

THE BIG IDEAS

Disillusionment

The switch: Panic to bewilderment.

Work

In the future.

AI + Wisdom

Investing dollar for dollar.

Education

Teaching wisdom.

Meditation

Yuval's #1 thing.

21 Lessons for the 21st Century

BY YUVAL NOAH HARARI · SPIEGEL & GRAU © 2018 · 400 PAGES

"In a world deluged by irrelevant information, clarity is power. In theory, anybody can join the debate about the future of humanity, but it is so hard to maintain a clear vision. We might not even notice that a debate is going on, or what the key questions are. Most of us can't afford the luxury of investigating, because we have more pressing things to do: we have to go to work, take care of the kids, or look after elderly parents. Unfortunately, history does not give discounts. If the future of humanity is decided in your absence, because you are too busy feeding and clothing your kids, you and they will not be exempt from the consequences. This is unfair; but who said history was fair?"

As a historian, I cannot give people food or clothes—but I can try to offer some clarity, thereby helping to level the global playing field. If this empowers even a handful of additional people to join the debate about the future of our species, I have done my job. ...

Reality is composed of many threads, and this book tries to cover different aspects of our global predicament without claiming to be exhaustive. Unlike *Sapiens* and *Homo Deus*, this book is intended not as a historical narrative but rather as a selection of lessons. These lessons do not conclude with simple answers. They aim to stimulate further thinking and help readers participate in some of the major conversations of our time."

~ Yuval Noah Harari from *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*

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irrelevant information, clarity
is power."*

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Yuval Noah Harari is a brilliant thinker and author.

He got his Ph.D. in History from the University of Oxford and now lectures at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, specializing in world history.

This is our third Note on his books.

We started with his first book, *Sapiens*, which "surveyed the human past, examining how an insignificant ape became the ruler of planet Earth."

Then we covered his second book, *Homo Deus*, which "explored the long-term future of life, contemplating how humans might eventually become gods, and what the ultimate destiny of intelligence and consciousness might be."

Those two books have sold over twelve million (!) copies and have been translated into over forty-five (!) languages.

This is Yuval's third book. As he says, "In this book I want to zoom in on the here and now. My focus is on current affairs and on the immediate future of human societies. What is happening right now? What are today's greatest challenges and most important choices? What should we pay attention to? What should we teach our kids?"

In many ways, of course, Yuval's books are outside the scope of our normal Optimizing focus. I'm choosing to share Notes on them because a) I personally want to wrap my brain around these globally Big Ideas so I can lead as effectively as possible (see: [An Audience of One](#)); and, b) I think it's important we ALL take the time to wrap our brains around these globally Big Ideas so we can all lead as effectively as possible.

As the title of the book suggests, Yuval shares 21 lessons for the 21st century. These lessons include his thoughts on how to think about everything from God, Religion and Terrorism to Education, Meaning and Meditation. It's a provocative, thoughtful book. (Get a copy [here](#).)

I'm excited to share some of my favorite Big Ideas with a focus on how we can apply that wisdom to our lives TODAY so let's jump straight in!

SWITCHING FROM PANIC TO BEWILDERMENT

"We are consequently left with the task of creating an updated story for the world. Just as the upheavals of the Industrial Revolution gave birth to the novel ideologies of the twentieth century, so the coming revolutions in biotechnology and information technology are likely to require fresh visions. The next decades might therefore be characterized by intense soul-searching and by the formulation of new social and political models. Can liberalism reinvent itself yet again, just as it did in the wake of the 1930s and 1960s crises, emerging as more attractive than ever before? Can traditional religion and nationalism provide the answers that escape the liberals, and might they use ancient wisdom to fashion an up-to-date worldview? Or perhaps the time has come to make a clean break with the past and craft a completely new story that goes beyond not just the old gods and nations but even the core of modern values of liberty and equality.

At present, humankind is far from reaching any consensus on these questions. We are still in the nihilist moment of disillusionment and anger, after people have lost faith in the old stories but before they have embraced a new one. So what next? The first step is to tone down the prophecies of doom and switch from panic mode to bewilderment. Panic is a form of hubris. It comes from the smug feeling that one knows exactly where the world is heading: down. Bewilderment is more humble and therefore more clear-sighted. Do you feel like running down the street crying, "The apocalypse is upon us"? Try telling yourself, "No, it's not that. Truth is, I just don't understand what's going on in the world."

That's from chapter #1: Disillusionment.

Yuval gives us a quick tutorial on the rise and fall of communism and fascism along with the rise of liberalism and its precarious position in today's world. Yuval also places Brexit, Trump and Putin in a broader historical context. Fascinating stuff.

Now, it's impossible to read this book (about 21 of the biggest challenges facing humanity!) and/or read the news and/or be alive today and not, at least occasionally, experience a sense of stress.

Yuval wisely encourages us to "switch from panic mode to bewilderment" as we approach the global scene. (And, of course, we'd be wise to do the same on the micro-personal scene.)

When I think of embracing "bewilderment," I think of Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer and Tony Robbins. In her book, [Mindfulness](#), Langer tells us that, if we want to live a mindful life, we MUST embrace uncertainty. It's our ticket to growth. [Tony Robbins](#) tells us the same thing: embrace the confusion that serves as a gateway between one level of understanding and the next.

The whole, exit "panic" mode reminds me of the psychological tendency described as "catastrophizing"—which is basically when we take a stressful situation and imagine the WORST possible outcomes that could come from it. It's one of the least psychologically healthy things we can do. Much better, the cognitive behavioral therapists tell us, to "challenge" our catastrophizing thoughts and then take constructive action.

"But in reality, there is no reason to assume that artificial intelligence will gain consciousness, because intelligence and consciousness are very different things. Intelligence is the ability to solve problems. Consciousness is the ability to feel things such as pain, joy, love, and anger. We tend to confuse the two because in humans and other mammals intelligence goes hand in hand with consciousness. Mammals solve most problems by feeling things. Computers, however, solve problems in a very different way."

~ Yuval Noah Harari

And... As I read that line I pondered the word "bewilderment"—which, as it often does, led me to the dictionary. Quick vocab lesson: *Bewilder* means "cause (someone) to become perplexed and confused." It, interestingly, has an "unknown" origin but comes from two words: *be* + *wilder*. *Be* means "thoroughly" and *wilder* means to "lead or go astray."

In other words, you're *thoroughly* lost!! That sounds about right, eh?

Here's what's interesting. *Bewildered* has a lot of synonyms (like confused, perplexed, etc.). It has ONE antonym: *enlightened*.

I find that interesting because, somewhat paradoxically, the path to our own (heroic) enlightenment often (always?) requires us to step into the darkest part of the forest—where there is no trail and where we are most likely to get most lost.

(btw: Brene Brown wrote a whole book on this theme called [Braving the Wilderness](#).)

To go back to Yuval's wisdom from *Sapiens*, we need to be willing to have an empty map and embrace our ignorance if we want to get wise. It's much healthier to do that with a "bewildered" mindset than a "panicked" mindset, eh?

So... All that to say: How are YOU approaching the current state of affairs in the global arena? With panic or with bewilderment? And, how about the current state of affairs in the micro-personal arena? With panic or with bewilderment?

Here's to a little less panic and a little more calm, bewildered curiosity!

Pro Tip: Reduce the inputs [Lead Yourself First](#) style so you can get more clarity, creativity, emotional balance and moral courage. In the midst of such great challenges, it's always wise to go all in on the fundamentals of eating, moving and sleeping as well. :)

WORK

"The benefits for human society are likely to be immense. AI doctors could provide far better and cheaper healthcare for billions of people, particularly for those who currently receive no healthcare at all. Thanks to learning algorithms and biometric sensors, a poor villager in an underdeveloped country might come to enjoy far better healthcare via her smartphone than the richest person in the world gets today from the most advanced urban hospital.

Similarly, self-driving vehicles could provide people with much better transportation services, and in particular reduce mortality from traffic accidents. Today close to 1.25 million people are killed annually in traffic accidents (twice the number killed by war, crime, and terrorism combined). More than 90 percent of those accidents are caused by human errors: somebody drinking alcohol and driving, somebody texting a message while driving, somebody falling asleep at the wheel, somebody daydreaming instead of paying attention to the road. ... Self-driving vehicles will never do any of those things. Though they suffer from their own problems and limitations, and though some accidents are inevitable, replacing all human drivers by computers is expected to reduce deaths and injuries on the road by about 90 percent. In other words, switching to autonomous vehicles is likely to save the lives of one million people every year.

It would therefore be madness to block automation in fields such as transport and healthcare just in order to protect human jobs. After all, what we ultimately ought to protect is humans—not jobs. Displaced drivers and doctors will just have to find something else to do."

That's from Chapter #2: Work.

Yuval walks us through the astonishing ramifications on the horizon as a result of the astonishing advances in biotechnology and information technology.

Read the book for his analysis on how to approach the inevitable job displacement.

"Though in the twenty-first century humans might be upgraded into gods, as of 2018 we are still Stone Age animals. In order to flourish we still need to ground ourselves in intimate communities. For millions of years, humans have been adapted to living in small bands of no more than a few dozen people. Even today most of us find it impossible to really know more than 150 individuals, irrespective of how many Facebook friends we boast. And if we don't belong to any intimate community, we humans feel lonely and alienated."

~ Yuval Noah Harari

For now, take a moment to soak in those mindboggling stats.

And, if you feel so inspired, imagine a future in which car accidents are nearly nonexistent (thanks, autonomous cars!) and some of the poorest people on the planet can get access to better health care than the wealthiest among us can today (thanks, biotech!).

Puts things in perspective, eh?

Now let's look at how to deal with such a quickly-changing world...

INVESTING: DOLLAR IN TECH = DOLLAR IN CONSCIOUSNESS

"The danger is that if we invest too much in developing AI and too little in developing human consciousness, the very sophisticated artificial intelligence of computers might only serve to empower the stupidity of humans. We are unlikely to face a robot rebellion in the coming decades, but we might have to deal with hordes of bots that know how to press our emotional buttons better than our mother does and that use this uncanny ability to try to sell us something—be it a car, a politician, or an entire ideology. The bots could identify our deepest fears, hatreds, and cravings and use these inner leverages against us. We have already been given a foretaste of this in recent elections and referendums across the world, when hackers learned how to manipulate individual voters by analyzing data about them and exploiting their existing prejudices. While science fiction thrillers are drawn to dramatic apocalypses of fire and smoke, in reality we might be facing a banal apocalypse by clicking.

To avoid such outcomes, for every dollar and every minute we invest in improving artificial intelligence, we'd be wise to invest a dollar and a minute in advancing human consciousness. Unfortunately, at present we are not doing much in the way of research into human consciousness and ways to develop it. We are researching and developing human abilities mainly according to the immediate needs of the economic and political system, rather than according to our own long-term needs as conscious beings. My boss wants me to answer emails as quickly as possible, but he has little interest in my ability to taste and appreciate the food I am eating. Consequently, I check my emails even during meals, which means I lose the ability to pay attention to my own sensations. The economic system pressures me to expand and diversify my investment portfolio, but it gives me zero incentive to expand and diversify my compassion. So I strive to understand the mysteries of the stock exchange while making far less effort to understand the deep causes of suffering."

For our Optimizing purposes, I'd say THIS is the most important line in the whole book:

"For every dollar and every minute we invest in improving artificial intelligence, we'd be wise to invest a dollar and a minute in advancing human consciousness."

So... How about a quick personal accounting? Two questions.

First: How much time and money do YOU spend on "artificial intelligence"?

It's pretty much impossible to calculate that because everything from your smartphone and your smartwatch to your Facebook feed and Amazon account are driven by AI. So, for the sake of discussion, let's just say you're spending a LOT of time and money on AI. (Laughing.)

Now, how much time are you spending on advancing your consciousness?

Again, it's tough to quantify that but unless you're like Harari and investing TWO HOURS A DAY into your meditation practice, you're probably not investing anywhere near enough.

So... Any ideas on how you can invest a little more time and money into advancing your consciousness?

btw: You know what "advancing your consciousness" could also be called? OPTIMIZING!!!

"Today, the richest 1 percent own half the world's wealth. Even more alarmingly, the richest one hundred people together own more than the poorest four billion. ... By 2100, the richest 1 percent might own not merely most of the world's wealth but also most of the world's beauty, creativity, and health."

~ Yuval Noah Harari

TEACHING EMOTIONAL STAMINA, FLEXIBILITY AND WISDOM

"So what should we be teaching? Many pedagogical experts argue that schools should switch to teaching 'the four Cs'—critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. More broadly, they believe, schools should downplay technical skills and emphasize general-purpose life skills. Most important of all will be the ability to deal with change, learn new things, and preserve your mental balance in unfamiliar situations. In order to keep up with the world of 2050, you will need not merely to invent new ideas and products but above all to reinvent yourself again and again."

That's from the chapter on "Education."

Remember that discussion from the chapter on "Work"? Well, Yuval paints a sobering future in which we'll all need to reinvent ourselves CONSTANTLY if we want to stay employable let alone thrive. The best way to prepare the next generation for THAT future?

—> *"Most important of all will be the ability to deal with change, learn new things, and preserve your mental balance in unfamiliar situations."*

Yuval also tells us: *"To survive and flourish in such a world, you will need a lot of mental flexibility and great reserves of emotional balance. You will have to repeatedly let go of some of what you know best, and learn to feel at home in the unknown. Unfortunately, teaching kids to embrace the unknown while maintaining their mental balance is far more difficult than teaching them an equation in physics or the causes of the First World War. You cannot learn resilience by reading a book or listening to a lecture. Teachers themselves usually lack the mental flexibility that the twenty-first century demands, since they themselves are the product of the old educational system."*

[Mental Flexibility](#). [Emotional Stamina](#). [How to Flourish](#).

<- Those are important lessons that are *considerably* harder to teach than physics or history.

They're even harder to teach when very few people within the educational world are even prioritizing this stuff. Which is one of the reasons why I'm so inspired by an elementary-school teacher named Mrs. Kristie Kuehnast. (Pronounced "keenest.") (Find her online [here](#).)

Quick story: One day my team sent me a package in the mail. It was from Mrs. Kuehnast. Within that package was a thank you card from Kristie in which she told me that she and her class have been watching +1s all year and that the ideas have "stuck."

In addition to her note and a picture of her class waving, there were thirty handmade thank you cards from all the awesome Optimizing students in her fifth-grade class.

Now, I don't keep a lot of stuff. But that package and those cards are some of my most treasured possessions. I'm looking at them with tears in my eyes now. Mrs. Kuehnast had her students write their favorite +1s on the front of the card and then a sweet little note inside.

I'm looking at one that has "OPTIMIZE" on the top, a beautiful flower in the middle and each of these +1 titles in different colored pencil: "Teach Like Their Five" + "4% Better" + ["Did I Win?"](#) + ["Win or Learn"](#) + ["Growth Mindset"](#) + ["OMMs"](#) + ["Grit"](#) + "Quiz Yourself" + ["That's Like Me!"](#)

Inside: *"Dear Brian, [Smokey bot](#) is a mix of a fast, more upbeat person and a slow, planner type. You are a smokey bot because you are chill, funny, and cool from your videos."*

Plus: *"Dear Brian Johnson, Your +1s have inspired me and helped me so much... Now I say [needs work](#) when I make a [mis-take](#). I also [power pose](#) and love it."*

x 30 other amazing notes = A big smile and a big thank you to the sweet, awesome, futures of our planet. And, thank you, Mrs. Kuehnast. That package so perfectly captures my deepest "Why." I'm honored to be a part of your life. Send my love to your kids! Let's do this!!

MEDITATION

“Before this I knew very little about meditation and presumed it involved all kinds of complicated mystical theories. I was therefore amazed by how practical the teaching turned out to be. The teacher at the course, S. N. Goenka, instructed the students to sit with crossed legs and closed eyes, and to focus all their attention on the breath coming in and out of their nostrils. ‘Don’t do anything,’ he kept saying. ‘Don’t try to control the breath or to breathe in any particular way. Just observe the reality of the present moment, whatever it may be. When the breath comes in, you are just aware—now the breath is coming in. When the breath goes out, you are just aware—now the breath is going out. And when you lose your focus and your mind starts wandering in memories and fantasies, just remain aware—now my mind has wandered away from the breath.’ It was the most important thing anybody had ever told me.”

That’s from the final chapter called “Meditation” in which Yuval shares “*how somebody so skeptical can still manage to wake up cheerful in the morning.*”

As I often mention, when someone like Yuval writes something like, “It was the most important thing anybody had ever told me,” I sit up a little straighter and fold the page over to make sure I share that particular wisdom.

Later in the chapter Yuval also tells us that “*The most important thing I realized was that the deepest source of my suffering was the patterns of my own mind. When I want something and it doesn’t happen, my mind reacts by generating suffering. Suffering is not an objective condition in the outside world. It is a mental reaction generated by my own mind. Learning this is the first step toward ceasing to generate more suffering.*”

All that, btw, comes right before he tells us that he spends ***at least* TWO HOURS per day** in meditation. And, each year, takes “a long meditation of a month or two.” btw: Important note: He tells us: “*It is not an escape from reality. It is getting in touch with reality.*”

All of that leads us to the most important Lesson for the 21st Century: What’s THE MOST IMPORTANT thing anybody has ever told YOU? Is that wisdom an integrated part of your daily life? If yes, high fives. If not, how can you make it so Today?

Here’s to Optimizing in service to playing our small role in meeting our world’s big challenges,

B

Brian Johnson,
Heroic Philosopher CEO

About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He’s spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at heroic.us.

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