Book Summary: 21 Lessons for the 21st Century, by Yuval Noah Harari

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This is a preview of the Shortform book summary of 21 Lessons for the 21st Century by Yuval Noah Harari. Read the full comprehensive summary at Shortform.

Contents

- 1-Page Summary
- Introduction
- Part 1: Technology | Chapter 1: Liberalism Is Becoming Irrelevant
- Chapter 2: Technology Will Create a Useless Class
  - Exercise: Could You Become a Member of the Useless Class?
- Chapter 3: Algorithms Threaten Human Liberty
  - Exercise: How Present Are Algorithms In Your Daily Life?
- Chapter 4: Technology Is Worsening Inequality
- Part 2: Politics | Chapters 5-6: Join Others to Tackle Modern Problems
  - Exercise: What Role Do Communities Play in Your Life?
- Chapters 7-8: Nationalism and Religion Divide People
- Chapter 9: Immigration Exacerbates Tensions Between Cultures
  - Exercise: How Do You Define the Terms of Immigration?
- Part 3: Perspective | Chapters 10-11: Terrorism and War Are Minor Threats
- Chapter 12: People Overestimate Their Culture's Importance
  - Exercise: Are You Overestimating Your Culture's Importance?
- Chapters 13-14: People Don't Need God to Keep Social Order
  - Exercise: What Guides Your Morals?
- Part 4: Truth | Chapters 15-16: You Know Less Than You Think
- Chapters 17-18: People Love Stories—Even When They're Lies
- Part 5: Meaning | Chapter 19: The Education System Is Outdated
  - Exercise: How Well Did Your Education Prepare You?
- Chapter 20: People Seek the Meaning of Life in Stories
  - Exercise: What's Your Meaning of Life?
- Chapter 21: Understand Your Mind Through Meditation
1-Page Book Summary of 21 Lessons for the 21st Century

The 21st century will bring changes and challenges unlike any humans have encountered before. Globalism and technological innovations are changing the structures of societies worldwide—and the changes are happening quickly. This book highlights the biggest challenges in the modern world, and it offers advice on making sense of and navigating such transitional times. If people don't become better informed about the present and participate in shaping the future, the world could have a class of obsolete workers whose jobs have been automated, people could lose their ability to make their own decisions, and nuclear weapons could annihilate much of the world.

Part 1: Political, Economic, and Social Realities Are Changing

Technological innovations are changing the structures of society—from politics to the labor market. If humans are to address these challenges, they'll need to create new tools and approaches that fit this new context.

Politics: The Fall of Liberalism

For centuries, people have developed political models that fit the political, economic, and social context of the time, and these models provided a story to make sense of the world and an ideal future to work toward. In recent decades, the dominant political story has been liberalism, which promoted individual freedoms—through free trade, low taxes, free elections, peaceful international relations, rights for minority groups, and pro-immigration policies. However, the massive technological innovations are automating jobs, broadening inequality, and altering human behavior in ways that are making the liberal story irrelevant—and people must either adapt an old political model to modern times or create a new one.

Parallel revolutions in infotech and biotech are transforming societies by:

- Making technology too complex for most people to understand. Many people are uninformed about how machines are changing the labor market and algorithms are influencing the way they think, shop, and vote.
- Allowing humans to alter their own bodies. Whereas past innovations altered the external world—for example, by building dams—new technology is being developed to alter humans' internal worlds, such as slowing the aging process through bioengineering.

Economy: Technology Is Transforming the Labor Market

In the 21st century, increasingly sophisticated technology could automate so many jobs that unemployment skyrockets among low-skilled workers. Neurological discoveries and technological innovations will enable machines to do jobs better than people can, because machines are immune to human error and biases.

Large-scale automation will likely cause a net loss in employment, creating a “useless class” of unskilled workers. Some workers will be able to get training in a new set of skills, but technology will continue to change so rapidly that those new skills could also become obsolete a decade later. This could eventually create a post-work society, in which workers face a fight against irrelevance and governments must determine alternative ways to support people.

Society: Technology Threatens Human Liberty

In addition to threatening jobs, technology threatens human liberty, as algorithms learn so much about people that they gain an immense power to influence and manipulate. Liberalism maintains that everyone has free will to choose how to vote, how to act, and what to buy—but algorithms can make better choices than you do. For instance, Netflix's algorithm might suggest a movie that fits your tastes better than one you would have picked.

Each decision that algorithms make for you has two effects:

1. Your trust in the algorithm increases. When Netflix suggests a movie, and you end up loving it, that experience reinforces your reliance on Netflix's recommendation. As you gain trust in Netflix, you also lose trust in your own choices.

2. The algorithm learns more about your preferences, which enables it to make even better decisions for you in the future. As the algorithm gains more knowledge about you, it will make better choices for you, which will reinforce your increasing trust in its decision-making and decreasing trust in your own.
People’s reliance on algorithms can easily snowball to big life decisions, such as where to go to college, which career to pursue, and who to marry.

**Society: Technology Could Worsen Inequality**

As technology threatens to create a useless class of unskilled workers and algorithms have the potential to overpowe free will, inequality could grow exponentially. On one end of the spectrum will be the useless class, and on the other end will be the wealthy CEOs of tech companies. Making matters worse, biotech innovations could enable wealthy elites to become biologically superior by improving their physical and cognitive abilities and extending their lives. *If wealthy elites gain biological advantages over the poor—and the poor are pushed out of opportunities to work and gain wealth—it could create a vicious cycle that continually widens the gap between haves and have-nots.* Taken to the extreme, bioengineering could eventually turn the rich into a separate species with no need for the underclass of commoners.

**Part 2: Address Challenges With Global Solutions**

Now that we’ve laid out the challenges, let’s explore potential methods that societies can use to address them.

**Method #1: Tackle Issues Through Communities**

How will humans tackle the massive challenges they face in the 21st century? One option is to band together and tackle them as communities. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg wants to facilitate this by using AI to suggest groups that might be meaningful to individual Facebook users. *The goal is to use the social media platform and the algorithmic tools to rebuild communities online in order to improve connections among people throughout the world.* However, the project will only work if these online communities also exist offline, because creating a true connection with someone requires you to interact with her as a whole person, which generally calls for face-to-face interaction. In order to achieve this, Facebook may have to adopt strategies that actually encourage users to spend less time online and more time in the real world.

**Method #2: Embrace the Global Civilization**

While you can belong to various communities—such as your family, your religion, and your nation—all humans are part of a **global civilization, and cultural identities are merely branches of that civilization**. In recent generations, as globalization has connected the world economically, socially, and technologically, all of humankind has merged into one global civilization. Although there are differences among groups within the global civilization—such as religious beliefs and national identities—all of the basic and practical matters are largely in agreement. These include:

- **Economic systems**: Although countries have different currencies, they generally all follow some version of capitalism. Additionally, in the modern globalized economy, nations around the world are interconnected through the global supply chain.
- **Medical practices**: Despite some cultural nuances and differences in available resources, just about all doctors learn the same scientific foundation, follow the same protocols, and prescribe the same drugs.
- **Science**: Scientists in all corners of the world agree on scientific principles, such as the earth being round and gravity pulling objects down.

**Method #3: Reject Nationalist Solutions to Global Problems**

Despite the existence of a global civilization, **in recent years, feelings of disconnection from global economic forces and fears that globalization would disintegrate national systems of education and healthcare have revived a sense of nationalism.** However, nationalism can’t offer solutions to the three major challenges that people will face in the 21st century, all of which exist on a global scale and require an international response:

1. **The nuclear challenge**: Once nuclear power became a tool of war, the threat of war meant the possibility of massive destruction. The loss of multinational cooperation and the rise in nationalism could lead to war and nuclear devastation.
2. **The ecological challenge**: Climate change threatens to make many plants and animals extinct, destroy ecological systems, cause more severe weather, hurt agricultural production, and make large areas of the globe uninhabitable. While individual nations can overhaul environmental practices, raise taxes on emissions, and develop eco-friendly technologies, the effort won’t be enough unless the whole world participates.
3. **The technological challenge**: As we discussed in Part I, the simultaneous rise of infotech and biotech threatens to transform the economy, labor market, social and political power, and even the biological makeup of humans. In order to avoid a dangerous snowball of technological development, nations need to reach an international agreement on ethical guidelines for technological innovation and adoption.
Method #4: Resist Seeking Answers in Religion

If political models, governments, and scientists have failed to provide answers for how to navigate the immense challenges of the 21st century, could religion hold the answers? In order to explore this, we’ll look at three areas where religion falls short:

1. Technical problems: Modern science has replaced religion as the authority for technical problems, such as how African farmers should deal with droughts caused by climate change. While priests used to pray for rain and shamans tried to heal the sick, science and technology offer far more effective solutions.

2. Policy problems: Religion offers policy solutions that apply to ancient contexts, which doesn’t help to solve modern policy problems such as how governments should prevent climate change to begin with. Leaders typically look for answers in modern sources—such as reports and case studies—and then they may find a passage from a religious text that can be interpreted to explain the decision. In other words, religion is used to justify policy solutions, but it does not provide them.

3. Identity problems: Religion plays a large role in modern identity problems—such as whether Americans should even worry about the plight of African farmers—but it serves to divide rather than to unite. Despite overwhelming similarities among different faiths, religions use ceremonies, rites, and rituals to reinforce followers’ membership in a particular religion, which inherently sets them apart from other religions.

Method #5: Resolve Immigration Challenges

Humans now find themselves in a global civilization, facing global problems, while also being divided by nationalism and religion. Amid this division, tensions have grown among people of different nationalities, and they come to a head in the issue of immigration. Immigration requires an understood deal between migrants and host countries—but immigration opponents say that immigrants aren't holding up their end of the deal, while immigration advocates say that host countries are falling short.

There are three terms of this deal:

1. The host country lets immigrants enter. Immigration advocates say that each country has a moral duty to open its borders to refugees and migrants. By contrast, immigration opponents say that countries have no obligation to allow immigrants to enter, and allowing immigration should be considered a favor—not a duty.

2. The immigrants adopt the host country’s basic values and norms. Immigration advocates and opponents disagree about the extent to which immigrants should be expected to assimilate. For example, if they migrate from a religious country to a secular one, must they adopt secular views?

3. **When the...**

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**21 Lessons for the 21st Century**

**Summary Introduction**

The 21st century will bring changes and challenges unlike any humans have encountered before. Globalism and technological innovations are changing the structures of societies worldwide—and the changes are happening quickly. *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* highlights the biggest challenges in the modern world, and it offers advice on making sense of and navigating such transitional times. In five parts, the book:

1. Takes stock of the current political and technological state
2. Examines potential methods for societies to deal with modern challenges
3. Discusses how humans can prevail over these challenges
4. Questions how to make sense of the emerging world
5. Explores how to find personal meaning in this world

This book is intended to inform people who feel too busy and overwhelmed with daily life to reflect on the state of the world and speculate on its future. If people don't become better informed about the present and participate in shaping the future, society could have a class of obsolete workers whose jobs have been automated, people could lose the ability to make their own decisions, and nuclear weapons could annihilate much of the world.

In our globally connected world, one person's small actions can impact an entire community on the other side of the world—for example, choosing to buy a particular shirt could be supporting child labor in Uzbekistan. This book will discuss individual and societal behaviors that shape cultures and impact the fate of the planet. Each of the 21 chapters covers a lesson about the challenges humans face and how...

21 Lessons for the 21st Century Summary Part 1: Technology | Chapter 1: Liberalism Is Becoming Irrelevant

Lesson: Liberalism—which values personal freedoms, free trade, and free elections—is the dominant political model today, but technological changes are transforming the political, social, and economic structures on which liberalism stands.

Political models have always served the purpose of providing a story to make sense of the world and an ideal future to work toward. That story depends on the political, economic, and social context at the time. As a result, there have been several times throughout human history when the political model of the day became irrelevant and needed to be replaced.

Feudalism and monarchism were the reigning political models until the Industrial Revolution created such upheaval in economics and politics that those models no longer fit. In response, in the 1900s, elites around the world developed three new political stories, each of which offered a different way of making sense of the world and shaping the future:

1. **The fascist story**: There have been tensions and struggles among nations throughout history. In an ideal future, one nation flexes its power over all others, but violence is likely.
2. **The communist story**: There have been tensions and struggles among economic classes throughout history. In an ideal future, a universal social system provides for everyone equally, but people wouldn't have liberty.
3. **The liberal story**: There have been tensions and struggles between freedom and tyranny throughout history. In an ideal world, everyone works together with little government intervention, but inequality is inevitable.

World War II struck down the fascist story. By the end of the 1980s, the communist story also unraveled. Through the 1990s and early 2000s, liberalism was the primary story that people used to understand the world around them. Liberalism promoted individual freedoms as the keys to resolving all major societal issues, including poverty, oppression, and violence—through free trade, low taxes, free elections, peaceful international relations, rights for minority groups, and...

21 Lessons for the 21st Century Summary Chapter 2: Technology Will Create a Useless Class

Lesson: Technological innovation is enabling AI to perform an increasing number of jobs, which will cause massive unemployment.

One of the biggest challenges of the 21st century will be a fundamental change in the labor market caused by technological disruption. In other words, increasingly sophisticated technology could automate so many jobs that unemployment...
Throughout history, each new machine and labor-saving technology created at least as many jobs as it eliminated—for example, a piece of equipment that replaced a human laborer also required someone to operate the equipment and another person to do maintenance on it. Past innovations substituted human workers' physical capabilities, but not their cognitive abilities. No matter how quickly a machine could sew a shirt compared to a seamstress, the machine couldn't take customers' measurements.

However, the dual rise of infotech and biotech is creating technologies that could truly replace the need for human workers. New discoveries in neuroscience have revealed that human skills such as analyzing, decision-making, communicating, and interpreting other people's emotions are the results of specific brain algorithms—not the elusive forces of free will. For example, when a lawyer enters negotiations, she's not being guided by her intuition, but rather by algorithms that pick up on the other party's biochemical patterns, including their gestures, tones of voice, and facial expressions.

Now that scientists understand how the human brain uses these algorithms, technologists can replicate those processes with AI. As a result, not only can machines do a human's job, but they can do it better than humans, because they're immune to human error and biases. Additionally, machines can be connected on a network and updated all at once. Imagine the implications in the medical field: When new research comes out, it's nearly impossible to alert every doctor in the world—but a global network of AI doctors could receive that update in an instant. Similarly, a network of self-driving taxis...

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This is the best summary of 21 Lessons for the 21st Century I've ever read. I learned all the main points in just 20 minutes.

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**Shortform Exercise: Could You Become a Member of the Useless Class?**

Could widespread automation threaten your job?

In the time you've been working in your field, has any part of the industry been automated? If so, describe what it was.

**21 Lessons for the 21st Century Summary Chapter 3: Algorithms Threaten Human Liberty**

**Lesson:** As algorithms provide increasingly accurate suggestions, their convenience is almost irresistible—but relying on algorithms to make your decisions causes you to lose the freedom and ability to make your own choices.

In addition to threatening jobs, technology threatens human liberty, as algorithms learn so much about people that they gain an immense power to influence and manipulate. This is another way that technology is undermining liberalism, which is all about freedom and personal liberties—to vote, to buy goods in a free market, and to pursue individual dreams and goals with the protection of human rights.

Liberalism maintains that everyone has free will, regardless of education and social status. In practice, people's choices of free will reflect their feelings more often than their knowledge. For example, between two presidential candidates, voters are more likely to choose the one who gives them a good feeling, even if the other candidate has a more thorough policy plan. Similarly, elected officials often make decisions based on gut feelings and intuition, even when they go against advisors' recommendations. From the way voters vote to the way leaders lead, democracy hinges on emotion-driven free will—but technological advancements could make it possible to hack people's emotions, leading to disastrous results.
Shifting From Free Will to Technology

Before the advent of liberalism, societies were guided by mystical, divine messages from the gods. In the last few centuries, the authority shifted from gods to free will. **Although free will feels free, it's actually a biochemical response honed by evolution and designed to help you survive and thrive.** For example, when you see a snake, your reaction to run away is merely an evolutionary response to keep you safe. Similarly, when you feel bad after having an argument with a friend, your desire to make amends is not purely emotional, but rather a function of your biological wiring to cooperate within a community.

This biochemical process meant to promote your safety and...

**Shortform Exercise: How Present Are Algorithms In Your Daily Life?**

You already use algorithms every day. Does the convenience outweigh any concerns?

List at least three ways that you use algorithms in your daily life (such as GPS navigation, Google search suggestions, Netflix recommendations, and social media feeds).

**21 Lessons for the 21st Century Summary Chapter 4: Technology Is Worsening Inequality**

**Lesson:** In addition to creating a useless class, technology gives wealthy elites access to health and economic advantages that exacerbate inequality, creating a vicious cycle.

As technology threatens to create a useless class of unskilled workers and algorithms have the potential to overpower free will, inequality could grow exponentially: **On one end of the spectrum will be the people who become unemployed when computers automate their jobs, and on the other end will be the wealthy CEOs who own the tech companies that automated those jobs.**

Inequality has always existed to varying degrees in human societies:

- **During the Stone Age,** some people were buried with jewels and other goods, while others were dumped into simple graves.
- **After the Agricultural Revolution,** inequality worsened as people possessed more property—in the form of animals, land, and tools—with which to distinguish between the haves and the have-nots.
- **During the Industrial Revolution,** a company’s and country’s success depended more than ever on masses of common workers, so equality became more important to societies and governments throughout the 20th century. Governments started providing more healthcare, education, and other resources to keep people healthy and working.

The rise of technology and globalization brought speculation that equality would increase among people all over the world, but the opposite is happening: A small class of the tech elite possesses a huge portion of the world's wealth, while billions struggle in poverty. If (or when) AI creates a useless class, the gap will widen further. Additionally, when the masses are no longer critical or even relevant to the economy, the wealthy elite may be less inclined to provide healthcare, education, and other services.

Making matters worse, developments in biotech could enable wealthy elites to become biologically superior by improving their physical and cognitive abilities and extending their lives. Throughout history, socially and economically elite classes owed their status to good fortune, cultural...
Lesson: People's social lives exist largely online, but people need communities and face-to-face interaction to thrive. In addition to maintaining close-knit communities, people must recognize and participate in the global civilization that exists today.

How will humans tackle the massive challenges they face in the 21st century? One option is to band together and tackle them as communities.

Besides food, water, and shelter, belonging to a community is essential for humans to survive and thrive. Throughout most of human history, people lived in small tribes, typically consisting of a few hundred people. In a community of this size, you can have some form of relationship with everyone, which optimizes group dynamics. However, in recent centuries, small tribes have been replaced with large nations—and some people believe that the loss of community has been a major factor in creating the challenges that modern societies face, from corrupt governments to drug addiction crises.

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg believes so strongly in the restorative power of communities that he has made a mission of connecting Facebook users via virtual groups. Zuckerberg's project uses AI to suggest groups that might be meaningful to individual Facebook users. The goal is to use the social media platform and the algorithmic tools to rebuild communities where people now gather—online—in order to improve connections among people throughout the world.

Zuckerberg is not the first to try to build communities in order to improve society. Activist groups, religious groups, and others build communities around their shared goals and values. However, the Facebook project is unique in a few ways, including:

1. Its global reach
2. Its reliance on technology
3. Its corporate funding

Communities Must Exist Offline

Zuckerberg's goal to connect people will only work if he can bridge the divide between the online world and the offline one. Facebook users can join meaningful communities online and connect with members of those communities through posts and messages—but will...

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**21 Lessons for the 21st Century Summary Chapters 7-8: Nationalism and Religion Divide People**

**Lesson:** Many people around the world are finding comfort in the identity and community of their nations and faith—but nationalism and religion create an "us" and "them" mentality, which makes it difficult to come together as a global civilization to address collective problems.

Despite the undeniable existence of a global civilization, many countries are increasingly leaning into nationalism. People have returned to nationalism in recent years in response to modern challenges, but nationalism has deep roots in human society.

For millions of years, humans lived in smaller communities and tribes, but, over time, they merged to take on challenges that were too big for one group to handle. For example, ancient tribes near the Nile River relied on the water to grow their crops, but they constantly had to deal with years of drought and years of flooding. Each tribe had limited manpower and claimed a small section of the river, so, eventually, many tribes banded together to build dams and canals that benefited everyone.

Over time, nation-states formed, and people used culture as a tool to achieve cooperation among a mass of people. The nationalism that resulted has two distinct ingredients:

1. **A preference for us over them,** meaning that people identify with fellow members of their nations and not with foreigners. This comes easily to humans.

2. **A sense of duty toward strangers within their nation over friends and family.** For example, a U.S. citizen pays taxes that help to fund public schools for millions of children, even though it takes away money to send her own children to private school. It is not natural for humans to benefit strangers over people they know and care about, so national governments promote patriotism and provide incentives in the form of healthcare, security, and welfare systems.

**Nationalism's Shortcomings**

Mild nationalism enables you to value your country as *unique* and valuable, and it motivates you to contribute to the well-being of all of your fellow citizens. On the other hand, extreme nationalism leads you...
resolve disagreements about immigration will indicate how effectively they'll be able to address global issues of the 21st century.

Immigration will increasingly be a flashpoint because of growing tensions among people of different nationalities as the global economy, increased international travel, and technology bring people together from across the world. If governments don't find ways of addressing the fierce debates about immigration, people will be too divided to tackle the global challenges of the 21st century.

**Immigration Strikes a Deal Between Migrants and Countries**

Immigration requires an understood deal between migrants and host countries—but immigration opponents say that immigrants aren't holding up their end of the deal, while immigration advocates say that host countries are falling short. We'll explore this debate within each of the three terms of this deal:

1. The host country lets immigrants enter.
2. The immigrants adopt the host country's basic values and norms, even when it conflicts with their traditional values.
3. As the immigrants assimilate, they gain equality and membership in the host country.

**Term #1: Immigrants Enter the Host Country**

The first aspect of immigration is the physical entry of migrants into the host country. This basic first step sparks heated debate because it taps into distinctly different beliefs.

Pro-immigrationists argue that:

- In our globalized world, each country has a moral duty to open its borders to refugees and migrants who seek better opportunities than those that exist in their home countries.

- An attempt to ban immigration would merely push it to an underground market of human traffickers and undocumented workers and children. It's better to legalize immigration so that the government can regulate it.

Anti-immigrationists argue that:

- Countries have no obligation to welcome foreigners, with the possible exception being...

**Shortform Exercise: How Do You Define the Terms of Immigration?**

Reflect on your definitions of the terms of immigration, and how well your beliefs align with your country's policies.

Do you believe countries have an obligation to accept immigrants? Why or why not?


**Lesson:** Don't waste too much energy worrying about terrorism, because it is a relatively minor threat unless terrorists get nuclear weapons. Similarly, military warfare is an increasingly remote possibility in the modern world.

In recent decades, fear of terrorism has gripped the world, ignited wars, and shaped politics—and that's by design. With the exception of outliers like 9/11, most acts of terrorism kill very few people; far more people die in traffic accidents or from diabetes. As the name suggests, *terrorism is meant primarily to incite terror, but it generally causes little physical damage.*

In an attack, most military strategists aim to destroy the enemy's most powerful weapons and essential resources, in order to handicap any retaliation. However, terrorists don't have the power to inflict such damage, so their attacks often do little to harm
their enemies' weapons, equipment, and infrastructure. Due to their weakness in resources and manpower, terrorists' only hope is to aggravate the enemy so much that it overreacts, and that the overreaction creates enough chaos and instability that the power balance tips in the terrorists' favor. In other words, terrorists instigate their enemies to cause the damage that the terrorists don't have the strength to create.

A terrorist is like a fly that wants to destroy a china shop. The fly isn't strong enough to tip anything over, so when a bull enters the china shop, the fly buzzes in its ear until the bull starts thrashing and causing destruction. The 9/11 terrorists were flies that buzzed in America's ear and caused mass fear and confusion. In an effort to calm the public's fears, America responded with a show of power and strength by declaring a War on Terror, in which it thrashed through the Middle East. America's efforts ultimately destabilized the Middle East and created space for the terrorists to seize more power.

**Terrorism Aims to Undermine Safety and Stability**

Terrorism is only effective because citizens of the United States and other centralized countries are unaccustomed to...

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**21 Lessons for the 21st Century Summary Chapter 12: People Overestimate Their Culture's Importance**

**Lesson:** People have inflated perceptions of their culture's importance and contributions to the world.

Even when war brings high costs and promises little reward, there are a host of reasons that leaders do it anyway. One major reason is that national leaders—as well as many people in general—overestimate the importance of their own culture and its impact on the world. Greeks, Chinese, and Hindus are just a few of the cultures that claim that history began with their ancestors’ achievements. However, this skewed view shows a lack of humility and a disregard for history. In reality, **morality, creativity, art, and spirituality can't be credited to any single culture because they're wired into human DNA.**

Although nearly every culture perpetuates similarly self-important myths, we'll break down the flaws in this view by examining the Jewish culture and claims of Jewish achievements.

**Case Study: Jewish Culture**

Children are raised with a misunderstanding of their culture's importance, as school history lessons emphasize certain events, downplay others, and frame history based on how it affected their ancestors. For instance, when Israeli students learn about the French Revolution, the lesson focuses on Jews' political and legal status in the French Republic. **When this egocentric perspective shapes an entire community's understanding of human history and the modern world, it's no wonder that they inflate their ancestors' contributions to humanity.**

In reality, Judaism's biggest contribution to humanity was indirect: Judaism gave rise to Christianity and Islam, which are two of the most influential religions in human history. Christianity and Islam were at the root of some of the greatest achievements and atrocities in history. However, Judaism deserves only as much credit and blame for Christianity's and Islam's contributions as Freud's mother deserves for his achievements.

Let's examine some specific claims of Jewish achievement:

**Morality:** Jews may claim credit for morality, but tens of thousands of years before the advent of Judaism,...

**Shortform Exercise: Are You Overestimating Your Culture's Importance?**

You may be spreading your culture's self-important myths without realizing it.
Reflect on your history education in school as well as current media and pop culture. How is your culture generally characterized?

21 Lessons for the 21st Century Summary Chapters 13-14: People Don’t Need God to Keep Social Order

**Lesson:** Many religious laws are meant to keep social order, but people are driven to cooperate regardless of religious convictions.

Just as people wrongly credit their cultures for contributing to society and maintaining social order, people mistakenly attribute morality to religion. In reality, humans are hard-wired to maintain social order, and religion has worked both for and against this cause.

When people talk about God, they can be referring to one of two versions:

1. **The cosmic God is grand and mysterious,** and humans know nothing concrete about Him. He is the answer to all unanswered questions: What is the meaning of life? What shaped the world? This is the philosophers’ God, which embodies human ignorance and speculation.

2. **The lawgiver God is strict and judgmental,** and humans know plenty about Him and His preferences. He has specific rules about what people can wear, eat, drink, and do. This is the God of homophobes, jihadists, and Crusaders.

Religious people talk about both gods as one—declaring that He is a mysterious force, but also that He has very clear rules about gay marriage. However, these two views of God are contradictory. **If God is an enigma, how could he have also delivered so many specific and minute ordinances about the ways that humans conduct themselves?**

Holy books such as the Bible and Quran try to draw the connection between the cosmic God and the lawgiver God, but these texts smack of human interpretation. It’s not logical that God Himself—whichever God that may be—wrote these texts not only to proclaim the principles of a moral life, but also to make decrees that were specific to the time and place when the texts were written. It makes more sense that humans wrote these texts in order to maintain social order and legitimize cultural norms.

While the rules of the lawgiver God may have successfully kept peace and social order in many eras and cultures, they have also been the source of much violence and discrimination. People have committed countless atrocities in the name of God. By contrast, **secular laws...**

**Shortform Exercise:** What Guides Your Morals?

Reflect on how you distinguish right from wrong.

Is your moral compass guided by religious values, laws, or some other force?


**Lesson:** You’ll never be able to understand everything about how the world works—and that’s OK, as long as you recognize your ignorance and don’t overestimate your knowledge.
In order to find truth, you must recognize what you know—and what you don't know. Modern society has an incredible amount of information at its fingertips, yet, individually, people know far less than their ancestors. In the Stone Age, hunter-gatherers knew how to hunt, make fire, and escape predators. Today, individuals don't need the same breadth of knowledge because they have access to a global network of collective knowledge and others’ expertise.

Our ability to access collective knowledge has been critical to humankind's incredible progress and achievements—but it's also led to two dangerous phenomena:

1. The knowledge illusion: People mistake group knowledge for individual wisdom, and their tendency to underestimate their own ignorance is having dangerous consequences. Lawmakers with no scientific training are creating policies on climate change that affect not just the nation but the world (as we discussed in Chapter 7).

2. Groupthink: People become so convinced of and loyal to the views of their community—whether it's their social group, political party, or society—that they fail to recognize when those views are flawed. Furthermore, people are typically surrounded by other people and sources of information that merely serve as an echo chamber, affirming the beliefs they already hold.

Corporate and political leaders are even more susceptible to groupthink, because they're so busy ruling that they don't have the time to reexamine issues and reach independent conclusions. In order to truly evaluate a belief and to come up with new insights, you need the opportunity to waste time. You must have time to come up with and sift through many new ideas—including many dead-ends—in order to hit on something insightful.

Besides being short on time, leaders also have the burden of power, which warps their perception of truth. First, when you have power, your...

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**21 Lessons for the 21st Century Summary Chapters 17-18: People Love Stories—Even When They're Lies**

**Lesson:** Humans are so driven to make sense of the world through stories that they're often willing to believe lies.

We are living in a post-truth society, in which lies aren't merely spread in social media posts, but they are also used to justify government actions. For example, when Russia invaded Crimea in 2014, the Russian government repeatedly denied responsibility for the invasion. The government rationalized that its lie served a higher purpose, which was to reunify Ukraine with Russia.

How did we get to this era of post-truth? The phenomenon has a long history. In fact, the great accomplishments of human progress are owed in part to humans' ability to create and get others to believe fictional stories in order to work together toward a collective goal. In other words, humans' penchant for stories allows strangers to cooperate for common causes. Storytelling is used in this way by different kinds of institutions, including:

1. **Religion:** The stories found in the Bible, Torah, Quran, and other holy texts have inspired millions of people to work together to build cathedrals, fight oppression, and even fight bloody wars.

2. **Nations:** Governments spread stories in order to justify their actions and spur public support for their causes. For example, Japan faked attacks on itself in order to justify invading China, and Israel ignored the existence of Palestinians in defending its pursuit of land.

3. **Political movements:** The leading forces in political movements promote stories—or propaganda—to reinforce an image of their politics. For example, Joseph Stalin took a photo with a young, smiling girl and posted the image everywhere in order to promote the fantasy of a happy childhood under Soviet rule, despite the reality of terror and brutality.

4. **Corporations:** Big businesses create stories to sell their products. For example, Coca-Cola fills its ads with images of young, healthy, vibrant Coke drinkers to weave a story that Coca-Cola is linked to youth and vitality, even though drinking soda leads to obesity and other health issues....
Lesson: The modern education system is designed to prepare students for a job market that's becoming obsolete.

The education that children today receive will determine how well-equipped they are not only to navigate but also to shape the future. However, the modern education system is not fit to prepare children for the 21st century.

First, humans don't know what the world will look like in 50 or 100 years. This has always been true to some extent, but, in the past, people could reasonably predict what kinds of jobs would exist and generally how government and politics would function by the time their children and grandchildren became adults. Now, technology makes it impossible to know which jobs will become obsolete, what the global political system will look like, and whether the human body will have new capabilities as a result of bioengineering. Without having a reasonable expectation of the future, it's impossible to know how to prepare children for it.

Second, the focus and the goal of the modern education system are outdated. In centuries past, information was scarce. Depending on where you lived, you had access to books, radio, and television—and whatever information you received may have made it through censorship screening by the government. School aimed to arm students with more information, in order to broaden their scope of knowledge and view of the world. By contrast, now people face an information overload, and instead of trying to censor information, some governments add to the noise by distributing false and misleading information to confuse people. As a result, schools no longer need to pile more information on students. Instead, they must teach students to make sense of the vast amount of information they take in, to distinguish between trustworthy and questionable sources, and to weave the pieces of reliable information into a comprehensive view of the world.

Third, schools currently put too much emphasis on teaching students skills, such as coding and solving math equations. In the past, such skills prepared students...

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Shortform Exercise: How Well Did Your Education Prepare You?

Reflect on whether your education gave you the tools to succeed as an adult.

Besides fundamental skills like reading and writing, how often do you use the knowledge you learned in grade school (K-12)?

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21 Lessons for the 21st Century Summary Chapter 20: People Seek the Meaning of Life in Stories

Lesson: People are driven to uncover their reason for living, and they often look for answers in meaning-of-life stories or within themselves.

As people prepare for a new reality and new challenges in the 21st century, they'll inevitably ponder, "What is the meaning of life?" When people ask this question, what they're really asking is, "What is the meaning of my life? What is my role in the universe?"

Humans have been asking these questions throughout history. More often than not, people want the answer to fit into a story, because humans love stories, and they use stories to make sense out of the world.

Meaning-of-Life Stories Are Illogical

Throughout human history, people have come up with countless stories to explain the meaning of life, including:
All life forms on the planet are part of an eternal circle of life, and you have a unique role in that cycle. The purpose of life is to find your function and to fulfill it. This explanation is powerful because it claims that an infinite cycle connects all people from the past, present, and future. The circle-of-life explanation also assigns everyone an identity and reason for living, and you merely have to discover your identity and carry out your duties—as long as you do that, you can overcome all obstacles in life with peace of mind because you know that you're living out your purpose.

The world began, conflicts arose, and conflicts continue to be an ever-present aspect of life until a future resolution or ultimate judgment day. According to this story, when that judgment day comes, people who helped the cause will enjoy the fruits of their labors. This storyline transcends Muslim teachings to Zionist nationalist beliefs and The Communist Manifesto. Regardless of the context, this explanation gives meaning to small, day-to-day actions that will put you on the right side of judgment day—whether that entails educating others about Islam or boycotting exploitive capitalist companies.

Each of these explanations has logical holes in it. For example, if you believe that you...

Shortform Exercise: What's Your Meaning of Life?

Reflect on how you search for the meaning of life.

If you've contemplated the meaning of life, where do you look for answers?

21 Lessons for the 21st Century Summary Chapter 21: Understand Your Mind Through Meditation

Lesson: You must understand your mind in order to make sense of the world, and meditation is one of the best ways to do that.

In order to understand life, you must understand your own mind, because your mind determines how you experience, interpret, and react to the world around you. When you understand your mind—including its biases, fears, and complexes—then you can choose your actions more wisely and execute them more effectively. There are many ways to get in tune with your mind, including art, therapy, and physical activity. The author's method of choice is meditation, which takes your attention away from the noise and distractions of the external world and focuses it on the reality of your breath and bodily sensations. Observing each inhale and exhale keeps your attention on the present reality, which offers a clearer view of life than any story or dogma can.

The better you know your mind, the more you'll realize that your thoughts and emotions are not as straightforward as you probably think. As we've discussed, your thoughts are a reflection of your brain wiring and your external influences. Furthermore, your emotions are a reflection of your physical sensations: External events trigger a physical reaction, and your emotions reflect that physical sensation. For example, if you read a politician's offensive tweet, the hot feeling in your stomach is your first reaction, and the anger you feel is a reaction to that sensation. Additionally, when your mind inevitably wanders during your meditation, you learn how little control you actually have over your thoughts—and that realization is the first step in gaining that control.

The Mind Is Difficult to Study

While scientists know much about the brain—and ongoing research with new technologies are constantly adding to that database—they know little about the mind. Whereas the brain is a physical organ with a network of neurons, biochemicals, and synapses, the mind is the source of feelings and subjective experiences, including love, pleasure, pain, and anger. Experts assume that the...
21 Lessons for the 21st Century Summary Final Thoughts

In a Q&A, the author shares some final thoughts about how to approach the 21st century's biggest challenges. The key takeaways include:

- **Of all the stories that humans use to make sense of the world, the two most dangerous are nostalgic fantasies and technological utopias.** Nostalgic fantasies misrepresent the past, and they wrongly imply that the past offers solutions to modern problems. Technological utopias suggest that simply creating new technologies will solve big problems, when the more important question is *how to use* the technologies.

- **Believing in the myth of free will makes you vulnerable to manipulation**, because you don't question the internal and external forces that influence your thoughts and feelings. As we discussed in Chapter 20, discarding the notion of free will enables you to explore the forces that influence you and to discover what truly defines you.

- If you want to explore your own mind, try art, therapy, or meditation, as we discussed in Chapter 21. Don't rely on intellectual research and speculation, because a purely intellectual approach will never help you get to know your mind.

- Humans have a basic desire to be understood. In your human relationships, there are many instances when you fail to understand the other person and she fails to understand you. By...