Can AI Know a Person?

A Philosophical Critique of Harari's Claim

Artificial intelligence has become one of the defining forces of our time. It powers everything from scientific breakthroughs to shopping lists, and yet it also raises pressing concerns: surveillance, misinformation, job automation, and even the future of human identity. In *Homo Deus*, Yuval Noah Harari makes a bold claim—one that unsettles the modern ideal of the autonomous self. He suggests that as AI learns to predict our behavior more accurately than we know ourselves, "authority will shift from humans to algorithms." If true, this would signal the end of individualism as we know it.

But before accepting this conclusion, we must ask: what does it truly mean to "know" a person? Can predictive accuracy ever replace self-awareness? Is Harari right to suggest that machine intelligence threatens the very foundation of human subjectivity?

In this essay, I take "individualism" to mean more than just having preferences or making choices—it refers to the idea that a person is a self-reflective agent, capable of interpreting their own experiences and exercising autonomous judgment. To "know" a person, then, is not just to anticipate their next move, but to understand their inner life—the fears, memories, hopes, and contradictions that shape who they are.

This distinction is at the heart of what Harari's argument risks overlooking.

The Illusion of Understanding

To begin, we should resist two common traps. One is to romanticize AI—fuelled by science fiction visions of sentient machines with emotions and desires, like those in *Her* or *Ex Machina*. These are fantasies. Real-world AI doesn't feel or reflect; it calculates. The second trap is to treat AI as if it acts independently. In truth, AI systems do not choose to collect our data or make decisions—they are built, trained, and deployed by humans. They recognize behavioral patterns, clicks, and habits, and build statistical models based on them. This is powerful, but it is not understanding.

Harari's deeper concern, however, is not about AI itself, but about us. As algorithms become more sophisticated, there is a risk that we begin to trust them not only with convenience, but with choice—deferring our attention, our memory, and even our sense of judgment to data-driven systems. His concept of *dataism* imagines a world where human experience is reduced to optimization problems, and individual agency is displaced by algorithmic precision.

But predictive power is not the same as meaning. The experience of choosing, doubting, or even failing is more than a variable in a model.

A Shoe Is Never Just a Shoe

Take the example of a machine recommending shoes. It might accurately predict your size, preferred color, and even budget. But it doesn't know why those shoes matter to you. Maybe they remind you of your childhood, or someone you lost. AI can find the pattern, but it cannot grasp the personal story. And yet, we often mistake pattern recognition for insight.

The danger isn't that AI will become sentient. It's that we will start treating it *as if* it already is—and in doing so, forget how to think for ourselves.

Socrates warned that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” He meant that without introspection, we become strangers to our own lives. As a student of physics and computer science, I admire systems that can optimize and predict. But Socratic wisdom reminds me that knowing *why* we do things is more important than knowing *what* we will do next. AI updates models. It doesn’t seek truth—it seeks correlation.

Beyond the Code: The Embodied Self

Descartes famously said, “I think, therefore I am,” grounding human identity in self-awareness. Simone de Beauvoir, from a very different tradition, argued that identity arises through lived struggle—through choosing who we are in a world that constantly tries to define us. Both philosophers suggest that individualism is not just about behavior, but about authorship. It’s about owning one’s choices, not just making them.

AI, on the other hand, has no body, no emotions, and no experience. Neuroscience tells us that human thought is deeply embodied. Emotions don’t arise from lines of code—they pulse through the nervous system, shaped by evolution and memory. To speak of AI as "knowing" a person is to confuse simulation with reality.

The Imitation Game

Still, some argue from a functionalist perspective: if an AI system behaves *as if* it is reflecting, pausing, doubting—should we consider it equivalent to a conscious being? If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck... maybe it *is* a duck?

But here lies the crux: simulated internality is not internality. A machine might mimic remorse, but it does not *feel* regret. Just as a mirror reflects a face without knowing what a face is, AI can reflect patterns of behavior without knowing what a choice means.

The True Threat

Harari is right to worry—not because AI will become conscious, but because we might stop being conscious of ourselves. If Spotify curates every emotion and Google finishes every sentence, do we forget how to listen, how to wonder, how to begin? The real loss is not cognitive—it's philosophical.

As Kant insisted, autonomy is not something we *have*—it is something we must *choose*. And we forfeit it not when AI gets smarter, but when we stop asking questions.

A Mirror, Not a Mind

I do not believe Harari's dystopia is inevitable. AI reflects our values, not our souls. It is a mirror, not a mind. If we let it think *for* us, the loss is ours. If we use it wisely—while staying rooted in self-examination—then it can enhance rather than erode our humanity.

Philosophy matters more than ever. In an age shaped by algorithms, Socratic questioning is not outdated; it's vital. Meaning is not downloaded—it is discovered. So long as we ask, "What am I doing—and why?", individualism will not die. It will evolve.