

Ernest Becker

Biography

*The following biographical material was extracted from Daniel Liechty's excellent book, **Transference and Transcendence: Ernest Becker's Contribution to Psychotherapy (Aronson, 1995)**. Liechty is the great expert on Ernest Becker and helps run the Ernest Becker Foundation. He can be reached at dliecht@ilstu.edu and has a great many research materials available.*

Ernest Becker was born in 1924 and died just 49 years later in 1974.

He grew up in a Jewish family in Massachusetts and participated in World War II as an infantry soldier. After the war he went to school at Syracuse University and then on to Paris to work at the U.S. Embassy. After becoming bored of life in the foreign service he returned to Syracuse to pursue a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology. He was awarded this degree in 1960 and began the interdisciplinary studies and writings for which he is best known.

While he wrote quite a few books and many more papers, the ones that are commonly available and jarring in their insights are: *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (2nd edition, 1971), *The Denial of Death* (1973), and *Escape from Evil* (posthumous, 1975). *The Denial of Death* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1974 which was awarded to Becker just before his death from cancer.

Excerpts

At its most elemental level the human organism, like crawling life, has a mouth, digestive tract, and anus, a skin to keep it intact, and appendages with which to acquire food. Existence, for all organismic life, is a constant struggle to feed—a struggle to incorporate whatever other organisms they can fit into their mouths and press down their gullets without choking. Seen in these stark terms, life on this planet is a gory spectacle, a science-fiction nightmare in which digestive tracts fitted with teeth at one end are tearing

away at whatever flesh they can reach, and at the other end are piling up the fuming waste excrement as they move along in search of more flesh. I think this is why the epoch of the dinosaurs exerts such a strange fascination on us: it is an epic food orgy with king-size actors who convey unmistakably what organisms are dedicated to. Sensitive souls have reacted with shock to the elemental drama of life on this planet, and one of the reasons that Darwin so shocked his time—and still bothers ours—is that he showed this bone-crushing, blood-drinking drama in all its elementality and necessity: Life cannot go on without the mutual devouring of organisms. If at the end of each person's life he were to be presented with the living spectacle of all that he had organismically incorporated in order to stay alive, he might well feed horrified by the living energy he had ingested. The horizon of gourmet, of even the average person, would be taken up with hundreds of chickens, flocks of lambs and sheep, a small herd of steers, sties full of pigs, and rivers of fish. The din alone would be deafening. To paraphrase Elias Canetti, each organism raises its head over a field of corpses, smiles into the sun, and declares life good.

Escape from Evil (New York: The Free Press, 1975), pp. 1-2.

...the first task of psychotherapy is to free the person from other peoples' opinions; he learns not to be crushed because someone says his tie doesn't match, or he has ugly ear lobes, body odor, or is not a good mixer. This is why therapists often put such a low valuation on the mind, on thought processes: the mind is the social self, the ways we have learned of attuning our self-esteem to the expectations and valuations of others; the mind automatically channels our self-esteem into society's roles. Thought processes are mostly rationalizations that we use in order to keep our self-esteem in balance, they are the feverish direction of the metteur-en-scène of our inner newsreel. The person has to learn to derive his self-esteem more from within himself and less from the opinions of others; he has to try to base it on real qualities and capacities, things he can make or do, as Goethe argued, and not on the mere appearances that others like to judge by. He has to try to get as many ways of earning self-esteem as possible, to constantly broaden his skills, the things he genuinely takes pleasure in, in place of what others think he should take pleasure in.

The Birth and Death of Meaning (New York: The Free Press, 1971), p. 192.

This is the uniquely human need, what man everywhere is really all about each person's need to be an object of primary value, a heroic contributor to world-life the heroic contributor to the destiny of man. This seems to be the logical and inevitable result of the symbolic constitution of self-worth in an unbelievably complex animal with exquisitely sensitive and effusive emotions. Once you took the general instinct of self-preservation of the lower animals, the basic irritability of protoplasm, the self-identity of the physio-chemistry, the vague pulsation of the warmth of the animal's inner processes, the nameless feeling of power and satisfaction in carrying out his instinctive behaviors once you took all this and gave it a directive self-control via the ego, and a precise, symbolic designation in a world of symbols, then you resulted in nothing less than the need for heroic self-identity. Self-preservation, physio-chemical identity, pulsating body warmth, a sense of power and satisfaction in activity all these tally up in symbolic man to the emergence of the heroic urge. Freud saw the psychic nature of these facts, and he tallied them up under the label of narcissism; it was a truly brilliant formulation, and Fromm recently stressed that this is one of his lasting contributions: the exposure of man's utter self-centeredness and self-preoccupation, each person's feeling that he is the one in creation, that his life represents all life, and apotheosizes it.

The Birth and Death of Meaning (New York: The Free Press, 1971), p. 76.

...human heroics is a blind drivenness that burns people up; in passionate people, a screaming for glory as uncritical and reflexive as the howling of a dog. In the more passive masses of mediocre men it is disguised as they humbly and complainingly follow out the roles that society provides for their heroics and try to earn their promotions within the system: wearing the standard uniforms but allowing themselves to stick out, but ever so little and so safely, with a little ribbon or a red boutonniere, but not with head and shoulders.

The Denial of Death (New York: Free Press, 1973), p. 6.

What does it mean to be a self-conscious animal? The idea is ludicrous, if it is not monstrous. It means to know that one is food for worms. 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. It seems like a hoax, which is why one type of cultural man rebels openly against the idea of God. What kind of deity would create such a complex and fancy worm food? Cynical deities, said the Greeks, who use man's torments for their own amusement.

The Denial of Death (New York: Free Press, 1973), p. 87.

Man has 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. 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 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.

The Denial of Death (New York: Free Press, 1973), p. 26.