

Humility

by Yuval Noah Harari

Exercise, Notes, Summary, Questions and Answers

(Exam focused Questions)

Class 12 English

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About the Author

Yuval Noah Harari (born 1976) is an Israeli historian, philosopher, and bestselling author known for explaining human history in simple yet thought provoking ways. He teaches history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and became internationally famous through books such as Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind, Homo Deus, and 21 Lessons for the 21st Century.

Harari's writings examine the development of human civilization, religion, politics, science, and culture from a broad historical perspective. Rather than glorifying one nation or religion, he encourages readers to question exaggerated historical claims and view humanity as a shared global story.

In Humility, Harari argues that almost every culture, nation, and religion believes it occupies the center of human history. He challenges these claims by showing that morality, creativity, spirituality, and art belong to all human beings rather than to any single civilization.

Summary

Humility is a thought provoking essay by Yuval Noah Harari that challenges the belief that any single nation, religion, or civilization stands at the center of human history. Harari argues that throughout history almost every community has imagined itself as the most important force in the universe, but these beliefs are driven more by ego than by historical evidence. His message is that genuine humility allows people to appreciate their own traditions without believing they are superior to everyone else's.

Harari begins by observing that many societies create stories that place themselves at the center of civilization. He presents numerous examples from different cultures to show that this tendency is universal rather than unique to any one group.

According to Harari, Chinese nationalists believe that history began with the Yellow Emperor and the Xia and Shang dynasties. They often argue that many discoveries made by Westerners, Muslims, and Indians are merely pale imitations of earlier Chinese achievements.

In response, Hindu nationalists make equally extraordinary claims. They argue that ancient Indian sages developed advanced technologies such as airplanes, rockets, missiles, and even nuclear weapons long before famous historical figures such as Plato, Confucius, Einstein, or the Wright brothers. Harari presents these claims as examples of how civilizations often glorify their own past.

He then discusses the beliefs of pious Muslims, who consider the period before Prophet Muhammad largely insignificant compared to the

revelation of the Quran. From this perspective, history gains its true meaning only after the emergence of Islam and revolves around the worldwide Muslim community, or Ummah.

Harari also examines the beliefs of the Aztecs, who were convinced that without their annual human sacrifices, the sun would stop rising and the entire cosmos would collapse. This illustrates how societies often imagine themselves as essential to the survival of the universe itself.

The essay becomes even more striking when Harari criticizes exaggerated claims from his own cultural background. Some Jewish traditionalists claim that famous yoga positions originated from the shapes of Hebrew letters. For example, they argue that Tuladandasana resembles the Hebrew letter daled, while Trikonasana resembles aleph. By criticizing claims from his own culture alongside those of others, Harari demonstrates his commitment to intellectual honesty rather than national pride.

After presenting these examples, Harari offers his central argument. The most important qualities of humanity, including morality, creativity, spirituality, and art, did not originate within any modern nation or religion. Instead, these abilities are universal human characteristics embedded in our DNA since the Stone Age, long before today's civilizations existed.

Harari argues that many historical conflicts arise because people refuse to criticize their own communities while eagerly criticizing others. Nationalism, religious supremacy, and cultural chauvinism encourage people to believe that their own civilization invented everything valuable. In reality, human civilization developed through countless contributions

from many different peoples across thousands of years.

The essay ultimately encourages readers to replace arrogance with humility. Instead of viewing their culture as the center of the universe, people should recognize that every civilization forms only one thread within humanity's much older shared history. This broader perspective promotes truthfulness, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence among different cultures.

Main Ideas:

No civilization is the center of human history.

National pride often turns into historical exaggeration.

Many religions and cultures create stories of superiority.

Morality, creativity, spirituality, and art belong to all humanity.

These universal abilities existed long before modern civilizations.

Egoism fuels historical conflicts.

Humility encourages tolerance and truthful thinking.

Important Themes:

Egoism vs Humility

The central theme contrasts human arrogance with genuine humility. Harari argues that exaggerated national and religious pride grows from ego rather than historical evidence.

Cultural Superiority

Many societies believe their civilization invented everything important. Harari challenges these beliefs by presenting examples from multiple cultures.

Universal Human Traits

Morality, art, creativity, and spirituality belong to humanity as a whole rather than to any single civilization.

Shared Human History

Human civilization developed through countless contributions across thousands of years instead of beginning with one nation or religion.

Tolerance

Humility helps people respect other cultures instead of competing over historical superiority.

Important Examples Used by Harari

Chinese Nationalists

They claim history began with the Yellow Emperor and that many foreign achievements merely copied Chinese civilization.

Hindu Nationalists

They argue that ancient Indian sages developed airplanes, rockets, missiles, and nuclear weapons long before modern science.

Pious Muslims

They believe history before Prophet Muhammad holds little significance compared to the revelation of the Quran.

The Aztecs

They believed annual human sacrifices kept the sun rising and prevented the collapse of the cosmos.

Jewish Traditionalists

Some claim yoga positions originated from the shapes of Hebrew letters such as daled and aleph.

Difficult Vocabulary

Humility: Modesty; freedom from arrogance.

Ummah: The worldwide Muslim community.

Monotheism: Belief in one God.

Chauvinism: Excessive or aggressive nationalism.

Egocentrism: Thinking only of oneself or one's own culture.

Cosmos: The universe as an ordered whole.

Paleoanthropology: The study of human evolution through fossils.

Nationalism: Strong identification with one's nation.

Supremacy: Belief that one is superior to others.

Civilization: An advanced human society with an organized culture.

Literary Devices

Historical Examples

Harari strengthens his argument by drawing examples from many civilizations instead of focusing on only one.

Contrast

The essay repeatedly contrasts exaggerated cultural pride with genuine humility.

Irony

He criticizes exaggerated claims from his own Jewish background, making his argument more balanced and credible.

Repetition of Patterns

By presenting similar claims from different civilizations, Harari demonstrates that human ego follows the same pattern across cultures.

Persuasive Argument

The essay combines historical examples with logical reasoning to encourage tolerance and humility.

Key Message

The essay teaches that no nation, religion, or civilization owns morality, creativity, spirituality, or history itself. Genuine humility allows people to appreciate their own traditions while recognizing humanity's shared past.

Understanding the Text

a. Describe the claim of the Chinese nationalists about human history.

According to Harari, Chinese nationalists believe that human history began with the Yellow Emperor and the Xia and Shang dynasties. They argue that many achievements later credited to Westerners, Muslims, and Indians are actually copies or pale imitations of earlier Chinese accomplishments.

This belief places Chinese civilization at the center of world history and illustrates the kind of cultural superiority that Harari criticizes throughout the essay.

b. What do pious Muslims believe about human history?

Harari explains that many pious Muslims believe that history before Prophet Muhammad is largely insignificant compared to the revelation of the Quran. They view the emergence of Islam as the true turning point in human history.

From this perspective, later history revolves around the worldwide Muslim community, known as the Ummah, rather than around earlier civilizations.

c. What did the Aztecs firmly believe about the universe?

The Aztecs believed that their annual human sacrifices were essential for the survival of the universe. They were convinced that without these sacrifices, the sun would fail to rise and the entire cosmos would

collapse.

Harari uses this example to show how societies often imagine themselves as indispensable to the universe itself.

d. What, according to the essay, are the universal human abilities?

According to Harari, the universal human abilities are morality, creativity, spirituality, and art. These qualities are not inventions of any modern nation or religion but are shared human characteristics that existed long before today's civilizations emerged.

He argues that these abilities are embedded in human DNA and trace back to the Stone Age.

e. How are the basic yoga postures derived from the shape of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet?

Harari explains that some Jewish traditionalists claim certain yoga positions originated from the shapes of Hebrew letters. For example, they argue that Tuladandasana resembles the Hebrew letter daled, while Trikonasana resembles the letter aleph.

He presents this claim as another example of how cultures sometimes attribute universal achievements to their own traditions.

Reference to the Context

a. How do Hindu nationalists refute the Chinese claim that human history began with the Yellow Emperor and the Xia and Shang dynasties? Who do you agree with, and why?

Yuval Noah Harari presents the claims of Chinese nationalists and Hindu nationalists to demonstrate how different civilizations often place themselves at the center of human history. Chinese nationalists argue that history began with the Yellow Emperor and the Xia and Shang dynasties, and that many achievements credited to Westerners, Muslims, and Indians merely copied earlier Chinese accomplishments.

Hindu nationalists reject this claim by arguing that ancient Indian civilization possessed advanced scientific knowledge long before famous figures such as Plato, Confucius, Einstein, or the Wright brothers. They claim that Indian sages had already developed airplanes, rockets, missiles, atomic theories, and even nuclear weapons, presenting India as the true birthplace of civilization and scientific progress.

Harari's purpose is not to prove either claim correct but to show that many civilizations create stories that exaggerate their own importance. Every group tends to glorify its own past while minimizing the contributions of others.

The broader message of the essay is that human history is the result of countless contributions made by many different civilizations over thousands of years. Archaeological discoveries and historical evidence show that different societies contributed to agriculture, writing, science, philosophy, mathematics, art, and technology at different times. Therefore, no single civilization can honestly claim to be the sole origin of all human achievements.

b. The author has dealt with a controversial debate on human history. Why do you think history has been a major contested issue in the present world?

According to Harari, history has become one of the world's most contested subjects because people often connect historical narratives with their identity, religion, culture, and national pride. Instead of treating history as an objective study of the past, many communities use it to prove that they are more important, older, or superior than others.

Nationalism encourages countries to celebrate their own achievements while ignoring or minimizing the contributions of other civilizations. Similarly, religious groups often believe that their own faith represents the center of human history. These beliefs create competition over questions such as who invented important discoveries, which civilization came first, and whose culture deserves greater respect.

Harari argues that this competition grows from egoism rather than evidence. People naturally prefer stories that glorify their own community because such stories strengthen their sense of belonging and pride. However, these exaggerated claims often create misunderstanding, prejudice, intolerance, and conflict between different groups.

In today's interconnected world, historical debates have become even more intense because social media, politics, and cultural movements frequently use historical narratives to support present day arguments. Harari therefore encourages people to approach history with humility, recognizing that every civilization forms only one part of humanity's much larger shared story.

Reference Beyond the Text

a. Write a short essay on *The Conflicting History of Human Civilization*.

The Conflicting History of Human Civilization

Human civilization has developed over thousands of years through the combined efforts of countless societies, cultures, and individuals.

However, throughout history, many civilizations have believed that they alone stood at the center of the world. This desire to claim superiority has created conflicting versions of human history that continue to influence modern society.

Ancient civilizations such as Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, Persia, China, and India all considered themselves exceptionally important. The Greeks believed that history began with cities such as Athens or Sparta. Chinese nationalists argued that civilization began under the Yellow Emperor and the Xia and Shang dynasties. Hindu nationalists claimed that ancient Indian sages developed advanced scientific knowledge long before modern scientists. Similarly, many Muslims regarded the revelation of the Quran as the true turning point of history.

Other civilizations created similar beliefs. The Aztecs believed that their annual sacrifices kept the universe alive, while some Jewish traditionalists claimed that even famous yoga positions originated from Hebrew letters. These examples show that many societies naturally create stories that place themselves at the center of the universe.

According to Yuval Noah Harari, these claims are not supported by objective historical evidence. Instead, they arise from egoism,

chauvinism, and cultural pride. Human beings often hesitate to criticize their own traditions while readily questioning the beliefs of others.

The reality is that humanity's greatest qualities, including morality, creativity, spirituality, and art, did not belong to any single civilization. These abilities existed long before modern nations and religions appeared and are shared by all human beings.

The conflicting history of civilization teaches an important lesson. Instead of competing over whose culture is greatest, people should recognize that every civilization has contributed something valuable to humanity's shared journey. Humility, tolerance, and respect for historical evidence can help reduce unnecessary conflicts and encourage peaceful coexistence.

b. The author claims, Since it is more polite to criticize one's own people than to criticize foreigners. Do you agree with his claim? Give your reasons.

Yes, I agree with Harari's claim that it is more polite to criticize one's own people than to criticize foreigners, especially when the goal is honest self improvement rather than hostility. People usually become defensive when outsiders criticize their culture, religion, or nation because such criticism often feels like a personal attack on their identity.

Throughout history, many communities have accepted flattering stories about themselves without questioning whether those stories are historically accurate. When foreigners challenge these beliefs,

disagreements can quickly turn into conflict. In contrast, self criticism usually demonstrates sincerity because it shows a willingness to examine one's own weaknesses instead of blaming others.

Harari himself sets an important example by criticizing exaggerated claims within his own Jewish cultural background. By doing so, he shows that humility begins with honest reflection rather than selective criticism.

Constructive self criticism also encourages progress. Societies improve when they identify their own mistakes, correct false beliefs, and learn from historical evidence. At the same time, criticizing one's own community does not mean rejecting it. Instead, it means caring enough to seek truth rather than comforting myths.

Therefore, Harari's statement promotes humility, intellectual honesty, and peaceful dialogue. When people first examine their own assumptions before judging others, they create better opportunities for mutual respect and understanding.

Exam Focused Short Questions and Answers

1. What is the central idea of the essay Humility?

The central idea of Humility is that no nation, religion, or civilization should consider itself the centre of human history or the universe. Harari shows that different cultures often exaggerate their own achievements and consider other civilizations less important. He argues

that such beliefs are usually the result of egoism, nationalism, and cultural pride rather than objective evidence.

According to Harari, qualities such as morality, art, spirituality, and creativity belong to humanity as a whole. They existed long before modern nations and religions were established. Therefore, people should look at their own history with modesty and recognize that every culture is only one part of the much larger story of human civilization.

2. Why does Harari criticize the idea of cultural superiority?

Harari criticizes cultural superiority because almost every civilization has a tendency to believe that it is uniquely important. Chinese nationalists may place the beginning of history in ancient China, Hindu nationalists may attribute modern scientific discoveries to ancient Indian sages, and some religious traditions may regard their own history as the central story of humanity.

Harari believes that such claims are usually motivated by egoism. They encourage people to glorify their own culture while ignoring the contributions of others. This can produce intolerance, conflict, and misunderstanding. Instead, he asks people to recognize that human civilization has developed through contributions from many different societies.

3. What is the relationship between egoism and history according to Harari?

According to Harari, egoism strongly influences the way people understand history. People naturally prefer historical stories that make

their own nation, religion, or civilization appear important and powerful.

As a result, communities may exaggerate their achievements and claim that important inventions or ideas originated with them. They may also ignore the contributions of other cultures. Harari argues that this kind of egoistic interpretation prevents people from seeing human history objectively. Humility is therefore necessary for understanding history more honestly.

4. Why does Harari give examples from different religions and civilizations?

Harari gives examples from different religions and civilizations to show that the tendency toward cultural superiority is not limited to one particular group. Chinese nationalists, Hindu nationalists, pious Muslims, the Aztecs, and some Jewish traditionalists are all presented as examples of communities that have made claims placing their own traditions at the centre of history or the universe.

By using examples from several cultures, Harari makes his argument broader. He wants readers to understand that the problem is a general human tendency toward self importance rather than a fault belonging to one specific civilization.

5. What do the Aztecs believe about human sacrifice?

The Aztecs firmly believed that their annual sacrifices were necessary for the continuation of the universe. They believed that without the sacrifices, the sun would not rise and the whole cosmos would collapse.

Harari uses this belief as an example of how a society can imagine its own actions to be essential to the survival of the entire universe. The example illustrates the extreme form that cultural or religious self importance can take.

6. What does Harari say about morality, art, spirituality and creativity?

Harari describes morality, art, spirituality, and creativity as universal human abilities. He does not consider them the exclusive achievements of any particular nation, religion, or civilization.

These qualities existed among human beings long before the emergence of modern nations and religions. According to the essay, they are deeply rooted in human nature and can be traced back to the Stone Age. Therefore, no culture can claim complete ownership of these qualities.

7. What is the significance of the title Humility?

The title Humility expresses the main message of the essay. Harari wants people to become less arrogant about their own cultures, religions, nations, and historical achievements.

Instead of believing that their civilization is the centre of the universe, people should recognize that their culture is only one part of a much older and broader human history. Humility encourages people to accept the contributions of other cultures and to examine their own beliefs critically.

8. Why is history a contested issue?

History becomes a contested issue because people often connect it with identity, religion, nationalism, and cultural pride. Communities want their ancestors and civilizations to appear important, ancient, powerful, and superior.

Different groups may therefore make competing claims about where civilization began or who invented important ideas. Harari suggests that such arguments often arise from egoism rather than a genuine search for historical truth.

9. Why does Harari criticize his own people?

Harari criticizes exaggerated claims associated with his own cultural background to demonstrate intellectual honesty. He argues that it is easy to criticize foreigners while accepting flattering stories about one's own community.

By criticizing his own people as well, he shows that the principle of humility should be applied universally. A person should be willing to examine the weaknesses and exaggerated claims of their own culture instead of judging only other communities.

10. What lesson does the essay give to human beings?

The essay teaches human beings to replace arrogance with humility. People should not assume that their nation, religion, or civilization is the centre of human history.

Instead, they should recognize the shared nature of human civilization and respect contributions from different societies. Such an attitude can

encourage tolerance, honesty, understanding, and peaceful coexistence.

Important Concepts to Remember

1. Humility

Humility means having a modest view of oneself and avoiding excessive pride or arrogance. In the essay, humility means accepting that one's own culture is not automatically superior to every other culture.

2. Egoism

Egoism is excessive concern with oneself or one's own group. Harari connects egoism with exaggerated claims about national, religious, and cultural superiority.

3. Cultural Superiority

Cultural superiority is the belief that one's own culture is more important, advanced, or valuable than others. Harari challenges this idea throughout the essay.

4. Universal Human Abilities

The essay identifies morality, art, spirituality, and creativity as universal human abilities. They are not exclusive possessions of a particular civilization.

5. Historical Bias

Historical bias occurs when people interpret or present the past in a way that favors their own nation, religion, or culture.

6. Nationalism

Nationalism can encourage people to feel proud of their country, but Harari warns that extreme national pride can develop into exaggerated claims about historical superiority.

Important Examples for Examination

Chinese Nationalists: Believed that history began with the Yellow Emperor and the Xia and Shang dynasties.

Purpose: Shows cultural pride.

Hindu Nationalists: Claimed that ancient Indian sages developed advanced technologies long ago.

Purpose: Shows exaggerated historical claims.

Pious Muslims: Considered history before Prophet Muhammad less significant compared with the Quranic era.

Purpose: Shows religious centrality.

Aztecs: Believed that annual sacrifices were necessary for the sun to rise and the cosmos to survive.

Purpose: Shows belief in human importance to the universe.

Some Jewish Traditionalists: Claimed that yoga postures were derived from Hebrew letters.

Purpose: Shows cultural appropriation of universal achievements.

Harari Himself: Criticizes exaggerated claims from his own cultural background.

Purpose: Demonstrates intellectual humility.

Very Important Exam Points

What should we understand from the Chinese example?

The Chinese example shows how a nation can place itself at the beginning and centre of world history and regard achievements of other civilizations as copies of its own achievements.

What should we understand from the Hindu example?

The Hindu nationalist example demonstrates how people may attribute modern scientific achievements to ancient ancestors in order to glorify their civilization.

What should we understand from the Muslim example?

The example demonstrates how religious belief can influence people's

interpretation of history by making a particular religious event or period appear central to humanity.

What should we understand from the Aztec example?

The Aztec example demonstrates extreme human self importance. They believed their sacrifices were necessary for the continuation of the entire cosmos.

What is Harari ultimately asking readers to do?

He asks readers to step away from cultural egoism, question exaggerated historical claims, respect other cultures, and recognize humanity's shared history.

One Minute Revision

Author: Yuval Noah Harari

Essay: Humility

Main idea: No nation, religion, or civilization is the centre of human history.

Main conflict: Egoism versus humility

Chinese claim: History began with the Yellow Emperor and Xia and Shang dynasties.

Hindu claim: Ancient Indian sages developed advanced scientific knowledge long before modern scientists.

Muslim belief: History before Prophet Muhammad is largely insignificant compared with the Islamic era.

Aztec belief: Human sacrifice was necessary for the sun to rise and the cosmos to survive.

Jewish example: Some traditionalists connect yoga postures with Hebrew letters.

Universal human abilities: Morality, art, spirituality, and creativity.

Origin of these abilities: They existed long before modern nations and religions, reaching back to the Stone Age.

Main cause of historical conflict: Egoism, cultural pride, and claims of superiority.

Main solution: Humility, self criticism, tolerance, and respect for shared human history.

Central lesson: Every civilization is only one part of humanity's much larger story.

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