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Notes on  
21 Lessons for the 21st Century. 400 Pages  
Book Author: Yuval Noah Harari  
Notes Author: William Gasarch. 27 Pages  
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### General Comment

*PRO* Most chapters have something interesting to say that either I had not heard or I had heard, but he expresses it better. Raises lots of interesting points and questions.

*CON* Some of the points are repetitive.

*CAVEAT* Lessons? I don't think any chapter is a lessons. More accurate to say that each chapter is a provocative essay on a topic.

## 1 Disillusionment: The End of History has been Postponed

For most of the 20th century there were three stories that different societies believed (or pretended to). There is some overlap.

1. **Fascism:** The state is the most important thing and defer to it. WW II discredited this when Nazi Germany was defeated. Even so, there are still some nations that try this.
2. **Communism:** The state controls the economy. The collapse of the USSR discredited this. Very few nations are even trying this anymore. China claims to but doesn't really. North Korea is prob better understood as Fascist than Communist. (I am reminded of seeing a special on spied where the narrator discussed why people betray their country. The reasons form an acronym: MICE (Money, Ideology, Compromised, Ego). They also pointed out that betraying America to the USSR Ideology (e.g., the Rosenberg's) became non-existent by the 1980's as nobody believed in Communism anymore.
3. **Liberalism:** Democracy and roughly free-market capitalism. And countries that are doing badly, the CURE is Liberalism!

After the fall of Communism it was thought that all countries would gravitate towards Liberalism. This was called *The End of History*. Francis Fukuyama wrote a book with that title which predicted that the struggles about politics and economics had (or will) finally converged to Liberalism. (We read his book *The Great Disruption*.)

For a while nations WERE going in that direction. Then it stopped and in some cases reversed (Brexit and Trump are part of that).

What made people disillusioned with Liberalism

1. The crash of 2008 people got disillusioned with Liberalism, and some countries got more authoritarian I didn't know that the crash of 2008 was a turning point.

Two keys were immigration and trade agreements— both part of liberalism. When the crash happened they were blamed. Is that accurate? I would guess no.

2. The pace of technology:info-tech. Nobody VOTED to have the internet permeate our lives so thoroughly. And life got a lot more complicated with decision to make. More comforting to have an authority make them? Or an authoritarian gov.
3. All of this progress lead to global warming (though authoriatians gov tend to ignore it).
4. (Future) In the past the poor and unskilled were *exploited* and some fought back. That was the struggle. But in the future many jobs will be automated so the poor and unskilled will be *irrelevant*. This may be much harder to fight against.
5. The Liberal nations are hypocritical: Free trade on THEIR terms for example. This was worse in the 1940's when the so-called liberal nations were colonizers and racists. Example: After WW II the Dutch rushed to recolonize Indonesia in a 4 year brutal war. (Fortunately the Liberal Nations got better on those points. Or so the book claims.)
6. Liberalism values the entire world and an individual country might sacrifice for a greater good (NAFTA might have been like that). Trump ONLY cares about whats good for America (and at times only whats good for himself). Other countries have followed as well. But is Trump the CAUSE or the RESPONSE to a problem that was already there?

Also, the advances in info-tech and biotech are leading to changes we still do not understand.

He didn't say this but I will: Democracies are bad at responding QUICKLY to problems where as Dictatorships can. Hence the appeal.

Everything old is new again: Liberalism had a crisis before WW II: Democratic Germany became the Nazi Regime.

Some misc notes:

1. America and England: YES for the Liberal Order so long as it stops at their border. NO to trade deals or international cooperation.
2. China is the opposite: NO for the Liberal Order. YES to trade deals or international cooperation.
3. Russia has no ideology. Recall that the USSR wanted to export Communism and some of the ideas are appealing. By contrast Russia has no ideas. Its allies want its help but nothing more. I've read that Putin does not really believe that the countries in NATO are there voluntarily. Nobody wants to immigrate to Russia.
4. Nationalistic movements have no ideology beyond their own borders. (Le Penn (French Nat party), Farage (England Nat party), Putin, and Trump all get along. Putin has even helped the others win. This makes some sense in that the weaker Europe is the better for Putin, so its not ideology, its pragmatic.)
5. Islam is so rooted in the middle east and some ethnic groups, so it is also hard to spread. For every Muslim in Germany who would prefer to go back to the Middle East, there are 100 Mideast Muslim who long go to Germany (or some place like it).
6. Some nationalists are also into false nostalgia- MAGA being the most obvious case. The Muslims who want to bring back the Caliphate are an absurd case.
7. Liberalism has been great at lifting people out of poverty and having technical advances BUT it has had a hard time with inequality and Global warming and Technical disruption (so unemployment).

So will countries go back to failed old policies (Communism, Fascism) or update Liberalism or invent a NEW story to tell? Whatever the answer it will need to deal with technology that has not come yet, like AI.

## 2 Work: When You Grow Up You Might Not Have a Job

With more and more jobs being outsourced to AI and other technologies which of the following will happen?

1. Many people will be unemployable. (If this happens to white-collar upper middle class workers we may finally see a Basic Minimal Income which is the one thing that everyone in our bookclub, and several of the books we have read, agree on.)
2. Much like the Industrial revolution, jobs in manufacturing were lost but jobs in technology (which paid better) were gained and the general standard of living increased. (The Luddites still had a valid concern since they weren't the ones getting the new jobs. Out of Work 60 year old Coal Miners today may have a hard time learning to code.)

The second seems more likely since the latest technology is doing the THINKING for us, even the creative part. OR perhaps ChatGPT is just showing us how boring and non-creative we are. (When I gave a talk about my REU program which included testimonials from students, the audience thought the testimonials were ChatGPT generated. They weren't, but I can see why the audience thought they were since they were all generic and not that interesting.)

Computers even have better intuitions *about other humans* than humans do. Also they have more information.

The following was the TV show Castle and I bring it up to DISAGREE with it.

*BOB*: The computer was all set to bomb a car that it thought had terrorists in it. But then the human monitoring it noticed red on the car and realized it was a married couple and the red was roses so he called it off. We can never let computers have the last word. *End of Bob's Speech*

This scene bothered me since I can just as easily imagine that a human would have bombed but the computer noticed the red roses.

Why will computers be better than us at so many things:

1. The computer has far more data.

2. Take self driving cars as an example. For one thing, the car has better sensors and is less emotional and won't panic. But also if ALL of the cars are interconnected and are aware of each other then that is MUCH safer.
3. People just aren't that good at stuff. The Drone example above is fictional. Here is a real one: The Hollywood writers strike was caused partially because a program really can output a good first draft of (say) a murder mystery (an innocuous character you see in the first 10 minutes is the murderer). That reduces the writers-pool from 10 to 2.

Which jobs will survive or be created?

1. Nurses may have safer jobs than Doctors. Any job that requires actually physical contact. (Counterargument: Robots. Already happening in Japan.)
2. People who help to train the computers. But some computers, like Chess, now train themselves.
3. People who do the creative stuff like come up with NEW medicines.
4. Working WITH computers on things like the above. These jobs might not last. Hybrid Chess has stopped working.
5. These jobs will require high skill levels. Low-skill jobs may be gone. (My Great Aunt Esther was emotionally retarded (or something). She had a GOOD job stuffing letters into envelopes. And this was NOT one of those jobs where the government pays a company to hire such people.)
6. These jobs may have short life spans as computers take over more and more.

And some artists are creative. But not many. In an episode of the TV show Scorpion there was a plot where a music group was using a program to write songs for them, but this was considered SCANDALOUS. They tried to hide it. The odd thing is if people LIKE the music will they care if it was produced by a computer?

There might also be songs tuned to a particular person. My co-blogger Lance Fortnow already did this and had AI write and perform a song about me:

<https://suno.com/song/777de155-4493-45ad-bdab-8f356c0d6ba5>

Facebook or other apps might even predict your moods and create songs or art or short stories just for you. Will these songs, or songs written for the masses, replace humans? YES. They don't have to be better than Bach, just better than Brittany Spears.

What can be done about employment?

1. Gov sponsors retraining programs for people who need to switch jobs. Expensive and might not work.
2. Regulation to slow down the progress. Won't work on two levels: (a) the countries that don't regular will get way ahead, (b) to many benefits of going ahead, and (c) might not work anyway.
3. Will Communism come back? No- Communism is about stopping the exploitation of WORKERS. But if there are no jobs, then the workers are irrelevant, not exploited.
4. Universal Basic Income- he is in favor. OR Univ basic services- free education, healthcare, etc. (I think UBI is better since if Education is Free people might not take it seriously, whereas if they are using their own money, they will.) BUT one issue: right now whenever UBI is done, its done by a local Government or by a country. But the jobs being lost are in (say) Pakistan, and that gov can't afford to do a UBI. So America should do a UBI program for Pakistan? Unlikely.
5. (This one would be hard to do.) Raising a kid is a JOB so treat it like one and give parents money.

But people will still be consumers! Not so fast- people now design websites to cater to Google's Search Engine. AI's buy stocks and bonds, not people (Hmm- thats a bit fuzzy since people pay for them).

Being made irrelevant both as workers and consumers is bad for us mentally. Changing jobs every x years is bad for us mentally. We are going to be a wreck. Will our robot-psychologist help us?

Back to **Universal** Basic Income. The government might need to provide a lot more than income. Education, job training. Also, once everyone has

basic healthcare and income there may still be an enormous gap between Rich and Poor for since jobs will be going away. Human happiness is based more on relative (they have more land than I do) rather than absolute (I have enough land to feed myself.) (I personally do not understand this. Whenever I hear that some other professors earn more, or that the new hires are getting paid close to or more than my salary I DO NOT CARE. Of course, it may help that I am a DINK)

One way out of this is giving the masses something else to make their life fulfilled. The Hasidim Jews in Israel and fully gov supported to study Torah. They don't have much but are happy because of their community.

They may be out future on some level.

### 3 Liberty: Big Data is Watching You

For better or worse, people vote how they *feel*, not how they *think* and sometimes vote on issue for which they have no expertise (e.g, Brexit).

But with AI it is possible for someone (the government, corporations, anyone with enough money) to *hack your feelings*. Thats what advertisements are all about, but with AI this is going to get a lot more sophisticated. So we have the liberty to do what we want, but what we want has been hacked.

In the past authority came from God or some divine being(s). Then with liberalism we are our own authorities so our feelings are supreme. But in the future it may be a computer program that decides what job you take, who you marry, etc. And we may do this willingly knowing that the AI knows better than we do.

(Not sure this is about liberty but its interesting, Page 49) Medicine is going to get much better at detecting what we have an proscribing a pure, perhaps preventive. So the irony is that we will have great healthcare but always think we are sick. This may lead to insurance issues: If the bio-sensors tell you to take some medicine, ad you don't, can you lose your insurance or have your insurance not pay off?

Technology will be able to track your health. But it will also track MANY other things- your sexuality (no more wondering if you are gay- the author is an uses that as an example), what movies you really like (No more pretending you like art files).

What if the algorithms tell you that you like (say) horror movies but you

honestly think you don't. Who's right? The book says that we may decide, based on experience, that the algorithm is right and we are wrong. This already happens with people following the GPS as opposed to what they think is the better route. Someone drove into Pacific Ocean because they were following Google Maps (Page 54)

AI knows us better than we know ourselves so if it says what to major in we should listen? Perhaps in the future. More and more decisions will be made by AI. The problem is not that these will be bad decisions (they are prob better than we can do ourselves) but that we lose something by handing over all decisions to an AI.

Democracy and Free Markets are a way to try to arrive at the best decisions. But in the future AI may well make better decisions. Note that the AI need not be perfect, just better than humans, which, frankly, is a low bar.

One might object that AI can do better in some limited domains (e.g., chess, maybe economics which uses stats) but not in Ethics. But again, Humans are terrible at ethics, so AI need only do better. But a caveat: Humans may choose which ethical system to use. This is no longer hypothetical: Set your car to guard your life or a pedestrians life [If ALL cars were self driving and connected there might be so few, or even no, accidents so these points become moot. There may be other domains. Would be funny if philosophers are suddenly employable.]

Coding an ethical theory into a program could be a problem since, in the end, Humans don't really want to follow a theory. Human emotions Trump Philosophical theories. Experiments prove this (the Good Samaritan experiment).

Question: You can either get your Tesla to be Altruistic or Ego. Who decides: Tesla? You? The Government? Regulations? No real answers here, but its a mess.

War: Human soldiers can rape, murder, pillage innocent civilians. Robot soldiers COULD be programmed to NOT do this. OR they could be programmed to be MORE RUTHLESS. And if its just robot vs robot there may be far less protests so wars could go on longer [Two points (1) They won't go on longer if other things like property being damaged, (2) There was an episode of Star Trek Episode: A Taste of Armageddon was about this- computers decided who would die so war was to clean and lasted a long time.]

Crime: AI surveillance. GOOD for catching criminals (this is on TV a lot where cameras everywhere catch bad guys). BAD if the laws are terrible

and/or the government is corrupt. BAD if the AI does make a mistake and there is no way to appeal it.

Politics: Democracies did (and still do?) better than dictatorships since decisions are better made with many voices. But in the future (or now) dictatorships may do better since they have the ability to get LOTS of data and use AI. There are pros and cons to this. Health Data: without those pesky privacy laws (I do not know if I am being sarcastic) you can get LOTS of data and discover LOTS of things. And the AI could help a lot here. But how will that data be used? [Dictatorships also promote on loyalty not merit, so they may have a problem with incompetent people writing the AI code, or with people telling (say) Putin what he wants to hear rather than what's true.]

Politics: If we think the future will be Hitler+AI that shows our lack of imagination. Louis the 14th and Hitler were both dictators but technology made what they did SO different. The future will also be VERY DIFFERENT. [For one thing, hacking the mind may be common.]

## **4 Equality: Those who Own the Data Own the Future**

A very brief history of inequality:

1. Hunter-Gatherer societies, people were fairly equal.
2. Farming revolution led to inequality, and this was seen as natural (perhaps they forgot how things were when they were Hunter-Gatherers).
3. Industrial Revolution- now we NEED talented people, lots of them, to run things. Equality becomes the goal (though often not achieved).
4. Modern Times- Equality is much more the goal (Witness the DEI programs- whether they work or not is not relevant here, it's that people want them to work.)

Note that the Rich and Powerful were able to DO MORE but this was largely due to their position. There were smart peasants and dumb (perhaps inbred) kings.

This may change.

1. As AI does more of our work for us, people will be irrelevant and not needed. (Makes me wonder why there is such a panic about low birth rates.)
2. With technology maybe the rich really CAN by genetic enhancements and really be smarter (or whatever) than the common person.
3. Once masses of people are no longer needed, will society stop supporting them?
4. This may lead to a death spiral of more and more inequality.

Then the book drones on about whoever has the most data wins. Repetitive.

## 5 Community: Humans have Bodies

Communities are breaking down This was the theme of the bookclub book *Bowling Alone*. The book was too long, but the essay it came from was just right. Its here:

<https://www.tesd.net/cms/lib/pa01001259/centricity/domain/1114/bowlingalone.pdf>

Facebook communities and other online communities are NOT a good substitute for personal intimate connections [COVID may have sped up the disintegration of communities but it was already happening.]

Great quote on page 89

*It is easier to talk to my cousin in Switzerland than to my husband across the breakfast table since he is looking at his smartphone.*

Mark Z claims that online communities lead to offline ones. But the reality is that online communities are replacing and hence damaging offline communities.

Our technology has made us LESS GOOD at observing our surroundings. [I used to hear things like *when my left knee hurts it means its going to rain*. Now people go to their weather apps.]

Key: Humans have bodies!

People's growing alienation has been blamed on less religion and less nationalism but the disconnect from our bodies is a bigger factor.

Mark Z wants to change this, but Facebook encourages people to be online MORE, not LESS.

So for Facebook to help, it needs a diff business model. Unlikely.

## 6 Civilization: There is just One Civilization in the Word

A contrast of people and animals:

1. Gorillas have a VERY STRICT social structure (Men Dominate and have harems). Chimps also have a VERY STRICT social structure (more egalitarian). These have been true since there were Gorillas and Chimps and CANNOT CHANGE.
2. People's cultures and habits change all the time. Even the notion of *European* or *Jewish* has changed immensely. People like to draw on long standing traditions, but even those change and are retrofitted. Example: The orthodox Jewish view of separating women from men in life (e.g., erasing the image of Hillary Clinton in the picture of the Cabinet supervising the raid on Bin Laden) is relatively NEW. Older Jewish communities, even orthodox, did not do this.

Even a person within a lifetime can go from Liberal to Libertarian, Jewish to Christian, etc and this is not unusual.

Another contrast: Species split, but only humans merge. The EU for example. Even wars lead to unification. We know more about Russia because of the Cold war. More about Vietnam because of the war there. [Without the war we would never had heard of Vietnam.]

Countries are now unified by being a country, not so much by religion or ethnicity. 1000 years ago if there was an Olympics the teams would be religions or ethnicities. Today its countries. All countries want and need some kind of international recognition (the Taliban is trying to get that). All national anthems sound the same, all flags look the same. Some countries thought they were the best

## 7 Nationalism:

Nationalism is not natural. Its to big. A country is to diverse to really be loyal to it. It was natural to have loyalty and affection for a group of at

most 200 people. Nations formed to achieve bigger projects (wars, farming, helping each other not starve) than a small group could do. While that can be good its not naturally an entity to pledge loyalty to.

It good to be some loyal to your country to help it get things done, but its bad if it becomes Chauvinistic nationalism. Another problem is to try to MAKE your country homogenous.

Before 1945

1. PRO: Health and Welfare projects, better defense, some unity.
2. CON: Wars- some with other countries and some even internal.

After the Atomic Bomb War became much scarier so global cooperation was needed to restrain it. And it has worked- far less wars now then before 1945 (can we even imagine Germany and France going to war?) and no Atomic Bombs aimed at another country since Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

[Another reason for less wars that we read in Sapiens is that LAND is no longer as key as it once was. Brainpower is, and thats much harder to capture in a war, possibly impossible.]

The benefits of globalization- less war, more trade have become so assumed and taken for granted that when the situation is less-than-perfect people overreach: Brexit. Also, we need international cooperation on Global warming and other Ecological issues [I don't recall if he mentioned forever-chemicals.]

Climate change will be harder to prevent then Nuclear war since some countries benefit from it (e.g., Russia has few coastlines and wants to sell oil) whereas Nuclear War affects all of us (if Russia nukes Ukraine the fallout affects all nations.)

Nationalism will make the coming problem of technological change (e.g., AI ethics, bio-ethics) far worse since no country has an incentive to hold back.

[This is a general problem- nationals acting in what they think is their own best interest in a way that is terrible for the rest of the world.]

The author talks of three main problems: Nuclear war, Ecological collapse, technological destruction. All three require international cooperation that is hard.

To end on a bright spot: The EU and also Britain deal with their problems without war. Example: No war over Brexit, no war over the move for Scottish

ind. We are so used to this that it seems odd to bring it up, but in the past Scottish Ind DID lead to war.

## 8 Religion

Religion will be no help to deal with these problems. I am surprised it takes a whole chapter to establish this.

In the past Religion was involved with very practical things like healing and farming. They may even have been somewhat helpful in these since people used traditions that had been tested. But science was so much better and took over so thoroughly that even very pious people now will go to a doctor or use science in other ways as well as pray.

[A study a while back showed that praying for people does not help them recover from an illness. This did not cause a controversy since our expectations for prayer are so low. A Catholic I know told me that prayer is till good as its talking to God.]

Same with economics: The bible and Koran if read honestly don't have much to say about modern society. Some of Jesus said to help thy neighbor and give to the poor but thats a far cry from a worked out economical system, or how much Government should be involved. (Some have tried to say Jesus was a Socialist, but thats a stretch.)

Religions sometimes take on hardline economic or policy positions, but they can't really be said to come from their faith.

1. Liberation Theology turns Jesus into Che Guevara (thats not quite right since the real Che was very cruel, but the Mythical Che fits better).
2. Right Wing Christianity claims Christ was for Capitalism.
3. Right Wing Christianity claims separating families at the border is a Christian viewpoint. This is just wrong.
4. The Catholic church has sometimes offered to help mediate wars, but nobody cares.
5. The Catholic church was pro-Nazi in WW II.

6. Pope Francis has urged Catholics to care about Global warming. Evangelicals preach that global warming is a sham. Gee- they both read from the same bible mostly. [There are some differences in their bibles and there are a few more books in the Catholic bible, but that is NOT the reason for the difference]

Arguments that the Bible supports their viewpoint are silly. Indeed, even religious leaders argue from secular sources. So what role is religion playing here? NONE except to unify people in a certain direction.

So where are we now? Many countries (Japan is his example) are modern secular countries but still have a state religion that unifies them but does not influence science. Thats good in that religion neither helps or hurts (could help a little with the unification but hurts if it becomes bigotry).

Negative: Religion also fosters an US vs THEM mentality. Less of a *whats good for humanity* approach. This is true but odd since Christianity is founded on breaking down barrier's and asking whats good for humanity.

## 9 Immigration

People now have much more of a chance to meet people very different from them. This can lead to either more understanding or more hatred.

Immigration debates center on 3 points. The book points out that they are often muddled in the public debate, and the book does a great job clarifying them.

### 9.1 The Host Country Lets Immigrants in

1. What criteria do we use to let them in? [The National Front in France is an anti-immigration party, hence *right wing* (those terms are problematic as we will see) but one reason they give to keep out Muslims is that Muslims are anti-gay and would threaten the gay community. Hence the NF has some gay members. This may backfire if the NF is also anti-gay which there are some signs of. Same with Jews.]
2. How many do we let in?
3. How do we enforce the rules? People who are PRO-immigration say its impossible to keep them out, while people who are ANTI-immigration

say we can do it with more firepower. But this debate is often muddled with the bigger question of who you should let in.

4. Can we have them as guest workers (so get the eco benefit) but not make the citizens? Should this be out in the open or done under the table?
5. Are we letting them in as a favor or as a duty?

## 9.2 The Immigrants Obligations

*In return, the immigrants must embrace at least the core norms and values of the host country, even if this means giving up some of their traditional norms and values.*

1. How much should immigrants give up?
2. Asking an immigrant to tolerate other religions may be against their religion. What do do about that?
3. A paradox: Both pro and anti immigration people claim their position is because of freedom and tolerance  
Pro Immigration: We are tolerant of foreigners.  
Anti Immigration: We don't want to let in foreigners who anti-semitic, homophobic, chauvinistic Muslims
4. Some Anti Immigration's also want the immigrants to adapt the same clothes and dress and either religious values (or lack). This is a form of intolerance.

## 9.3 End result

*If the immigrants assimilate to a sufficient degree, over time they may become equal and full members of the host country. "They" become "us"*

[This has happened a lot in America. Its rare to even here the terms Italian-American or German-American.]

How long to wait? Personal timescale: 40 years is a long time to wait.  
Global timescale: 40 years is a short time.

## 9.4 Is the Deal Working?

In many countries Immigrants are not assimilation or not fast enough. Whose fault is that

Anti-Immigrants people way its the immigrants fault.

Pro-Immigrant people say that the society has made it hard for immigrants. For example, red tape and prejudices. Indeed- prejudice may make an immigrant hang on to their home countries values more. [Joke: The biggest threat to Judaism in American is the LACK of anti-semitism until, thank goodness, the Israel-Hamas war has ignited anti-semitism in America which will revive Judaism!]

Some countries think that their country is inherently better than other countries. This may make it hard for immigrants.

## 9.5 Racism and Culturism

Before 1945 many people thought that the different races were genetically different and that some were genetically inferior. [Oddly enough, later in the book he talks about how technology may eventually make the rich genetically superior.] This point of view is now seen as wrong.

But there are *cultural differences* between different groups of people. These may change over time. While it is probably good to tolerate other cultures what about cultures that are intolerant of FILL IT IN: GAYS, WOMEN, BLACKS, WISIANS or in favor of FILL IN IN: widow burning (India in an earlier time), stoning to death,

When someone immigrants to a country and his culture is very diff than the host country (and not even bad), he might think people are racist when they are culturist or even just not understanding.

Culturism has replaced racism but it may have some of the same problems. And most important- not only can people break out of their culture (but not out of their race) but the stereotypes will not apply to all people and may be false in the first place. [When I first heard the stereotype that Jews were cheap this was news to me- I had literally never seen it before or since then. Some Stereotypes are completely made up and do not even have a grain of truth to them.]

## 10 Terrorism: Don't Panic

Terrorism kills FAR less people than ... YOU NAME IT (car accident, car accident-per-capita, violence against women, drugs, guns, gum, suicides). Yes it is an issue. Terrorists are *not* military commanders trying to win a war. They are producing Theatre to induce the emotion of fear.

1. During them Middle Ages not a single king lost their job because of the Plague. *It was not the job of the King to stop the Plague. It was the job of the King to stop heresies from spreading*, and some Kings were killed for their failure to do that. Today it *is not the government's job to prevent car accidents* and indeed, no president or leader has been kicked out of office because there are too many car accidents. However *it is the president's job to prevent a terror attack, or to retaliate if there is one* (note that for car accidents or the Plague there is nothing to retaliate against). Oddly enough, nowadays *it is the governments job to manage COVID, the modern day plague*.

2. During WW II the Japanese bombed *Pearl Harbor*. This was a military target and they hoped to sink some of our ships. (There were 102 ships. 69 had no damage. 15 had minor damage. 11 had medium to heavy damage. 7 sunk but *only 3 were a total loss, The Arizona, Oklahoma, Utah* (Quote from <https://www.pearlharbortours.com/pearl-harbor/things-you-dont-know/>

Sinking a cruise ship would not have served any military objective, but it would have struck fear into America. If they were terrorists they would not be able to attack Pearl Harbor but they would be able to attack a cruise ship.

3. In medieval times terrorism made no sense. If Muslims attacked civilian Christians demanding the crusades to be stopped then the Muslims would have been laughed at. The book says that there were bigger things to worry about. I think that (1) there was no democracy so the notion of the people demanding that the government do something to stop civilians being killed was an alien notion, and (2) life was cheap- the Pope or the Kings did not care even a little if some peasants (most people were peasants) got killed.

4. Again medieval times. Estates fought estates all of the time. So you can call that terrorism but it was to them standard operating procedure.
5. In most countries there is no political violence. Jan 6 was shocking because it was so unusual. Here is a great quote (Page 168, second paragraph)

*The less political violence in a state, the greater the public shock at an act of terrorism. Killing a few people in Belgium draws far more attention than killing hundreds in Nigeria or Iraq. Paradoxically, then, the very success of modern states in preventing political violence makes them particularly vulnerable to terrorism.*

6. Terrorists hope for an over-reaction. This happened in both WW I and 9-11. (Even so, in either case, did the terrorists get what they wanted?)
7. If terrorists get nukes, that is a game changer because then they really can do real damage. [At that point they are a nation state so why do we call what they do terrorism? More generally, when is someone a terrorists?]

How to deal with terrorism. Three points (page 168-169)

1. Take clandestine action against terror networks.
2. The Media should keep things in perspective (impossible).
3. We the public should remind ourselves of how few people they kill and how minor the risk is (impossible). This would also involve politicians not making it an issue (impossible).

## 11 War: Never Underestimate Human Stupidity

War has declined *significantly* since 1914. Why?

1. In 1914 people could point to cases where a country that attacked another benefited. (Most great empires. The United States vs Mexico and also the Native Americans. Now, not so much. Either the aggressor loses or both countries lose (The Russia-Ukraine war will surely be in one of those categories).

2. The cold war was won without the USSR and America ever fighting directly.
3. American invaded Iraq but this cost a lot of money and lives but yielded not real benefit (e.g., Iraq is not a democracy and not a friend to the US). China and the US both did badly in Vietnam.
4. Trade and such makes a country a success without firing a shot. (Canada, Sweden, UAE are getting more successful by making it much easier for talented immigrants to go there and become citizens. So they benefit without a shot fired.)
5. As the world gets more connected there is more of a downside to war. Odd Example: Germany and Russia both agreed to have an oil pipeline. Russia got money and Germany (and the EU) thought that by integrating Russia into the European economy they would never attack a nation. That makes perfect sense and is logical. Oh well.
6. War used to be about LAND. Now countries compete on so many fronts (talent, knowledge, innovation) that are not the kind of thing you take by force. (I always thought that James Bond movies where the bad guys capture a scientist and force him to work for them were silly- you can't coerce innovation.)
7. The USSR and America had a real ideological conflict. Communism was appealing to some other countries. Putin has no ideology so its harder to get allies to fight with you. Note that China will buy oil from Russia but not supply weapons.

Can all of this last?

1. Since the 2008 Financial crisis there have been more skirmishes
2. Despite the illogical of war, some countries still do it (Russia is the most obvious one).
3. Terrorism
4. Human Stupidity. See next chapter on Humility.

## 12 Humility: You are Not the Center of the World

All groups (religions, ethnicities, other groupings) think they are special or better than others. He uses the Jews as **just an example** of why this is false. He claims that he could have done this with **any** group, but this is the one he is most familiar with.

Here is what the Jews (or some Jews) claim that makes them special and why they are not.

1. The Jews introduced Ethics. Not true- there were ethical systems before the Jews. Some better, some worse.
2. The Jews introduced monotheism. Not true but also not something to brag about. Polytheistic people never fought over religion.
3. The Jews were the origin of Christianity. So do we give Freud's mother credit for founding the field of Psychology. We do not.
4. Jews have contributed far more than their numbers (0.2% of world's population). They have won 41% of the Nobel Prizes in Economics, 26% of the Nobel Prizes in Medicine, 25% of the Nobel Prizes in Physics, 19% of the Nobel prizes in Chemistry, 13% of the Nobel Prizes in Literature, 9% of the Nobel Prizes in Peace.

This seems to be rather impressive and odd example of how to show the Jews *are not* special. Here is what the author says: Jews only began making these contributions (not jut the Nobel prize, but science in general) once they STOPPED being religious. ALL of those Nobel Prizes were done by secular Jews (or not-that-religious Jews). Not a single Orthodox Jew has contributed to science.

So is this really a good example for the author? Depends on how you view the statement that Jews are somehow special.

- People of the Jewish FAITH have contributed: FALSE.
  - People of the Jewish Ethnic group have contributed: TRUE.
5. While Jews may have contributed to science there is no such thing as *Jewish Physics*. There is nothing distinctly Jewish about any field of study.

A curious thought: at one time it was said we needed more Black doctors since they would take diseases of black people (e.g, Sickle Cell Anemia) seriously. More generally, science that benefits a particular group is of more interest to that group. Even so, I would not call the the field where one studies Sickle Cell Anemia *Black Medicine*

## 13 God: Don't Take the Name of God in Vein

Not much new here.

1. The creator of the universe and the Moral Law Giver- these two beings would seem to have nothing to do with each other.
2. Ethics do not need God- all animals, including us, have an innate morality.
3. Religion has inspired great things like Abolition, but has also created the need for those things. The book Dominion claims that Christianity has been good for society in the **very long** run.

He has an interesting take on the Third Commandment:

*Don't take the Name of God in Vein*

He thinks it means:

*Perhaps the deeper meaning of this commandment is that we should never use the name of God to justify our political interests, our economic ambitions, or our personal hatreds.*

## 14 Secularism: Acknowledge Your Shadow

Here is the secular Ideal:

1. Commitment to truth based on observation and evidence, not faith.
2. Do not confuse truth with belief.
3. No person or entity has sole custody of the truth.

4. Ethics: Have compassion for others.
5. Ethics: do not (say) murder because it leads to suffering. So the ethical principle is to minimize suffering.
6. Responsibility.
7. Judge people on their actions, not their beliefs. So you can be Jewish or christian and still be secular.
8. On all of the above admit your ignorance if that's what you have.

This is woefully incomplete- what if helping one person harms another? What about the Trolley Problem?

So secular is not just the lack of religion.

A false criticism is that people who are secular do not have ethics. Actually the opposite is true- the ethical bar is high.

Stalin: the problem is that in the absence of religion and a definite authority, rather than (as secular people should) work things out for yourself and see what works, there are times when a society decides that their leader knows best.

Secularists try to avoid dogma, but some dogmas like Human Rights are good.

Even though secularism has sometimes led to dictatorships it's better than religion since it can admit error.

## **15 Ignorance: You Know Less Than You Think**

As a society we know a lot more than hunter-gatherers (e.g., we can drive and fly and buy food in supermarkets). As individuals we know far less (we have no idea how most of our technology works and we have no idea how to survive as a hunter-gatherer).

As time goes on we know less and less and things we know more and more. People make policies about things they barely understand. Teaching the public more science doesn't seem to help as they use it badly to reinforce their own preconceived notions.

The policy positions of the parties in America (and elsewhere) are an arbitrary collection of positions. Too much groupthink. People's opinions are more shaped by their friends than by rational thought.

## 16 Justice: Our Sense of Justice Might be Out of Date

We evolved to deal with issues of justice in a society of at most 200 people. So we are not able to deal with modern society.

- 10,000 years ago: If you collect mushrooms to feed your family and I am stronger than you, hit you on the head, take your mushrooms then that is WRONG. Your action is intentional and the harm is direct.
- Today: If I eat a tomato that was made by overworked farmers in Mexico who dies from exhaust. Hmm- Is my eating the tomato wrong? We are all so far removed from the evil (and the good) that we do.

The problems are structural with society, not with individuals. We have no idea how to handle that.

What to do? We take the Syrian Conflict as an example.

1. Imagine the conflict as Assad vs the Rebels and see whose side is right. This will not lead to a solution but you at least know who is in the right.
2. Think of ONE person harmed by the conflict and set up a charity based on that ONE person. People are happy to give to ONE person. (Many charities work this way- you pay x dollars a month to support ONE family or ONE elephant.)
3. Imagine that there is a conspiracy responsible for the problems.
4. Start with some dogmatic believe system (perhaps a religion) and use that to determine who is right.

Or give up and declare we are in a post-truth world, which is the next chapter.

## 17 Post-Truth: Some Fake News Lasts Forever

Lies that people claimed were true:

1. The Protocols of Zion and other anti-semitic falsehoods that have no trace of truth to them.
2. The founding of Israel denied there were such a thing as Palestinians.
3. China denies that Tibet was every a country.
4. In 1931 Japan staged a mock attack on itself to justify going to war with China. They then set up a fake country Manchukuo, a puppet state of Japan in Northeast China.
5. Nationalist propaganda - Nazi's and others.
6. Russia in 2022 claimed that Ukraine was never a country.
7. Pizzagate.

[Gee- is fake news, or post-truth, even a new concept?] He says NO- its always been this way. We are hard-wired for it. He also includes all organized religions in this category.

Its easier to unite people with a simple lie than a complex truth.  
So how to get good information:

1. You need to pay for it. Free news is often not true.
2. If an issue is important to you then read up on it A LOT and on all sides.

We also need scientists to be more engaged with policy (like the UMCP ACES program)

## **18 Science Fiction: The Future is Not What you See in the Movies**

(This chapter seems like it should be in a different book.)

Science fiction (and other fiction) often has us in one world (e.g., The Matrix, The Truman Show) that isn't real but then the hero escapes and is then in *the real world*. The author thinks that there is no such thing as the real world and the movies should reflect that. We are all stuck in or own minds.

The movie *Inside Out*, a pixar movie, seems to have escaped this cliché. Another contrast:

1. *1984* shows a government who controls everything by force and propaganda. Alas, the main characters never do escape it.
2. *Brave New world* the government pacifies people with pills and entertainment (today's TV, cable, cell phone games might be quite close) so nobody cares enough to rebel.

## 19 Education

We train students for the future. But the future is far more unknown to us than it was (say) 100 years ago. Technology is changing so fast and jobs will go away and/or be transformed. Even the knowledge needed to be a good citizen is changing fast. Ideally schools will teach people how to learn, how to evaluate. But we are already failing at that.

In the past the state or other power-centers could censor what information you get. Today they can no longer do that (the internet) but they can push so many false narratives that you don't know what is true. (There are people who doubt Global Warming.)

Should teach the four C's: Critical Thinking, Communication, Collaboration, creativity.

In the past we had a period of learning, then of having a stable job (even if we changed jobs it was doing the same thing or a variant). And by 50 it's very hard to change. But we may have to!

The book club thought that the author may be wrong about how fast things will change. For example, he thinks that not only will our jobs change (likely) or go away (likely) but our genders may change (our choice), the entire structure of society or family may change, AI may make many choices for us, we may have our emotions hacked.

## 20 Meaning: Life is Not a Story

All cultures have stories that give their lives meaning.

We must uphold the Kosher laws and preserve our future.

We must make America Great Again

There is a circle of life

You have a predestined path that you must adhere to.

These stories all seem silly after you think about them.

A simpler story is that you just need to leave something behind: Children, a theorem, a work of art (according to Dr. Who Agatha Christie stories will be around 1,000,000 years from now). Or some kind of reincarnation. Alas, this also never works. Most genetic lines die out, most goods get old or destroyed.

*I am here to help others. But I don't know why they are here.*

Deep believe in a fictional story has caused many religious wars. And the stories are reinforced by multiple tellings and rituals (e.g., communion). Suffering for your story also makes you want to stick to it.

People often have multiple stories that conflict (e.g., pro-life but against any maternity-leave policy). But they manage fine.

In modern society we have many stories to choose from.

*The universe does not give me meaning, I give the universe meaning.*

*even if you liberate humans from the yoke of the Catholic Church and the Soviet Union, their choices will still be dictated by biochemical algorithms as ruthless as the Inquisitional and the KGB.*

This is similar to the Science Fiction chapter about never escaping the matrix.

Sounds to sad to be true.

The author does not believe in free will.

Even Buddhists who don't believe in much can have fierce fights.

*According to the Buddha then, life has no meaning and people don't need to create meaning. They just need to realize that there is no meaning, and therefore be liberated from the suffering caused by our attachment and our identification with empty phenomena. "What should I do" ask people, and the Buddha advises "Do nothing. Absolutely Nothing"*

*In the 18th century, the royal dynasties of both Burma and Siam were devoted Buddhist. The king endowed monasteries and listened to the monks on the five basic moral commitments: no killing, no sexual abuse, no deception, no stealing, no intoxication. On April 7, 1967 the army of Burma stormed the capitol of Siam after a long siege. The victorious troops killed, looted, raped, and probably got intoxicated. They then burned much of the city including the monasteries and carried home thousands of slaves and cartloads of gold and jewels.*

Japan did SMILAR things. One loophole: if you give up everything in your life you then defer to the wise and kind emperor and follow him blindly (I doubt they would put it that way).

This is NOT just the past. A Buddhist monk Ashin Wirashu preaches intense hatred of Muslims under the excuse of wanting to stop a jihad. This same monk has compassion for a dead mosquito but when told of a Muslim women who was raped he said *Impossible, their bodies are to disgusting*

*Danger* When a politician (or someone else powerful) invokes mystical things like *the soul of the nation* and wants its people to do concrete things like *kill all those who disagree* then that is dangerous. Beware the following four words: Sacrifice, Eternity, Purity, Redemption.

## **21 Meditation: Just Observe**