

Doors and Corners

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Epistemic Status: Weakly Endorsed

Content Warning: Neuropsychological Infohazard, De-Biasing Infohazard, Evocation Infohazard

Recommended Prior Reading: The Tower, Vaporize

Part of the Series: Death

“You can tell you’ve found a really interesting question when nobody wants you to answer it.”

The Denial of Death is a Pulitzer prize winning theory of human psychology written by cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker as he died of colon cancer. I’m going to attempt to summarize and discuss it here, but honestly it’s worth finding a copy and just reading the whole thing. Becker is a tour-de-force through some of the deepest and most fascinating aspects of psychology and humanity, and for a fifty year old text it reads very easily. If the only thing you take away from this post is to go read *The Denial of Death*, well. **Go read *The Denial of Death*.**

We’ll begin in the same place we started when we looked at Ziz, with all the suffering in the universe.

Becker’s theory was that humanity existed in a unique place in the animal kingdom in that we alone are consciously aware of our own mortality. Jason Silva sums this up well in his 2013 speech at the festival of dangerous ideas:

“Ernest Becker says we are gods with anuses. We have the capacity to ponder the infinite. We’re seemingly capable of anything. We can mainline the whole of time through the optic nerve with our astronomy and with our space telescopes, and yet we’re housed in these heart pumping breath gasping decaying bodies. So, to be godly and yet creaturely is just impossibly cruel.”

Humans are animals, and as animals evolution has shaped us to freak out if we think we’re in danger. This works well *if* we don’t think we’re in danger all the time, but at some point in our evolutionary and cognitive development we came to a particular realization, one no other species* had learned or had to deal with. Possibly the most dangerous existing infohazard, and one everyone unavoidably encounters. It can be expressed as the simple statement:

You are going to die.

The evolutionary fear of death is shaped like the fear of getting eaten by a tiger or hit by a truck, but this doesn't play well with the knowledge of the inevitability of the death and decay of all things yourself included. When our inner animal notices that people get old and die and this will happen to us too, it responds to it the same way it would respond to a truck racing towards them.

How could it be any other way? The mind doesn't have another modality to place that fear into. But unlike the truck or the tiger, there's nothing that a person can do to step out of the way of their mortality. This manifests as intense anxiety and insecurity, to the point where we would be driven mad if we didn't find some way to hide the knowledge from our conscious minds. According to Becker,

“The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man.”

To Becker, the world is incomprehensibly vast and terrifying. We are before it just tiny frightened primates cowering from the fierce and towering majesty of nature. And yet that nature is also *of* us and lies within us, so our very bodies betray and turn against us. We attempt to flee from the world, but we cannot flee from our own assholes.

Becker describes humanity as divided beings, half substance and half symbolism. A person is their body, but their body is also a symbol of them. A person is their name, but their name is also a symbol of them. Becker writes:

“Man has a symbolic identity that brings him sharply out of nature. He is a symbolic self, a creature with a name, a life history. He is a creator with a mind that soars out to speculate about atoms and infinity, who can place himself imaginatively at a point in space and contemplate bemusedly his own planet. This immense expansion, this dexterity, this ethereality, this self-consciousness gives to man literally the status of a small god in nature, as the Renaissance thinkers knew.”

It is through this symbolic identity that mankind is able to ~~suppress~~ transcend the fear of death. While everything physical appears to fester and decay, the symbolic soars onwards after the organism has gone to rot in the ground, and in this way, we are able to symbolically control life and death and gain a measure of peace. And yet:

“Yet, at the same time, as the Eastern sages also knew, man is a worm and food for worms. This is the paradox: he is out of nature and hopelessly in it; he is dual, up in the stars and yet housed in a heart-pumping, breath-gasping body that once belonged to a fish and still carries the gill-marks to prove it. His body is a material fleshy casing that is alien to him in many ways—the strangest and most repugnant way being that it aches and bleeds and will decay and die. Man is literally split in two: he has an awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever. It is a terrifying dilemma to be in and to have to live with.”

In our day to day existence, we are faced constantly with the troubling reminder of our nature as split beings of symbol and substance, and however high we soar, we still have to shit. Moreover, this dualism is a delicate balance wherein tipping too far into one direction leads to madness, forcing the individual to walk a delicate tightrope between storms of insanity.

I want to linger on the idea of controlling life and death because it undersets a large amount of psychological action. It seems slightly strange to phrase it that way, out in the open, when it is a mostly hidden magical alief, to use modern jargon.

We as mortal beings at the mercy of the universe *obviously do not* control life or death, and yet we feel the need to take control of it in order to cope with our existence in the universe. Thus we adopt lies as aliefs about the world because actual reality is simply too dreadful to handle.

“all man’s creative life-ways, are in some basic part of them a fabricated protest against natural reality, a denial of the truth of the human condition, and an attempt to forget the pathetic creature that man is.”

Becker runs through what he sees as the developmental psychology going on at work here, reframing much of Freud and other classical psychoanalysts and placing them into this new context. According to Becker, when children are born, they initially don’t have edges to their self, they are little gods, everything is provided to them, they cry and receive food and attention. They are tiny omnipotents.

Then, as they age and grow more of a sense of self and a separation between other and self, they start to run into the limitations of their abilities. Their parents start expecting things of them, and they realize the nature of the gross fragile decaying machines that they inhabit. Everything about life harken’s to death, nothing is safe, and there is no rock upon which to stand. Life and death are inexorably bound, and so the individual must shrink from them both to preserve some insane facade of sanity in an insane world. This results in a mental crisis which in order to solve requires the formation of a sort of neurotic armor around the mind, to shield an individual from the soul crushing madness that is the raw unfiltered truth of reality.

“Perls conceived the neurotic structure as a thick edifice built up of four layers. The first two layers are the everyday layers, the tactics that the child learns to get along in society by the facile use of words to win ready approval and to placate others and move them along with him: these are the glib, empty talk, “cliche,” and role-playing layers. Many people live out their lives never getting underneath them. The third layer is a stiff one to penetrate: it is the “impasse” that covers our feeling of being empty and lost, the very feeling that we try to banish in building up our character defenses. Underneath this layer is the fourth and most baffling one: the “death” or fear-of-death layer; and this, as we have seen, is the layer of our true and basic animal anxieties, the terror that we carry around in our secret heart. Only when we explode this fourth layer, says Perls, do we get to the layer of what we might call our “authentic self: what we really are without sham, without disguise, without defenses against fear.”

To Becker, the truth of reality was synonymous with trembling and madness, and to escape from this madness, we flee into our symbolic identity, into *character* and *narrative*, into untruth and repression and obfuscation. It is by this action of flinching away which we are able to be controlled and manipulated by larger forces of society.

Why are groups so blind and stupid?—men have always asked. Because they demand illusions, answered Freud, they “constantly give what is unreal precedence over what is real.” And we know why. The real world is simply too terrible to admit; it tells man that he is a small, trembling animal who will decay and die. Illusion changes all this, makes man seem important, vital to the universe, immortal in some way.

This lie of self importance, in individuals and in societies, is the foundation atop which we have built our place in the world and the cornerstone supporting our social systems and institutions. Our need for this lie is what makes us follow strong leaders, submit to authority, believe in religion, and deny any knowledge that would threaten our symbolic immortality.

To reject this lie would be tantamount to a suicide of the symbolic self, it would destroy a person’s immortality and expose them to death, the magical belief in their safety no longer shielding the tiny animal from madness and trembling.

And thus, to protect ourselves from the awesome madness of the universe, from the bones of our heroes we have built an empire of the dead.

Part of the Series: [Death](#)

Next Post: [Empire of the Dead](#)

Previous Post: [One Hundred Billion Children’s Sky](#)

*There is evidence that some other higher mammals, particularly elephants, are conceptually aware of death in some fashion as well.