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Ignorance is Not Bliss: Reflections on Harari's Humanistic Challenge to Acknowledge Ignorance

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Abstract: "Ignorance is bliss." A catchy phrase that we have come across many times in our lives. A seemingly harmless, funny and a wisdom quote that gives consolation, as it pampers the lazy, comfortable, afraid-to-take-risk attitude within us. Harari strongly criticizes the system that subdues us in clipping our wings; that serves as blockade in our forward evolution as *Homo Deus*. Ignorance is not bliss, but rather a golden chain; an intoxicating drug that binds us within a limited horizon and hampers our development to meet the challenges of the present digitally explored universe. In this article I have tried to show that ignorance

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not only breeds sorrow, but brings about great confusion in ourselves.

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Introduction

The term ignorant is an adjective that defines a person in the state of being uninformed or unaware, or even mental discord and other cognitive relation, and can describe persons who intentionally ignore or neglect important information or facts, or individuals who are unmindful of important information or facts. Ignorance can appear in three different types: factual ignorance (absence of knowledge of some fact), object ignorance (unacquaintance with some object), and technical ignorance (absence of knowledge of how to do something).

Ignorance can have negative effects on peoples and societies, but can also profit them by creating within them the desire to know more. For instance, ignorance within science unlocks the opportunity to seek knowledge and make discoveries by enquiring new questions. Though this can only take place if the individual possesses an inquisitive and curious mind. Research suggest that adults with adequate education who perform enriching and challenging jobs are happier, and more in control of their environment. The confidence that adults obtain through the sense of control that education provides allows those adults to go for more leadership positions and seek for power throughout their lives.

According to the American novelist Thomas Pynchon, “We are often unaware of the scope and structure of our ignorance. Ignorance is not just a blank space on a person's mental map. It has contours and coherence, and for all I know rules of operation as well. So as a corollary to writing about what we

know, maybe we should add getting familiar with our ignorance, and the possibilities therein for ruining a good story." (Wikipedia Contributors: Ignorance, 2020)

Ignorance exists even though one may have great knowledge, a good education, be sophisticated, have capacity in the exercise of which one achieves fame, notoriety, money. Ignorance is not dispelled by the accumulation of a great many facts and much information. The computer can do all that better than the human mind. Ignorance is the utter lack of self-knowing. Most of us are superficial, shallow, have so much sorrow and ignorance as part of our lot. Again, this is not an exaggeration, not an assumption, but an actual fact of our daily existence. We are ignorant of ourselves and therein lies great sorrow. That ignorance breeds every form of superstition, perpetuates fear, engenders hope and despair and perpetuates all the inventions and theories of a clever mind. In this paper we would be critically examining the topic of ignorance taking inspiration from the book *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* by Yuval Noah Harari, the celebrated author of *Sapiens* and *Homo Deus*. I would be basing my thoughts from the author and especially from the 15th chapter of the book, "Ignorance." So, this article attempts to show that ignorance not only breeds sorrow, but brings about great confusion in ourselves.

Introducing Yuval Noah Harari's *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*

Harari predicts that a human life's individual value will ultimately vanish. Due to the rapid advancements of the digital revolution, our cyborg selves will be sucked deeper into the online world and turned into faceless data.

Worrying is a predominant factor of the human mind. This is not essentially a bad thing. When the house is on fire, worrying about it may save our life. Modern life presents plenty of other reasons for concern: terrorism, climate change, the rise of Artificial Intelligence, infringements on our privacy, and also the obvious decline of international cooperation. In his latest book, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, the historian Yuval Noah Harari creates a suitable outline for meeting these fears. While his previous best sellers, *Sapiens* (Harari, 2014) and *Homo Deus* (Harari, 2015), covered the past and future respectively, his latest book is all about the present. The trick for putting an end to our anxieties, he suggests, is not to stop worrying. It's to know which things to worry about, and how much to worry about them. As he writes in his introduction: "What are today's greatest challenges and most important changes? What should we pay attention to? What should we teach our kids?" (Harari, 2018)

These are indeed big questions, and this is a far-reaching book. There are chapters on work, war, nationalism, religion, immigration, education and 15 other weighty matters. But its title is misleading. Although one would find a few concrete lessons scattered throughout, Harari mostly resists handy prescriptions. He is more interested in defining the terms of the discussion and giving you historical and philosophical perspective. After learning of the importance of Harari's work,

21 Lesson for 21st Century, we are in a better position to understand his insights on Ignorance, which is part of this book. From his insights we would be delving into why ignorance does not have a positive impact in our lives and society and why the proverb ignorance is bliss would breed sorrow and great confusion in ourselves.

The Discovery of Ignorance

Throughout history, we knew little about 99.99 percent of the organisms in our planet namely, microorganisms. Not because they are insignificant. We are hosts to billions of single-celled organisms within us. They are our allies and at the same time our worst foes. Some digest food and clean our body, others make us ill. They were discovered in 1674 for the first time, when Anton van Leeuwenhoek spotted them through his microscope at home. In the course of the next 300 years, we've become more accustomed with them. The deadliest diseases caused by them have been eradicated and these microorganisms are being used in the service of medicine and industry. Science has advanced a lot in the last few centuries, but the most defining moment in the last 500 years occurred in July 1945, when American scientists detonated the first atomic bomb in New Mexico. From then on, humans have had the ability to not only change history, but to end it.

Usually, in case of ignorance about something, all that had to be done was to approach someone who is knowledgeable and experienced. There was no need for anyone to go on a quest to discover anything that was unknown. A thousand years ago, a simpleton need not have to look further than his local priest to discover the story of how the universe began. Further, if a tradition was ignorant about something, then that something was not significant. If the Bible didn't have any information about

bird's nests, then bird's nests were simply not very important, otherwise, an explanation would have been found in the Bible. Science altered this. Modern science openly acknowledges collective ignorance regarding the most important questions. Scientists confess the lack of knowledge pertaining to the operations of brain producing consciousness or the root cause behind the Big Bang. Rather than studying old traditions, science looks at the latest observations and experiments for answers. But simple observations are not sufficient. Earlier they were described through theories in the form of myths or stories. Today, modern science uses mathematics and physics.

Alexander Webster and Robert Wallace, two clergymen in Scotland, developed statistics, a new branch of mathematics that was developed in the last 200 years (Harari, 2014: 219). They had to set up a life-insurance fund, but to do so they had to look at some numbers. How long would wives outlive their husbands? And how many ministers would die each year? They did not pray to God for the answer, and they didn't get into philosophical argumentation. They were pragmatic in their approach. They came into contact with a mathematics professor, and the three of them collected the data they needed to make their predictions. Their work was based on Bernoulli's equations and other advances in statistics. Bernoulli's Law of Large Numbers states that while it may be hard to predict the death of a single person, it is possible to accurately predict the average number of people that would die over a given period. "According to their calculations, by the year 1765 the Fund for a Provision for the Widows and Children of the Ministers of

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the Church of Scotland would have capital totaling £58,348. Their calculations proved amazingly accurate. When that year arrived, the fund's capital stood at £58,347 – just £1 less than the prediction! This was even better than the prophecies of Habakkuk, Jeremiah or St John. Today, Webster and Wallace's fund, known simply as Scottish Widows, is one of the largest pension and insurance companies in the world. With assets worth £100 billion, it insures not only Scottish Widows, but anyone willing to buy its policies" (Harari, 2014: 220).

Mathematics used to be a field that was not taken seriously even by educated people. A proper education in medieval Europe implied studying logic, grammar, and rhetoric. Today, the situation is changed. Mathematics has permeated almost all the subjects. Even the social sciences requires one to take statistics courses. *The New Instrument* was a scientific manifesto published by Francis Bacon in 1620 (Harari, 2018: 222). He argues that knowledge is power because it empowers us, not because it is true. Scientists do not assume that their theories are 100 percent accurate. Truth is a poor test of knowledge anyway, as claimed by American pragmatists. (Pragmatism and utilitarianism says). The actual test is how worthwhile the knowledge is. A theory that helps us exercise new things constitutes knowledge. World War I was decided not by the soldiers who fought the war, but by the most dangerous minded scientists. Combat jet-craft, poisonous gas, armored tanks, submarines and ever more efficient machine guns, artillery pieces, rifles and bombs were the real heroes of war.

Science played an even greater role during World War II. The V-2 rocket and jet-powered aircraft brought new hope to the Germans when they though that they were on the verge of defeat. But at the same time, the Manhattan

project by the United States developed the atomic bomb. Germany had surrendered by the time the atomic bomb was ready. But Japan, the ally of Germany at the time refused to yield. An American invasion of Japan would cost the U.S millions of lives and lots of time and resources. President Truman ordered the use of the atomic bomb twice in two weeks. The war came to an end with the surrender of Japan.

Traditionally, poverty and death were always considered a fact of life. Today, scientists view them as technical problems. "Poverty is increasingly seen as a technical problem amenable to intervention. Its common wisdom that policies based on the latest findings in agronomy, economics, medicine and sociology can eliminate poverty" (Harari, 2014: 227).

In the Epic of Gilgamesh, a person's quest to defeat death which includes many battles, across the world, yielded nothing but the realization that man's inevitable end was death. But the people of progress do not agree. To them, death happens because we don't know enough. If organs fail, machines can be used to augment them, or to replace them. While not all biological problems can be solved today, we have made a lot of progress since Gilgamesh. "Genetic engineers have recently managed to double the average life expectancy of Caenorhabditis elegans worms. Could they do the same for Homo sapiens? Nanotechnology experts are developing a bionic immune system composed of millions of Nano-robots, who would inhabit our bodies, open blocked blood vessels, fight viruses and bacteria, eliminate cancerous cells and even reverse ageing processes. A few serious scholars suggest that by 2050, some humans will become a-mortal (not immortal, because they could still die of some accident, but a-mortal, meaning that in the absence of fatal trauma their lives could be extended indefinitely)" (Harari, 2014: 231).

Central to our pursuit of progress, is financing. Without money, Darwin, Columbus, and Galilei would not have accomplished what they did. Brilliant minds are not enough. And science cannot set its priorities, there needs to be commercial reasons to invest in one thing and not another. For science to advance; politics, finance, and ideology must be combined towards the same objectives.

The discovery of ignorance have led to breakthroughs in various fields of life. It is not without its negative side-effects that instigates us to think that it would be better off without these knowledge. As the proverb goes that "Truth is bitter," people have tried their best to avoid the hard truths of life and have close themselves within the comfortable prison of ignorance. The following paragraph would prove that people are not interested in the facts of life but with information and principles that would adhere to their thinking and world view. It is those people who are comfortable in their own prison of ignorance have formulated the proverb 'Ignorance is bliss' and created confusion in themselves and in others as we would be seeing in the following paragraph.

Ignorance: A Comfortable Prison?

From the perspective of evolution, it has been valuable to trust in the knowledge of others. But like other characteristics of the past that may have worked well but may not be useful today, the illusion of knowledge can be dangerous. The world we live in is more complicated and only few people understand the limitations of their knowledge. "Consequently, some who know next to nothing about meteorology or biology nevertheless propose policies regarding climate change and genetically modified crops, while others hold extremely strong views

about what should be done in Iraq or Ukraine without being able to locate these countries on a map" (Harari, 2018).

People do not seek out new knowledge that challenges their existing standards but trap themselves in a closed container of like-minded friends and subscribe to news feeds that are agreeable to them. Their beliefs are seldom challenged. The problem is that facts do not matter since people rarely change their minds when they are presented with sheets of statistical date, it simply is not how human beings operate. It is a belief that Liberal groupthink results in the product of individual rationality. It may be the case that individual rationality is overvalued. Harari recalls a scene from Monty Python's Life of Brian where a crowd of starry-eyed followers mistake Brian for the Messiah. "Brian tells his disciples that 'You don't need to follow me, you don't need to follow anybody! You've got to think for yourselves! You're all individuals! You're all different!' The enthusiastic crowd then chants in unison 'Yes! We're all individuals! Yes, we are all different!' Monty Python were parodying the counterculture orthodoxy of the 1960s, but the point may be true of the belief in rational individualism in general. Modern democracies are full of crowds shouting in unison, 'Yes, the voter knows best! Yes, the customer is always right!'" (Harari, 2018).

It isn't merely that groupthink affects ordinary voters but presidents and CEOs. The powerful do not prioritize the discovery of truth or seeing reality for what it is. They are driven to changing reality whenever they can. There is a pragmatic consideration: how to allocate time effectively? "Leaders are thus trapped in a double bind. If they stay in the center of power, they will have an extremely distorted vision of the world. If they venture to the margins, they will waste too much of their precious time" (Harari, 2018). From the above paragraph it is clear that people are happy being subservient to someone whom they deem superior in knowledge, wisdom and

power. Adding to that, the worst part is they feel confident that they know the best and therefore, the leader whom they appoint to govern over them wouuld know the best and that they need not take control over their lives. In the following paragraph we would be debating if accumulating more and more information is a source of power or burden and whether it would result in the alleviation of confusion in our lives and in those around us.

Is Ignorance Power?

In *Sapiens*, Harari analyzed the intellectual and physical development of human beings until today. He visualizes how societal developments alongside technological progressions of the current 'digital revolution' will take us to the status of 'god-like' (Deus) humans in the next few decades. How will artificial intelligence effect our everyday lives? And when will we be able to demand our bioengineered children on the internet? Soon, he says. Harari predicts that a human life's individual value will ultimately vanish. Due to the rapid advancements of the digital revolution, our cyborg selves will be sucked deeper into the online world and turned into faceless data. Why? Because "Dataism" is our 21st century religion. We are willing to share every detail of our lives on Google or Facebook and give them more power than ever before by knowing us, and our every move, better than anybody offline (Harari, 2015: 325).

The evolution of Homo sapiens in the 21st century, having survived famines and eradicated many life-threatening diseases, Harari asks if there are just not enough other issues to worry about anymore. "For the first time in history, more people die today from eating too much than from infectious diseases; and more people die from old age

than from infectious diseases; and more people commit suicide than are killed by soldiers, terrorists and criminals combined. In the early twenty-first century, the average human is far more likely to die from bingeing at McDonald's than from drought, Ebola or an al-Qaeda attack" (Harari, 2015: 10).

It's true, we do have somewhat diverse complications now than 300 years ago. Like which Youtube or Facebook video to watch next. I find myself in a state of disagreement. With the rapid rise of 'fake news' and misinformation, we seem to live in an age of endless confusion. In the competition for who-gets-more-views, the media shows us what we want to see, as do Facebook and Youtube, due to their methodically programmed algorithms. Will there ever be a time when the balanced 'two sides to every story' become the standard?

"In the past, censorship worked by blocking the flow of information. In the twenty-first century, censorship works by flooding people with irrelevant information. People just don't know what to pay attention to, and they often spend their time investigating and debating side issues. In ancient times having power meant having access to data. Today having power means knowing what to ignore" (Harari, 2015: 350). It's not a new theory in cognitive psychology that people prefer to consume facts and ideas that align with their existing beliefs, rather than opinions that challenge their beliefs (it's called "reinforcement theory" in media psychology)."

Is the world moving too fast for us to adjust? Shouldn't we be 'in charge' as Homo Deus; the most powerful creature on this planet? Harari stresses again how change is the only constant in our lives. "People are usually afraid of change because they fear the unknown. But the only constant in history is change" (Harari, 2015: 67); and we should get better at preparing for it. It all comes down to teaching each other about different points of view, and finding information that isn't consumed only

because it's most convenient to me, or of low risk to change my pre-existing believes of the world.

We should use our 'god-like' powers, such as being able to produce, share and circulate our own opinions unlike previously, to learn the ability of adapting to change. This is the basis to influence change, and this is easier than ever before through our digital and scientific evolution. We just need to figure out how to boost the development of the skills that enable us to filter and analyze the incredibly large amount of information out there, so we can adapt to an ever-changing world. And not let watching funny and trending videos replace our curiosity to find out what else is going on in our increasingly digitally explored universe. In order to grow out of our ignorance, the primary thing that ought to be done is to learn to acknowledge what we do not know. In the next topic we would be discussing the importance of curiosity and an inquisitiveness to gain knowledge and information.

Learning to Acknowledge Ignorance

Harari offers outlook on the beginning days of the Enlightenment's Scientific Revolution. As it began, there were a few cities of almost 100,000 people, but the buildings were mud, wood and straw. Technology advances were not the result of organized science, but primarily creative improvements accorded to the craftsmen. At the dawn of the Enlightenment, there was no sense of progress. The Golden Age was long gone. Strict adherence to the past may bring a little of the good times back, but nothing was going to change much. "If even Muhammad, Jesus, Buddha, and Confucius, who knew everything there is to know, were unable to abolish famine, disease, shortage, and war from the world, how could we expect to do so?" (Harari, 2014: 226).

Curiosity was amusing but not a thoughtful attempt. There was no sense of humanity's ignorance. The traditions asserted that the gods were omniscient and knew everything important and revealed it to us in scriptures and oral traditions. "It was inconceivable that the Bible, the Quran or the Vedas were missing out on a crucial secret of the universe" (Harari, 2014: 215).

One instance of ignorance in my life lately was this. The name America had been a familiar word in my vocabulary. But it never occurred to me to know the reason behind naming the continent as such. The American continent should have originally be named Columbia; which apparently is the name of a single state. But acknowledging my ignorance and willingness to know the answers paved way towards the consequent knowledge. Christopher Columbus had no idea that he had discovered a continent. When his crew met the locals, he called them "Indians" because he assumed that they were in the East Indies. A decade later, Italian Amerigo Vespucci led expeditions north of Columbus's route. Vespucci's texts wondered if the lands were indeed an entirely unknown continent between Europe and East Asia. Respected German mapmaker Martin Waldseemüller read the texts and published the first maps of a new world, naming the continent in honor of its discoverer, America. The name stuck. Many of us are still unaware that so many scientists were aboard the early oceanic expeditions and in their subsequent first landing parties. Indeed, the reason for expeditions was to obtain economic advantage. What the scientists learned, and converted into ways to use resources, promoted the economic improvement beyond our wildest imaginations.

In this article, after introducing ourselves to the basic insights of Harari, we spent some time discovering the significance of ignorance. We tried to show that ignorance is a comfortable and convenient prison, which most people enjoy. Then we

asked ourselves if ignorance is really a power? Finally we concluded asserting that we need to learn to acknowledge our ignorance so that we can move forward. Otherwise our ignorance not only breeds sorrow, but brings about great confusion for the whole of humanity. That needs to be avoided for the growth of science and for the betterment of humanity.

Conclusion

To summarize the views of my argument, I would say, Ignorance is a bane of our existence. Rather, than accepting it as inevitable, challenging the obstructions and going ahead into the abyss is the purpose of our human existence.

When we come across unknowns, whether in our private or professional lives, we should explore them. Chris Shelton recommends using the scientific method.

- Make observations, use existing knowledge and assumptions to form a hypothesis.
- Engage with scientists and see what they observe and think.
- Brainstorm to come up with an experiment to test the hypothesis.

"Experiments give back more detail, more specifics, more intricacy than the hypothetical concepts with which we design them. The response of nature to experiments breaks up the concepts and theories with which we came, and forces the researcher onto the edge." (Bhattacherjee n.d.) The learning process goes like this; analyze the data from the experiment. If necessary, develop another experiment, or revise the hypothesis to conform to the data one's experiment had produced.

As a human being of the 21st Century, I personally confess to my ignorance, but I can say this with conviction. What I learn in this experiment would not be a universal truth; it would only apply to my personality and circumstances. But learning what works for me is a suitable goal. Perhaps one day my investigation into what I don't know will lead to a universal, scientific discovery. I will only find out by remaining curious, exploring and using science to reveal truths. The scope of my paper has been limited. I have tried to examine only one aspect of this broad field of ignorance. Which is, its limitation in our lives and the way it would bound us if we do not take the necessary steps to break away from its chains. My paper also opens up the possibility of exploring the other side of this study; which is, the systematic eradication of ignorance which would include aspects of education and teaching techniques.

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