitehouse et al. in <i>Nature</i> find moralising gods follow social complexity; the paper is retracted after a methodological critique; the authors' corrected reanalysis reports the same direction.

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Written and compiled by Lovepreet Singh · misterlove.in/books/sapiens/ · August 2026.

Method: one sentence; every axiom under it named and graded; the argument steelmanned twice before it is attacked; each field of study allowed its own verdict; the whole thing tested against events that actually happened. Where the author is right, the scorecard says so.

Quotations from *Sapiens* are short and used for criticism and review. All errors are the compiler’s.