

Week 3: Money and Thinking

Links

Loebner Prize (Turing Test)
Let's chat with Mitsuku!

The transcripts you read were from *Can machines think? A report on Turing test experiments at the Royal Society*, Kevin Warwick and Huma Shah, *Journal of Experimental & Theoretical Artificial Intelligence*, 2016.

Upcoming: First Paper

The idea for your first paper is due Sunday, 30 September. From the syllabus, the first paper can “focus on one aspect of how artificial intelligence has already impacted society, describing the impact of technological advances on a social, political, economic, or psychological aspect of human existence.” It is not required that your paper idea is on this topic though — anything that is relevant to the seminar theme (broadly interpreted), interesting, and with a scope suitable for a 4-5 week effort is reasonable. We'll talk more about this next week, but you should start thinking of ideas for your paper now.

Assignment

Before the next class (Monday, 24 September), you should read:

- Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Chapter 14-17 (if you want to read further, we'll complete the book the following week).
- Neil DeGrasse Tyson, *Science's Endless Golden Age*.
- Tim Urban (“Wait but why”), *The AI Revolution: The Road to Superintelligence (Part I)*. (Posted in 2015)
- (optional) John Maynard Keynes, *Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren*, 1930.

Read carefully, different from previous weeks: Everyone should (1) post at least one “fact check” (about any claim of your choice in any of the readings), (2) post a response to one of the readings (I've provided some prompts for the *Sapiens* chapters below, but you can respond to any of the readings by posing and answering your own question, and (3) post a (thoughtful and respectful) comment on someone else's fact check or response. (If you are the first one to do (1) and (2), you do not need to do (3).)

- Week 3: *Sapiens*, Ch 14-17: Fact Checks
- Week 3: Other Readings: Fact Checks
- Week 3: *Sapiens*, Ch 14-17: Responses
- Week 3: Other Readings: Responses

Response prompts for *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Chapters 14-17

(Chapter 14) Question 1: Harari writes,

“All modern attempts to stabilise the sociopolitical order have had no choice but to rely on either of two unscientific methods:

- a. Take a scientific theory, and in opposition to common scientific practices, declare that it is a final and absolute truth. This was the method used by Nazis (who claimed that their racial policies were the corollaries of biological facts) and Communists (who claimed that Marx and Lenin had divined absolute economic truths that could never be refuted).
- b. Leave science out of it and live in accordance with a non-scientific absolute truth. This has been the strategy of liberal humanism, which is built on a dogmatic belief in the unique worth and rights of human beings – a doctrine which has embarrassingly little in common with the scientific study of *Homo sapiens*.”

This seems like a pretty bleak choice. Is there no other option? (or is one of these, less unpalatable than it seems in Harari’s writing?)

(Chapter 14) Question 2: Harari writes about Bacon’s argument in *Novum Organum Scientiarum* that “knowledge is power”. In founding the University, Jefferson wrote,

“[T]his last establishment [a state university] will probably be within a mile of Charlottesville, and four from Monticello, if the system should be adopted at all by our legislature who meet within a week from this time. my hopes however are kept in check by the ordinary character of our state legislatures, the members of which do not generally possess information enough to perceive the important truths, that knowlege is power, that knowlege is safety, and that knowlege is happiness.”

(when the University uses this quote they tend to leave out the context that it was part of a dig against the state legislators).

How much of an influence on Jefferson was Bacon? (This isn’t really a response question, but something you might be interested in looking into.)

(Chapter 16) Question 3: Harari quotes Adam Smith, “In the new capitalist creed, the first and most sacred commandment is: ‘The profits of production must be reinvested in increasing production.’” In Smith’s time, businesses produced physical goods, and producing more of them required investment in capital. Today, most businesses mostly produce virtual goods, that can be produced in unlimited quantities without any production cost. Has this changed the capitalist creed?

(Chapter 16) Question 4: Harari writes, “Much like the Agricultural Revolution, so too the growth of the modern economy might turn out to be a colossal fraud. The human species and the global economy may well keep growing, but many more individuals may live in hunger and want.” He offers two answers to this (there’s no alternative, and we just need more patience), neither of which seems very satisfying. Is there a better answer?

(Chapter 17) Question 5: Discuss this quote:

“The history of ethics is a sad tale of wonderful ideals that nobody can live up to. Most Christians did not imitate Christ, most Buddhists failed to follow Buddha, and most Confucians would have caused Confucius a temper tantrum. In contrast, most people today successfully live up to the capitalist-consumerist ideal. The new ethic promises paradise on condition that the rich remain greedy and spend their time making more money, and that the masses give free rein to their cravings and passions – and buy more and more. This is the first religion in history whose followers actually do what they are asked to do. How, though, do we know that we’ll really get paradise in return? We’ve seen it on television.”