



Reclaiming Freedom Despite Its Denial: A Critical Reading of Harari on Liberty

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Abstract: For Harari, freedom has always been an illusion. But, as such, it was at the basis of the democratic and humanist project. Suddenly, the abandonment of our autonomy in favour of optimizing our satisfactions will mark the end of modernity, especially since the principle of equality will no longer hold. New technologies and medical advances will indeed be reserved for the elite who will control the processing of information and its advances in an attempt to achieve immortality, like the gods. Concomitantly, the disappearance of a large number of trades, supplanted by machines, will create a huge class of people who are economically useless and dominated both socially and intellectually. Having lost the illusion of being able to choose their own destiny, these citizens without a well-defined identity will seek the meaning of their existence in algorithms. Harari can therefore suggest that the cult of the sovereign individual will give way to that of data processing. Is the advent of the new cult inevitable? Should we be afraid of this new religiosity? Can we reclaim our freedom? Attempts to answer these questions involve a breath-taking analysis.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Autonomy, Choice, Desire, Freedom, Free Will, Liberty, Myth.

Cite as: Irudayadason, Nishant (2021). Reclaiming Freedom Despite Its Denial: A Critical Reading of Harari on Liberty (Version 1.0). AUC: Asian Journal of Religious Studies, July-August 2021(66/4), 41-48. <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5033914>

“This storm will pass. But the choices we make now could change our lives for years to come” - Yuval Noah Harari

Introduction

Containment tests our need for freedom. When every act of everyday life—leaving home, going to a store, going to the hairdresser or taking the bus—is subjected to draconian conditions, or outright prohibitions, and our fundamental freedoms are compromised. This new reality has led some observers to reject in principle any infringement of public freedoms, as if the protection of public health was not also an obligation of the State towards its citizens. But in doing so, it is also the very idea that we have of freedom that is questioned. To be free is human person’s noble aspiration, as old as humanity!

Modernity—which embodies the epoch of human history when each generation considers itself more learned and therefore better inspired than the previous ones—today looks with amused condescension at the way in which the ancients considered the ideal of freedom. How to trust the proclamations of freedom of a Sophocles or of a Moses, when we know that the Greeks, like the Hebrews, accepted slavery? In the eyes of contemporary human person, no freedom is worth, if it is not valid for all. Of course, this current prejudice against the great thinkers of Antiquity is due more to ignorance than to an enlightened judgment on their message that is still relevant for us. The simple fact that Sophocles’ *Antigone* (442 BCC) either read and staged, or that the biblical Exodus is still considered a universal model of the fight for freedom, are more convincing in this respect than any scholarly analysis. In fact, the contempt often displayed in our time for the wisdom of the Ancients shows that “the paradox of cultural relativism” (Lévi-Strauss, 1977, 329), well anchored in the West accommodates the conviction that we know everything better than our ancestors.

However, the situation in which the world has reached today illustrates a sad paradox, which means that human freedom has never been so threatened as since human rights became universal. What we mean by this is that no other era in human history has made such an emphasis on individual freedom, and yet we are living in the decline - and some would say, the end - of a long period of progress in freedom, which began with

the rise of modern democracies in Europe, America and elsewhere. The examples of this paradox are countless. To understand how this is possible, let us analyse the work of a highly visible representative of contemporary political thought, Jerusalem University professor Yuval Noah Harari.

Choice and Freedom

Harari believes that most of our decisions are not a matter of our free will. Certainly, we have intentions and desires, but where do they come from? Did we really choose them? Are they not rather organic or the result of impressive networks? Based on neuroscientific studies, he argues that the vast majority of our decisions (who we date, who we vote for, etc.) do not result from our free will. Gaspard Koenig underlines the paradox of this opinion which is far from achieving consensus in the neuroscientific community. Indeed, if we do not have free will, then why not capitulate to artificial intelligence and accept the comfort and convenience it gives us?

Freedom, for human person, refers to the power to decide freely, the power to do and choose what he thinks is best. Spontaneity is therefore not enough to qualify the free act. Spontaneous or unconstrained movement can be mechanical or habitual. I may spontaneously grab a cigarette and no one stops me. However, this spontaneous and mechanical gesture means nothing, from the point of view of freedom. It is only when reflection comes to suspend action that freedom comes into play. The free act is the act that results from a choice, after one has deliberated (Aristotle, 2009, 41-45).

It is therefore in the experience of choice that freedom is discovered. Any choice assumes the idea of the possible. This is obvious. Without possibility, there is no choice, and this, in a first sense first: as we have seen, there is no freedom, if there is constraint. But that any choice presupposes the possible is also true in a second sense, which is more fundamental, no doubt: it is because man is this being capable of projecting himself into the future, and of aiming for the ends that arise in him the question of choice. What will I do with my life? Which profession will I choose? Will I get married? Will I have children? What political commitment will be mine? So many questions, so many decisions that I will have to make and that no one, in principle, can assume my place. These serious questions involve the subject's freedom, which can be tested

to the point of anguish. This is probably why it may sometimes seem easier to hand over to others to make choices for one's life. Submission to authority and conformism are attitudes which bear witness to the difficulty that human person experiences in exercising her freedom.

Choosing is therefore judging what is best among several possible options. Yet to be free is not only to judge, but also to act. Here again, freedom cannot be taken for granted because of one's powerlessness and the insufficiency of his one's to achieve what is considered the best. Human person is thus divided between two opposing instances, that of the good which she chooses, and that of the evil which she realizes. Am I free to will, as I am carried along by the weight of sin? wonders Saint Paul: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Rom. 8:15). Opposed to the idea of free will as an absolute power of choice, Luther would become the theoretician of the bondage of the will in his work *De Servo Arbirtio* (Luther, 1957). Human person is not free, and yet she is guilty: only divine grace can save here. Without entering into the theological debate, let us acknowledge the problem here: am I free to do what I want, when I am chained by the past of my upbringing, socialization, education, and even heredity?

However, except to "deny that man is a moving principle or begetter of his actions, as of children" (Aristotle, 2009, 46), should we not lay down freedom? After all, we may not be free when it is time to act, because we have developed bad habits, though we were free to have developed them or not, says Aristotle. We are brought back to the question of choice. Could we have chosen to act differently than we did?

To this question, we spontaneously tend to answer positively, thereby affirming the existence of our free will, understood as absolute power of beginning. I made such a choice, but I could make another: this is our conviction, based on which the feeling of remorse, regret or repentance can be explained. But a belief does not prove anything. It is not enough to believe yourself free to be free. The belief in free will is perhaps, ultimately, only an illusion. And illusion is what makes us mistake our desires for reality. To which desire does the desire for free will correspond? Is it not, as Nietzsche suggests that, "the demand to bear the entire final responsibility for one's actions oneself and to relieve God, the world, ancestors, chance, and society of responsibility for it, is [...] an

attempt to pull oneself into existence out of the swamp of nothingness by the hair, with more audacity than Munchhausen”? (Nietzsche, 2009, 21).

Thus, divided between the belief in free will and the feeling of our powerlessness, between pride and humility, we are divided and uncertain. Conscience given over to free choice seems doomed to be a torn and unhappy conscience. To overcome these philosophical problems, Harari admits the hypothesis of a specific form of freedom. The heart of the debate is not the existence or absence of freedom. According to him, in most cases, people make choices, including the most important ones in their lives, that are not real choices. The problem with the idea of free will is its formulation. Freedom is presupposed to be something that we have, when we should struggle and fight for it. Freedom is the end, not the beginning. It is dangerous to think that we are exercising our free will in every decision, because that does not make us question ourselves about who we are and what is the nature of our desires. Moreover, it makes us easily manipulated by others, which is extremely problematic in our liberal democracies. Hence it is important that we defend freedom as an end, without which we become too quickly and too easily manipulable subjects to conform to very idea of the attack on civil liberties as a necessary prerequisite for liberal democracies.

Are liberal democracies the end of history, as Fukuyama seems to think? (Fukuyama, 1992). According to Harari, liberal democracies are the most adaptable political regime among other regimes that we know so far. They have managed to adapt and progress through a series of crises, the severity of which reached its peak in the twentieth century (the two World Wars, the Great Depression of 1929, etc.). Thus, Harari is the bearer of a message of hope: if today our liberal democracies are again in crisis, they have a good chance of being revived.

The Contemporary Paradox of Freedom

Long before the Coronavirus, he already denounced the “attacks on liberty” committed by the Israeli government, accusations which he recently repeated, on the occasion of the very effective measures taken by Israel to protect its citizens against the pandemic. Like many proponents of post-modern thinking, Harari considers infringements of the freedom of the individual more dangerous than the evil against which they protect him, whether it is terrorism or pandemic. Coronavirus. Warning us against

the risk of every citizen being watched and kept under surveillance, in the name of the fight against the pandemic, Harari affirms in an interview that “a big battle has been raging in recent years over our privacy. The coronavirus crisis could be the battle’s tipping point” (Harari, 2020). The professor from Jerusalem has thus become an international herald of freedom that is threatened by the fight against the Coronavirus.

Yet, according to him, freedom does not exist! As he confidently asserts, freedom is an invention of human person and just like other universal and immutable principles it exists “in the fertile imagination of the Sapiens, and in the myths they invent and tell” (Harari, 2014, 89). Thus, according to Harari, we should defend our freedom, knowing well that freedom does not exist. More than a simple fallacy, this statement expresses very precisely the post-modern approach to the condition of human person. We are at the heart of the contemporary paradox of freedom. Today’s Europe and the entire post-modern West claim to defend human freedom (and human rights) even though they no longer believe in human freedom. Human person is not free, because she is enslaved to the political and economic structures which dominate him (according to Marxist doctrine), to her drives (according to Freudian *doxa*), or even to her neurons (according to contemporary cognitivism). Thus, we can claim freedom for the individual, while denying human freedom.

Once human person is considered to be no more than an information processing system, defending the freedoms of the individual only amounts to defending the “right to privacy” or “data confidentiality”, as the new champion of freedom, Yuval Harari, explicitly states. These principles are certainly honourable and important, but which do not deserve that we risk our lives and health for them, unlike the generous ideals of the founding fathers of modern democracy.

Freedom, as a constitutive element of the human condition, has broadened in practical terms, along with economic and technical development, but at the same time it has shrunk in its theoretical meaning. Instead of the proclamation of the ideal of human freedom, central element of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1791 (“men are born and remain free and equal in rights”) and of the US Constitution of 1789 (“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, ensure domestic Tranquillity, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings

of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America)”, we only have the “General Data Protection Regulation” of the European Union.

Behind every piece of legislation, there is a philosophy and a certain idea of the human being. The elevated and generous conception of human person, on which liberties guaranteed by the first constitutional texts and by the *Bill of Rights* were based, has thus given way today to a much more dull, technical and stunted conception of the human being. The new “Law Tablet” of the French Revolution, given to the French people who were freed from their chains, under the gaze of the Supreme Being—secular and revolutionary transfiguration of the revealed Mosaic Law given by Moses to the people of Israel on Mount Sinai—culminated today in a banal bureaucratic settlement of the European Union, where there is neither a religious spirit nor a secular spirit.

The Triumph of Neural Sciences and the End of the Individual

Who can still say today that humans are born and remain free? Certainly not the present-day proponents of a determinism with a biological or neurological basis. In his *Homo Deus*, a new Bible of a sick and faltering humanity, which no longer believes in man and his freedom, Harari writes: “Over the last century, as scientists opened up the Sapiens black box, they discovered there neither soul, nor free will, nor ‘self’—but only genes, hormones and neurons that obey the same physical and chemical laws governing the rest of reality” (Harari, 2015, 282). Gaspard Koenig, essayist and novelist, in his book *The End of the Individual*, investigated the artificial intelligence industry and the conceptions that underlie it. This fascinating book, subtitled *A Philosophical Journey into Artificial Intelligence*, is the travel diary of a moderner, visiting Silicon Valley and the other places where so-called “intelligent” robots are made. At the end of his journey to the four corners of the globe in the footsteps of the untraceable “Artificial Intelligence”, and after his interaction with Harari, Koenig thinks that the ultimate meaning of *Homo Deus* is not mastery of autonomy, but pacifism as a personal path to bliss (Koenig, 2019). Thus Harari along with other supporters of the neuronal human being, makes a sad prognosis that we can find in the neuronal human, the key to the paradoxical negation of freedom, in which the West has been stuck ever since it renounced free will, the most precious idea inherited not only from

the Enlightenment, but also from the entire two-thousand-year-old Judeo-Christian tradition.

Peter Singer, professor of bioethics at Princeton, author of the best-selling book *Animal Liberation* is a leading theorist of anti-speciesism ideology, which aims to free animals from human oppression. His essential credo is that the Judeo-Christian doctrine of the “sanctity of life” must be abolished and replaced by the notion of “quality of life”. In a 2009 article in *Foreign Policy* magazine, titled “The Sanctity of Life”, Singer wrote: “During the next 35 years, the traditional view of the sanctity of human life will collapse under pressure from scientific, technological, and demographic developments. By 2040, it may be that only a rump of hard-core, know-nothing religious fundamentalists will defend the view that every human life, from conception to death, is sacrosanct” (Singer, 2009).

Much like Peter Singer, the animal rights ideologue, who claimed to replace the “sanctity of life” with a pale and insignificant “quality of life”, Harari abolished the “myth” of human freedom, to erect the Golden Calf of a banal “right to happiness” promised to a human-machine, “freed from her insane desires”.

Conclusion

The liberal discourse postulates that our choices, in particular political ones, are guided by our free will which it tacitly confuses with our feelings. We do act according to our feelings, but these have nothing to do with any free will leading us to make reasoned choices. Feelings are inherited biochemical mechanisms, shaped by evolution from our distant ancestors to allow us to optimize our chances of survival and reproduction. In the Brexit referendum, how many British voters, even the most learned, had sufficient knowledge of the issues to make a reasoned choice? Most just followed their feelings.

However, these intrusive evolutions of the artificial intelligence will always be more essential. Medical algorithms will detect diseases before symptoms appear, decision support systems will tell us which profession to exercise or whom to marry. In turn, our capacity to make decisions will diminish. The heads of state themselves will end up arbitrating between solutions developed by computer systems. The dictatorships of the twentieth century were less efficient than democracies because of their inability to process information centrally. Artificial Intelligence could

give them back the advantage: going beyond the wildest dreams of the tyrants of yesterday and today, bio-sensors will make it possible to detect the intentions of citizens, even to manipulate them.

Science fiction is full of stories of robots that gain consciousness and revolt against humans. However, the main danger of artificial intelligence in the short term is not the uprising but the total docility of machines applying with appalling efficiency and without any discernment the orders they have received. Artificial intelligence amplifies the natural stupidity of men. The digital dictatorship is lying in wait for us if we do nothing to advance consciousness.

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Article received: March 23, 2021; Accepted: April 11, 2021. Word count: 3360



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