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At the heart of human experience lies an obsession with the nature of death. Religion, for most of history, has provided an explanation for human life and a vision of what comes after it. But in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such beliefs came under relentless pressure as new ideas—from psychiatry to evolution to communism—seemed to suggest that our fate was now in our own hands: humans could cease to be animals, defeat death, and become immortal.

In *The Immortalization Commission*, the acclaimed political philosopher and critic John Gray takes a brilliant and frightening look at humankind's dangerous striving toward a scientific version of immortality. Probing the parallel faiths of Bolshevik "God-builders," who sought to reshape the planet and psychical researchers, who believed they had evidence of a nonreligious form of life after death, Gray raises fascinating questions about how such beliefs threaten the very nature of what it means to be human. He looks to philosophers, journalists, politicians, charlatans, and mass murderers who all felt driven by a specifically scientific and modern worldview and whose revolt against death resulted in a series of experiments that ravaged whole countries.

An urgent examination of Darwin's post-religious legacy, *The Immortalization Commission* is an important work from "one of Britain's leading public intellectuals" (*The Wall Street Journal*).

The Immortalization Commission: Science and the Strange Quest to Cheat Death **Details**

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From Reader Review The Immortalization Commission: Science and the Strange Quest to Cheat Death for online ebook

Richard says

I enjoyed reading this book, especially the second half which focused on the Russian Communist attempt to immortalize man in the body of Lenin. Maxim Gorky played the role of the immortality hunters of the first part of the book, the English atheists who looked for "proof" of the continuance of personality after death. Some, like Henry Sidgwick, the great ethicist, believed that morality would collapse were there no afterlife. I kept thinking of Hume who had a strong feeling that religion served a necessary purpose, keeping most people in line through fear.

Recent developments suggest that Sidgwick, Frederic W.H. Myers, and Hume were wise to be concerned. Gray makes much of the materialistic basis of the Russian Communist interest in "immortality," but, of course, the Western establishment of Capitalism as the basic "religion" has created a similar situation in which morality collapses into egotism and greed, the Sermon on the Mount into "consumer satisfaction."

The attempt to fathom the unfathomable is, one supposes, an admirable endeavor, but to wager what the Ancients called "the good life" on it is imbecilic. This book certainly suggests the truth of this observation.

I did enjoy reading this as Mr Gray offers significant detail, especially in 20th-century history. He raised my estimation of H.G. Wells considerably, and I'll be off to the library to sample his work beyond the inescapable *War of the Worlds*.

Larry Koester says

Difficult to know what to say about this book. Interesting if you have thought about the subject. Makes some good points. But leaves me flare.

Dan says

In this book, John Gray gives the full attention to the ultimate standard of Progress: cheating death. For the initiated, there are few new ideas here, but fans of Gray's work may still find passages that reward their time.

The book is cut into three distinct but related sections. Of the three, the last section is by far the shortest, but the nearest to my expectations. I'd been interested in the John Gray perspective on Ray Kurzweil, whose his ilk and ideology seem to me indicative of the times. There was little explicit examination of that but what there was was articulate and thought provoking, especially in the context of the main portions of the book.

The first section is on Victorian period elites seeking knowledge of the afterlife by a bizarre interweaving of occult rituals via pseudoscience and psychology. Having only read Heresies, which compiles articles written for The New Statesman, I found Gray's writing more elegant here than before. His biographical renderings of F.W.H. Myers, Henry Sidgwick and Arthur Balfour were usually interesting, if not exactly riveting. They did serve to provide a human dimension to all of the idealizing about life, death and afterlife. That the occult was popular with many Victorians is common knowledge now. Their methods were almost comical, of course,

but at times their earnestness was heart breaking. I found myself having more sympathy for them the stranger and more desperate their quest became. Gray examines their ideas and their mission articulately and respectfully, never dismissing them out of hand simply because they were silly or unconventional. What comes clear is that, behind all the seances and automatic writing there is a human longing quite universal and not at all abstruse.

The second section explores similar themes of conquering death through technology and a bastardized science-as-religion in Communist Russia. I found it less interesting, and often digressive. The Stalinist mission of "progress" at all costs certainly holds relevant lessons for Gray's topic here, but the biographical bits about H.G. Wells and especially Moura Budberg seemed overdrawn and largely irrelevant despite their being interesting characters. The meander through the perils of living in Russia during this period seemed unjustified, given that it's all been explored so much more thoroughly in many, many other books. Perhaps the ideology that Gray discusses here has it's most extreme historical example in this period, but there were many other factors involved in these atrocities that he can hardly explore here. I got the feeling he lingered on certain bits here just to give the book a little more meat.

The last section was a short but superb conclusion in which Gray gives his own ideas center stage. I have my particular bones of contention with his philosophy, but this is hardly the place to get into that. One never agrees entirely with any writer, and it's usually beneficial to be at odds on at least a few things. The two previous stories present humanity desperately seeking certainty and control, loathe to tolerate long any conditions that undermine the feelings of either. Should those Victorian characters seem distant from the 21st century, Gray reminds us that the same messianic view of technology is alive and well today in many new forms. The methods may have changed, but the mission bears frightening resemblance to the justifications that spawned the follies and horrors of the past. In the quest for absolute control over nature and fate, the human race has proven itself capable terrors our ancestors would never have imagined. Gray also makes the excellent point, so often ignored or downplayed by the new atheists, that science and progress have been just as guilty of engendering these terrors as religion ever was. Perhaps more so, when one considers that the greatest calamities of the twentieth century(which also happen to be the greatest in recorded history) happened at the hands of progressive regimes.

I've often felt that if our progress in the sciences demonstrates one thing for sure, it's the ultimate ignorance and finitude of human beings. Every new truth discovered undermines a previous one, and yet we remain so sure of ourselves. Contradiction and even ignorance are nothing to be ashamed of, once you recognize how unavoidable they are. In fact, the recognition of it allows for humility, and the retention of a sense of mystery and curiosity. The last portion of this book quotes from several poems, which are complimented by Gray's own occasionally eloquent prose. It reminds us that, as much as death may make life appear absurd at times, life without death would be at least as absurd. In a way, it's the ending that grants our lives with so much of their beauty and their novelty. Here, Gray says it better than I -

"Without seasons nothing ripens and drops to the ground, the leaves never change their colors nor the sky its vacant blue. Nothing dies, so nothing is born."

Oscar Manuel says

La idea de alcanzar la inmortalidad no es en absoluto extraña. Lo extraño son los métodos que se han ideado para lograrlo. En este libro, Gray narra la empresa de un puñado de hombres, locos, que llevaron su proyecto parasicológico, esotérico entonces, hasta sus últimas consecuencias, la idealización radical política que llevó al exoterismo la pretensión de resucitar a Lenin, y otras locuras añadidas.

Al Bità says

John Gray has a name for being a kind of maverick philosopher, and this book continues the tradition. What makes it a pleasure to read is that he also writes cleverly and well. The combination always tends to make his works exciting and thrilling, not always in expected ways. His techniques appears to be the skilful application of an extremely sharp rational scalpel to reveal inconsistencies, contradictions, ironies, etc. in most if not all of one's cherished beliefs. As such, he is a post-modernist par excellence (a great irony, since he eschews postmodernism — how post-modern can you get!).

This books deals with the fascination humanity has with wanting to cheat death. It is presented in three parts: the first ('Cross-Correspondences') examines the late 19th-c fascination with spiritualism, and the attempts by the cognoscenti and literati of the times to conduct experiments to prove the existence of life after death through the study of seances, automatic writings, etc. They failed, of course; but the information Gray provides about the people involved is both very interesting and quite illuminating. The second part ('God-builders') concentrates on the early 20th-c equivalents, particularly in Russia, and the Soviet attempts to 'immortalise' Lenin. The information provided about the world of spies and political manoeuvrings, particularly between Britain and Russia, are again immensely illuminating and fascinating after reading about H G Wells, Lockhart and the enigmatic Moura (one may never quite look at the work of Wells, for example, in quite the same light again!). The third part ('Sweet Mortality') essentially asks for humanity to accept the fact that death is not only inevitable, but also, perhaps, 'a consummation devoutly to be wished' (with apologies to Shakespeare).

While not necessarily disagreeing with this conclusion, I feel that it is in this third part that Gray's intellectual scalpel has been dulled somewhat. For me, this section made me review my thoughts on the basic question allegedly raised by this book. The sub-title of this book is 'Science and the Strange Quest to Cheat Death'. What, if anything, does Gray mean by 'science' here? Conducting experiments in seances, clairvoyance, automatic writing, etc? Preserving Lenin's body after he has died? I suspect Gray's antagonism to 'science' is more akin to the misapplication of science by certain individuals to achieve some kind of misguided ideal of 'perfecting' humanity (the implication being that humanity is basically 'imperfect', a concept at the core of most if not all religions). Gray's assessment seems to be that all human activities, including 'science' and 'religion', are responses to certain dilemmas humanity faces in contemplating its existence. Within this interpretation 'science' seems to come out the loser (since its use has perpetuated pain and suffering) while the mythologies of the past, including those of religion, more of a winner (since these myths provide 'comfort'). For me, such a conclusion is not only dishonest but also a kind of wimping out (let's hang on to those warm and cuddly things which provide comfort rather than deal with all those nasty consequences technology has wreaked on us).

For me Science is Knowledge. Nescience (ignorance) is no way to survive in this world. It is through knowledge that we have been able to improve our lot: we live longer, healthier lives; we can keep in communication with our loved ones even when we are not actually present; we have technologies which assist us in our daily transactions; etc. Sure, misapplied knowledge is another matter altogether, but misapplied knowledge is not 'science', it is misapplied science. And if it is true that human beings like to kill and destroy (that is part of who we are) then using 'science' to do so does not condemn science as being evil. Gray is right in attacking all forms of -isms. But just as Christianity is not Christianity, Catholicism is not Catholic, Islamism is not Islam, etc. so Scientism is not Science.

Phillip Ramm says

This not the "Men Are From somewhere, Women From Somewhere Else..." John Gray. Different guy. You have been warned.

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This book seems to be made up of left-over notes from his Black Mass, which was about millennialism and things eschatological. The take-home message from that book was: Don't get involved with groups which advocate solutions to the world's problems that involve killing huge swathes of "imperfect" people.

The take-home message from this current book: You are going to die, and mankind is going to become extinct. Might as well face up to it.

Harsh, but fair.

To warn you, Gray is not a scientist or a journalist. He is a philosopher. This is not some fact-filed, pop-sci expose destined for the best-seller shelves. It's not as much of hard slog as some have said, but it might not be what you are looking for, given the title. I have read a lot of Gray (am I a masochist?) so I knew what to expect.

Having said that, let's look at the book...

Through some potted biographies of well-known people such as H.G Wells, Maxim Gorky and Arthur Balfour (of the Balfour letter fame - the one that suggested giving Palestine to the Jewish people - it seemed a good idea a the time) and some incredibly less well-known ones, we look very unscientifically at the philosophy of pinning one's hopes on immortality (to avoid existential despair, I presume). There are so many off-topic digressions and barely on-topic discussion, that one might wonder if Gray had any idea what this book was going to be about while he was writing it.

First half concerns itself with the turn of the last's century's obsession with seances and automatic writing. The hope of contacting the dead through spiritualism could 'prove' there was continuance of the personality in the spirit world. Epic fail. Second half is about the crazy ideas in communist Russia that all of us become one mind, somehow. This is not explained well. Something to do with embalming Lenin.

It finishes off with that other nutter Allen Kurtzweil predicting that we will be living eternally in a nanorobot controlled Virtual World (cf Tron Reconfigured). Meanwhile the real world falls apart and is that virtual "I" really the same person as "me". Plus a despondent poet or two we have never heard of, happy (well maybe happy isn't the right word) to accept possible death by heading straight into trouble - 1st WW and communist Hungary.

I don't know how this last section fits in at all except to confirm that not everyone wants to live forever. One need only quote some suicide stats to make this point. I think Gray just wanted to transcribe some of his favorite pieces of writing - they are good, but only barely relevant.

His brief discussions on the laws of nature and man's place in the universe are thin, and I recommend a much more eloquent and elegant questioning of the philosophical difficulties here given by Michael Frayn (a journalist and novelist!) in The Human Touch.

This book is very unfocussed overall. However the insights into some of the personalities are instructive. Even smart people can be stupid. And they can go way off-topic.

## **José Uría says**

Aunque tiene momentos muy buenos, y goza de las virtudes y defectos propios de este autor, el gran problema que tiene este ensayo es la completa desconexión de las dos líneas argumentales principales. Y es que no sería tan difícil conectar las historias de los constructores de Dios soviéticos y los investigadores psíquicos victorianos. Quizá el problema es que, a pesar de todo, Gray es demasiado mainstream para encontrar un único hilo conductor, sea desde una perspectiva materialista u ocultista, que el tema se presta a ambas.

En su momento la lectura de este libro fue una pequeña decepción. Menos mal que su origen fue el de la biblioteca y no una compra. Quizá guste a otros lectores, pero yo no lo recomiendo. No obstante sí que tiene algunos pasajes intensos e interesantes que consiguen que al menos le aporte dos estrellas.

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## **Williwaw says**

This book certainly deserves a closer, more thoughtful reading than I was able to give the first time through.

The biggest surprise for me was that this is primarily a history book. The first part delves into the activities of the British Society for Psychical Research (SPR), and its attempts to prove that there is an afterlife. Such efforts began in the last quarter of the 19th century and continued well into the 20th century, but slowly petered out as it became clear that there was no such proof. Many SPR members were prominent scientists, philosophers, and statesmen, who became obsessed with this topic and engaged in seances and automatic writing sessions. They hoped (or pretended to hope?) that they could reconnect with lost loves. I had previously been aware of Conan Doyle's obsessions with Spiritualism, and the keen interest in it after WWI, but I was totally unaware of the earlier roots of the Spiritualist movement.

The second part of the book is a study of the Soviets and the so-called "God-Builders." Although the Soviets rejected religion, they anticipated Kurzweil's aspirations to the "Singularity." Under this view, religion always had it backwards. God did not create the universe. Instead, the universe created Humanity so it could aspire to create or become God. Materialism and technology, according to this view, can provide us the tools to triumph over matter and become immortal, incorporeal beings.

Unfortunately, the Soviet Union became the greatest killing machine the world has ever known. The ends justified the means. It was all in the name of the ultimate deification of humankind, so there was no need to feel any guilt.

The final section of The Immortalization Commission is what I really expected this book to be: namely, Gray's own perspective on the quest for immortality. It's quite brilliant, but gnostic. You'll find several profound statements in a single paragraph here, and each such statement easily deserves an hour or more of discussion.

If I had to sum it up, Gray seems to be saying that the quest for immortality is a fool's errand. Paradoxically, immortality would really be a kind of death. Nothing that lasts forever can really be "alive." Because birth, change, and death -- the whole life cycle -- is integral to life.

Here's a taste of the paradoxes that Gray brings up toward the end:

"Matter can be intelligent without ever being conscious (think of flocks of birds and ant colonies) while conscious beings may be so unintelligent that they destroy themselves."

"The notion that humans can attain immortality by merging in a cosmic consciousness is in any case muddled. In the theories of Myers and Lunacharsky the individual mind was absorbed into a world-soul, while in Kurzweil's it is uploaded in to a virtual universe. In both cases a speck of humanity becomes part of a cloud of consciousness or information. Whatever survives, the individual is extinguished. Death is not conquered but triumphs unnoticed."

I especially appreciated some of the powerful and poetic writings that Gray quotes from toward the end of the book. In particular, a long passage from Edward Thomas's "The Icknield Way" (1913) stunned me with its melancholy beauty. This, along with a description of Casablanca during WWII, by Gyorgy Faludy, added dimension and pathos to Gray's thesis.

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### **Nick Hagger says**

Very disappointing and somewhat of a slog, the book suffers not so much from a lack of or poor quality of ideas (though I have disagreements with those), but the lackluster execution of the prose which surrounds them. The first chapter details occultism amongst the upper classes of victorian/edwardian England, and consists mainly of charmless page after page of expositional detail about people who may not have been particularly interesting in themselves, and are rendered even duller here. All this is meant to illustrate the difficulties a largely protestant society had coming to terms with the accelerating scientific revolution and the devastating implications of darwinian thought, but is excruciatingly lumpen and inadequate to the task. The second chapter eschews any adherence to the central thesis of the book in lieu of Page after page of regurgitated facts about the horror of the soviet Union. The details are excoriating, but widely covered elsewhere, and are repeated here without any real attempt to frame them within the critique of the modes of thought that he takes issue with.

The third chapter takes the concept of progress more firmly in its sights, specifically with the modern belief in science as a conduit for progress. Whilst this is the most substantive chapter of the book in terms of critique of ideology, it is also the shortest, less than a third of the length of the other chapters, and also attempts a summing up and synthesis of the previous chapters, and a conclusion and send off. Therefore the more weighty questions and attempt to find their historical origins, logical implications, and intellectual flaws (and perhaps a better alternative system) are given over to very few pages of text.

More than anything it seems that Gray had been reading a bunch of books about the occult in victorian England, a bunch of books about soviet atrocities, and wrote an essay about each which tried to shoehorn his standard reproachment of the idea of progression and it's various manifestations. Each of these essays could well have been extended to a whole book, but as it is they remain self-serving rehashes of Gary's old (and repeating) material against a paltry background of poorly painted character sketches and shallow historical investigation.

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### **Vilém Zouhar says**

Interesting passages about dead Lenin were balanced by annoying historical trivia.

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## Ayan Dutta says

Not five stars since the first chapter gets too much biographical in nature . Otherwise fantastic , like all Gray reads - the biggest thinker of the 21st century

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## Stephen Hull says

This is a puzzling book. The title (and particularly the subtitle) feels like an attempt after the fact to impose some sort of theme on what is a rather arbitrary set of pieces. At the same time it was a very enjoyable book which I'm glad I read, it being very well written and not overly long.

The book starts by looking at the psychic researchers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and, as well as providing portraits of some quite interesting and curious people, gives a fascinating perspective on their work: in particular, the idea that their work wasn't rejecting science but quite the opposite, based on a firm belief that science was the way to establish the truth of existence beyond the grave. He unfortunately assumes that the reader already has a good understanding of automatic writing and could perhaps be a bit more detailed when he explains the theory of cross-correspondences, but these are minor quibbles.

So far, so good. Then, in the next section he seems to start an entirely different book. He tells the story of Moura, the mistress of H.G. Wells, in particular her struggles for survival in Bolshevik Russia and the allure she had for Wells and others. The only connection that this has to the subtitle is that death is something she came close to but managed to evade on several occasions. He goes on to look at Wells and Maxim Gorky, another of Moura's conquests (though perhaps not sexually) and someone whom the author classifies as a God-builder, one of the Soviet intellectuals of that period whose philosophy of existence mixed occultism and science, although this feels more like a footnote to the chapter rather than its theme.

The author then looks more closely at the early Soviet era, focusing on the government-imposed terrorism, the murder of literally millions in the cause of establishing the state. It briefly looks at the story behind the embalming of Lenin, and here he seems to return to what is supposed to be the theme of the book. In this case, the cheating of death refers to the firm belief that at some point Lenin could be brought back to life if his body were sufficiently well preserved.

This book is then concluded with a brief chapter which, once you get past the beautifully crafted prose, feels like little more than a rant against science, and not a terribly well-informed one. He sets up scientific straw men which he then knocks down. In particular, he attacks scientists' belief that they can discover the laws which govern the entire universe. The problem with this for me is that I don't personally know any scientist who actually believe this. He also (and to be fair I am simplifying here) suggests that the belief that there are patterns of the universe is equivalent to theism, so for science to deny the existence of God is absurd.

He finally concludes the book with some reflections on how our entire existence is built upon our relationship to death. While this is perhaps not terribly new, it is nonetheless beautifully presented.

And that's for me the key thing about this book. I may be puzzled at why it contains what it does and I may be a bit exasperated at the author's various soapboxes, but I nevertheless enjoyed reading it a lot -- and that's far more important than anything else as far as I'm concerned.

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## Nikolay Nikiforov says

What an awful book!

To begin with, its title comes from a mistranslation: there was never Lenin Immortalization Commission in Soviet Russia, only a Commission for the (Eternal) Preservation of his Memory — sort of a big difference, right?

Instead of an interesting philosophical argument one would expect after reading the book's preface, what you get is a hodgepodge of historical trivia and random gossip and insinuation.

The author never resists a temptation for another digression that serves no purpose other than to show off his wide (actually not that wide) knowledge. Walter Duranty was a bastard, no doubt about that, but why spend pages talking about him, when his relevance to the book's topic is, approximately — none whatsoever?

If this were a W.G. Sebald's book, all those ramblings and digressions would not be a problem. But there's nothing resembling Sebald's brilliance and insightfulness here, just bland and commonplace — though probably *correct* - philosophizing.

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## Mango says

"Let's stay human". This could synthesize this book by against-the-grain philosopher John Gray. Staying human means first understanding the reach and richness of human existence in its complicated and convoluted unfoldings, and at the same time remaining humbly attached to human nature in front of uncontrolled and easily addictive exercises of indulgence, excess and hubris. It takes an entire lifetime in the best case to understand how to leave fully the single-shot instance we are eventually given, and the distractions along the uniquely contingent path of each human experience are manifold. Here Gray is attracted by that unseemingly perverse and dangerously alluring such fascination that is immortality, which stands for the ultimate attempt to cancel the role of chance, disorder and contingency (path dependence physicists would say) in one's life by overcompensating with an endless possibility of resetting, retrying, procrastinating and skipping any possibility ever happened or imaginable. Immortality has to do with infinity -- in fact, it is a division by infinity of any activity, which ends up counting for zero relative value in any case.

Gray openly elaborates his negative view of immortality only in the third and final part of the book, which takes start from the hyped Singularity prophesized (or advertised) mostly by Ray(mond) Kurzweil, currently engaged with Google to make his own obsession with immortality turn into an escapable reality for everyone. Gray takes two thirds of the book in its previous two parts to introduce the reader to some of the subterranean esoteric streams that have underlined the previous two centuries ultimately in the same quest. Gray does not go as far as trace this subliminally cogent drive to its Egyptian antecedents -- he is content with bringing forward a substantial amount of carefully documented evidence on the personal businesses of eminent personalities that drew inspiration from the hidden quest to be able to bear their own often miserable life. The first part of the book concentrates mostly on the automatic writing and cross correspondences experienced in England at the end of the nineteenth century. The second centers on the esoteric nature of Bolshevism, which will surprisingly remind some readers of a very similar character found in Nazism, which in turn Gray does not address here much to anyone's pity. In the Bolshevik mass killing of its own citizens converged a naive inspiration from Darwin's (rather Spencer's?) evolution theory perverted into racism and at the same time of Nietzsche's Übermensch -- in fact it seems one could not but misunderstand Nietzsche's ultrahuman message during and right after his time, probably because his own literary efforts were by far and outrageously distorted and covered up by his sister's posthumous renditions and reframing in a Wagnerian/proto-Nazi direction. Gray's accounts of the ease with which Lenin and Stalin above many others just accepted or even fostered the mass erasure of their population in view of the future birth of a new and superior race is shocking. Yet the climax of the book is indeed reached when the words of Kurzweil are quoted to show how close they resemble in style, inspiration, content and outlook to the equivalent attributed

to Sigdwick, Wells, Gorky and others. To Gray the thread really looks the same, and it is the use of science to overcompensate and finally reach where religion failed.

Yet Gray indulges too much and too often into biographical details along the way, to the point that the main thread is put aside for so long at times that the reader can think the author has some other goal in mind pro tempore. His tone is constantly objective if comprehensive, yet he shows his best in the final unleash of his own judgments in defense of humanity.

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## **J. says**

Reviewers are rights in complaining that the title makes no sense. This work is extremely interesting and fits well with Gray's other works/themes, at times expands on them, but the original description is misleading, especially for someone looking for a work more like Homo Deus.

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