



Big Bang, Big Sleep, Big Problem

The death of any human being is an outrage; it is the outrage par excellence, and all attempts to diminish this outrage are contemptible, no more than opium for the masses. . . . Death is the unacceptable. The annihilation of one memory cannot be compensated for by the existence of the universe and the continuance of life. The death of Mozart, despite the preservation of his work, is an utterly evil thing.¹

Why dawdle? Let's stare the monster in the eye, close up, right away: this book amounts to nothing, and so do you and I, and the whole world. Less than zero.

So the experts tell us.

These pages and all the words in them will burn up and vanish into oblivion some day, along with every word ever written, every trace of our brief existence and that of every living creature that has ever squirmed on the face of the earth or in its waters.

So we might as well revel in brusqueness.

Never mind that you and I are both headed for certain death, or that our species might face extinction. That's not the worst of it. No. Ponder this: not a speck will be left of you and me; no trace at all. And no number of progeny we engender, and no amount of technological marvels they invent, will make any difference either. Nothing can thwart the ultimate ecological and cosmic crisis.



Figure 1.1. Gustave Doré, illustration for Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* (1861), *Paradiso*, canto 31, verses 1–3, showing the empyrean or highest heaven, where God dwells eternally. For many centuries, eternity was conceived of not just as some other dimension beyond time but also as a location: eternity was identical with the highest heaven above the stars, also known as the empyrean heaven. Dante's fourteenth-century epic poem, *The Divine Comedy*, is a tour of the afterlife: hell, purgatory, and heaven. Widely acknowledged as one of the greatest masterpieces in all of literature, *The Divine Comedy* reflected, shaped, and reinforced medieval conceptions of eternity and their cultural role.

In this scene, at the apex of the cosmos, God is seen as a brilliant light, surrounded by a swarm of very orderly angels. The image draws on nineteen centuries of tradition, and even more, for the circle is an ancient universal symbol for eternity. The fact that this image looks like a depiction of the Big Bang is no accident, even though neither Dante nor Doré knew anything about it.

Five centuries separate the poet Dante from the illustrator Doré, but both faced an equally daunting challenge: representing eternity itself, the source and the ultimate destiny of human existence, as understood in the Christian West. *Source: La divina commedia di Dante Alighieri*, ed. Eugenio Camerini, illustr. Gustave Doré (Milan: E. Sonzogno, 1869), vol. 3.

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First, about a billion years from now—whether or not humans still exist—the sun will grow hot enough to evaporate our oceans, burn away the atmosphere, and incinerate all living organisms. Forget global warming, the melting of the polar ice caps, the depletion of the ozone layer, the shrinking of the glaciers, the swelling of the oceans, the inevitable reversal of magnetic fields, and all the dire predictions that bombard us nowadays, ceaselessly. Forget any other cataclysm anyone might forecast, even a collision between earth and a comet or a giant asteroid. This solar flare-up will be the real deal, the mother of all disasters. Global incineration.

Then, to add insult to injury, in five billion years or so the sun will balloon into a red giant and consume what is left of the earth. Shortly afterward, relatively speaking, this bloated sun will extinguish itself and shrivel into a dark, dwarfish cinder, a pinpoint shadow of its former self, adrift in an ocean of subatomic particles. Planetary and solar annihilation.

But that's not the end of the story. It gets worse. Even if our progeny manage to colonize other planets in distant galaxies and evolve into a smarter, less violent species, even if they manage to prolong their lives for centuries or millennia, or eradicate pain, poverty, and disease, or find a way to live in constant ecstasy, certain annihilation lies in store for them.

Since our material universe is in perpetual flux, ever expanding, it's bound to vanish, in one way or another. Scientists propose several models for the eventual destiny of the cosmos, none of which is comforting. Whichever fate ultimately befalls the whole shebang depends on how fast the universe is actually expanding relative to how much matter it contains—something that has not yet been determined. But no matter where it's headed, exactly, our universe is in for a very rough and tragic ride.

One possibility is that the universe will expand forever and suffer a “cold death,” as physicists call it, reaching a temperature of absolute zero. This is the Big Freeze, which could also be called the Big Stretch or the ultimate Big Sleep. Eternal dissipation: a cold, lonely, and dark eternity, ever abounding in nothingness. Linked to this is the highly paradoxical proposition that an ever-expanding universe will eventually slow to an infinitesimally minimal crawl as a result of maximum entropy. Physicists speak of this as “heat death,” but I suppose it could also be called the Big Whimper. This, too, sounds awful: an eternal now in which nothing happens. Another possibility is that the universe will stop expanding and collapse on itself and disappear, in a monstrous self-immolation. Cosmic annihilation: no more time and space. As there was a Big Bang, so will there be a Big Crunch.

But that may not be the end of everything.

For all we know, the Big Crunch could be only the prelude to another Big Bang, and then another Big Crunch, and so on, and so on, forever and ever, ad infinitum and therefore also ad nauseam. For all we know, this is how it has always been and ever will be: bang and crunch, always and forever: Yes, the Big Yo-Yo, known in earlier ages as the eternal return.

These are the endings that our scientists propose, ever mindful of their disagreements and of the humbling fact that their grand theories, like those of historians, are somewhat tentative, subject to revision. But in many ways, even before there were astrophysicists or telescopes or microwave probes or infrared spectrophotometers, human beings seemed to intuit the impending doom, fitfully.

About 2,700 years ago, the prophet Isaiah said that our earth would one day vanish, and that it would “not be remembered, nor come into mind” (Isaiah 66:15).

Seven hundred years later, one of the books of the Christian New Testament would be more explicit: “The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the Heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up” (2 Peter 3:10).

The Zoroastrian magi of Persia, the astrologers of the Mayas and the Aztecs, the shamans of the Hopi voiced similar predictions about cosmic doom, as have clairvoyants and kooks of all sorts, all around the world, at different times, down to our own day.

It’s an outrage. *C’est un scandale, le scandale par excellence.*

So much for my property and yours, or the Louvre, the Vatican Library, Disney World, the pyramids of Giza, the Great Wall of China, or any of the kitsch sold at these tourist traps. So much for all precious gems, every tombstone at every cemetery, every monument, every fossil hidden from view, and every coin ever minted. So much for all family photos, lovingly kept dust-free, and those old home movies and videotapes painstakingly transferred to digital video disks. So much for everything, including this book, of course, and your socks and underwear.

Everything will turn to nothing. And there will be no one there to witness this epic ontological reversal. Nobody. No one. No consciousness, so they say; nothing there, nothing left behind. Not a thing.

Nihil. Nada. Nichts. Rien.

The same question asked of the tree in the forest could be raised here: If the universe vanishes and no one notices, will it have ever existed? But that is a very bad question, *une question mal posée*, as some aging existentialist might say. A better question for us human beings—we who are painfully

aware of our own mortality—is this: What are we to make of our brief existence, both personal and collective?

As individuals, we blink on and off in the vortex of time with appalling evanescence, each of us, much like a firefly's butt on a warm summer night. We come and go like waves on a beach, as my wife's brother John said recently, at an old cemetery on the banks of the Hudson River, while we were depositing his father's ashes in a perfectly square niche in a massive wall containing hundreds of other such repositories, all duly graced with identical plaques that record not just the names of the deceased (including a man and wife *forever* saddled with the surname *Outhouse*) but also the very symmetrically paired dates of their birth and death. Burial grounds have a unique way of conveying the message we prefer to ignore. Relative to the age of the universe, it could be said that we hardly even register as ripples in a rain puddle, or that we barely exist at all. What is a decade compared to 13.6 billion years, the estimated age of the universe? What is it compared to the time the universe has yet left to exist? What is a century? A millennium? Come to think of it, what, really, is a measly 13.6 billion years?

Not much.

Any length of time, when measured against eternity, amounts to little. Next to nothing: not even as small as the period at the end of this sentence when measured against infinite space. If you have ever had a really lousy job, a job you loathed but could not afford to quit, then you know how pathetically brief every coffee break can seem. Well, imagine a fifteen-minute coffee break in hell that comes around only every 13.6 billion years. "*Kaffeepause, jetzt, schnell!*" Imagine how brief that would seem. Well, now imagine a 13.6-billion-year coffee break in a hell that is eternal. Same difference,

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more or less: still pathetically short, still next to *nothing*, really. Hardly worth it.

And what might eternity be? Is it anything other than a purely abstract concept, totally unrelated to our lives, or worse, a frightfully uncertain horizon, best summed up by Vladimir Nabokov: “The cradle rocks above an abyss, and our common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness”²

We loathe death, even pledge our love forever, and yet only very few of us can hope to last for one paltry century. Jeanne Calment (1875–1997), the woman with the longest confirmed life span in history, lived for only 122 years and 164 days, which adds up to a mere 44,724 days. What is that? Less than the wink of an eye, so to speak. An old vinyl record spinning at 33.3 revolutions per minute for a mere 24 hours will gyrate 47,952 times on its turntable. So, despite the fact that someone took the time and trouble to count them, Madame Calment’s days on earth amount to less than one full day in the life of a vintage “long-playing” record, a device that did not exist when she was born and was already obsolete when she died. In 1988, a hundred years after the event, at the age of 113, she could still recall meeting at Arles the now famous but then ignored painter Vincent van Gogh, whom she described as “very ugly, ungracious, impolite, and crazy.”³ We are staggered by the thought that someone could have lived so long, and could still remember an encounter with someone long dead, whose work can only be seen in museums or purchased for millions of dollars. Nonetheless, her 44,724 days are but an insignificant sliver of time, less noticeable than a snowflake atop Mount Everest.

As for the human race altogether, the proportions of its existence are no better: as insignificant as an eyelash bobbing

on the ocean. We humans have only been writing down our history haphazardly, for about five thousand years. That is an incredibly brief amount of time. Chances are that when she met van Gogh back in 1888, Jeanne Calment was within a stone's throw of the Roman amphitheater at Arles, which was already ancient and revered as a relic, despite its continual use as a Provençal bullring. Ancient Rome might seem very distant to you and me, but we would only need about fifteen Jeanne Calments, laid end to end, chronologically, to take us back to the days when gladiators killed each other in that arena. Imagine fifteen people in a room. It's a very small number. The ideal number for a college seminar. Now try to imagine forty people. That is the number of Jeanne Calments required to take us back to the dawn of civilization in Sumeria during the Uruk period, and to some old Mesopotamian lady who could remember Gilgamesh as "very ugly, ungracious, impolite, and crazy," with bad breath to boot. Forty is a small number of people, too, hardly enough customers for a fine restaurant on any night of the week.

The farther back one reaches into the past for some sense of proportion in the history of the human race as a whole, the more ephemeral that history seems, the more life-denying its relative nothingness. Before Sumerians devised writing for record keeping they had already been farming for about two thousand years. Imagining two thousand years of history without any written record of what happened is very difficult for any historian, perhaps for most people who give it any thought. What happened to all those people, during all that time? Imagining twenty or forty or a hundred thousand years without records, or without farming or cities, is even harder.

Experts now say that our species, *Homo sapiens*, appeared in Africa about a quarter of a million years ago, and that, oddly enough, we are all descended from one woman, as the

authors of Genesis claimed way back when myths ruled the day.⁴ This means we have no record of what happened to this woman's progeny, our kin, for roughly 245,000 years. The Paleolithic age, when all we had were crude stone tools, at best, covers the greatest portion of our time on earth, or roughly ninety-eight percent of human history. That is also around 2,050 Jeanne Calments or so, if we choose to reckon time according to the longest confirmed life span. If we include our immediate hominid ancestors—Neanderthal, *Homo erectus*, Australopithecus, and so on—we can go back a million years, or two, which amounts to more than 8,000 to 16,000 Jeanne Calments, roughly the number of students at many top-notch research universities. Contending with such a thought is impossible. Forget it; the mind reels.

What is my life span or yours, compared to so many others that are lost in an inconceivable, impenetrable fog? And what are all human lifetimes compared to the age of the earth, or of the universe? As nothing, really. Chances are that you are familiar with the following attempt to make sense of our place on earth: If the history of our planet is reduced to a twenty-four-hour scale, with 00:00 hours equal to 4,600,000,000 years ago and 24:00 equal to our present time, then the most rudimentary life would appear at 4:10, land-dwelling plants at 21:31, dinosaurs at 22:46, and *Homo sapiens* at 23:59:59.3, a split second before midnight. Your lifetime and mine do not even register on such a scale, except as the smallest of fractions, with enough zeroes after the decimal point to make a seasoned accountant dizzy. The same is true of our Ur-mother, Eve, and every one of our Paleolithic ancestors.

Yet when we lay eyes on art from the Paleolithic age, we peer into a very distant mirror, and thousands upon thousands of years seem to evaporate, instantly. We know these

cave dwellers were our kin, and we are stunned. They weren't knuckle-dragging troglodytes or half-beasts but men and women with thoughts and emotions and abilities like ours.⁵ Their genius, buried in silence, lost to time, can only be guessed at, but here and there it has survived, along with evidence of cannibalism: the Venus of Willendorf (22,000 BCE); the cave paintings at Chauvet (30,000 BCE), Altamira (18,000 BCE), and Lascaux (16,000 BCE). Some might even say, as did the ancient Romans and Greeks, that those early years of human history were a golden age, an ideal stage. After visiting the caves at Altamira and seeing its antediluvian paintings, Pablo Picasso supposedly exclaimed, "after Altamira, all is decadence." Some would like to agree with this quip, or to believe it was really uttered by Picasso.⁶ Others who contemplate the leftovers from cannibalistic feasts also found in such caves, however, might agree with Thomas Hobbes, who described life in those times as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short,"⁷ or with St. Augustine, who argued that there is a beast raging within all of us, itching for mayhem at all times. Some of us might be more comfortable with ambivalence, and a quotation from Dickens: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."⁸

And there's the rub: apparently, these sublimely ambiguous physical signs point to a rejection of the brevity and brutishness of life. Many experts think that the cave paintings and the fertility figurines were religious in nature, and an attempt to transcend mundane existence. Paleolithic burial customs lend credibility to this hypothesis, for the caring respect shown to the dead, and the ritualistic behavior implied by such care, point to a belief in something beyond the material world.⁹ Acceptance of the brevity and finality of human life, and of the limitations of nature, was apparently as much of a quandary for them as it is for us. Contemplating a yawn-

ing abyss of nothing after the loss of dear ones, then, could have been as tough on our cave-dwelling ancestors as it is on us, even if they ate their enemies. Perhaps tougher, for they lacked spices and antibiotics, and didn't have three hundred channels of television programming to distract them. And no cocktails, either.

Thinking and feeling that one *must* exist is part and parcel of human experience. Conceiving of *not being* and of *nothingness* is as difficult and as impossible as looking at our own faces without a mirror. As Miguel de Unamuno put it almost a hundred years ago, "Try to fill your consciousness with the representation of no-consciousness and you will see the impossibility of it. The effort to comprehend it causes the most tormenting dizziness."¹⁰ Strict materialists would say that this does not necessarily point to the existence of some transcendent reality beyond the physical universe, to which we are attuned as a species, or as individuals. They would most likely say that nature has encoded us to think and feel this way, or that it is simply impossible to imagine our own nonexistence because our brains are not equipped for such a task, and never will be.¹¹ And they are probably one hundred percent correct in making that assumption. All life on earth is programmed to survive, and thrive, and reproduce. Occasionally, nature goes berserk and living beings kill themselves, be they lemmings, beached whales, or anguished artists, such as Vincent van Gogh, who may or may not have been troubled by his own churlishness. But the vast majority of living organisms go on living and struggling to thrive, even as others die by the thousands, or hundreds of thousands, or even millions. If you doubt this, simply consider that over 150,000 people die every day on planet earth. That is about one per second, or over twice the number killed by the atomic bomb the United States dropped on Hiroshima

on August 6, 1945. If the Nazis had been able to achieve that same death rate in their extermination camps, it would have taken them only forty days to kill six million people. Do the math, and you might begin to wonder why you are still alive. The grim reaper is the ultimate workaholic.

Death always intrudes rudely, uninvited; very few living beings ever consciously seek it out, even when they refuse to wear seatbelts and smoke three packs of cigarettes a day. Scientists affirm this concept, emphatically and without question. This is why no credible scientist has yet attributed the extinction of any species to mass suicide. Human beings in particular are not exempt from this encoding, which is crucial to the survival of all life on planet earth. We even pass laws making suicide a crime.

Nonetheless, the fact that our preference for life over death is a survival tactic genetically encoded by nature in every fiber of our being does not necessarily make death seem any less rude to us, or repulsive, or scandalous, or unfair. And it is precisely this incongruity, this chasm between what we are compelled to feel and what we know must happen, that makes death seem so heinous and unnatural, and worthy of our contempt. And this scorn is perhaps one of our chief unquestioned assumptions, universally embraced. Who, for instance, would not resonate with one of the most famous poems of our time?

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.¹²

Countless texts, both ancient and modern, offer us proof that human beings have been raging for a very long time. Sixteen centuries ago, when the Roman Empire was teetering on the brink of collapse, St. Augustine of Hippo gave voice

to this sensibility, and to the ultimate unquestioned assumption, saying to his congregation: "I know you want to keep on living. You do not want to die. . . . This is what you desire. This is the deepest human feeling; mysteriously, the soul itself wishes and instinctively desires it."¹³ Three and a half centuries ago, in the earliest days of the so-called scientific revolution, one of the brightest minds of that day, Blaise Pascal, burned and raged against the human predicament with icy logic. Ambushed by death at an early age, he left behind only formidable fragments of what would have been an even more formidable book on the human need for transcendence. Many of these fragments touch on the absurdity and unfairness of our mortality. One in particular sums up his moral outrage over the extinction of human life:

Man is only a reed, the weakest in nature; but he is a thinking reed. There is no need for the whole universe to take up arms to crush him; a vapour, a drop of water is enough to kill him. But, even if the universe were to crush him, man would still be nobler than his slayer, because he knows that he is dying and the advantage the universe has over him; *the universe knows none of this*.¹⁴

This is but one side of the coin, so to speak. In addition to raging, we human beings have also tried to transcend death in positive ways. No matter how brief our collective presence on earth has been, relatively speaking, we human beings have sought to do more than simply survive, thrive, and reproduce, as our DNA impels us to do. We have also imagined more than this, more than the birthing, eating, digesting, reproducing, and dying. Human beings have imagined something beyond material existence, something beyond space and time. Inchoately and precisely, and in myriad ways, human beings have imagined an enduring life, some state of

being beyond constant flux and evanescence. Human beings have imagined *eternity*, a permanent state of being. Whether by means of rituals and symbols or of clear, cold logic—or anything in between—we as a species have been intuiting or imagining or constructing very elaborate and sometimes elegant conceptions of *forever*, of permanence and endurance: we have imagined and even pined for whatever is the opposite of transience and impermanence and the nothingness from which we came, which always engulfs us, on all sides. In some cases this eternity has been actually experienced. Or at least some claim to have glimpsed it, for real. Poets and mystics, especially, make their rounds of eternity with embarrassing frequency. Take the Welshman Henry Vaughan, for instance, who penned these lines in the seventeenth century:

I saw Eternity the other night
 Like a great Ring of pure and endless light
 All calm as it was bright;
 And round beneath it, Time, in hours, days, years,
 Driven by the spheres,
 Like a vast shadow moved, in which the world
 And all her train were hurled.¹⁵

At an opposite extreme, even a great skeptic such as Bertrand Russell, philosopher and mathematician, could find an odd sort of comfort in believing that our existential quandary could give meaning to life, and sustain all our thinking and striving. “Brief and powerless is Man’s life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark,” Russell was proud to admit. Yet this was no reason for despair. On the contrary, he proposed, “only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of *unyielding despair*, can the soul’s habitation henceforth be *safely* built.”¹⁶ Safety in despair: if that is not a leap of faith, nothing else is.

Russell may have had no patience for eternity, but nonetheless exemplified an innate human trait. One could just as easily refer to our race as *Homo credens* rather than *Homo sapiens*. What makes us unique among all living organisms on earth is not just the fact that we are rational, the fact that we *know*, and have managed to figure out many details of the structure of the physical universe, but also the fact that we seek coherence and meaning, that we imagine and we *believe*: the inescapable fact that we tend to be grossly dissatisfied and offended by the thought that we came from nothing and to nothing shall return. Perhaps even more significant is the fact that we as a species tend to find the very concept of *nothing* and the thought of *not existing* unimaginable and abhorrent, that we are disturbed by our own awareness of mortality, and conceive of existence beyond the here and now, *forever*.

That, precisely, is the subject of this book: how conceptions of *forever*, or eternity, have evolved in Western culture, and what roles these conceptions have played in shaping our own self-understanding, personally and collectively. In essence, this is a book about belief, about the ways in which the unimaginable is imagined and reified, or spurned, and the ways in which beliefs relate to social and political realities. Its subject is the largest subject of all, which has taxed minds great and small for centuries, and will *forever* be of human interest, intellectually, spiritually, and viscerally. Interpret *forever* as you wish.

Essential Boundaries and Definitions

When dealing with eternity—the ultimate boundless subject—the first order of business should always be the drawing

of boundaries. What, exactly will be covered? What will not? Which approach will be taken? Which will not? What should the reader expect, or not expect? In other words, what this book is and what it is not needs to be made crystal-clear at the outset, for eternity is a subject that raises large expectations. Defining our scope and limits is an essential first step, and in order to do this, one has to establish not only what the book seeks to do, but also what it will definitely avoid.

This is a survey of the major ways in which an abstract concept has played a role in the development of Western culture. In other words, this is history, pure and simple. It is not philosophy or theology, even though it will deal with philosophers and theologians. I am a historian, and my own peculiar obsession has always been the intersection of intellectual and social history. One of the chief assumptions I have tried to challenge in all my work is the conceit that ideas matter very little or not at all in human history, that mentalities or collective thoughts and beliefs are mere symptoms, perhaps even involuntary reflexes or passive epiphenomena, flotsam and jetsam, meaningless effluvia in the septic tank of class conflict, bobbing on the surface of a swirling gurge of natural, economic, and political forces. Right up front, at the very start, the reader should know that I reject any history that overlooks the dynamic relation that often exists between beliefs and behavior. As I see it, a material determinism that excludes ideas is as wrongheaded as that type of intellectual history, now nearly extinct, that traces ideas from mind to mind over the centuries and assigns causality to disembodied thoughts. I speak from experience. Having lived under a doctrinaire Marxist-Leninist totalitarian regime that saw class struggle as the sole determining factor in all of history and sought to eradicate all “intellectuals,” and having lost some of my family to its dungeons and firing squads simply

because they dared to challenge dialectical materialism in public, I am especially sensitive to the dangers of reductionism, and especially of the material determinism that some historians accept unquestioningly.

More specifically, all of my work has focused on the way in which realms beyond those experienced by the senses have been imagined, and how these imaginings relate to social, cultural, and political realities and to people's behavior. This complex interrelationship of belief and material environments is hard to pin down, as far as terminology is concerned. What we are dealing with here is not simply *ideology*, for that is a term that normally refers to abstract concepts alone.¹⁷ Neither is it *mentalities*, or *mindsets* or *worldviews*, for these terms refer to attitudes and habits of mind and behavior, with only vague references to the way in which environments and minds shape one another.¹⁸ It is not *social theory* either, for that, too, has more to do with abstract thinking and certified experts than with anything else.¹⁹ Very recently, Charles Taylor has used the neologism *social imaginary* to describe how people imagine their social existence, what expectations they share, and "the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations." But what we are dealing with here is not exactly what Taylor's newly minted *social imaginary* has in mind.²⁰

This book explores the nature and function of one concept and of how it evolved in one particular culture, that of Western Europe and of those of its colonies in which native cultures were eclipsed. Our main concern here is eternity as it pertains to human existence, not eternity as abstractly conceived. In other words, we will not focus so much on the universe itself, which came into existence long before humans entered the scene and could continue to exist without humans, as on the concept of eternal life for humans. This,

then, is an existential, anthropocentric history of eternity, a history of how humans in the West have tried to insert themselves into the largest picture of all, and how they have dealt with a formidable conceptual imbalance: namely, that while it is certainly possible to conceive of an eternal universe without human beings, it is utterly impossible to conceive of eternal life for humans without an eternal universe. Consequently, since our prime concern is really the place humans have tried to conceive for themselves in eternity, this history will be quite different from that which an astrophysicist or a philosopher might write. Our focus will be eternity solely as it pertains to humans. You may be tempted to ask, Is this then more a history of immortality than eternity? My answer to that would be “no, not necessarily,” owing to the conceptual imbalance just mentioned: that immortality, in and of itself, cannot be conceived of apart from some eternal realm.

The idea for this project emerged from a seminar funded by the Lilly Foundation, in which I have taken part since 2005: The Project on Lived Theology.²¹ Terms such as *lived religion* and *lived theology* have gained acceptance over the past decade in several disciplines, not in spite of their vagueness but precisely because of it.²² In essence, the concept of a “lived” set of religious beliefs acknowledges the two-way symbiosis that constantly takes place between the abstractly conceived and the concrete realities of life in the material world. And this acknowledgment is left wide open, allowing for a wide range of approaches. We are a long way from a universally accepted definition of this intentionally ambiguous term, but its broad contours are at least recognizable: “lived” theology is no mere list of doctrines, and “lived” religion is no mere code of ethics or set of rituals, viewed as the sole framework of human behavior. Lived religion is always

in sync with specific environments, responding directly to certain circumstances and at the same time giving shape to its environment, in a constant exchange. Speaking of this relationship as *symbiotic*, much as one would in biology, thus seems perfectly appropriate.

What, you may ask, is the difference between *lived religion* and *lived theology*? Suffice it to say that lived theology applies more directly to beliefs and ethics, and lived religion has a broader reach which includes rituals and symbols along with the beliefs and ethics. You may also ask, why not speak of *lived beliefs* rather than lived theology or lived religion? My answer would be that beliefs are covered by lived theology, especially in the case of religions that have well-developed doctrines and theological traditions. In the case of those religions that lack formal theologies, however, or of societies such as our own, which are secularized, to speak of lived beliefs might be more appropriate. For instance, throughout the democratic nations of the industrialized world, the equality of all human beings is a shared *belief*, not necessarily based on any theology. In Puritan New England or Afghanistan under Taliban rule, in contrast, everyone was forced by law to live out a specific *theology*.

As far as this book is concerned, I would prefer to speak of lived beliefs, for a simple reason: we are dealing here with about four thousand years of history, give or take a few centuries. This means we have a very broad focus across a vast landscape, covering many different cultures and time periods, tracing the evolution of ideas and paradigms rather than theology per se, which, as normally understood, refers to the formal belief system of one specific religion or tradition.

To study “lived” beliefs is to delve into one of the most deeply entrenched dichotomies in modern and postmodern thought: that which distinguishes between “material factors”

and “ideas.” This binary template is most often applied when historians deal with causality. At its most extreme, this dichotomy is turned into an antagonistic either/or proposition, and when this happens it is usually the case that the material factors will be proposed as the “real” causal agent, while the ideas are curtly dismissed as a response, or a by-product of the material factors. This reductionism is not only wrongheaded but dangerous, for it lessens the value of one of the things that make us human beings who we are, and in the process provides a template for dehumanization, especially of the sort exalted by totalitarian regimes. Ideas are part and parcel of human existence, and so are beliefs. And they do make a difference. Sometimes, a hell of a difference. The fact that they are invisible and unquantifiable does not necessarily mean that they are inconsequential. Human behavior is all about the interaction of mind and environment, and it is not a simple one-way relation, in either direction. Charles Taylor, who is a philosopher rather than a historian, has summed up this interdependence succinctly:

What we see in human history is ranges of human practices which are both at once, that is, “material” practices carried out by human beings in space and time, and very often coercively maintained, and at the same time, self-conceptions, modes of understanding. These are often quite inseparable. . . . Just because human practices are the kind of thing which make sense, certain “ideas” are internal to them; one cannot distinguish the two in order to ask the question, which causes which.²³

In sum, this book takes it for granted that lived beliefs are that nexus between the abstract and the concrete: they are the manifestation of convictions that in some way or another

proclaim a higher, transcendent reality beyond the physical universe and the here and now—a reality that promises all the order and purpose that seems to be missing among mortals in time and space. Allow me to provide but one brief concrete example of what tends to be meant by lived religion: it is the last will and testament of Father Juan de Talavera Salazar, written in Madrid in 1587, in which the priest named his own eternal soul as *heredera universal*, or sole heir of his earthly estate. “It is fitting that my soul should now enjoy the fruits of my labor,” he declared, “and that my earnings all be spent in masses and sacrifices, so that through these devotions and through His mercy, God my redeemer may save me.” Sinking everything he had earned into something totally beyond this world, as into some eternal retirement plan, this priest (ostensibly an exploiter who foisted false beliefs on the masses, according to Marxist historians) expected a real return on his investment.²⁴ His choice was not at all unusual. In fact, it was commonplace, and expected: His will—a legally binding document—made eternity a crucial part of the Spanish economy. So did every other will in Spain at that time, for it was required of all testators to include some minimum number of mass requests. Multiplied millions of times over, in will after will, such bequests made eternity a very real thing in his day and age.

So, to move as quickly as possible from the abstract to the concrete, and back again: this book explores how that transcendent higher reality has been conceived in the West, and how such conceptions relate to social, political, and economic structures, and even to specific lives, such as that of Father Juan de Talavera Salazar. Since there is no concept more central to the definition of transcendent reality in the West than that of eternity, it cries out for attention, especially from historians who seek to study lived religion.

A brief history of a large subject, like a good map of a large area, needs to be brutally succinct, and to condense and generalize fiercely while paying careful attention to all the essential details. It is a perilous venture for any scholar, for our profession values details, with good reason. Fortunately, we also value surveys and summaries, because we know that they serve an indispensable purpose of their own: after all, a life-sized map of the world would not only be useless but insanely cumbersome. Fully aware of the dangers involved, I have structured this book according to the most easily recognizable paradigm shifts that have occurred in the history of a single concept. “Paradigm shifts” are those moments in history when thinking changes irreversibly. It is a term that was first applied to the history of science to describe a change in basic assumptions that realigns all subsequent thinking, such as the so-called Copernican revolution, after which it became impossible for anyone to propose that the sun orbits the earth without being taken for a fool. Paradigm shifts occur not just in science but also in belief systems, even though when it comes to beliefs, the older interpretations can survive and even thrive alongside the new ones. When it comes to belief, then, a paradigm shift does not necessarily kill off older ways of thinking—although that can happen sometimes, as with polytheism in Europe—but it does certainly bring about the existence of a rival interpretation of reality.²⁵ Each of the chapters, then, traces one of four distinct periods, from ancient times to the present, each of which is distinguished by a different dominant paradigm, or conception of eternity. The periods covered by each chapter are not of equal length, but the chapters tend to focus equal attention on each period, more or less. Chronological symmetry has never been a pattern in the development of civilization (one need think only of the technology developed in the past

century alone), but we historians are nonetheless compelled to impose a certain degree of symmetry on our summaries of the past so it can make more sense, much like cartographers who stretch and bend real landscapes in order to make intelligible maps of complex subway systems.

First, in chapter two, we cover roughly a thousand years, tracing the development of Western concepts of eternity back to their Greek and Jewish roots, up until the collapse of the Western Roman Empire (fifth century BCE–fifth century CE). The main focus of this chapter is the early development of Christian notions of eternity, viewed simultaneously as a rupture with the past and continuing expression of some of its most salient features. Chapter three covers the medieval period, a millennium during which eternity was tightly woven into the very fabric of Western society (500–1500). Chapter four traces and analyzes the early modern period, roughly two centuries during which the medieval synthesis of time and eternity was challenged and overturned (1500–1700). This chapter looks closely at those changes that this pivotal rupture with the past brought about—changes that marked a transition to modernity and continue to have an effect on us. Chapter five takes us from the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century up to the present day, a period during which the impact of eternity on Western civilization has steadily declined or almost disappeared. The final chapter takes stock of the impact that the decline of eternity has on us who live in the secularized West and offers some reflections on the ways in which we cope with the big problem that is at the heart of all thinking on eternity and will therefore never vanish from view: that of our own mortality. Naturally, this last chapter is somewhat different from those that preceded it, and more like the introduction you have just read: meditative in tone and approach, it seeks to

situate the main subject in our own immediate historical context.

A few basic points need to be touched on before delving into the history of eternity. First and foremost, one has to admit that the concept of eternity has boundaries as complex and bewildering as those of the old Holy Roman Empire, and that the word *eternity* can be understood in various ways.²⁶ Three of the most common definitions of eternity are:

1. As time without beginning or an end, or *sempiternity*.
2. As a state that transcends time wholly and is separate from it.
3. As a state that includes time but precedes and exceeds it.

In addition, *eternity* is often linked to the concept of *infinity*, or confused with it. Normally, in common speech, infinity is understood as endless space and eternity as endless time, but infinity can also be applied to time and eternity to space, often inappropriately or carelessly. In Western history, eternity also became inseparable from conceptions of God, who tends to be ascribed both eternity and infinity, along with prescience, or foreknowledge of all events. Moreover, in Western history eternity has also been given a human dimension, insofar as it touches on conceptions of an after-life, and beliefs about heaven, hell, apocalyptic millennia, the New Jerusalem, and whatever else might follow earthly existence. This overlapping meaning could be very vague, even totally devoid of religious substance, as in the novel and film entitled *From Here to Eternity*. Or it could lead to speculation about what may lie between time and eternity, and the invention of terms such as *aeviternity*, which applies to angels and demons; or to the development of doctrines such as that of *purgatory*, where souls are cleansed of their sins after death on some time scale that is vastly different from that of earth.

This book will not plot a way out of this terminological labyrinth. Not at all. But it will definitely encompass all of these conflicting and overlapping approaches to eternity, and analyze their role in the history of the West. Similarly, this book will not seek to answer metaphysical, epistemological, and ontological questions, much less those of dogmatic or systematic theology. But it will definitely try to make sense of this question: What difference has eternity made in history? What difference might it make for us now? To anyone who asks “Is time contained within eternity, or outside of it?” or “How can humans have free will if God has fore-ordained everything from before the beginning of time?” or “What was the eternal God doing before he made time and space?” I can only respond as a historian. Which means that when it comes to philosophy and theology, the best I can do is to quote St. Augustine. When faced with that last query just mentioned, here is what he said: Before God created heaven and earth, he was busy designing hell for people who ask such questions.²⁷

To imagine eternity is to venture beyond the world of sense experience, to ponder the unimaginable, to contemplate the ultimate. Eternity is beyond comprehension, but not beyond the mind’s grasp. It is no mere logical conundrum, something contradictory or fantastic, such as a square circle. Neither is it a “hiccup of gross irrationality,” as some extreme materialists like to argue.²⁸ Eternity is a real logical possibility, with many dimensions; it is as much an epistemological and metaphysical question as a scientific or even ethical and political one. Eternity is a subject closely linked to religion, philosophy, psychiatry, and astrophysics, but not limited to them. It is a subject without boundaries, of as much interest to the faithful on their knees as to atheists and agnostics who analyze images of the outer reaches of the universe sent

back to earth by the Hubble telescope. Eternity is at once an abstract idea and a practical concept, a puzzle for logicians and cosmologists and a goal for individuals and societies; to grapple with it is to search for meaning and purpose, or ultimate justice, even if one is not conscious of the fact. Given the vast size of the subject and the stakes at hand—both personal and cosmic—none of this should be surprising.

Measured against eternity, all time seems outrageously insufficient. What is a billion years but a fraction of an infinite number, or of something much greater, beyond number? Or, even worse, just a fraction with a beginning and an end, something sandwiched at both ends by nonexistence? Any history of eternity, then, no matter how long or short, is ridiculously brief when measured against eternity itself. Another way of putting this is to say that the only definitive history of eternity would be an eternal one, without beginning or end. And that would be as useless as a life-size map of the earth. So, perhaps, since anything short of that is insufficient, and our time on earth runs out too quickly, a brief account seems best. When one also considers that all books and everything else are *as nothing* and will one day vanish completely into oblivion, then the “perhaps” can vanish too.

In the meantime, as you and I wait for our inevitable end, all we have is time, and time can seem very precious—even if it is *as nothing*. Some, like Sigmund Freud, might say it is all the more precious for precisely that reason. Time has relative value not only when measured against eternity, but also against itself. Who has not felt this? Even Albert Einstein admitted it, when trying to explain the concept for which he is best known. “When a man sits with a pretty girl for an hour, it seems like a minute,” he said. “But let him sit on a hot stove for a minute—and it’s longer than any hour. That’s relativity.”²⁹

Big Bang, Big Sleep, Big Problem ~ 27

So let us move along, and make the best of the ticking of the clock. I don't know about you, but I can't wait *forever*, and I rage, rage against the tick, tick, tock, and anything else so pathetic, so much a reminder of the Big Sleep and the grim reaper's inexorable approach.