

When Tech Knows You Better Than You Know Yourself

Nicholas Thompson interview with Tristan Harris and Yuval Noah Harari

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YNH: I think that we are now facing really, not just a technological crisis, but a philosophical crisis. Because we have built our society, certainly liberal democracy with elections and the free market and so forth, on philosophical ideas from the 18th century which are simply incompatible not just with the scientific findings of the 21st century but above all with the technology we now have at our disposal. Our society is built on the ideas that the voter knows best, that the customer is always right.... Ultimately, my choices, my desires reflect **my free will** and nobody can access that or touch that. And this was never true. But we didn't pay a very high cost for believing in this myth in the 19th and 20th century because nobody had a technology to actually do it. Now, people—some people—corporations, governments are gaming the **technology to hack human beings**...

YNH: To hack a human being is to understand what's happening inside you on the level of the body, of the brain, of the mind, so that you can predict what people will do. You can understand how they feel and you can, of course, once you understand and predict, you can usually also **manipulate and control** and even replace. And of course it can't be done perfectly and it was possible to do it to some extent also a century ago. But the difference in the level is significant. I would say that the real key is whether somebody can understand you better than you understand yourself...

YNH: So you need to get to know yourself as best as you can. It's not a perfect solution but somebody is running after you, you run as fast as you can. I mean it's a competition. So who knows you best in the world? So when you are 2 years old it's your mother. Eventually you hope to reach a stage in life when you know yourself even better than your mother. And then suddenly, you have this corporation or government running after you, and they are way past your mother, and they are at your back. They're about to get to you—this is the critical moment. **They know you better than you know yourself.** So run away, run a little faster. And there are many ways you can run faster, meaning getting to **know yourself** a bit better. So **meditation** is one way. And there are hundreds of techniques of meditation, different ways work with different people. You can go to therapy, you can use **art**, you can use sports, whatever. Whatever works for you. But it's now becoming much more important than ever before. You know it's the oldest advice in the book: **Know yourself.** But in the past you did not have competition. If you lived in ancient Athens and Socrates came along and said, "Know yourself. It's a good, it's good for you." And you said, "No I'm too busy. I have this olive grove I have to deal with—I don't have time." So OK, you didn't get to know yourself better, but there was nobody else who was competing with you. Now you have serious competition. So you need to get to know yourself better....

YNH: ...So I would say we need to **re-conceptualize completely our world.** And this is why I began by saying that **we suffer from philosophical impoverishment**, that we are still running on the ideas of the basically the 18th century, which are good for two or three centuries, which were very good, but which are simply not adequate to understanding what's happening right now.

TH: ... I think, often, this conversation usually makes people conclude that there's nothing about human choice or the human mind's feelings that's worth respecting. And I don't think that is the point. I think the point is that **we need a new kind of philosophy that acknowledges a certain kind of thinking or cognitive process or conceptual process or social process that we we want**....

TH: ...So you know we're going to have to have **a much more comprehensive view and restructuring of the tech industry to think about what's good for people.** And there's going to be an uncomfortable transition, I've used this metaphor, it's like with climate change. There are certain moments in history when an economy is propped up by something we don't want. So the biggest example of this is slavery in the 1800's...

...I agree that...this is a **global conversation about human nature and human freedom**. If there is ...at least **kinds of human freedom** that we want to preserve...But we're going to move in that direction by having a global conversation about it.

YNH: I would say get to **know yourself** much better and have as few illusions about yourself as possible. If a desire pops in your mind don't just say well this is **my free will**. I chose this therefore it's good, I should do it. Explore much deeper. Secondly,...join an organization. There is very little you can do just as an individual by yourself....

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Tech CEO's Are in Love With Their Principal Doomsayer,

Nellie Bowles Interviewing Yuval Noah Harari published in the NY Times, Nov. 11, 2018,

He worries that by creating powerful influence machines to control billions of minds, **the big tech companies are destroying the idea of a sovereign individual with free will**.

They said that the younger employees had expressed concern about whether their work was contributing to a **less free society**, while the executives generally thought their impact was positive.

He told the audience that **free will is an illusion**, and that human rights are just a story we tell ourselves. Political parties, he said, might not make sense anymore. He went on to argue that the liberal world order has relied on fictions like "the customer is always right" and "follow your heart," and that these ideas no longer work in the age of artificial intelligence, when hearts can be manipulated at scale.

"If humans are hackable animals, and if **our choices and opinions don't reflect our free will**, what should the point of politics be?" he wrote. "How do you live when you realize ... that your heart might be a government agent, that your amygdala might be working for Putin, and that the next thought that emerges in your mind might well be the result of some algorithm that knows you better than you know yourself? **These are the most interesting questions humanity now faces.**"