



Auckland Unitarian Church  
Love beyond belief

## A Brief History of Tomorrow

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When recently selecting topics for my March talks I was intrigued by historian Yuval Harari's subtitle to *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, the sequel to his book *Homo Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. The downside is I would have to read it first in a hurry. I wasn't disappointed as it ticked my boxes for a good read: it was well written, it was entertaining, I learned lots of things, and it made me think critically. What I wasn't prepared for were the chilling possibilities he laid out for the future of human beings. To my mind it makes *1984* and *Animal Farm* larks in the park suitable for bedtime reading to children.

Harari's first book wrestles with how we humans reached our present state. To take just one data point, a mere 150,000 years ago, there were approximately one million humans alive on earth. Today there are more than 7.3 billion of us, with more than one new human being added to the total each second! So what does the future hold? Will we continue to grow in number and power as a species — in ways that increase wealth inequality, exacerbate climate change, and hasten extinction rates of various plants and animals — or will we also grow in wisdom and responsibility?

Harari seeks to answer that in his second book. The Latin name for our species is *homo sapiens*, meaning "wise human." Harari's title "*Homo Deus*" means "godlike human," and invites us to reflect on the ways that our increasingly godlike powers as a species have both tremendous promise for good and terrible potential for harm. His is not an optimistic view. Fortunately I am steeped in Unitarian thought about the future. Our closing hymn (#145) is new to this congregation but the third verse captures our view: "A freedom that reveres the past, but trusts the dawning future more; and bids the soul, in search of truth, adventure boldly and explore." We are a religious movement that seeks to live responsibly and well in our globalised, pluralistic, postmodern world, and we are not stupid. We know that there are some potential trends and threats of which we need to be aware. Aware, we can be preparing to meet and shape them. While I do not share all, if not many, of Harari's assumptions he does lay out some of them for us that I think are very real.

In a nub: "*Homo Deus*" makes the case that we are now at a unique juncture in the story of our species. "For the first time in history," Harari writes, "more people die today from eating too much than from eating too little; more people die from old age than from infectious diseases; and more people commit suicide than are killed by soldiers, terrorists, and criminals combined."

Having subdued (though by no means vanquished) famine, pestilence and war, Harari argues, we can now train our sights on higher objectives. Eternal happiness. Everlasting life. "In seeking bliss and immortality," he writes, "humans are in fact trying to upgrade themselves into gods."

Looking to the future, one of the major trends that Harari foresees I take very seriously is what he calls "Dataism" — in effect, an emerging "religion of data." "What Is Religion?"

One of the many definitions of religion is from theologian Paul Tillich, who argues that something is a religion if it is the “ultimate concern” of an individual or group. From that perspective, Harari is correct that the growing fervour around data collection, management, and analysis is increasingly religious for its adherents in Silicon Valley.

Fitbits, for example, are one among many wearable devices that collect data including “number of steps walked, heart rate, quality of sleep, steps climbed, and other personal metrics involved in fitness.” Those of us with iPhones may or may not know that that if you click on that heart icon on your home screen that says “Health,” Apple is collecting as much as possible of that same data about you—depending on how much we carry our iPhone.

Back in 1984, Apple launched a Super Bowl advertisement for the Mac, which declared, “1984 won't be like '1984.’” The ad's subtext was that Apple computers were “freedom” from Big Brother. Ironically, Apple may be one of today's new Big Brothers.

To say more about both the potential promise and peril of personal data collection, consider a study that Facebook recently conducted on more than 86,000 people. The same hundred-item personality questionnaire was completed by (1) individuals about themselves; (2) “work colleagues, friends, family members and spouses” about that individual; and (3) a Facebook algorithm about that individual. Then the results were compared:

The Facebook algorithm predicted the volunteers' answers based on monitoring their Facebook Likes—which webpages, images, and clips they tagged with the Like button.... Amazingly,

- the algorithm needed a set of only ten Likes in order to outperform the predictions of work colleagues.
- It needed seventy Likes to outperform friends,
- 150 Likes to outperform family members, and
- 300 Likes to outperform spouses.

In other words, if you happen to have clicked 300 Likes on your Facebook account, the Facebook algorithm can predict your opinions and desires better than your husband or wife!

I have been on Facebook about a decade, and I am somewhat stingy about how much free data I give Facebook, I still make occasional posts and click like on some of other's postings. I get a lot of benefit from Facebook—from increased connections with friends, family, and colleagues to increased awareness of trends of both personal and political interest. But we all need to be increasingly aware of the snowballing implications of the information many of us are giving away.

To name just one among many implications, that Facebook study “implies that, in future US presidential elections, Facebook could know not only the political opinions of tens of millions of Americans, but also who among them are the critical swing votes, and how these voters might be swung.” As I am definitely not a swing voter, being 100% opposed to Trump and his Republican enablers, my newsfeed is not likely to be a target of his base.

Recently, Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's co-founder and Chief Executive Officer, has been in the process of visiting all fifty US states. During his visits, he's been doing very similar

activities as candidates for political office. He may have nothing more in mind than better understanding of the many different lives of Facebook users across his country in order to improve his product. Or maybe he is planning to run for President. I don't know either way. But I invite you to consider this quote from Harari, which lands somewhere between the flippant and the profound: "In the heyday of European imperialism, conquistadors and merchants bought entire islands and countries in exchange for coloured beads. In the twenty-first century, our personal data is probably the most valuable resource most humans still have to offer, and we are giving it to the tech giants in exchange for email services and funny cat videos.". In fact, the one mortal sin of this new religion of Dataism is not giving your personal data away freely.

That being said, there are positive benefits. Public monitoring based on Google searches, called "Google Flu Trends," can already give a warning about flu outbreaks "ten days before traditional health services." It could be even more accurate, of course, if Google also searched private emails for signals of flu outbreaks.

Or consider the forthcoming potential of autonomous cars. If we were collectively willing to give up the privacy of our location—and let algorithms know in advance where we are, where we want to go, and when we want to get there—then experts estimate that we could replace 1 billion private cars (which spend most of their time sitting around unused) with 50 million communal cars (whose use is optimized by algorithms). We would also need "far fewer road, bridges, tunnels, and parking spaces," and we would lose less time and equanimity in traffic — and traffic jams.

To give another example along those lines, how many of you use Google Maps? Even when I am driving familiar roads, I sometimes turn on Google Maps because it lets me know if there is an unexpected traffic backup for any confluence of reasons and, if so, what my potential options are for re-routing. This app has frequently saved me a lot of time. And more than once I've ended up stuck in traffic because I was not using my mapping app. Of course, when I have it on, I'm giving Google lots of data about myself.

But my larger point is actually one level beyond that. Currently, all the various mapping apps give control to individual drivers. They present the situation and ask if you want to take an alternative route. But as some of you may have experienced, this can cause a bunch of people using the same mapping app to create a secondary traffic jam on a small side road. The next generation of mapping apps may try to "think for us": "Maybe it will inform only half the drivers that Route #2 is open, while keeping this information secret from the other half. Thereby, pressure will ease on Route #1 without blocking Route #2". More perniciously, maybe the "better" routes will be given to users who pay extra for a "pro" level of the app.

I'll give you just one more example of the many different ways the religion of data could take us in the future. People may, one day in the not too distant future, find themselves picking up a smart phone and asking Apple's Siri, Amazon's Alexa, Google's Assistant, or Microsoft's Cortana — you know, depending on your Corporate Overlord of choice — and find themselves asking, "Siri/Alexa/Assistant/Cortana, whom should I marry?" And you might hear this answer: "Well, I've known you from the day you were born. I have read all your emails, recorded all your phone calls, and know your favourite films, your DNA and the entire biometric history of your heart. I have exact data about each date you went on, and, if you want, I can show you second-by-second graphs of your heart rate, blood pressure and sugar levels whenever you went on a date with John or Paul.... And naturally, I know them as

well as I know you. Based on all this information, on my superb algorithms, and on decades' worth of statistics about millions of relationships — I advise you to go with John, with an 87 percent probability that you will be more satisfied with him in the long run. Indeed, I know you so well that I also know you don't like this answer. Paul is much more handsome than John, and because you secretly give external appearances too much weight, you secretly wanted me to say 'Paul....' My algorithms, which are based on the most up-to-date studies and statistics — say that looks have only a 14 percent impact on the long-term success of romantic relationships. So, even though I took Paul's looks into account, I still tell you that you would be better off with John.”

That sort of dating “Big Data” style may (or may not) sound appealing. But you might ask whether it could be a helpful perspective to consider, irrespective of whether you decide to follow its advice.

There is so much more to say about all of this. But for now I'll say this. There is a lot of fear-mongering happening these days around immigration. I invite you to consider that all that energy might be more fruitfully spent planning for a transition to a future in which, not immigrants, but robots and other forms of Artificial Intelligence really are coming for our jobs. And the jobs under threat of robotisation are not only of bus/cab drivers, telemarketers, insurance underwriters, sports referees, cashiers, chefs, waiters, tour guides, construction labourers, and security guards, but also doctors, pharmacists, teachers, music composers, artists. Few people want my job anymore, so I'm not particularly worried that an artificially intelligent robot will be interested in giving next week's sermon.

This is where Harari's Dataism, his religion of data, can challenge us to ask: What are our deepest, most authentic “ultimate concerns?” On the brink of a potential paradigm shift from *homo sapiens* (“wise humans”) to *homo deus* (“godlike humans”) — augmented through algorithms, nanotechnology, and wearable/implanted data processing — we have the opportunity to ask ourselves anew “What are people for?” If we allow the answer to be that people are for the so-called bottom line of corporate profit alone, then we are headed toward some form of dystopia along the lines of Orwell's *1984*. But there are alternative paths in which people demand a global ethic such as the “Triple Bottom Line” of people, planet, and profit. Financial profit is still a factor, but it must be balanced against the wellbeing of people and the long term sustainability of this planet.

Earlier, I quoted verse three of Hymn #145 as resonant with those themes of Harari's book that we Unitarians tend to seek: “A freedom that reveres the past, but trusts the dawning future more.” In contrast to orthodoxies, which tend to be focused on, and limited by, the past, we tend to be a future-oriented people. And as I conclude, a helpful guide for living into such a future responsibly comes from the fourth and final verse of that historic hymn: “Prophetic church, the future waits your liberating ministry; go forward in the power of love, proclaim the truth that makes us free.”