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Research article

Harari: The New Grand Narrative

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Abstract

During his life-time, Gernot Böhme (1937-2022) provided a wide range of studies on alternatives in science, on a social science of nature, on Kant and the alienation of reason, on an ecological aesthetics, on phenomenology of the living body, on architecture and atmosphere, on invasive technologies, and much more. All of these reflect his commitment to make philosophy matter for the practice of living in a world that is shaped by modern science and technology. Twelve days after his 85th birthday and only a few days before his death, the *Neue Züricher Zeitung* published his critical essay on the popular writings of Yuval Noah Harari which, according to Böhme, provide a contemporary myth of the transcendence and demise of humanity through technology. Böhme's critical arguments are important because they expose how such myths leave us mystified, even paralyzed – fixated on prophecies of redemption or doom. Seeking to break Harari's spell, Böhme proposes to pose differently the question of the human self.

Keywords: Yuval Noah Harari; History and Narrative; Organisms and Algorithms; Evolutionary Humanism; Self-Knowledge

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¹ For general background see Böhme 2001, 2012, 2017a, 2017b.



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Научная статья

Харари: новый великий нарратив

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Аннотация

При жизни Гернот Бёме (1937-2022) провел широкий спектр исследований по альтернативам в науке, философии природы, Канту и отчуждению разума, экологической эстетике, феноменологии живого тела, об архитектуре и атмосфере, об инвазивных технологиях и многом другом. Все это отражает его стремление сделать философию значимой для практики жизни в мире, сформированном современной наукой и технологиями. Через двенадцать дней после его 85-летия и всего за несколько дней до его смерти “Neue Züricher Zeitung” опубликовала его критическое эссе о популярных произведениях Юваля Ноя Харари, которые, по словам Бёме, представляют собой современный миф о превосходстве и гибели человечества с помощью технологий. Критические аргументы Бёме важны, потому что они показывают, как такие мифы оставляют нас в замешательстве, даже парализованными – заикленными на пророчествах об искуплении или гибели. Стремясь разрушить чары Харари, Бёме предлагает иначе поставить вопрос о человеческом я.

Ключевые слова: Юваль Ной Харари; История и повествование; Организмы и алгоритмы; Эволюционный Гуманизм; Самопознание

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Harari: The New Grand Narrative²

HISTORY AND (HI)STORIES

Yuval Noah Harari is Professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. His subject area is universal history, but he interprets it much more broadly than it is typically done. In his book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (Harari, 2014) he presents universal history as the history of the species *Homo sapiens*, so within the context of natural history. Harari has also expanded the methodological approach to history as a narrative. Specifically, he characterizes the emergence of humans as *Homo sapiens* from the group of hominids through the invention of language as a narrative.

According to Harari, the superiority of *Homo sapiens* over other hominids, which began to emerge around 40,000 years BC, is due to their unique ability to talk about non-real things, that is, the ability to engage in fiction. With this, humans have gained a principle for organizing increasingly larger groups of people. It should be noted, though, that the organizing power of narratives – or *stories* – does not come from their content but from the shared belief in them.

This distinction is important because Harari often simply talks about fictions and fantasies, such as when he says that the power of money is based on a fiction. He also does not distinguish between fairy tales and legends, such as the concept of the divine right of kings. This distinction would also be important. There is fiction and then there is fiction. The literary genre ‘fiction’, for instance, is made up precisely of such stories which one does not believe to be real.

However, there are powerful stories which large groups of people believe – religions are of this kind. According to Harari, the sequence of religions structures the universal history of humankind, and he does not hesitate to call capitalism and finally digitalization (the religion of dataism) religions as well. There are forms of human organization that are based on the shared belief in a story. Sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies refers to them as communities, distinguishing them from societies: While communities

² „Harari: The New Grand Narrative [*Harari: Die neue Große Erzählung*]“ is the title of Böhme’s manuscript which was originally written for his family. The print edition of the NZZ chose the title “How Things are Coming to an End for Humanity [*Wie es mit dem Menschen zu Ende geht*],” adding the subtitle: „Historian Yuval Noah Harari explains a world to us that we couldn’t understand even if it existed already [*Der Historiker Yuval Noah Harari erklärt uns eine Welt, die wir selbst dann nicht verstehen könnten, wenn es sie schon gäbe*].” The online-edition of the NZZ offered a longer title and subtitle: „Yuval Noah Harari is the Pop Star among Historians. But fundamentally, he sees himself as a Prophet. His Vision: He knows why Humanity is coming to an End. – The Israeli best-selling author explains to us a world that we can only understand once it no longer exists. It’s hard to resist the pull of his suggestions. [*Yuval Noah Harari ist der Pop-Star unter den Historiker. Aber im Grunde versteht er sich als Prophet. Seine Vision: Er erkennt, warum es mit dem Menschen zu Ende geht. Dem Sog seiner Suggestionen kann man sich kaum entziehen*]“ – see <https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/yuval-noah-harari-ist-der-pop-star-unter-den-historikern-aber-im-grunde-versteht-er-sich-als-prophet-seine-vision-er-erkennt-warum-es-mit-dem-menschen-zu-ende-geht-ld.1663934> – This English translation restores some passages which were cut in the original publication, it also restores Böhme’s own section-headings. The manuscript and newspaper publication did not include footnotes and references, these were added as part of this English-language edition. – We thank Gernot Böhme’s family, especially Rebecca Böhme, for supporting this publication.



are united by the command of an authority or a shared belief, societies are formed through interactions among their members, based on division of labor and the market, for example (Tönnies, 1887/1957). Since Harari does not make this distinction, human history becomes according to him a history of religions, a sequence of believed fictions.

But modern socialization differs from traditional communalization. Harari overlooks this, and therefore he also fails to recognize the worldwide interconnectedness of people, which represents a new form of human organization that transcends societies. He misleadingly refers to it as a “global village” (Harari, 2014). If one refers to interconnected human ensembles as societies, their socialization is based in an infrastructure, in this case the World Wide Web, and people's affiliation is defined by their being connected to it. A shared belief is no longer necessary. Therefore, labeling this networked interconnectedness of people a new religion is misguided. It is a mystification of current events.

THE END OF GRAND NARRATIVES

Already in the 1930s Martin Heidegger spoke of the modern age as the “age of the world picture” (Heidegger, 1976) – thereby limiting the reach of this concept to a specific historical period. Related to this skepticism is François Lyotard's (1984) call to abandon the “grand narratives” that were meant to justify the rationality of the sciences and instead to strive for consistency in regional discourses.

Unconcerned by such scruples, Harari has set out to conceive a new grand narrative himself. In short, it states that our era of human history is heading towards an end, hopeful or doomed. This is because humanity is either transcending itself to become superhuman or godlike, or obsolete. Either way, the era of *Homo sapiens* is coming to an end.

Harari wants to turn this grand narrative into the dogma of postmodern humanity. He wants people to believe his story. He presents himself as a teacher of humanity. And it is difficult to resist the suggestiveness and the vivid examples he employs in his books. Finally, he prophesies where the history of humankind is headed.

Harari essentially identifies three main tendencies: First, war as a form of human interaction will be overcome; second, diseases will disappear or be eradicated; and third, individual happiness will be achieved for all. Harari tries to make plausible by way of statistics the impressive advancements that humanity is making towards these goals.

But the overcoming of mortality, the happiness of humans, and their perfection [*Vervollkommung*] as gods is only one side of his prophecies. The tremendous progress in medicine – or as Harari calls it: of biology – which enables the transition into the transhuman, also renders humans obsolete. At least “en masse,” that is, as workers and warriors: Their business is taken over by algorithms. What is to be done with the superfluous masses of people? According to Harari, the elites will no longer care about them anymore because these are no longer needed.



NEW ENLIGHTMENT

All the things and conditions that seem important to us are, according to Harari, mere fantasies and fictions. In his book *Homo Deus*, he writes: “All large-scale human cooperation is ultimately based on our belief in imagined orders. These are sets of rules that, despite existing only in our imagination, we believe to be as real and inviolable as gravity” (Harari, 2016, p. 197).

Accordingly, only scientific facts are said to be truly real. Everything else: fiction, fantasy. In this regard, Harari distinguishes three types of entities: There are firstly the things and facts, objective reality; secondly, the subjectively felt experiences that nowadays are summarily referred to as ‘*Geist*’, or ‘mind’ in English. Crucial to Harari’s ontology is the third type, namely intersubjective entities or fictional realities.

These entities come into existence when we believe in something or, as Harari writes, when we „ascribe real power to the contents of our imaginary stories” (Harari, 2016, pp. 207-208). But this evidently falls short, since the ‘reality’ of these fictions does not depend on an individual’s belief. Money, the state, and even gods belong to the category of intersubjective entities. Harari leaves their nature ambiguous, describing them with the air of Enlightenment as mere fantasies, yet attributing “real power” to them. What this quasi-reality of intersubjective entities consists in, remains unclear.

With his devotion to science, Harari could have investigated this in biology. Slime molds are initially and primarily single-celled organisms, but under certain environmental conditions they can form organisms, some of these even with functional cell differentiation. This example shows that the formation of higher organisms does not require forms of consciousness in the individual elements. What is characteristic is that higher forms of organization become autonomous entities, confronting individual humans as quasi-objective powers. But what kind of autonomy is this?

Intersubjective entities exist as institutions. These institutions may well be based in realities, but what is more important is that they are sustained by a number of people who represent them and who, in turn, are authorized by the institution – by officials.

The institutions do not depend on specific individuals for their existence. They also outlive the individuals associated with them. While narratives may secure the legitimacy of institutions, they do not constitute them. They appear as givens to any individual person. Only since the time of the French Revolution do we suppose that the State, as a republic, is based on the assent of all individuals. But this assent is, in fact, only a supposition: Every person is born as a citizen into the State.

The reality of the State is based on the disposal over material means of violence. Historically, this has coalesced as the State’s monopoly on violence. Although the individual person is no longer subservient it is evident also in the case of the State that the “intersubjective entity” at hand is not constituted by the individual’s belief in fictions, but that individuals in their disposition as citizens are shaped by the higher-level organization into which they are born.



ARE ORGANISMS NOTHING BUT ALGORITHMS?

Algorithm has become a buzzword. It is fashionable to see algorithms at work everywhere. This is owed crucially to the fact that social networks create profiles of individuals using the data they gather, and these can then be utilized, for example, for individually tailored advertising. Harari follows the trend by seeing algorithms as the most important form of interaction within and between organisms. This is due to the realization that DNA enables metabolic processes in the organism, including growth, and that these processes are to be understood not simply as causality but rather in terms of information processing.

Organisms are thus supposed to be algorithms. This thesis is central to Harari's "grand narrative." But is it true? If organisms, including us humans, are algorithms, then we can be controlled just as well or even better from the outside after sufficient further development of artificial intelligence (AI). Subjective reactions and the mind then become superfluous according to Harari. What we call happiness could be produced by neuronal, hormonal, or genetic control.

In terms of the history of philosophy, Harari's thesis that organisms are algorithms is Platonism. What the human being really is, according to Plato, is the idea of the 'human.' In the second part of *Faust*, Goethe demonstrated in his story of the artificial human being, of the homunculus, that a human being is as such not even viable when it is existing only in a vial – lacking the material.

But even the thesis that the human being is a whole made up of form and matter could be falling short, because organization can change matter in its elements. The emergence of a higher unity does not simply assemble the many elements like Lego blocks but modifies them. Such organization of organisms cannot be understood in analogy to downloading a software program. An organism is therefore not simply an algorithm.

Moreover: Organisms are living beings, but this they are only in symbiosis with others. This has recently been emphasized for humans, since until now human beings have largely considered themselves as existing separately from other living beings. While this separation did not exclude metabolism, the life process of the human organism was thought to be self-contained.

This, however, is not the case: Humans can only live in symbiosis with bacterial strains in their intestines that involve trillions of organisms. And this is not simply a parallel process. The togetherness of the human with bacterial strains is actually a joint existence. And this is simply not compatible with the view that humans are algorithms that could just as easily be run in an AI machine.

HARARI'S FAITH IN SCIENCE

Yuval Noah Harari is a historian and as such a humanities scholar. But this has not inspired in him the slightest doubt of 'science' in the sense of natural science.³ This fails

³ Böhme alludes here to the German *Geisteswissenschaft* (for the humanities) and that other 'science' of the natural sciences [*Naturwissenschaften*].



to recognize a central aspect. It is precisely because of its objectivity that natural science is not answerable to questions of meaning. That is what the ‘humanities’ are for, including the science of history (*Geschichtswissenschaft*). Harari tells the story⁴ of humankind as a succession of religions. Accordingly, for him, the study of history becomes the grand narrative of the creation of human meaning through religions.

This is also true of modernity: On the one hand, it is characterized by the scientific revolution, which leads to the emptying of the meaning of the world. On the other hand, however, it has for the purpose of finding meaning entered into a pact with humanism, i.e. the faith of humans in themselves. This means that while modern science robs the world of meaning, this is substituted by humanism as the faith of humans in themselves. The characteristic example of this pact, alongside liberalism and communism, is the third variety of humanism: National Socialism as so-called evolutionary humanism. According to Harari, the Nazis believed in the evolution of humanity in a pact with scientifically based racial hygiene.

This pact, however, was rendered obsolete by genetic research after the Second World War, which proved that the genetic differences between the so-called races are much smaller than Hitler had to believe at the time. This insight exonerates evolutionary humanism from the stain of National Socialism. Thus Harari writes in *Homo Deus*: “Not all evolutionary humanists are racists [...] Evolutionary humanism played an important part in the shaping of modern culture, and it is likely to play an even greater role in the shaping of the twenty-first century.” (Harari, 2016, p. 349).

After this cleansing of national socialism, one might consider resuming the basic intent of this kind of humanism by other means – and this Harari does: “They (the scientists of our days) increasingly argue that human behaviour is determined by hormones, genes and synapses, rather than by free will” (Harari, 2016, p. 263)

So, what the Nazis wanted to achieve through racial hygiene could today be achieved much more elegantly by way of hormones and genetic manipulation: The enhancement of the human being.

In all of that, Harari's faith in science remains unshakeable. Scientific papers are cited as truth. This is especially true of the life sciences: They have “ditched the soul” (Harari, 2016, p. 161). And in general: “The better we understand the brain, the more redundant the mind seems” (Harari, 2016, p. 155). And apparently, we are so far along that we can dispose of the concept of freedom as well. The human being is not free but controlled by biochemical processes in the brain.

For the disposal of the concept of freedom one typically appeals to an experiment conducted by the American physiologist Benjamin Libet in 1985. Test subjects had to make decisions and press certain buttons accordingly. It was shown that in the brain of a test person there is already a potential for the action “a few milliseconds to a few seconds” before the action. This is observed before the test person “decides” to perform the action, before they become aware that they want to perform this action (Libet, 1985).

⁴ Here Böhme writes in the German original “*Geschichte*.” So he plays with the ambiguity of the word because it can be translated as “story” or as “history.”



Harari quotes experiments that confirm Libet's results, but none that relativize or refute them. For him, it is clear: 'Freedom' is an empty concept, just like 'soul.' "When a biochemical chain reaction makes me desire to press the right switch," he writes, "I feel that I really want to press the right switch. And this is true. I really want to press it. Yet people erroneously jump to the conclusion that if I want to press it, I *choose* to want to. This is of course false. I don't *choose* my desires. I only *feel* them, and act accordingly." (Harari, 2016, p. 384).

The last sentence is a fallacy. At the moment when my desire becomes conscious to me, I have the possibility to decide against it. One can act against one's desires. But Harari fails to recognize that consciousness provides an additional degree of freedom. His conclusion: After sufficient development of algorithms, democratic elections would be unnecessary. Based on personality profiles or direct capture in the brain of tendencies for action, it would be possible to determine which party a person will vote for.

This can be easily refuted by using a voting advice application to determine which party one would vote for⁵ – then choosing another party, perhaps as a matter of defiance or due to a consideration which the app did not provide for. The crucial point is that Harari posits a direct transition from desire to action, while – as tradition has established since Socrates – freedom resides precisely in the conscious examination of one's own desires.

GETTING TO KNOW THE SELF

Harari's faith in natural science is also evident in his endorsement of a behaviorist approach that is oriented solely to observable and quantifiable behavior. According to Harari, algorithms know you better than you know yourself (Harari, 2016, p. 530). But what might that mean? Harari refers here to the automatic profiling that social networks create for individual people. They are formed on the basis of the traces that individuals leave behind on the internet.

From this point of view, „knowing someone better than they know themselves“ is knowledge from the outside that is oriented exclusively to the human being as a phenotype. This corresponds to the approach of science: Whether an individual is glad or depressed, etc., is read off the data that can be tapped from their skin or their brain. But the self that human beings have to contend with is not in how they appear, but in the way they are given to themselves.

This way is quite vague and comes from afar. The self is to be distinguished from the conscious 'I' which every human being must develop in order to be acknowledged as a mature human being and to acknowledge oneself. And it is to be clearly distinguished from the outward appearance which people have to create for social reasons. However, when it comes to serious decisions, a person must try to act not only according to certain criteria, but in such a way that they are "in agreement" with themselves through their actions (Böhme, 2001).

In order to do so, humans must get to know their own self of which they normally have a vague sense only, and which is still slumbering and undefined within them. A

⁵ Böhme refers to the German *Wahl-O-Mat* which ascertains the level of agreement between a voter and the positions held by the various political parties. The user might then choose to vote accordingly.



decision in serious situations thus implies simultaneously a clarification and a determination of what one actually is. And how should algorithms know any of this? For their profiling and tracking they rely exclusively on data, they are radically behaviorist, and Harari is with them.

FINAL DAYS AND THE PRESENT [ENDZEIT UND GEGENWART]

In light of the sometimes astonishingly pompous assertiveness with which Harari advocates his theses, it is remarkable that such terms as humility and resilience appear in his more recent *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (Harari, 2019). Crucial for this turn is the final chapter on meditation. Faced with an apocalyptic outlook, Harari finally arrives at the question of how we should live now, namely with a certain humility – and in such a way that our resilience, our power to resist is strengthened.

While in the first two books [*Sapiens* and *Homo Deus*] he acted more or less as a teacher of humanity, Harari here takes a step back and expresses himself very personally. He talks, for example, about the content and intention of the Vipassana meditation that is practiced by him. He describes the practice of this meditation as awareness and exploration of what shows up in the stirrings of consciousness. For example, he asks himself what anger actually consists in. He is thus dealing with the substance of what is called ‘mind’ – in the German translation unfortunately rendered as *Geist*.

Mind or *Geist*, in Harari’s first two books these are something to be disposed of, along with the soul and God. But now emerges a way of taking seriously spiritual-mental phenomena. Nonetheless, Harari still regards the contents of the stream of consciousness as pure information and insinuates that we are ultimately only information-processing machines which should rather be “controlled” by machine algorithms.

Yuval Noah Harari’s anthropology thus continues in failing to recognize what is crucial about the phenomena of consciousness: their being implicated or affected [*Betroffenheit*]. To be sure, he now states that suffering – after all a subjective reality – is the real reality: “[...] [t]he most real thing in the world is suffering” (Harari, 2019, p. 356). After such a sentence, will he still be able to commit as he did before to humanity’s grand project of *abolishing all suffering*?

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