# The Denial of Death

Ernest Becker

SOUVENIR
PRESS

This edition first published in Great Britain in 2020 by
Souvenir Press,
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ
*www.profilebooks.co.uk*

First published in Great Britain in 2011 by
Souvenir Press

First published in the USA by Free Press Paperbacks in 1973



1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78816 426 9
eISBN 978 0 28564 007 8

*Non ridere, non lugere, neque detestari, sed intelligere.* (Not to laugh, not to lament, not to curse, but to understand.)

—SPINOZA

## *Contents*

# *Foreword*

The first words Ernest Becker said to me when I walked into his hospital room were: "You are catching me in extremis. This is a test of everything I've written about death. And I've got a chance to show how one dies, the attitude one takes. Whether one does it in a dignified, manly way; what kinds of thoughts one surrounds it with; how one accepts his death."

When *The Denial of Death* arrived at Psychology Today in late 1973 and was placed on my desk for consideration it took me less than an hour to decide that I wanted to interview Ernest Becker. On December 6th, I called his home in Vancouver to see if he would do a conversation for the magazine. His wife, Marie, told me he had just been taken to the hospital and was in the terminal stage of cancer and was not expected to live for more than a week Unexpectedly, she called the next day to say that Ernest would like to do the conversation if I could get there while he still had strength and clarity. So I went to Vancouver with speed and trembling, knowing that the only thing more presumptuous than intruding into the private world of the dying would be to refuse his invitation.

Although we had never met, Ernest and I fell immediately into deep conversation. The nearness of his death and the severe limits of his energy stripped away the impulse to chatter. We talked about death in the face of death; about evil in the presence of cancer. At the end of the day Ernest had no more energy, so there was no more time. We lingered awkwardly for a few minutes, because saying "goodbye" for the last time is hard and we both knew he would not live to see our conversation in print. A paper cup of medicinal sherry on the night stand, mercifully, provided us a ritual for ending. We drank the wine together and I left.

That day a quarter of a century ago was a pivotal event in shaping my relationship to the mystery of *my* death and, therefore, my life. I will carry for a lifetime the images of Ernest's courage, his clarity purchased at the cost of enduring pain, and the manner in which his passion for ideas held death at bay for a season. It is a privilege to have witnessed such a man in the heroic agony of his dying.

In the years since his death, Becker has been widely recognized as one of the great spiritual cartographers of our age and a wise physician

of the soul. Gradually, reluctantly, we are beginning to acknowledge that the bitter medicine he prescribes—contemplation of the horror of our inevitable death—is, paradoxically, the tincture that adds sweetness to mortality.

Becker's philosophy as it emerges in *Denial of Death* and *Escape from Evil* is a braid woven from four strands.

The first strand. The world is terrifying. To say the least, Becker's account of nature has little in common with Walt Disney. Mother Nature is a brutal bitch, red in tooth and claw, who destroys what she creates. We live, he says, in a creation in which the routine activity for organisms is "tearing others apart with teeth of all types—biting, grinding flesh, plant stalks, bones between molars, pushing the pulp greedily down the gullet with delight, incorporating its essence into one's own organization, and then excreting with foul stench and gasses the residue."

The second strand. The basic motivation for human behavior is our biological need to control our basic anxiety, to deny the terror of death. Human beings are naturally anxious because we are ultimately helpless and abandoned in a world where we are fated to die. "This is the terror: to have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression—and with all this yet to die."

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and Ernest Becker were strange allies in fomenting the cultural revolution that brought death and dying out of the closet. At the same time that Kubler-Ross gave us permission to practice the art of dying gracefully, Becker taught us that awe, fear, and ontological anxiety were natural accompaniments to our contemplation of the fact of death.

The third strand. Since the terror of death is so overwhelming we conspire to keep it unconscious. "The vital lie of character" is the first line of defense that protects us from the painful awareness of our helplessness. Every child borrows power from adults and creates a personality by introjecting the qualities of the godlike being. If I am like my all-powerful father I will not die. So long as we stay obediently within the defense mechanisms of our personality, what Wilhelm Reich called "character armor" we feel safe and are able to pretend that the world is manageable. But the price we pay is high. We repress our bodies to pur-

chase a soul that time cannot destroy; we sacrifice pleasure to buy immortality; we encapsulate ourselves to avoid death. And life escapes us while we huddle within the defended fortress of character.

Society provides the second line of defense against our natural impotence by creating a hero system that allows us to believe that we transcend death by participating in something of lasting worth. We achieve ersatz immortality by sacrificing ourselves to conquer an empire, to build a temple, to write a book, to establish a family, to accumulate a fortune, to further progress and prosperity, to create an information-society and global free market. Since the main task of human life is to become heroic and transcend death, every culture must provide its members with an intricate symbolic system that is covertly religious. This means that ideological conflicts between cultures are essentially battles between immortality projects, holy wars.

One of Becker's lasting contributions to social psychology has been to help us understand that corporations and nations may be driven by unconscious motives that have little to do with their stated goals. Making a killing in business or on the battlefield frequently has less to do with economic need or political reality than with the need for assuring ourselves that we have achieved something of lasting worth. Consider, for instance, the recent war in Vietnam in which the United States was driven not by any realistic economic or political interest but by the overwhelming need to defeat "atheistic communism."

The fourth strand. Our heroic projects that are aimed at destroying evil have the paradoxical effect of bringing more evil into the world. Human conflicts are life and death struggles—my gods against your gods, my immortality project against your immortality project. The root of humanly caused evil is not man's animal nature, not territorial aggression, or innate selfishness, but our need to gain self-esteem, deny our mortality, and achieve a heroic self-image. Our desire for the best is the cause of the worst. We want to clean up the world, make it perfect, keep it safe for democracy or communism, purify it of the enemies of god, eliminate evil, establish an alabaster city undimmed by human tears, or a thousand year Reich.

Perhaps Becker's greatest achievement has been to create a science of evil. He has given us a new way to understand how we create surplus evil—warfare, ethnic cleansing, genocide. From the beginning of time,

humans have dealt with what Carl Jung called their shadow side—feelings of inferiority, self-hate, guilt, hostility—by projecting it onto an enemy. It has remained for Becker to make crystal clear the way in which warfare is a social ritual for purification of the world in which the enemy is assigned the role of being dirty, dangerous, and atheistic. Dachau, Capetown and Mi Lai, Bosnia, Rwanda, give grim testimony to the universal need for a scapegoat—a Jew, a nigger, a dirty communist, a Muslim, a Tutsi. Warfare is a death potlatch in which we sacrifice our brave boys to destroy the cowardly enemies of righteousness. And, the more blood the better, because the bigger the body-count the greater the sacrifice for the sacred cause, the side of destiny, the divine plan.

Becker's radical conclusion that it is our altruistic motives that turn the world into a charnel house—our desire to merge with a larger whole, to dedicate our lives to a higher cause, to serve cosmic powers—poses a disturbing and revolutionary question to every individual and nation. At what cost do we purchase the assurance that we are heroic? No doubt, one of the reasons Becker has never found a mass audience is because he shames us with the knowledge of how easily we will shed blood to purchase the assurance of our own righteousness. He reveals how our need to deny our nakedness and be arrayed in glory keeps us from acknowledging that the emperor has no clothes.

After such a grim diagnosis of the human condition it is not surprising that Becker offers only a palliative prescription. Expect no miracle cure, no future apotheosis of man, no enlightened future, no triumph of reason.

Becker sketches two possible styles of nondestructive heroism.

The best we can hope for society at large is that the mass of unconscious individuals might develop a moral equivalent to war. The science of man has shown us that society will always be composed of passive subjects, powerful leaders, and enemies upon whom we project our guilt and self-hatred. This knowledge may allow us to develop an "objective hatred" in which the hate object is not a human scapegoat but something impersonal like poverty, disease, oppression, or natural disasters. By making our inevitable hatred intelligent and informed we may be able to turn our destructive energy to a creative use.

For the exceptional individual there is the ancient philosophical path of wisdom. Becker, like Socrates, advises us to practice dying. Cultivat-

ing awareness of our death leads to disillusionment, loss of character armor, and a conscious choice to abide in the face of terror. The existential hero who follows this way of self-analysis differs from the average person in knowing that he/she is obsessed. Instead of hiding within the illusions of character, he sees his impotence and vulnerability. The disillusioned hero rejects the standardized heroics of mass culture in favor of cosmic heroism in which there is real joy in throwing off the chains of uncritical, self-defeating dependency and discovering new possibilities of choice and action and new forms of courage and endurance. Living with the voluntary consciousness of death, the heroic individual can choose to despair or to make a Kierkegaardian leap and trust in the "sacrosanct vitality of the cosmos," in the unknown god of life whose mysterious purpose is expressed in the overwhelming drama of cosmic evolution.

There are signs—the acceptance of Becker's work being one—that some individuals are awakening from the long, dark night of tribalism and nationalism and developing what Tillich called a transmoral conscience, an ethic that is universal rather than ethnic. Our task for the future is exploring what it means for each individual to be a member of earth's household, a commonwealth of kindred beings. Whether we will use our freedom to encapsulate ourselves in narrow, tribal, paranoid personalities and create more bloody Utopias or to form compassionate communities of the abandoned is still to be decided. So long as human beings possess a measure of freedom, all hopes for the future must be stated in the subjunctive—we may, we might, we could. No prediction by any expert can tell us whether we will prosper or perish. We may choose to increase or decrease the dominion of evil. The script for tomorrow is not yet written.

In the end, Becker leaves us with a hope that is terribly fragile and wonderfully potent. "It is," he says, "the disguise of panic that makes us live in ugliness, and not the natural animal wallowing. And this means that evil itself is amenable to critical analysis and, conceivably, to the sway of reason." If, in some distant future, reason conquers our habit of self-destructive heroics and we are able to lessen the quantity of evil we spawn, it will be in some large measure because Ernest Becker helped us understand the relationship between the denial of death and the dominion of evil.

Those interested in the ways Becker's work is being used and continued by philosophers, social scientists, psychologists, and theologians may contact The Ernest Becker Foundation, 3621, 72nd St., Mercer Island, WA 98040 and receive a newsletter and notification of lectures and conferences.

*Sam Keen*

# Preface

*. . . for the time being I gave up writing—there is already too much truth in the world—an overproduction which apparently cannot be consumed!*

—Otto Rank[1]

The prospect of death, Dr. Johnson said, wonderfully concentrates the mind. The main thesis of this book is that it does much more than that: 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. The noted anthropologist A. M. Hocart once argued that primitives were not bothered by the fear of death; that a sagacious sampling of anthropological evidence would show that death was, more often than not, accompanied by rejoicing and festivities; that death seemed to be an occasion for celebration rather than fear—much like the traditional Irish wake. Hocart wanted to dispel the notion that (compared to modern man) primitives were childish and frightened by reality; anthropologists have now largely accomplished this rehabilitation of the primitive. But this argument leaves untouched the fact that the fear of death is indeed a universal in the human condition. 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.

In these pages I try to show that the fear of death is a universal that unites data from several disciplines of the human sciences, and makes wonderfully clear and intelligible human actions that we have buried under mountains of fact, and obscured with endless

back-and-forth arguments about the "true" human motives. The man of knowledge in our time is bowed down under a burden he never imagined he would ever have: the overproduction of truth that cannot be consumed. For centuries man lived in the belief that truth was slim and elusive and that once he found it the troubles of mankind would be over. And here we are in the closing decades of the 20th century, choking on truth. There has been so much brilliant writing, so many genial discoveries, so vast an extension and elaboration of these discoveries—yet the mind is silent as the world spins on its age-old demonic career. I remember reading how, at the famous St. Louis World Exposition in 1904, the speaker at the prestigious science meeting was having trouble speaking against the noise of the new weapons that were being demonstrated nearby. He said something condescending and tolerant about this needlessly disruptive play, as though the future belonged to science and not to militarism. World War I showed everyone the priority of things on this planet, which party was playing idle games and which wasn't. This year the order of priority was again graphically shown by a world arms budget of 204 billion dollars, at a time when human living conditions on the planet were worse than ever.

Why, then, the reader may ask, add still another weighty tome to a useless overproduction? Well, there are personal reasons, of course: habit, drivenness, dogged hopefulness. And there is Eros, the urge to the unification of experience, to form, to greater meaningfulness. One of the reasons, I believe, that knowledge is in a state of useless overproduction is that it is strewn all over the place, spoken in a thousand competitive voices. Its insignificant fragments are magnified all out of proportion, while its major and world-historical insights lie around begging for attention. There is no throbbing, vital center. Norman O. Brown observed that the great world needs more Eros and less strife, and the intellectual world needs it just as much. There has to be revealed the harmony that unites many different positions, so that the "sterile and ignorant polemics" can be abated.[2]

I have written this book fundamentally as a study in harmonization of the Babel of views on man and on the human condition, in the belief that the time is ripe for a synthesis that covers the best thought in many fields, from the human sciences to religion. I have

tried to avoid moving against and negating any point of view, no matter how personally antipathetic to me, if it seems to have in it a core of truthfulness. I have had the growing realization over the past few years that the problem of man's knowledge is not to oppose and to demolish opposing views, but to include them in a larger theoretical structure. One of the ironies of the creative process is that it partly cripples itself in order to function. I mean that, usually, in order to turn out a piece of work the author has to exaggerate the emphasis of it, to oppose it in a forcefully competitive way to other versions of truth; and he gets carried away by his own exaggeration, as his distinctive image is built on it. But each honest thinker who is basically an empiricist has to have some truth in his position, no matter how extremely he has formulated it. The problem is to find the truth underneath the exaggeration, to cut away the excess elaboration or distortion and include that truth where it fits.

A second reason for my writing this book is that I have had more than my share of problems with this fitting-together of valid truths in the past dozen years. I have been trying to come to grips with the ideas of Freud and his interpreters and heirs, with what might be the distillation of modern psychology—and now I think I have finally succeeded. In this sense this book is a bid for the peace of my scholarly soul, an offering for intellectual absolution; I feel that it is my first mature work.

One of the main things I try to do in this book is to present a summing-up of psychology after Freud by tying the whole development of psychology back to the still-towering Kierkegaard. I am thus arguing for a merger of psychology and mythico-religious perspective. I base this argument in large part on the work of Otto Rank, and I have made a major attempt to transcribe the relevance of his magnificent edifice of thought. This coming-to-grips with Rank's work is long overdue; and if I have succeeded in it, it probably comprises the main value of the book.

Rank is so prominent in these pages that perhaps a few words of introduction about him would be helpful here. Frederick Perls once observed that Rank's book *Art and Artist* was "beyond praise."[3] I remember being so struck by this judgment that I went immediately to the book: I couldn't very well imagine how anything scientific

could be "beyond praise." Even the work of Freud himself seemed to me to be praiseworthy, that is, somehow expectable as a product of the human mind. But Perls was right: Rank was—as the young people say—"something else." You cannot merely praise much of his work because in its stunning brilliance it is often fantastic, gratuitous, superlative; the insights seem like a gift, beyond what is necessary. I suppose part of the reason—in addition to his genius—was that Rank's thought always spanned several fields of knowledge; when he talked about, say, anthropological data and you expected anthropological insight, you got something else, something more. Living as we do in an era of hyperspecialization we have lost the expectation of this kind of delight; the experts give us manageable thrills—if they thrill us at all.

One thing that I hope my confrontation of Rank will do is to send the reader directly to his books. There is no substitute for reading Rank. My personal copies of his books are marked in the covers with an uncommon abundance of notes, underlinings, double exclamation points; he is a mine for years of insights and pondering. My treatment of Rank is merely an outline of his thought: its foundations, many of its basic insights, and its overall implications. This will be the pale Rank, not the staggeringly rich one of his books. Also, Ira Progoff's outline presentation and appraisal of Rank is so correct, so finely balanced in judgment, that it can hardly be improved upon as a brief appreciation.[4] Rank is very diffuse, very hard to read, so rich that he is almost inaccessible to the general reader. He was painfully aware of this and for a time hoped that Anaïs Nin would rewrite his books for him so that they would have a chance to have the effect they should have had. What I give in these pages is my own version of Rank, filled out in my own way, a sort of brief "translation" of his system in the hope of making it accessible as a whole. In this book I cover only his individual psychology; in another book I will sketch his schema for a psychology of history.

There are several ways of looking at Rank. Some see him as a brilliant coworker of Freud, a member of the early circle of psychoanalysis who helped give it broader currency by bringing to it his own vast erudition, who showed how psychoanalysis could illuminate culture history, myth, and legend—as, for example, in his

early work on *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* and *The Incest-Motif*. They would go on to say that because Rank was never analyzed, his repressions gradually got the better of him, and he turned away from the stable and creative life he had close to Freud; in his later years his personal instability gradually overcame him, and he died prematurely in frustration and loneliness. Others see Rank as an overeager disciple of Freud, who tried prematurely to be original and in so doing even exaggerated psychoanalytic reductionism. This judgment is based almost solely on his 1924 book *The Trauma of Birth* and usually stops there. Still others see Rank as a brilliant member of Freud's close circle, an eager favorite of Freud, whose university education was suggested and financially helped by Freud and who repaid psychoanalysis with insights into many fields: cultural history, childhood development, the psychology of art, literary criticism, primitive thought, and so on. In short, a sort of many-faceted but not-too-well-organized or self-controlled boy-wonder—an intellectually superior Theodor Reik, so to speak.

But all these ways of summing up Rank are wrong, and we know that they derive largely from the mythology of the circle of psychoanalysts themselves. They never forgave Rank for turning away from Freud and so diminishing their own immortality-symbol (to use Rank's way of understanding their bitterness and pettiness). Admittedly, Rank's *Trauma of Birth* gave his detractors an easy handle on him, a justified reason for disparaging his stature; it was an exaggerated and ill-fated book that poisoned his public image, even though he himself reconsidered it and went so far beyond it. Not being merely a coworker of Freud, a broad-ranging servant of psychoanalysis, Rank had his own, unique, and perfectly thought-out system of ideas. He knew where he wanted to begin, what body of data he had to pass through, and where it all pointed. He knew these things specifically as regards psychoanalysis itself, which he wanted to transcend and did; he knew it roughly, as regards the philosophical implications of his own system of thought, but he was not given the time to work this out, as his life was cut short. He was certainly as complete a system-maker as were Adler and Jung; his system of thought is at least as brilliant as theirs, if not more so in some ways. We respect Adler for the solidity of his judgment, the directness of his insight, his uncompromising humanism; we

admire Jung for the courage and openness with which he embraced both science and religion; but even more than these two, Rank's system has implications for the deepest and broadest development of the social sciences, implications that have only begun to be tapped.

Paul Roazen, writing about "The Legend of Freud,"[5] aptly observed that "any writer whose mistakes have taken this long to correct is . . . quite a figure in intellectual history." Yet the whole matter is very curious, because Adler, Jung, and Rank very early corrected most of Freud's basic mistakes. The question for the historian is, rather, what there was in the nature of the psychoanalytic movement, the ideas themselves, the public and the scholarly mind that kept these corrections so ignored or so separated from the main movement of cumulative scientific thought.

Even a book of broad scope has to be very selective of the truths it picks out of the mountain of truth that is stifling us. Many thinkers of importance are mentioned only in passing: the reader may wonder, for example, why I lean so much on Rank and hardly mention Jung in a book that has as a major aim the closure of psychoanalysis on religion. One reason is that Jung is so prominent and has so many effective interpreters, while Rank is hardly known and has had hardly anyone to speak for him. Another reason is that although Rank's thought is difficult, it is always right on the central problems, Jung's is not, and a good part of it wanders into needless esotericism; the result is that he often obscures on the one hand what he reveals on the other. I can't see that all his tomes on alchemy add one bit to the weight of his psychoanalytic insight.

A good many phrasings of insight into human nature I owe to exchanges with Marie Becker, whose fineness and realism on these matters are most rare. I want to thank (with the customary disclaimers) Paul Roazen for his kindness in passing Chapter Six through the net of his great knowledge of Freud. Robert N. Bellah read the entire manuscript, and I am very grateful for his general criticisms and specific suggestions; those that I was able to act on definitely improved the book; as for the others, I fear that they pose the larger and longer-range task of changing myself.