Ernest Becker

Ernest Becker was an American cultural anthropologist who was born on September 24, 1924 and died on March 6, 1974 at the age of 49. He exerted a significant influence in the discipline of social psychology, philosophy and psychology. Becker attempted to create a science of human behavior resting on the intersection of these three disciplines. In 1974 he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his groundbreaking book The Denial of Death. His main thesis in the book is that human beings are creatures painfully aware of their mortality, and this realization, the inevitability of death creates anxiety.

“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 men” (Becker, 1973, p.17)

Ernest Becker’s masterpiece The Denial of Death (1973) which won him a Pulitzer for non-fiction, pulled from the work of Otto Rank, Soren Kierkegaard and Norman O. Brown. In this remarkable and illuminating work, Becker takes Freud’s major concepts and reformulates them in existential terms. For Freud, sex and aggression constituted our primary drives. Becker theorized that underneath our subconscious, what was being repressed was a basic anxiety related to awareness of death and mortality. Thus, man’s primary motive is to control anxiety and deny the terror of death. Man is aware of his mortality; that he will die one day. This awareness is so overwhelming that man must repress it and contain it in his unconscious. Influenced by the Freudian tradition, Becker conceived of man as an organism driven to perpetuate himself and, in the process, becoming painfully aware of the threats to his survival and mortality. For Becker, evil was identified as the greatest threat to self-preservation. In comparison to the masses,

man desires to differentiate himself from others which explains why he thrives on developing his own unique talents and skills. Becker explains:

“And what, then, would be the highest development and use of those talents? To contribute to the struggle against evil, of course. In other words, man is fated, as William James saw, to consider this earth as a theater for heroism, and his life as a vehicle for heroic acts which aim precisely to transcend evil. Each person wants to have his life make a difference in the life of mankind, contribute in some way toward securing and furthering that life, make it in some ways less vulnerable, more durable. To be a true hero is to triumph over disease, want, death. One knows that life has had vital human meaning if it has been able to bring real benefits to the life of mankind. And so men have always honored their heroes, especially in religion, medicine, science, diplomacy and war” (Becker, 1975, p. 149)

Becker theorizes that the hero deliberately sets out to immunize himself from death. The hero is conscious; aware of his mortality and is driven to conquer and parade his conquests to the world. In some cultures the hero is said to be favored by G-d and is perceived as a savior by the people. The set of virtues associated with the hero are goodness, purity, righteousness and immunity (Becker, 1975). Here Becker’s analysis suggests that striving for hero significance lies at the core of the human experience because self-perpetuation guarantees us time on earth and the pursuit of life enhancing experiences. The pragmatic look at Becker’s philosophical treatment of heroism reveals that beyond man’s principled need for self-perpetuation; that in the process of defeating evil forces, the hero’s single minded dedication also rests on behaving in ways that reinforce that he matters to the world. In other words, man desperately needs to confirm to himself and others that he is significant and through heroic acts, he justifies and reinforces the understanding that he can preserve the life of others; sort of like reinstating life that could have been cut short. It’s almost like undoing death—and what greater, more sacred maneuver is there than saving a life?

In its rawest sense Becker explains that the hero in society is a “savior” an extraordinary, supercharged human being able to rescue an entire civilization from destruction. In its most fundamental form, Becker’s hero defeats evil because evil exists everywhere in the world. For Becker, the hero walks the earth searching for evil forces to destroy. The hero fully understands what an ultimate sacrifice is and he attains added power by killing his enemies (Becker, 1975).

According to Becker (1975) “As Dostoevsky saw, killing is sometimes distasteful, but the distaste is swallowed if it is necessary to true heroism: as one of the revolutionaries asked Pyotr Verhovensky in The Possessed, when they were about to kill one of their number, “Are other groups also doing this?” The critical questions concerning behaving heroically center around what the social/cultural norms are that guide behavior. Becker asks “What is the socially heroic thing to do?” The hero behaves heroically because they want their life to matter, to reinforce that they are good and can leave an imprint of goodness on culture. The cultural values, morals and norms of a society define what constitutes heroic behavior.

In Nazi Germany, it was morally acceptable for an SS officer to take orders from a superior officer and execute 100 Jews and Poles in a field. For Freud, evil originated and was driven by man’s aggressive and self-destructive instincts. The problem of evil was ever present in modern man and it led Freud to profess a fatalistic look about humanity. Freud concluded that as long as instincts drive behavior, evil will look us straight in the face at every turn:

“The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction. It may be that in this respect precisely the present time deserves a special interest. Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man. They know this, and hence comes a large part of their current unrest, their unhappiness and their mood of anxiety. (Freud, 1929, p. 92)

The best we can do is to unwittingly assume that culture represents a meaning system best suited for human beings; it is embedded with values, morals, language, religion and belief systems to perpetuate civilization. Society with its norms, values and morals ideally promote conformity and increased collaboration and cooperative behavior among a people.

According to Becker, human beings, unlike any other animal are intimately aware of their mortality. Awareness of one’s eventual demise generates a tremendous amount of anxiety, fear and trepidation that can only be repressed and denied. The strategic maneuver humans then activate is a striving for heroism. Becker isn’t necessarily suggesting that one seeks opportunities to be heroic by saving a life or self-sacrificing, but to pursue activities that transcend their physical body and convert their life to a symbol that is immortal and death defying. For Becker, humans occupy a physical and symbolic self. He coined the construct “immortality project” to describe activities human beings pursue to ensure they become members of systems or institutions that will outlast their lives such as belonging and practicing their religion. Since our physical body will perish, our life will be imbued with meaning and purpose in the eternal, symbolic world of things.

A great novelist, artist or scientist has their body of work alter the course of history thereby achieving immortality. The influence of their artistry or revolutionary discoveries will have an eternal influence on humanity. However, how does the ordinary human

being; the coal miner, bus driver or teacher achieve immortality? For Becker, every human being satisfies their urge for heroism through society. Culture is the vehicle for

human beings to assume social roles, some of which come with prescriptions for how they are to be performed. For example, one may be motivated to pursue financial prosperity and fame after realizing their society admires individuals with high social status and positional goods that come with their prestigious status. Becker (1975) believes society is “a codified hero system, which means that society everywhere is a living myth of the significance of human life, a defiant creation of meaning.”

“In our culture anyway, especially in modern times, the heroic seems too big for us, or we too small for it. Tell a young man that he is entitled to be a hero and he will blush. We disguise our struggle by piling up figures in a bank book to reflect privately our sense of heroic worth. Or by having only a little better home in the neighborhood, a bigger car, brighter children. But underneath throbs the ache of cosmic specialness, no matter how we mask it in concerns of smaller scope (Becker, 1975, p. 4)

Ernest Becker’s ideas derive from a psychoanalytic model that suggests all human beings “ache for cosmic specialness” or heroism. Given we are painfully aware of our mortality, we desire to differentiate ourselves from the common lot of people; to stand above others and make our life count. Animals are not aware of their mortality but human beings live with an inescapable anxiety and fear of their finitude. Mechanisms to manage this anxiety include repressing or denying we are mortal. So we strive for heroic significance by attaching ourselves to cultural institutions which transcend our physical limitations. Becker captures the absurdity one grapples with realizing we are all doomed to die:

This is the terror: to have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, and excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression-- and with all this yet to die. It seems like a hoax…. What kind of deity would create such a complex and fancy worm food? (Becker, 1973

One may discover that their greatest duty is to transcend ordinary life and “desperately justify himself as an object of primary value in the universe; he must stand out, be a hero, make the biggest possible contribution to world life, show that he counts more than anything or anyone else” (Becker, 1973, p. 4). One searches for how he/she can make a valuable, lasting contribution to the world that will outlive his/her life. A sort of death defying contribution. For Becker, this drive for heroism originates as an unconscious urge to leave a meaningful mark on the world. We attempt to connect our identities to meaning systems such as spirituality/religion, culture or political movements because they give us a more permanent, enduring affiliation with institutions that transcend our lives. Becker refers to this as connecting to immortality systems or symbols that imbue our life with powerful meaning. For example, identifying as a Jew or Christian anchors me to a system of meaning that has survived three thousand years. Individuals who write their memoir or autobiography do so from a need to leave a death defying, immortality symbol of their life. The life memoir represents one’s immortality project, a symbolic expression that one has lived and drawn meaning and purpose from life. The memoir or autobiography is a physical object in the form of a book that gives permanence and significance to life so that it exists after one dies. The need for symbolic immortality is a strategy to combat existential dread.