The subject of time has preoccupied countless thinkers across diverse disciplines throughout time. Questions such as whether time exists externally to us or whether we move within it, when time began, and what preceded it have been posed in both philosophy and physics. Does time have some independent and absolute being, as Plato claimed, or is its being rather dependent upon changes or motion, as Aristotle contended? The great myths too concern themselves with the essence of time. For Chronos, the God of Time in Greek mythology, time is eternal, continuous, perfect, and ceaselessly flowing. Questions such as whether time will cease or reach the end of history are raised in various religious contexts as well as in connection with scientific predictions of global warming.

Every culture’s perspective on time dictates and acts as the form of thought. All knowledge is time, for man lives at all times in the framework of time. At different periods throughout western culture, various conceptualizations of time have existed contemporaneously with one another, sometimes contradicting one another and other times complementing one another. For this reason, discourses on the subject of time should not be confined to scientific or philosophical contexts exclusively and should instead be understood in light of broader cultural, political, and artistic contexts. Time stands at the very center of our conceptualization of our existence. As Virilio claims, existence offers us multiple, diverse layers of meaning from which we must extract a single, individual, cultural meaning.

In this article, we shall undertake a genealogical investigation of time and its traces by studying both the changes/differences that the concept of time overlooks as well as our attempts to understand the future of time. Although this engagement with genealogy shall have as its subject the past, its goal is the comprehension and critique of contemporary existence. Disclosure of the past diminishes its power in determining our lives; culture is determined by way of foundational assumptions which are often so entrenched that they are completely invisible save in the hindsight of later era. Adopting the genealogical method for the purpose of practical critique is further supported by Nietzsche and Foucault: Nietzsche is considered to be the father of the critical-genealogical method, while Foucault implemented and build upon Nietzsche’s work. In Foucault’s opinion, the genealogical method enables one to take a new perspective on values.

People in the West today, I would like to suggest, live according to two different worldly axes of time. The first axis is that of linear, cultural, historical time, which tends towards the end of days, the eschaton. Even though this axis of time has gone through cultural changes, it is fundamentally based upon an established religious narrative. The second axis of time is “personal time” which characterizes capitalism and the culture of individualism. In addition to these two axes, in the Judeo-Christian West there also exists an other-worldly dimension of time, namely, the mystical. These various axes of time, which together form our conceptualization of future time, are undergoing changes in this current period of global crisis. Most significantly, the eschatological narrative is becoming more prominent, beginning to penetrate and influence even the axis of “individual time.” Moreover, in this article we shall consider the accelerated changes that are currently taking place in connection with both the worldly axes of time and the other-worldly, mystical dimension of time in the context of virtual reality and other cultural shifts.

Narratives of living on the precipice of the apocalypse tend to become profuse in periods of crisis that are characterized by fear and uncertainty around the unknown and unknowable future. Originally, this narrative emerged out of a religious worldview that is deeply embedded in Western culture. Accordingly, there is a pervasive feeling that what we are experiencing in this period of time: on the heels of the Covid-19 pandemic and in the midst of climate crisis, ought to be characterized as life on the verge of the apocalypse. This is a period of great uncertainty and fear. And this is a warning in connection with the nature of time itself. The apocalyptic sensibility of believing that one is living at the end of time tends to arise principally in periods of crisis. Yet at the same time, such a view is built upon cultural structures deeply embedded in the West. For this reason, discourse on the future of time is always relevant.

Our genealogy of the traces of time begins with religious sources of [Western] culture. Various systems of thought and cultural values are reflected in the religious doctrines of a given culture. Both Western culture and Christianity were based off of Jewish scriptures, which were scattered throughout the provinces of the Roman Empire. Christianity preserved and disseminated the books of the biblical canon. Bible is considered a sacred text in both religions, tantamount to absolute truth, the fruit of divine revelation. The Lutheran Reformation served to make scripture even more important and established Jewish sacred texts as central to European identity. Accordingly, we shall investigate the roots of the Western cultural perspective on that axis of time which is directed towards the end of days, or the eschaton, and we shall identify its basis with an apocalyptic worldview found in both biblical texts and other Christian religious texts. We shall also investigate the parallel development of the individual axis of time. That is to say, in what follows, we shall also investigate the changes that occurred in these perspectives under the influence of capitalist culture vis-à-vis the interpenetration of spiritual movements and the influence of virtual reality.