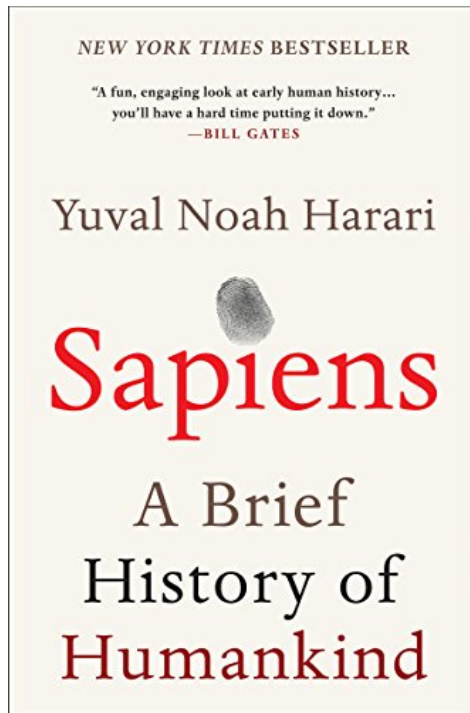


## #1 Book Summary: Sapiens, by Yuval Noah Harari

by Allen Cheng

<https://www.allencheng.com/sapiens-book-summary-yuval-noah-harari/>



In *Sapiens*, Yuval Noah Harari uses concepts from biology, history, and economics to tell the story of us, *Homo sapiens*. Harari takes us on a journey that starts 2.5 million years ago, when Sapiens make their historical entrance, and ends in the future, when the creation of an artificially created superhuman race may mark the end of the Sapiens species. Along the way, we learn how our ability to create imagined realities led to our dominance over other species. We watch as the Agricultural Revolution, the Scientific Revolution, imperialism, capitalism, and the Industrial Revolution change our species in lasting, and not always positive, ways.

Ultimately, we're left with one question: As we design our future, who do we want to become? Harari doesn't give an opinion. Rather, he shows us that asking the right questions may be more important than finding the right answers.

Read this summary to explore our history as a species—in doing so, you'll see today's world in an entirely new way.

## 1-Page Summary of Sapiens

In *Sapiens*, Yuval Noah Harari uses concepts from physics, chemistry, biology, and history to tell the story of us, *Homo sapiens*.

Our history is punctuated by four major revolutions: The Cognitive Revolution, the Agricultural Revolution, the Scientific Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution. We'll look at each revolution and how it dramatically redirected the course of human history.

### The Cognitive Revolution

2.5 million years to a time when *Homo sapiens* was just one of eight human species. The first major revolution for Sapiens was the Cognitive Revolution 70,000 years ago. Before that point, Sapiens weren't particularly special and weren't superior to the other seven human species. The Cognitive Revolution involved the development of three new abilities, all related to language, that helped Homo sapiens outpace their fellow humans.

#### Ability #1: Flexible Language

**One reason the language of Sapiens was different was that it was more complex.** Rather than communicating simple ideas the way green monkeys do ("Careful! A lion!" or "Careful! An eagle!"), the language of Sapiens could warn someone about a lion, describe its location, and plan how to deal with it. This allowed them to plan and follow through on complex actions like avoiding predators and working together to trap prey.

## Ability #2: Gossip

A second distinction of the Sapiens language was its ability to convey gossip. We think of gossip as a bad thing, but **using language to convey information about other people is a way to build trust**. Trust is critical for social cooperation, and cooperation gives you an advantage in the struggle to survive and pass on your genes. Sapiens could form groups of up to 150 people. They didn't need to know every group member personally to trust them. In a battle, a small group of Neanderthals was no match for a group of 150 Sapiens.

## Ability #3: Fictions

A third benefit of the Sapiens' language was how it was used to create fictions, also known as "social constructs" or "imagined realities."

Being able to communicate information about things that don't exist doesn't seem like an advantage. But **Sapiens seem to be the only animals who have this ability to discuss things that don't have a physical presence in the world, like money, human rights, corporations, and God.**

### Collective Fictions

In and of itself, imagining things that don't exist isn't an asset—you won't aid your chances of survival if you go into the forest looking for ghosts rather than berries and deer.

**What's important about the ability to create fictions is the ability to create *collective* fictions, fictions everyone believes.** These collective myths allow people who've never met and otherwise would have nothing in common to cooperate under shared assumptions and goals.

Although imagined, these myths are crucial. **Without collective fictions, the systems built on them collapse.** And as we'll see, most of our modern systems are built on these imagined realities. These myths are powerful, and the fact that they're not rooted in objective reality doesn't undermine them.

Collective fictions allowed early Sapiens to cooperate within extremely large groups of people, most of whom they'd never met, and it rapidly changed their social behavior.

## **The Agricultural Revolution**

About 10,000 years ago, between 9500 and 8500 BC, Sapiens started shifting from forager lifestyles to a life revolving around agriculture. This was the Agricultural Revolution. It was so successful for our species that we went from 5-8 million foragers in 10,000 BC to 250 million farmers by the first century AD.

The move from foraging to agriculture wasn't necessarily a conscious choice. Rather, it was a gradual process of small, seemingly insignificant changes. Let's see how those small changes add up to a monumental revolution.

### **The Spread of Wheat**

18,000 years ago, **the last ice age retreated, increasing rainfall.** This was great for wheat and other grains, which started to spread. Because there was more wheat, people started eating more of it, taking it back to their campsites to grind and cook. On the way to the campsite, some of the small grains were sprinkled along the path, helping the spread of wheat.

Humans burned the forests to create clearings that attracted animals. This also cleared the area of large trees and bushes that would have competed with the wheat for sunlight and water. Where wheat prospered, nomads would settle for a few weeks, enjoying the plenty. **A few weeks turned into a few more, and over generations, these areas became permanent settlements.**

People started storing grain for later and invented stone scythes, pestles, and mortars. Because they saw that wheat grew better when it was buried deep in the soil rather than sprinkled on top, **humans began to hoe and plow the fields. Weeding, watering, and fertilizing followed.** With all this time spent on tending the wheat, there was less time to hunt and gather. Sapiens had become farmers.

The move toward farming wasn't an obvious benefit, since it led to a number of drawbacks.

- Agriculture was much harder than foraging and hunting for food, and it left farmers more vulnerable to disease and hunger.
- Farmers also had a less nutritious diet than foragers due to its lack of variety.
- When agriculture succeeded, all the extra food they grew resulted in a population boom. More people meant closer living quarters, leading to disease epidemics. Child mortality soared.

Most of the surplus went to the elite, and they probably did live better lives than their ancestors. But **the Agricultural Revolution didn't immediately translate to a better life for most individuals.**

## The Scientific Revolution

In the last 500 years, we've seen unprecedented scientific and technological growth, so much so that a time traveler from 1500 would recognize very little of our world. For instance, since 1500, the world population has grown from 500 million Sapiens to 7 billion. Every word and number in every book in every medieval library could be easily stored on a modern computer. Further, we've built skyscrapers, circumnavigated the earth, and landed on the moon. We've discovered the existence of bacteria and can now cure most diseases caused by it, even engineer bacteria for use in medicines. **All of these advances were made possible by the Scientific Revolution.**

In many ways, the Scientific Revolution was the result of a shift in the way Sapiens viewed the world and its future.

We post-Scientific Revolution Sapiens understand the world differently than our ancestors:

**1. We are willing to acknowledge our ignorance:** Today, we assume there are gaps in our knowledge, and we even question what we think we know. This wasn't the norm before the Scientific Revolution.

**2. We emphasize observation and mathematics:** Rather than getting our knowledge from divine books, we use our senses and the technologies available to us to make observations. We then use mathematics to connect these observations and make them into a coherent theory.

**3. We strive for new powers:** Knowledge is only valuable in its use to us. We don't develop theories for the sake of knowing more. We use theories to gain new powers — in particular, new technologies.

**4. We believe in progress,** whereas our ancestors believed that the golden age was behind them.

### Judging Findings by Their Usefulness

In the late 16th century, Francis Bacon made the connection between scientific research and the production of technology, but the relationship didn't become really strong until the 19th century. Bacon saw that assessing how “true” knowledge is isn't a good yardstick because we can't assume that any theory is 100% correct. A better yardstick is how useful that knowledge is.

War has developed both science and technology. By WWI, governments depended on scientists to develop advanced aircraft, efficient machine guns, submarines, and poison gases. During WWII, the Germans held on for so long because they believed their scientists were on the verge of developing the V-2 rocket and jet-powered aircraft, weapons that may have turned the tide of the war. Meanwhile, Americans ended the war with a piece of new technology, the atomic bomb.

Our views on the value of technology have strayed so far from those of our ancestors that **we now turn to technology to solve our global conflicts.** The US Department of Defense is currently investing research money on bionic spy-flies that stealthily track the movements of enemies and fMRI scanners that can read hateful thoughts.

### The Industrial Revolution

Economic growth requires more than just trust in the future and the willingness of employers to reinvest

their capital. It needs resources, the energy and raw materials that go into production. **While the economy can grow, our resources remain finite.**

At least, that's what we've thought for centuries. But the energy and raw materials that are accessible to us today have increased as a result of the Industrial Revolution. **We now have both better ways of exploiting our resources and resources that didn't exist in the worlds of our ancestors.**

## The Discovery of Energy Conversion

Our ancestors were limited in how they could harness and convert energy.

**First, they had limited resources.** Before the Industrial Revolution, humans burned wood and used wind and water power for energy. But if you didn't live by a river, if you ran out of trees in your area, or if the wind wasn't blowing, you were out of luck. The ways people could access energy were limited.

**Second, there was no way to convert one type of energy into another.** For example, they couldn't harness the wind and then turn that energy into heat to smelt iron.

## Breakthroughs in Converting Energy

The discovery of gunpowder introduced the idea that **you could convert heat energy to movement**, but this was such an odd concept that it took 600 years for gunpowder to be used widely in artillery.

Another 300 years passed before the invention of the steam engine, which used also converted heat to movement, through the pressure of steam. After this, the idea of turning one type of energy into another didn't seem so foreign. **People became obsessed with discovering new ways to harness energy.** For example, when physicists realized that the atom stores a lot of energy, they quickly devised ways to release it to make electricity (and bombs). The internal combustion engine turned petroleum, previously used to waterproof roofs and lubricate axles, into a liquid that nations fought wars over. Electricity went from being a cheap magic trick to something we use everyday and can't imagine living without.

## The New Problem: Supply Outstrips Demand

For most of history, goods were scarce. People lived frugally, and frugality was a virtue. In an odd twist, today, we have too much stuff. Rather than supply not meeting demand, demand didn't always meet the supply. We needed buyers.

This prompted the new ethic of consumerism. **Frugality became a bad word, and people were taught by industries that consuming was a positive thing. Self-indulgence is “self-care” and frugality is “self-oppression.”**

Consumerism has changed our values, habits, and health.

- We think it's normal that manufacturers make poor-quality, short-term goods and then invent new models that we don't need but are told we do.
- Shopping is a huge part of holidays like Christmas and Memorial Day.
- In many countries, the poorest, who live on low-nutrition junk foods, are more likely to die of obesity rather than starvation.
- We spend huge amounts of money on food, and then we spend huge amounts of money on diet products, doubly supporting the growing economy.

Consumerism seems to conflict with the capitalist mentality of wasting nothing and reinvesting profits. While the two codes of ethics *do* conflict, they can inhabit the same space as the “capitalist-consumer ethic,” because this combined ethic has different rules for different people. **The capitalist-consumer ethic tells the rich to invest and the poor to buy.** The rich believe in frugality and investing, and the poor believe in buying and indulging. The rich manage their investments while the poor buy televisions and new phones they don't need. The spending of the poor supports the wealth accumulation of the rich. The capitalist-consumer ethic allows the rich to keep getting richer and the poor to keep getting poorer.

## The Future of *Homo Sapiens*

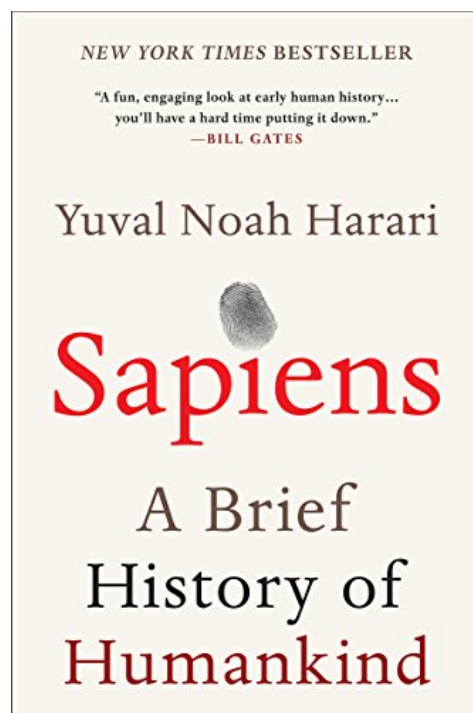


**For the last 4 billion years, species, including Sapiens, have been constrained by the laws of natural selection, but today, we're on the brink of replacing natural selection with intelligent design. This poses questions we've never had to answer before.**

### **The Danger of Inequality**

**We could be in the process of creating the most unequal society in history.** The richest have always felt they were the smartest and most capable, but throughout history, this has been a delusion. Now, we're approaching an era in which you could pay to increase your intelligence and give you superhuman skills. The rich and powerful might actually become objectively smarter and more skilled than the rest of humanity.

**---End of Preview---**



**Read the rest of the "Sapiens" summary at my new book summary product, [Shortform](#).**

Here's what you'll find in the **full Sapiens summary**:

- Concise summaries of all 20 chapters in Sapiens
- The single critical development that led Sapiens to dominate other human species
- Why most of what we believe about the world is nothing more than a collective imaginary reality
- ...and much more

Shortform has the world's best summaries of nonfiction books and articles. Even better, **it helps you remember what you read, so you can make your life better**. What's special about Shortform:

- The [world's highest quality book summaries](#) - comprehensive, concise, and everything you need to know
- Interactive exercises that teach you to apply what you've learned
- [Discussion communities](#) - get the best advice from other readers

Sound like what you've been looking for? [Sign up for a 5-day free trial here](#).

**Like this book summary? Visit [www.allencheng.com](https://www.allencheng.com) for more.**