Empire of the Dead

Saede Riordan   January 20, 2020

Epistemic Status: Weakly Endorsed
Content Warning: Neuropsychological Infohazard, De-Biasing Infohazard, Evocation Infohazard
Recommended Prior Reading: The Story of the Self, Am I Truly Mardukth
Part of the Series: Death
Previous Post: Doors and Corners

> "Very few beings really seek knowledge in this world. Mortal or immortal, few really ask. On the contrary, they try to wring from the unknown the answers they have already shaped in their own minds — justifications, confirmations, forms of consolation without which they can't go on. To really ask is to open the door to the whirlwind. The answer may annihilate the question and the questioner."

As of 2020, the time of the writing of this blog, death has a 100% kill rate. Everyone *actually* dies eventually and so far no one has proven immune or been rendered safe in any way. According to Becker this fact is rather too painful for most people to deal with directly. So, they come up with methods of dealing with it which rely on adopting anthropocentric narratively driven views of reality, rejecting the cold truth of their nature as tiny animals.

This puts an interesting spin on Balioc's concept of narrative and narcissism. Humans relate to stories better than we relate to actual reality. According to Balioc, this is because stories are a form of superstimulus, but according to Becker, this is because reality is simply so awful that we *must* construct a fake world of narrative and meaning in order to keep moving forward in the ultimately meaningless universe. I don't think these two ideas actually exist in opposition. Stories are a form of superstimulus in part *because* reality is so terrible.

So in order to deal with death, we retreat behind narrative and hope it will protect our symbolic selves. Becker identifies three main classes of narrative solutions to the problem of death that humanity has used throughout history. All of these methods rely on the victory of the symbolic over death and the achievement of an abstract immortality in this way. They are a sort of holographic immortality projected by the cultural systems that uphold them, what Becker calls *immortality projects*.

The religious solution is the oldest and can probably be thought of as the 'original' immortality project if such a thing is conceivable. It was simply that you create a narrative, which says that after your body is destroyed, you go to live in the sky or under the ground or on street signs or in whatever symbolic representational landscape is associated with immortality, the ultimate victory of the symbolic over the physical. You're *told* that after you die you become immortal, and like suckers, you believed that

lie for most of human history.

> "To be sure, primitives often celebrate death—as Hocart and others have shown— because they believe that death is the ultimate promotion, the final ritual elevation to a higher form of life, to the enjoyment of eternity in some form. Most modern Westerners have trouble believing this any more, which is what makes the fear of death so prominent a part of our psychological make-up."

This worked well for the individual because it made death a good thing, it was taking them to a better place, and thus no longer something they had to actively fear. This also worked well from the perspective of ensuring conformity to social and cultural norms. Someone who attempted to break away from the society could be threatened not just in the body but in the soul as well. Their immortality could be put at risk and they could be exposed to annihilation or worse.

If you didn't obey the laws of the tribe, your soul would not be welcomed into the afterlife and would instead be eaten by an ichorous beast. However, as science and reason have and will continue to inexorably advance, the religious solution has become increasingly difficult to believe. For modern people, Becker states:

> Most people play it safe: they choose the beyond of standard transference objects like parents, the boss, or the leader; they accept the cultural definition of heroism and try to be a "good provider" or a "solid" citizen. In this way they earn their species immortality as an agent of procreation, or a collective or cultural immortality as part of a social group of some kind.

These normative forms of heroism could be thought of as modern extensions of the religious solution. Even without God, the cultural immortality project still carries a large amount of weight, but this normative pathway necessarily entails a curtailing of the self.

> By seeing the multitude of men about it, by getting engaged in all sorts of wordly affairs, by becoming wise about how things go in this world, such a man forgets himself . . . does not dare to believe in himself, finds it too venturesome a thing to be himself, far easier and safer to be like the others, to become an imitation, a number, a cipher in the crowd.

This rather closely maps to Ziz's ideas of neutral and undeath. Ziz fails in explaining *why* the knowledge of the shade causes most people to lose their agency, but Becker comes in with the answer: Dismantling your personal sense of agency and falling in line with society gives you access to society's immortality projects, and transcendence by sublimating into a larger, harder to kill cultural bloc. And indeed, this heroism through sublimation is the method most people choose to pursue since it comes somewhat preinstalled. When you encounter death as a seven year old, you tend to grab onto whatever's around you and convenient to deal with it with. And for most people, that's submission to the larger, more powerful forces swirling all around them.

However, this is not a universal pathway, and as culture has evolved and atomized and

individuated and grand narratives have come apart at the seams into a postmodern mess, it's become a less and less accessible one.

Which brings us to what Becker calls **The Romantic Solution** but which could also somewhat more widely be described as the attraction solution in general. The struggle that a modern person is placed in is that like those of ancient times, they still want to prove themselves a hero and thus immortalize themselves, however, they no longer can simply believe in an overarching religious or cultural narrative to push this forward. God is dead, as Nietzche said, but this didn't stop people from trying to recreate Gods out of those around them.

> The self-glorification that he needed in his innermost nature he now looked for in the love partner. The love partner becomes the divine ideal within which to fulfill one's life. All spiritual and moral needs now become focussed in one individual. Spirituality, which once referred to another dimension of things, is now brought down to this earth and given form in another individual human being.

Becker is then quick to point out that this really doesn't work in the long term. Trying to coax that impossible feeling of cosmic heroism out of a relationship just sours the love if it existed. No relationship can truly carry the burden of godhood and remain intact. Eventually, we get enough glimpses behind the curtain that our ability to ignore our lover's imperfections finally breaks down and the fear of death is forced back upon us.

> After all, what is it that we want when we elevate the love partner to the position of God? We want redemption—nothing less. We want to be rid of our faults, of our feeling of nothingness. We want to be justified, to know that our creation has not been in vain. We turn to the love partner for the experience of the heroic, for perfect validation; we expect them to "make us good" through love. Needless to say, human partners can't do this. The lover does not dispense cosmic heroism; he cannot give absolution in his own name. The reason is that as a finite being he too is doomed, and we read that doom in his own fallibilities, in his very deterioration.

Everyone eventually dies, our lovers included, and with it so too does someone's immortality. Becker points to this as the reason why entire nations go into mourning when a great leader dies. There was a sense in which the leader was *protecting* them from death, the leader was the projector maintaining the culture's holographic immortality, without it, the sheet is pulled away and the horror and terror of the real world is revealed to them.

Thus we come to Becker's third immortality project, what he calls **The Creative Solution.**

If normal cultural heroism is achieved by the sublimation of the individual into the group, then creative heroism is achieved by personal individuation from the group. This is the path of the creator or artist.

> He wants to know how to earn immortality as a result of his own unique gifts. His creative work is at the same time the expression of his heroism and the justification of it. It is his "private religion" —as Rank put it. Its uniqueness gives him personal immortality; it is his own "beyond" and not that of others.

The artist attempts to achieve immortality through their art, creating great works that justify their existence, prove their worthiness and heroism, and outlast their physical body. This like all these solutions is imperfect, and like Ozymandias' empire sinking into the desert sands, so too any creative work will be subject to the unrelenting vagarities of time.

There is one last immortality project to mention before we move on. This solution didn't really exist to a wide degree in Becker's time. The term for it was coined by Jason Silva, what he calls **The Engineering Solution** and while he refers to it as a subset of the creative solution, I think it's worth looking at as its own category of immortality project. This perspective could be summed up in this quote by Alan Harrington:

> "Death has become an imposition on the human race and is no longer acceptable."

All of Becker's methods of achieving immortality rely on the victory of the symbolic, which was predicated on death basically being insurmountable. The idea of *actually defeating death* and achieving literal rather than symbolic immortality was seen as a manic fantasy at best. But fifty years after Becker and thirty years after the beginnings of the transhumanist movement, the idea of defeating death literally rather than symbolically is no longer such a far away impossibility.

This is highly worked into the normative cultural heroism of a culture that believes death is a defeatable adversary. Prior to the defeat of death the engineering solution and the religious solution appear to somewhat converge, however the engineering solution, unlike the religious solution, is not built on lies, or at least not the *same* lies.

The engineering solution's most prominent lie seems to be the idea that those who fell before death could be defeated would be immortalized symbolically by the survivors, but this has all the inherent fallibility of the artistic solution or certain forms of ancestor worship in the religious solution.

But the real carrot that the engineering solution holds out to people is the idea that *they might not actually have to die at all.* Forget going to heaven, or achieving a symbolic immortality through your works, how would you like to, you know, *just not die?*

In addition to all these immortality projects, there is one additional solution to the problem of death which is *not* an immortality project. This solution wasn't *rare* in Becker's time, but in the fifty years since his death, its prominence has skyrocketed.

We'll call this **The Anthropic Solution**, and again, it *isn't* an immortality project in the traditional sense. Instead, it relies on the attempted destruction of that which might be able to see death. Not everyone sets out to become a hero and earn their immortality.

For some people merely acknowledging the possibility of reality is too painful, and they must retreat as fully and completely from reality as they are able in order to protect themselves. The cultural immortality projects are too risky, better to just deny death directly.

If the world is frightening to look at, blind yourself, if it is full of discordant sounds, stab stakes into your ears so you cannot hear. Do whatever you can to destroy your agency and consciousness to stop yourself from noticing the existence of reality. This gives rise to escapism of every form. Netflix, video games, drugs, partying, fitness, music, historical reenactment, sports, kink, hiking, anything that we can use to distract and numb ourselves to the reality of the world. "Just give me something to take the pain away."

As the religious solution has finished failing and religiosity in the western world has crashed hard, this desire to obliterate one's agency and collapse into hedonism and escapism has blossomed into one of the dominant solutions to the death problem in our time. God is dead, but at least we have *Star Wars*.

This is somewhat more speculative, but I believe that the anthropic solution is also the source of large amounts of suicidality. There's only so much time you can spend immersed in drugs or video games or fanfiction. Every so often you have to surface into reality in order to keep your body running and every time you do this you're confronted with the existence of that reality. The growth of this dichotomy between the horror of reality and the wonder of fantasy could, I believe, lead someone into suicide as the ultimate form of escapism.

In the end, all these methods rely essentially upon self deception. The true world and our true insignificance in it is too dreadful and full of terror and trembling to contemplate, and all these methods work to talk around that fact.

Even the engineering solution hides from death by implying that maybe if we work hard enough, we can defeat it before it gets to us and those we love. And maybe we can, but we can't know for sure, and in this sense, the engineering solution is also the religious solution. For now, we have to take it on faith that science and technology should be able to defeat death someday.

The fundamental paradox of our humanity is that we are finite mortal beings that seek an immortal eternity. It's as Balioc says:

> We want to matter. We want there to be meaning in our lives, not some kind of jury-rigged existentialist "I've decided that it's meaningful to me" meaning, but real meaning that is endorsed by metaphysical powers as exalted as Author and Audience. We want reality to sit up and pay attention to the fact that we are A and not B, that we have chosen X and not Y.

Or as Jason Silva says:

> "Even Miguel de Unamuno said "Nothing is real that is not eternal." That is why we write poetry and we build cathedrals that try to create transcendence as a topographical statement, that's why we eternalize beautific moments and create gorgeous statues and write amazing songs; we long to eternalize ourselves, we want to say as Alan de Botton said, we want to carve our names, we want to say, I WAS HERE, I EXIST, I FELT SOMETHING, AND I MATTER."

And aye, there's the rub, for this is the fundamental lie. *We don't* matter, we might matter to each other but we don't matter in the ways we want. We can't make reality sit up and take notice. We can't coax a cosmic purpose out of the universe because it doesn't exist. 'Mattering' isn't a part of reality, and all our attempts to squeeze meaning and purpose from the universe amount to attempts to bleed a stone.

The truth that we don't live in an anthropocentric universe hurts, so we subconsciously buy into the lie and say we *do* live in an anthropocentric universe. This is all fine for someone who goes through their life inside of one of these narratives. I don't think there's anything really *fundamentally wrong* with buying into the cultural narratives or trying to pursue a symbolic immortality through art and creation. I might have objections to *particular* cultural narratives for various reasons, and the whole field is dreadfully unoptimized, but this is how most people live their lives and that seems fine. Believe whatever you need to believe to be able to sleep at night.

I just don't think it will save the world, and it's easy to let your eyes off the ball and be distracted into thinking you're doing something by cultural forces. It's as Hotel Concierge says, If you do not have a code of conduct, one will be provided for you. The very shape of our minds makes us highly susceptible to this sort of capture. It's *what we want* deep down.

We all want to be the heros of our life story and selling heroism is a great way to get someone to do what you want, regardless of how actually good or actually bad that ends up being. Just take a look at some of the worst atrocities of the last century and you'll see that they were all conducted from within the scope of a group's immortality project, at the command of a great leader promising to transform the world.

Escaping this is incredibly hard because the more you fight to escape the pull of these forces, the greater the degree to which you expose yourself to the knowledge of your nature as a finite, decaying being. The knowledge only seems to make the world worse, and only shows you how to collapse in on yourself. Becker writes:

> The irony of man's condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation; but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive … What exactly would it mean on this earth to be wholly unrepressed, to live in full bodily and psychic expansive-ness? It can only mean to be reborn into madness.

This is a major problem for people working to prevent long tail risks, because it's very very easy to buy into the lie that you're doing something useful. It's incredibly important to be able to discern between things that appeal to your need for meaning and purpose, and things that actually do useful work. It means performing a careful balancing act between the madness that is inherent to reality, and the lies we want to accept to make it okay. It means learning to cultivate an extreme outside view, and learning to detach from the cultural forces that would distract us. It means learning to look past the social reality and see the truth of the matrix.

Part of the Series: Death
Next Post: The Room Eats You
Previous Post: Doors and Corners