



If It Can Suffer, It's Real, by Yuval Noah Harari

Many people believe that truth conveys power. Unfortunately, this is just a comforting myth. In fact, truth and power have a far more complicated relationship, because in human society, power means two very different things.

On the one hand, power means having the ability to manipulate objective realities: to hunt animals, to construct bridges, to cure diseases, to build atom bombs. This kind of power is closely tied to truth. If you believe a false physical theory, you won't be able to build an atom bomb. On the other hand, power also means having the ability to manipulate human beliefs, thereby getting lots of people to cooperate effectively. Building atom bombs requires not just a good understanding of physics, but also the coordinated labor of millions of humans. Planet Earth was conquered by Homo sapiens rather than by chimpanzees or elephants, because we are the only mammals that can cooperate in very large numbers. And large-scale cooperation depends on believing common stories. But these stories need not be true. You can unite millions of people by making them believe in completely fictional stories about God, about race or about economics.

When it comes to uniting people around a common story, fiction actually enjoys three inherent advantages over the truth. First, whereas the truth is universal, fictions tend to be local. Consequently if we want to distinguish our tribe from foreigners, a fictional story will serve as a far better identity marker than a true story. The second huge advantage of fiction over truth has to do with the handicap principle, which says that reliable signals must be costly to the signaler. Otherwise, they can easily be faked by cheaters. If political loyalty is signaled by believing a true story, anyone can fake it. But believing ridiculous and outlandish stories exacts greater cost, and is therefore a better signal of loyalty. If you believe your leader only when he or she tells the truth, what does that prove? In contrast, if you believe your leader even when he or she builds castles in the air, that's loyalty! Third, and most important, the truth is often painful and disturbing. Hence if you stick to unalloyed reality, few people will follow you. An American presidential candidate who tells the American public the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about American history has a 100 percent guarantee of losing the elections. The same goes for candidates in all other countries. How many Israelis, Italians or Indians can stomach the unblemished truth about their nations? An uncompromising adherence to the truth is an admirable spiritual practice, but it is not a winning political strategy.

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For me, maybe the most important question, both as a scientist and as a person, is how to distinguish between fiction and reality. I'm not suggesting that everything is fiction, but that it's just very difficult for human beings to tell the difference between fiction and reality. It has become more and more difficult as history progressed because the fictions that we have created -- nations and gods and money and corporations -- now control the world. Even just to think, "Oh, these are all just fictional entities," feels quite difficult.Â

Yet, there are several tests to tell the difference between fiction and reality. The simplest one is the test of suffering. If it can suffer, it's real. If it can't suffer, it's not real. A nation cannot suffer. That's very, very clear. Even if a nation loses a war, we say, "Germany suffered a defeat in the First World War," it's a metaphor. Germany cannot suffer. Germany has no mind. Germany has no consciousness. Germans can suffer, yes, but Germany cannot. Similarly, when a bank goes bust, the bank cannot suffer. When the dollar loses its value, the dollar doesn't suffer. People can suffer. Animals can suffer. This is real.

If one really wants to see reality, I would go through the door of suffering. If we can really understand what suffering is, we will receive the key to understand what reality is.