From Big Bang to Big Mystery is Brendan Purcell’s magnum opus, the book in which he has finally pulled together the fascinating threads of his interest over several decades. The result is a work that explodes the genres in which it is likely to be placed. It is at once a work of scientific reporting, philosophical analysis, and deeply humanistic affirmation, all within a horizon of theological openness. Mastery of these fields, to the level of being able to synthesize their significance, is a formidable achievement. There are no models for this type of project in our compartmentalized academy. Yet the daring to attempt it is indispensable if we are to understand what it means to be human, to address the topic that Darwin called “the descent of man.” This is the book that anyone who works in biology, cultural anthropology, or the intersection of science and religion that marks our public world, as well as the self-isolated fields of philosophy and theology, wishes someone would write. Well here it is. It is nothing less than the meaning of life unfolded on all its various levels.

This is what Purcell has been aiming at over his professional career. He refers to it as “philosophical anthropology” but the book actually explodes the boundaries of such a conception. There is no philosophical account of human nature that fails to locate itself within the long empirical record of human emergence. To treat adequately of human nature today, as Purcell intends to do, one must acknowledge that the understanding of
humanity depends on the full range of sciences from astrophysics and cosmology, to paleontology, evolutionary genetics, and paleoanthropology. This is what Aristotle in his empirical opening sought to do while assuming that the natural order could be mastered within his philosophical framework. What Aristotle largely omitted is the history of human self-reflection on our emergence within the world. He understood the importance of language but he did not give it the full weight it ought to have as the unending history of human self-interpretation. The cultural explosion that constitutes human history is the creation of a field of meaning that includes even the scientific horizon. In studying human origins we study beings who already have formed an account of their origins. This has been the great stumbling block in the controversies that have swirled since Darwin first provoked them.

Behind the battles between creationists and evolutionists is the awareness that the status of humanity is at stake. Even Darwin was uneasy with the eradication of mystery from human existence and sought to hold onto the idea of a Creator, one who would affirm the grandeur of the vision of evolutionary unfolding. It was evident to Darwin that the reductionistic thrust of his account of a blind evolutionary process threatened to invalidate even that account itself. “Would anyone trust the convictions of a monkey’s mind,” he asked, “if there are any convictions in such a mind?” Somehow the perspective of truth must be anchored outside of the process that it judges. But how can the flash of transcendence be preserved if there is nothing but random variations and survival of the fittest? Somehow the great leap into intelligence, and not merely the instrumental variety, must be preserved if there is to be the possibility of truth. A creature must emerge who cares less about survival than about transcending it.
It is this disturbing intuition that has driven the public reception of evolution over the past two centuries. Religion has intuited the threat as an evacuation of the idea of a Creator and of the whole world of spirit. The devaluation of the idea of humanity as something exalted and infinite disappears, when we understand ourselves as merely the product of blind random success. It is difficult to see how human relationships built on the unique irreplaceability of each one could be affirmed on such a basis. As products of the “primeval slime” there is no clear point where we rise above it. This is the anxiety that has driven the counter-Darwinian movements, most recently in the scientific guises of creationism and intelligent design. The great merit of Purcell’s work is that it confronts these twin crises, both the anxiety embedded within Darwin and the anxiety provoked in the wider social world. Purcell has been able to reach what Lonergan calls a higher viewpoint that surpasses the partial perspectives of the opposing sides.

An account of human unfolding that fails to account for the intelligence that grasps it must remain unsatisfactory. Equally, a version of the material evidence that requires a God of the gaps is an insult to the same intelligence. The great intellectual challenge to all such efforts has been to find a conception of reality adequate to the complex multi-dimensionality encountered. Purcell is able to supply this in Lonergan’s notion of emergent probability. The multiple layers of being, from the inorganic, to the organic, the sentient, up to the rational, have been a feature of accounts of reality since Aristotle listed them as the levels in which human beings participate. But there has so far been no model of their relationship apart from dualistic or reductionist alternatives. How can biology be related to chemistry without being reduced to it? How can thought be anything more than neurophysiology? Purcell has deepened and enlarged the notion of
emergent probability beyond what he found in Lonergan and Voegelin to fashion it as the major theoretical linchpin of the understanding of origins. The notion of emergent probability explains how what is random at one level becomes integrated at a higher level to produce a different kind of reality. What at the level of particle physics may appear as random movements is grasped at the level of chemistry as a distinct regularity. This, as Purcell explains, is why the infamous problem of the gaps in the fossil record that so concerned Darwin and inflamed his critics is a non-problem. The emergence of species can occur only when the prior emergence has provided the material basis on which a higher form can emerge. Punctuated equilibrium is not a fallback but what is to be expected in a world built on the leaps constituted by emergent probability.

It is a notion that does not necessarily resolve the mystery of the emergence of life, including human life, but it does render the structure of that mystery without diminishing it. At the very least emergent probability demonstrates the possibility of the intellectual shift so badly needed in the study of human origins. Purcell does a superb job of tracing the growing pressure within the field, which centers on the lack of an adequate definition of what it means to be human. Paleoanthropologists are most acutely aware of the problem since they are tasked with distinguishing human beings as such. It is the central philosophical question that Purcell has taken as the burden of his work. He has made a remarkable contribution to the topic by demonstrating that the question cannot be answered externally. No one can say what a human being is by confining the study to what is outside. No amount of material evidence will yield a satisfactory definition, for we are compelled to enter into the symbolic self-presentation that human beings from the very beginning have initiated. With all other species the external remains present them.
Human beings are different in presenting themselves. It is the emergence of inwardness that marks humanity, an inwardness that goes far beyond the basics of consciousness. It is human beings alone that are capable of the kind of detachment that enables them to search for origins that they have already gone beyond. With humanity reality has gained inwardness and is contained within it.

Purcell is virtually alone in confronting the full implication of this realization. That is, that human beings that can reflect on their origins can nowhere be contained in the record that they leave behind. Only the full historical reach of their self-reflection can aspire to anything approaching an adequate account of what remains inexhaustible. This is the great insight that Purcell gained from Eric Voegelin who also employed the term philosophical anthropology before ultimately conceding that it is only partially approached within the whole historical unfolding. The nature of man is history. From Big Bang to Big Mystery proclaims the obsolescence of the opposition between the sciences and humanities. Not only do they address the same human reality, but they are mutually indispensable. What kind of science would it be if it left out the most crucial aspect of what counts as human? What kind of humanistic understanding can ignore the long material unfolding that has provided the possibility of human life? Our modern world has long aspired to integrate the disjointed perspectives of faith and reason, of experience and fact. In Purcell’s study we have at last a model that has been developed, not in abstraction, but within the pressing scientific and spiritual imperative for self-understanding.

Confident, like St. Thomas, in the unity of truth, Purcell has been able to find a way toward that more capacious vision. Animated by the scientist’s love of empirical
cases, the ceaseless quest of the intricate marvels of the universe, he has never lost sight of the deeper spiritual affinity with all that is as the undertow that carries him forward. In the end, it is Purcell’s own generosity of spirit that deeply stamps the work. Love is not too strong a word. There are no opponents or competitors in the enterprise in which one discovers that “it is only with the heart that one sees rightly.” It is in that reaching out toward all others that Purcell leads us toward the Love that makes it all possible. In the end the only adequate perspective is that of God for whom each person is the center of the whole universe. Science if it is to be true to itself must ultimately reach that concession, for that is the condition of its own possibility too. Love is stronger than death, including the love that drives the scientific investigation of reality, for the scientist has already set his or her own survival aside. In the end the only adequate account of human origins is one that is able to include its own magnificent witness to self-transcendence. Otherwise we are assailed by the “horrid doubt” that afflicted poor Darwin in those moments when he forgot that he already surpassed a monkey in prioritizing truth over his own convictions. Brendan Purcell’s book is itself a big bang in its affirmation of faith that makes the study of origins possible at a time when the scientists themselves can be overcome by uncertainty concerning their quest. It is faith in the end that carries Purcell toward a deeper investigation of the beginning.