

Yuval Noah Harari: 'Will coronavirus change our attitudes to death? Quite the opposite'

Will the coronavirus pandemic return us to more traditional and accepting, attitudes towards dying – or reinforce our attempts to prolong life? - 4/20/20 - The Guardian ([source](#))

The modern world has been shaped by the belief that humans can outsmart and defeat death. That was a revolutionary new attitude. For most of history, humans meekly submitted to death. Up to the late modern age, most religions and ideologies saw death not only as our inevitable fate, but as the main source of meaning in life. The most important events of human existence happened after you exhaled your last breath. Only then did you come to learn the true secrets of life. Only then did you gain eternal salvation, or suffer everlasting damnation. In a world without death – and therefore without heaven, hell or reincarnation – religions such as Christianity, Islam and Hinduism would have made no sense. For most of history the best human minds were busy giving meaning to death, not trying to defeat it.

In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, the Bible, the Qur'an, the Vedas, and countless other sacred books and tales patiently explained to distressed humans that we die because God decreed it, or the Cosmos, or Mother Nature, and we had better accept that destiny with humility and grace. Perhaps someday God would abolish death through a grand metaphysical gesture such as Christ's second coming. But orchestrating such cataclysms was clearly above the pay grade of flesh-and-blood humans.

Then came the scientific revolution. For scientists, death isn't a divine decree – it is merely a technical problem. Humans die not because God said so, but because of some technical glitch. The heart stops pumping blood. Cancer has destroyed the liver. Viruses multiply in the lungs. And what is responsible for all these technical problems? Other technical problems. The heart stops pumping blood because not enough oxygen reaches the heart muscle. Cancerous cells spread in the liver because of some chance genetic mutation. Viruses settled in my lungs because somebody sneezed on the bus. Nothing metaphysical about it.

And science believes that every technical problem has a technical solution. We don't need to wait for Christ's second coming in order to overcome death. A couple of scientists in a lab can do it. Whereas traditionally death was the specialty of priests and theologians in black cassocks, now it's the folks in white lab coats. If the heart flutters, we can stimulate it with a pacemaker or even transplant a new heart. If cancer rampages, we can kill it with radiation. If viruses proliferate in the lungs, we can subdue them with some new medicine.

True, at present we cannot solve all technical problems. But we are working on them. The best human minds no longer spend their time trying to give meaning to death. Instead, they are busy extending life. They are investigating the microbiological, physiological and genetic systems responsible for disease and old age, and developing new medicines and revolutionary treatments.

In their struggle to extend life, humans have been remarkably successful. Over the last two centuries, average life expectancy has jumped from under 40 years to 72 in the entire world, and to more than 80 in some developed countries. Children in particular have succeeded in escaping death's clutches. Until the 20th century, at least a third of children never reached adulthood. Youngsters routinely succumbed to childhood diseases such as dysentery, measles and smallpox. In 17th-century England, about 150 out of every 1,000 newborns died during their first year, and only about 700 made it to age 15. Today, only five out of 1,000 English babies die during their first year, and 993 get to celebrate their 15th birthday. In the world as a whole, child mortality is down to less than 5%.

Humans have been so successful in our attempt to safeguard and prolong life that our worldview has changed in a profound way. While traditional religions considered the afterlife as the main source of meaning, from the 18th century ideologies such as liberalism, socialism and feminism lost all interest in the afterlife. What, exactly, happens to a communist after he or she dies? What happens to a capitalist? What happens to a feminist? It is pointless to look for the answer in the writings of Karl Marx, Adam Smith, or Simone de Beauvoir.

The only modern ideology that still awards death a central role is nationalism. In its more poetic and desperate moments, nationalism promises that whoever dies for the nation will live forever in its collective memory. Yet this promise is so fuzzy that even most nationalists do not really know what to make of it. How do you actually “live” in memory? If you are dead, how do you know whether people remember you or not? Woody Allen was once asked if he hoped to live for ever in the memory of moviegoers. Allen answered: “I’d rather live on in my apartment.” Even many traditional religions have switched focus. Instead of promising some heaven in the afterlife, they have begun to put far more emphasis on what they can do for you in this life.

Will the current pandemic change human attitudes to death? Probably not. Just the opposite. COVID-19 will probably cause us to only double our efforts to protect human lives. For the dominant cultural reaction to COVID-19 isn’t resignation – it is a mixture of outrage and hope.

When an epidemic erupted in a pre-modern society such as medieval Europe, people of course feared for their lives and were devastated by the death of loved ones, but the main cultural reaction was one of resignation. Psychologists might call it “learned helplessness”. People told themselves it was God’s will – or perhaps divine retribution for the sins of humankind. “God knows best. We wicked humans deserve it. And you will see, it will all turn out for the best in the end. Don’t worry, good people will get their reward in heaven. And don’t waste time looking for a medicine. This disease was sent by God to punish us. Those who think humans can overcome this epidemic by their own ingenuity are merely adding the sin of vanity to their other crimes. Who are we to thwart God’s plans?”

Attitudes today are the polar opposite. Whenever some disaster kills many people – a train accident, a high-rise fire, even a hurricane – we tend to view it as a preventable human failure rather than as divine punishment or an inevitable natural calamity. If the train company didn’t stint on its safety budget, if the municipality had adopted better fire regulations, and if the government had sent help quicker – these people could have been saved. In the 21st century, mass death has become an automatic reason for lawsuits and investigations.

This is our attitude towards plagues, too. While some religious preachers were quick to describe AIDS as God’s punishment for gay people, modern society mercifully relegated such views to its lunatic fringes, and these days we generally view the spread of AIDS, Ebola and other recent epidemics as organizational failures. We assume that humankind has the knowledge and tools necessary to curb such plagues, and if an infectious disease nevertheless gets out of control, it is due to human incompetence rather than divine anger. COVID-19 is no exception to this rule. The crisis is far from over, yet the blame game has already begun. Different countries accuse one another. Rival politicians throw responsibility from one to the other like a hand-grenade without a pin.

Alongside outrage, there is also a tremendous amount of hope. Our heroes aren’t the priests who bury the dead and excuse the calamity – our heroes are the medics who save lives. And our super-heroes are those scientists in the laboratories. Just as moviegoers know that Spiderman and Wonder Woman will eventually defeat the bad guys and save the world, so we are quite sure that within a few months, perhaps a year, the folks in the labs will come up with effective treatments for COVID-19 and even a vaccination. Then we’ll show this nasty coronavirus who is the alpha organism on this planet! The question on the lips of everybody from the White House, through Wall Street all the way to the balconies of Italy is: “When will the vaccine be ready?”

When the vaccine is indeed ready and the pandemic is over, what will be humanity's main takeaway? In all likelihood, it will be that we need to invest even more efforts in protecting human lives. We need to have more hospitals, more doctors, more nurses. We need to stockpile more respiratory machines, more protective gear, more testing kits. We need to invest more money in researching unknown pathogens and developing novel treatments. We should not be caught off guard again.

Some might well argue that this is the wrong lesson, and that the crisis should teach us humility. We shouldn't be so sure of our ability to subdue the forces of nature. Many of these naysayers are medieval holdouts, who preach humility while being 100% certain that they know all the right answers. Some bigots cannot help themselves – a pastor who leads weekly Bible study for Donald Trump's cabinet has argued that this epidemic too is divine punishment for homosexuality. But even most paragons of tradition nowadays put their trust in science rather than in scripture.

The Catholic church instructs the faithful to stay away from the churches. Israel has closed down its synagogues. The Islamic Republic of Iran is discouraging people from visiting mosques. Temples and sects of all kinds have suspended public ceremonies. And all because scientists have made calculations, and recommended closing down these holy places.

Of course, not everyone who warns us about human hubris dreams of getting medieval. Even scientists would agree that we should be realistic in our expectations, and that we shouldn't develop blind faith in the power of doctors to shield us from all of life's calamities. While humanity as a whole becomes ever more powerful, individual people still need to face their fragility. Perhaps in a century or two science will extend human lives indefinitely, but not yet. With the possible exception of a handful of billionaire babies, all of us today are going to die one day, and all of us will lose loved ones. We have to own up to our transience.

For centuries, people used religion as a defense mechanism, believing that they would exist for ever in the afterlife. Now people sometimes switch to using science as an alternative defense mechanism, believing that doctors will always save them, and that they will live forever in their apartment. We need a balanced approach here. We should trust science to deal with epidemics, but we should still shoulder the burden of dealing with our individual mortality and transience.

The present crisis might indeed make many individuals more aware of the impermanent nature of human life and human achievements. Nevertheless, our modern civilization as a whole will most probably go in the opposite direction. Reminded of its fragility, it will react by building stronger defenses. When the present crisis is over, I don't expect we will see a significant increase in the budgets of philosophy departments. But I bet we will see a massive increase in the budgets of medical schools and healthcare systems.

And maybe that is the best we can humanly expect. Governments anyhow aren't very good at philosophy. It isn't their domain. Governments really should focus on building better healthcare systems. It is up to individuals to do better philosophy. Doctors cannot solve the riddle of existence for us. But they can buy us some more time to grapple with it. What we do with that time is up to us.