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Article

Ernest Becker's Dark Turn (1971-1973): A Critical "Deepening"

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Abstract

The "dark turn" evident in Ernest Becker's final two major works (*The Denial of Death* and *Escape From Evil*) is described and explained in terms of its content and possible sources in the author's work and life from 1971 to 1973. Becker's mature philosophical anthropology, anthropodicy, and theory of evil are discussed, related to, and contrasted with his previous work and considered in the context of his life experiences, including his terminal illness.

Keywords

Ernest Becker, existential humanism, death, immortality striving, evil, enlightenment scholarship

Ernest Becker's "dark turn" refers to a more pessimistic and complex view of human nature and the human condition evident in what he himself referred to as his "most mature" works. These works, which originally were written as one large volume (Martin, 2014), are his final two books, *The Denial of Death* and the posthumously published *Escape From Evil*. Did Becker, who sought an Enlightenment perspective on human nature and the human condition in his first eight books, come to doubt or even discard such a

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commitment in his final two? In the preface to *Escape From Evil*, Becker took up this question with some obvious discomfort and perhaps uncertainty. There, he continued to consider himself an Enlightenment scholar, but also worried openly that the central task of such a scholar was much more difficult and perilous than he previously had assumed. That task, of course, is to theorize about human nature in a way that suggests and perhaps warrants human actions that might improve the human condition. As Becker (1975) stated in that preface:

> Obviously it is an enormous problem: to show that man *is* truly evil-causing in much of his motivation, and yet to move beyond this to the possibilities of a sane, renewing action, some kind of third alternative beyond bureaucratic science and despair. Whether I have succeeded in leaving open the possibility for such a third alternative, while looking man full in the face for the first time in my career, is now for others to say. . . . Let me just say that if I have changed my views on many things, this change leaves intact, I believe, the basic premise of the Enlightenment which I feel we cannot abandon and continue to be a working scientist—namely that there is nothing in man or nature which would prevent us from taking some control of our destiny and making the world a saner place for our children. This is certainly harder and more of a gamble, than I once thought; but maybe this should reinforce our dedication and truly tax our imaginations. . . . There is a distinct difference between pessimism, which does not exclude hope, and cynicism, which does. I see no need, therefore, to apologize for the relative grimness of much of the thought contained in this book; it seems to me to be starkly empirical. Since I have been fighting against admitting the dark side of human nature for a dozen years, this thought can hardly be a simple reflex of my own temperament, of what I naturally feel comfortable with. Nor is it a simple function of our uneasy epoch, since it was gathered by the best human minds of many dispositions and epochs, and so I think it can be said that it reflects objectively the universal situation of the creature we call man. (p. xviii)

These were sentiments he also expressed in some of his private correspondence during his final few years of life:

> . . . the main shortcoming of my work is that I have not really accounted for human viciousness as I should have. It is not that man is "evil," but he is not "neutral" either. He is terribly afraid of his own death, and of the insignificance of his life, his "creatureliness." And so, his whole life is a protest that he "is somebody," and this protest he takes out on others: he will even kill them to show that he can triumph over death. I think that the theoretical problem for our time is to harmonize this knowledge with the possibility of a humanistic science, and I am now writing what I think is my most mature work to that end.

> . . . In this light, one of the most important writers for social science is Otto Rank, see especially his book BEYOND PSYCHOLOGY. Also, Erich Fromm is, I think, of great importance, although not so brilliant as Rank, and not so sophisticated with anthropological-sociological data. (Becker, from his undated letter, in response to a previous letter from a Professor Momin dated July 21, 1971, Ernest Becker Papers, Columbia University)

In this article, we consider and explicate Becker's dark turn in a way that emphasizes a continuity across his writings, earlier and later, but which also recognizes a clear shift in his thought that is evident in his final two books and perhaps carries important implications for his desire to contribute to an amelioration of the human condition. In doing so, we trace this shift to Becker's reading of the writings of Otto Rank in particular, but also consider the possibility that Becker's dark turn may have been influenced by events in his own life, including his deteriorating health due to terminal illness. We submit that Becker's dark turn constituted a critical deepening of his earlier work, especially of his philosophical anthropology, what he frequently referred to as his "science of man." There is some irony in this conclusion because Becker was thought, by his colleagues in the interdisciplinary Department of Political Science, Anthropology and Sociology at Simon Fraser University (SFU), to be adverse to the teachings of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory (personal communication between the first author and Heribert Adam, then Chair of the PSA Department, May 18, 2010). Yet there is a critical quality to Becker's work during and after "the turn" that we believe fits nicely with that of members of the Frankfurt School and subsequent Continental thinkers. The matter of exactly how and if Becker's failing health played into his intellectual shift is less easily resolved but invites some speculation that we oblige with caution.

Becker's Philosophical Anthropology

Throughout his peripatetic academic career, Becker was preoccupied with understanding why we humans do the things we do, both good and evil. In his writings prior to "the turn," he created an evolving synthesis of ideas and themes extracted from his reading and study of an eclectic mix of social scientists, humanists, theologians, and others, including Rousseau, Kierkegaard, Dewey, Freud, and a wide variety of important existential, social psychological, and psychodynamic thinkers. In doing so, he subscribed to *self-esteem maintenance* as a central principle to explain human striving. For Becker, the existential, social psychological condition of human beings was that of socially oriented, self-reflective, and self-interpreting beings attempting to

locate and achieve significance in their lives in the face of their inevitable limitations and demise. Becker's idealized goal for individual humans and their societies was simultaneously to maximize both social and personal development. Any such achievement required a thorough going understanding of human nature and the human condition, which was the goal of his "science of man." Moreover, the science of persons, that is, the philosophical anthropology Becker sought (what he referred to as an adequate "science of man") had to be adequate to the task of underwriting human meaning and significance at both individual and collective levels.

Both prior to and after coming to SFU for the Fall term of 1969 and undertaking a painstaking study of the works of Otto Rank and others like Norman O. Brown, Robert J. Lifton, and Paul Tillich, Becker's writings can be read as successive attempts to get clear about human nature and the human condition. Whether writing about psychiatry, education, religion, philosophy, or the history of human thought, his work was that of an interdisciplinary philosophical anthropologist—combing through relevant works, extracting and articulating what he regarded as an increasingly adequate and comprehensive scientific understanding of human experience and existence. What Becker was after was not scientific in any narrow or technical sense. He did not employ experimentation or any other formal methods of empirical inquiry favored by most social scientists, including social and cultural anthropologists. For Becker, a true science of man was not just biological, social, psychological, and historical but also metaphysical, phenomenological, and ontological, and especially existential. He sought a philosophical anthropology of the nature of the human person in context, one that would capture our unique reality as we exist, experience, and struggle within the human condition. He sought the broadest possible array of ineluctable truths about the essence of human existence. That such a project was directly tied to, and a necessary prerequisite for, his Enlightenment project cannot be doubted. Becker's career plan was to construct what he called an *ideal/real* theory of democracy—"a state in which each person strives to achieve *maximum individuality within maximum community*" (Liechty, 2005, p. 19).

Yet, despite all his labors prior to 1970, Becker was painfully aware that something absolutely essential to his project remained beyond his grasp. Perhaps his clearest statement about what he was missing can be found in the epilogue of what many regard as his most accomplished intellectual work, *The Structure of Evil: An Essay on the Unification of the Science of Man*, published in 1968 and widely praised by intellectuals as diverse as Abraham Maslow and Arthur Koestler. Here, Becker argued that a credible science of persons must

> if it is to shoulder the task it inherited from the demise of medieval cosmology … do three things that were formerly assured by religion: (1) It would have to explain evil credibly, and offer a way to overcome it; (2) It would have to define the True, the Good, and the Beautiful; (3) And it would have to re-establish the unity of man and nature, the sense of intimacy with the cosmic process. (Becker, 1968, p. 375)

Becker's Theory of Evil

In his "mature work" that constituted his dark turn, Becker finally, to his own satisfaction, provided the theory of evil required for his unified science of the person, one which, although facing human evil fully, retained the Enlightenment goal of learning to live better with this knowledge. Without such a theory, Becker came to believe that our uncritical, unconscious allegiances to our cultural and symbolic meaning systems would continue to unleash increasingly destructive levels and amounts of evil. In *The Denial of Death* and *Escape From Evil*, Becker achieved his theory of evil by depicting *cultures as immortality projects*, which if threatened, could release destructive, even murderous mayhem. In doing so, he replaced the principle of *self-esteem maintenance* with the principle of *immortality striving* as the cornerstone of his theoretical edifice. He did *not* reject self-esteem maintenance but repositioned and reprioritized it within his neo-Rankian understanding of human striving for significance and immortality.

Rank's post-Freudian writings (1936/1978, 1932/1989) traced human anxiety and fear to two oppositional tendencies in human experience—one toward individuation and separateness, the other toward collectivity and communion, both of which are simultaneously desired and feared. The former is linked to a fear of life but also to the desire to create; the latter to a fear of death but also to the desire to love. Throughout life, each person is caught up within and tossed about by these fears and desires. For Becker, self-esteem maintenance and immortality striving were set within this Rankian depiction of the human condition, with the creations and loves of individuals defining their lives and anticipating their deaths.

Like Rank, Becker was a post-Freudian scholar who tended to view humans as more pro- than anti-social. Perhaps the most salient feature of Becker's post-Freudianism, both before and after his immersion in the works and ideas of Rank, was the manner in which he expanded Freud's notion of the psychoanalytic transference to characterize all human interaction (see Liechty, 1995, 2004). From infancy on, we gird ourselves to the demands of the world by sheltering ourselves (emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually) within that which symbolically represents "higher power." Becker

believed we have no choice but to live within the general dynamics of transference. Although we never can escape such dynamics, Becker, as an Enlightenment scholar, also believed we can come to understand the nature of our transference relationships, their costs, and eventually learn to cultivate transference objects that are more beneficial than harmful. Using Becker's expanded conception of transference as a hermeneutical tool for understanding our living toward death helps us comprehend both our need for and susceptibility to authority and its various forms of reassurance. For Becker, it was inevitable that our underlying death anxiety courts heroic transference objects and opens us to cultural immortality projects. The fact that it is possible to point to the notion of expanded transference as central to the majority of Becker's writings before and after coming to SFU in 1969 is important for judging Becker's "dark turn" as a significant deepening of, but not a radical rethinking of his pre-SFU oeuvre. Nonetheless, after reading Rank, Becker more clearly perceived the precise ways in which his own core idea of expanded transference was animated by Rankian fears of living and dying. In particular, Becker saw that entire societies and cultures, like individuals, inevitably need to reach out to transference objects and projects of their own construction. However, because it is cultures and their members who construct them, such objects and projects cannot really offer the required assurance and transcendence they promise. After all, such objects and projects, including significant lines of cultural development and achievement within them, are idols of our own making. As such, they do not constitute an external authority that connects us to the cosmos in ways we genuinely might understand as transcending our human condition (Liechty, 1995).

Becker's principle of immortality striving holds that all individuals seek immortality, at least in some form of significance that marks their passing, and identify with ideologies of self-expression they believe might grant such immortality. Historically, so as to escape the tenuous and terrifying nature of existence as self-conscious beings mindful of their mortality, people have created societies and cultures consisting of norms, rituals, institutions, artifacts, practices, and traditions that provide meaning and succor to balance fears of insignificance and demise. Both self-esteem maintenance and immortality striving are buoyed by cultures, understood as shared immortality projects. Becker uses the principle of immortality striving to explain our fetishized attachments to our groups, communities, societies, and cultures and our capacities for destructiveness and evil in support of these attachments. The ultimate irony is that our highest needs and virtues, those associated with our belongingness, our sacrifices, our worth, our heroism, and our religions may be recruited in atrocities committed against others—atrocities which may come to entail our self-destruction as well.

When endowed with a transcending significance, culture becomes a life-affirming and death-defying system of beliefs and structures that will perpetuate and redeem its members in the face of their mortality. Understood in this way, culture enables a unique form of development for human beings. The reason so many social scientific research programs and theories end in failure is that they are not animated by an adequate ontological theory of human nature and the human condition, one that is capable of understanding human evil and its sources. Whatever truths such undertakings point to are comparatively trivial. What such research cannot begin to contemplate, and what Becker's principle of immortality striving claims, is that under its sway, "men kill out of joy, in the experience of expansive transcendence over evil" (Becker, 1975, p. 155). Without adequate critical awareness, our attempts to combat evil can turn us into evil doers.

It is only human persons, even and sometimes especially those with highly cultured natures, who derive satisfaction from destruction. As self-conscious creatures, Becker claimed that human capacities for both heroic self-transcendence and violent evil are grounded in attempts to deny our creatureliness, insignificance, and ultimately, the inevitability of death. The "idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is the mainspring of human activity" (Becker, 1973, p. ix). It is by erecting cultural symbols and artifacts that humans achieve the promise of a transcending significance. For Becker, all of culture, religious or not, was *de facto* supernatural, because the function of every cultural is to assure its members in one way or another of the meaningfulness of life and hence of the transcendence of death. "It is an expression of the will to live, the burning desire of the creature to count, to make a difference on the planet because he has lived, has emerged on it, and has worked, suffered and died" (Becker, 1975, p. 3). Faced with any perceived threat to their culture, humans will kill and destroy—"the logic of killing others to affirm our own life" is the paradox which unlocks much that puzzles us about the history of evil (Becker, 1975, p. 110). Unfortunately, our "search for immortality is most often worked out as a frenzied and fetishistic escape from mortality and weakness through victory over an enemy, a hate object" (McCarthy, 1981, p. 50). "Victimage is a universal human need. And the highest heroism is the stamping out of those who are tainted" (Becker, 1975, p. 116).

Evil of the sort exemplified in the Holocaust is a collective and individual embrace of a fetishized heroism, a conquering of the other in a mass refusal to accept insignificance and demise. Scapegoating, dehumanizing, cultish ritualism and symbolism, and bureaucratized murder are the "thoughtless," uncritical results of a perverted heroism (in the form of a symbolically transcendent mastering of death) run amok. The reality of the Holocaust is that of

the nation state needing to represent heroic victory over evil and mortality (e.g., the "Fuhrer Cult," Bartov, 1992).

For Becker, neither science nor religion alone could provide a solution to the human condition that occasions evil. The best Becker could offer was a carefully considered assertion that the kind of cosmic heroism he thought humans seek will require a merger of idealized scientific and religious perspectives. Such a heroism must be based on a carefully critical meditation on and confrontation with the reality of our circumstances, nature, and limitations. "Science [informed by Becker's theoretical methods] paints the grim but objective picture of man's propensity for evil; religion redeems science from cynicism and despair by demanding of man hope—even when that hope is an illusion" (McCarthy, 1981, p. 57).

A Critical Deepening

As he came to SFU in the Fall of 1969, Becker was beginning to struggle with this core problem: how to explain the reality of human evil without entirely jettisoning the possibilities of human enlightenment and transcendence. Historically, theodicy has been concerned with precisely such attempts, framed in the more explicitly religious context of explaining the existence of evil within the creation of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God. In his anthropodicy, Becker wanted to maintain the possibility of meaningful transcendence (religious, spiritual, and/or sociocultural) in a world where evil clearly can flourish. However, to ensure that the problem of evil is not inadvertently underestimated even when seemingly acknowledged, Becker was at pains to portray it in the starkest most unsettling manner possible by insisting that it is the nature of human evil to usurp all that we hold most dear in ourselves and our societies and twist it toward Armageddon.

Earlier in his career, Becker (1967) had crafted his anthropodicy as a general theory of alienation, an explanation for the evil in the world that is caused by human persons and points to those evils that can be prevented or ameliorated by human effort, the form of which is a liberal education that teaches how personal freedom and responsible choice are constrained—that is, which teaches "being good" by revealing the causes of evil. In this way,

> Becker characterized the educational system in the ideal/real democracy as a *Great Conversation* carried on by a community of scientist-scholar-investigators. This was also his basic description of an ideal social existence in the ideal/real democratic state, in which the expansion of maximum individuality within maximum community would itself serve as the socio-cultural immortality

> project—the only project that by its nature will not displace freedom with servitude in the process of achieving its actualization. (Liechty, 2005, p. 21)

However, as he read Rank and began his dark turn, Becker realized that for all its merits, his previous thinking was too naïve to combat the twists and turns of human evil.

Becker's dark turn was initiated by his mature theory of evil and comes fully into view with an appreciation of the much heavier demands such a theory makes on any hope of possible human enlightenment that might be capable of constraining what Becker now understood as an extraordinarily adaptive and opportunistic evil. This is an evil that threatens to enlist our most cherished enlightenment projects, including our religious and intellectual commitments and beliefs (even Becker's own prior formulations of his science of man and his anthropodicy) and to turn them against others and ourselves. Our only hope for enlightened life together is a kind of cosmic heroism that might issue from a fusion of the insights of an idealized social science with the functions of religion, a merging that will require an honest and sustained confrontation with the reality of our condition, nature, and limits, at both collective and individual levels. This challenge helps to define Becker's legacy. It was his call to us to be continuingly vigilant and reflective about the evil that lurks within our own best critical thoughts and practices, waiting to turn them into exactly that which they are set against.

A contemporary rendering of this legacy might help us navigate cultural conflict, achieve a synthesis of science and transcendence, slow and perhaps eventually attenuate environmental degradation, overcome excessive and acquisitive consumption, and learn to die with dignity by incorporating death into life without the terror that undergirds evil. Becker's dark turn does not deny the possibility of human enlightenment but it certainly deepens our understanding of the immense difficulty of initiating and sustaining it without having it transform into its opposite. This is a critical deepening that asks us to search ourselves and our societies and dampen the tendency of our most beloved cultural and personal commitments to set us on a path of evil and destruction. Not only must any critical theory have "as its object human beings as producers of their own historical form of life" (Horkheimer, 1993, p. 21), this object must include a clear-eyed, non-flinching confrontation with what even the most critical of critical theorists understand as their greatest achievements and contributions.

Sourcing and Contemplating the Dark Turn in Becker's Life Experiences

Given the nature of his personal life (see Liechty, 2005; Martin, 2014), it is well worth engaging a bit of psychobiography as a possible means of sourcing

Becker's dark turn in his own previous and concurrent life experiences. Such a possibility is further encouraged by Becker's quiet satisfaction with the success of *The Denial of Death*, in terms of critical and public attention and sales, especially compared with that of any of his previous eight volumes. In a deathbed interview with Sam Keen, Becker said,

> It's funny, I have been working for 15 years with an obsessiveness to develop these ideas, dropping one book after another into the void and carrying on with some sort of confidence that the stuff was good. And just now, these last years, people are starting to take an interest in my work. Sitting here talking to you like this makes me wistful I won't be around to see these things. . . . I think, gee, all these things going on and I won't be a part of it. (Keen, 1974, p. 80)

With these words, Becker, who received his PhD in social and cultural anthropology from Syracuse University in 1960, implicitly acknowledged a progressive continuity across his entire oeuvre and displays, in muted fashion, his strong desire for success and recognition. This was a drivenness that was well known to his family, friends, and colleagues, and given an existential interpretation by Becker himself (Martin, 2014). In an entry in one of his occasional diaries/journals the year before coming to SFU, Becker wrote: "It is clearer to me lately that I am masking my own fear of finitude, of death, of being stupidly killed and ended, and my life having no real weight or meaning" (Becker, December 10, 1968, see Kramer, 2007, p. 471). There can be little doubt that Becker's scholarly work was well rooted in his personal experiences of fearing death and insignificance (Martin, 2014, 2016).

Becker's diary entry of December 10, 1968 was written just before he resigned from his position at San Francisco State College because he was opposed to S. I. Hayakawa's (President of SFSC) decision to call in the National Guard to maintain order during student protests and found "it impossible to pursue scholarly work and teaching in the campus atmosphere" (Becker's letter of resignation, dated January 27, 1969, Ernest Becker Papers, Columbia University). At this point in his life, Becker had been unable to find an appropriate appointment at four different universities and again found himself engaged in what had become a biennial ritual of searching for a different position and planning another move for his family. According to his wife, Marie, Becker was depressed about his inability to secure a desired university job and was also deeply upset at the state of U.S. politics and society (personal communication with first author, June 15, 2011). He was concerned for several of his previous students who were fighting in Vietnam, disgusted at the intrusion of business and military interests on campuses, and worried about the increasing alienation he perceived in many quarters of

American society. Given all of this, Becker was clearly inclined to a less optimistic view of the human condition when he traveled north from San Francisco to Vancouver in the late summer of 1969.

In a similar vein of life-fueling interests and work, Martin (2016) suggested that Becker's preoccupation with human evil also reflected his earlier, youthful experiences in the U.S. Army during World War II, where he witnessed events in Europe firsthand, including the liberation of a Nazi concentration camp (Liechty, 2005, p. 13), and to his work for the Central Intelligence Agency while he was employed in the American Embassy in Paris in the 1950s (Leifer, 2013), where he was directly exposed to East–West realpolitik. Becker was no stranger to human evil and its consequences, a direct familiarity that probably played a part in initiating and channeling his academic interests.

Yet another possible life–work connection pertains to Becker's final few years of life. The temporal congruence in these years between the conduct of his "mature work" and the onset of his terminal illness has occasioned considerable, mostly informal, conversation and speculation on the part of Becker scholars and devotees. Becker was diagnosed with colon cancer in December of 1972 (Martin, 2014, p. 97) after submitting the final manuscript for *The Denial of Death* to The Free Press on November 1, 1972 (Martin, 2014, p. 96). Becker completed the copyediting for the book in January and February, 1973 (Martin, 2014, p. 96) while recovering from his initial operations. Given this sequence of events, there would seem to be no direct link between Becker's diagnosis and the contents of *The Denial of Death.* However, what is less clear is how Becker's illness prior to his diagnosis might have interacted with his work on the manuscripts for both *The Denial of Death* and *Escape From Evil.*

In December 1972, Dr. R. J. Hancock, Becker's surgeon and also a residential neighbor in Vancouver, Canada, was shocked by Becker's appearance during a brief social encounter, and upon conducting a subsequent examination of Becker's condition, expressed frustration "that any man whose cancer was that far advanced had not noticed it or done anything about it" (Martin, 2014, p. 97). Although Hancock's comment may be understood as indicating that Becker was unaware of his condition, at least two of his closest friends, Paul Bakan (a health psychologist who befriended Becker while at SFU, personal communication with the first author, October 24, 2014) and Ron Leifer (a medical doctor and long-term friend from Becker's days as a graduate student in Syracuse, personal communication with the first author, April 29, 2015) recall talking with Becker about his symptoms of severe physical discomfort, and asking him if he had sought medical opinion and advice concerning them, during the early Fall and Summer of 1972, respectively.

Consequently, it is very likely that Becker may have been aware that something quite serious was afflicting him several months prior to receiving the initial diagnosis of colon cancer in December, 1972.

There also is evidence that Becker worked feverishly in the summer and early Fall of 1972 to complete the manuscript of *The Denial of Death*, which involved separating it from what later was to be published posthumously as *Escape From Evil* and ensuring that it was coherent and polished as a work that could stand by itself (Martin, 2014, pp. 95-96). For example, in a November 15, 1972, letter to Gilbert Murillo, a previous student of Becker's from his days at Berkeley and San Francisco State College, Becker, commenting on his preoccupation with his work on *The Denial of Death*, stated that

> I have been sort of out of touch with everyone these days, bending over my own shoemaker's last—trying to make sense of the world, *mostly for myself* [italics added]. My work is drifting further and further away from the Enlightenment I fear; and since I am not an activist, this cuts me off from everything meaningful to say or do in these times. (Martin, 2014, p. 97, emphasis added here)

Consequently, it remains an open question if, and the extent to which, Becker's terminal illness, over its entire course, may have contributed to the actual content of his "mature work" and his "dark turn." That Becker's physical, mental, and emotional states for much of 1972 were motivationally decisive for the completion of his mature work, and that his rigorous and exhausting labor to complete it may have affected his health adversely, are both entirely plausible.

Becker's comment to Murillo that his work was drifting "further and further from the Enlightenment" also might lend support to thinking that if Becker had lived longer he might have become more pessimistic, perhaps even to the extent of abandoning his Enlightenment faith and commitment. The immense problems confronting any Enlightenment project, including his own, were laid bare in his last work, *Escape From Evil*.

> Death is a "culture mechanism" that was utilized by societies from primitive times on as a means of social control and repression, to help an elite force its will on a meek and compliant populace. The definition of culture, after all, is that it continues the *causa sui* project of the transcendence of death; and so we see the fatality and naturalness of human slavishness: man helps secure his own domination by the tribe, the polis, the state, the gods, because of his fears. (Becker, 1975, pp. 125-126)

In this context, Becker (1975) pondered the futility of conceiving, let alone achieving "a nondestructive yet victorious social system," one which does not drive us "blindly to self-destructive heroics" (p. 126). It does not get much more deeply critical than this. And yet, toward the very end of this same (and his last) book, despite the fact that "We surely will never be able to do great things with our condition," Becker (1975) allowed that it nonetheless might be possible to "introduce just that minute measure of reason to balance destruction" (p. 170).

After coming to SFU and completing his careful study of Rank's works and ideas concerning the deep and unavoidable anxieties of living and dying, Becker seemed to realize more fully that even his own existential, enlightenment project, his hope of encouraging better human societies through the creation and gift of his philosophical anthropology—his theories of the human being and the human condition—could not possibly count as an adequately external source of reassurance or balm to human existence, suffering, and the temptation to evil. With this realization, he perhaps came to appreciate more directly and forcefully the precarious nature of all human existence and meaning and exactly how it applied to himself and every one of us, whether alone or together.

Those who, nonetheless, read Ernest Becker with therapeutic intent will all but inevitably seek at some point to move "beyond" Becker and toward some meaningful application of Becker's work to the ongoing process of human betterment (Liechty, 1995). Yet very often, the temptation is to move too quickly beyond Becker, seeing the vision he presented after "the turn" as so pessimistic it can hardly be entertained for any period of time without flinching and looking away. Thus, for example, Wong and Tomer (2011, 2012) proposed reading these ideas through the lenses of Logotherapy and Positive Psychology. Others working from a framework of grief awareness have begun to talk about a Death Acceptance Movement, which employs irony and humor, group work, and social discussion as means by which to regularly bring unconscious fears and attitudes about death into the more mindfully conscious sphere of life (cf., e.g., www.orderofthegooddeath.com). Ernest Becker would certainly have remained cautious about assuming it is just this easy to push death anxiety aside (following William James, he somewhat sarcastically called people who do the "healthy minded" and the "cheerful robots,"—e.g., Becker, 1964, note 43; 1973, pp. 13ff.)[1] Nonetheless, the generally positive mention he made to Sam Keen in the interview referred to above about the work of people such as Avery Weisman and Elisabeth Kuebler-Ross, the early pioneers of modern psychosocial thanatology, make it clear that Becker himself, had he lived long, might very well have been

seeking avenues for incorporating the pessimism evident in “the turn” into insights in some way useful for the well-being of his fellow human beings.

Clearly, Becker struggled mightily to sustain a possibility of enlightenment against even the most odious of human acts as he toiled to produce his Pulitzer-prize winning masterpiece. In a letter to Harvey Bates, dated April 28, 1971, Becker writes:

> I am living “on the boundary” between renouncing the science of man as a bad dream of youth (or a good dream, but a dream anyway) and, on the other hand, of continuing to work as though the words we put together about our condition and our hopes have some meaning for bettering our lot. You see the dilemma: it is right to be in such a dilemma, because in the human condition nothing is clear cut. (Bates, 1977, p. 226)

In the last sentence in *The Denial of Death*, Becker (1973) wrote, “The most that any of us can seem to do is to fashion something—an object or ourselves—and drop it into the confusion, make an offering of it, so to speak, to the life force” (p. 285). In many ways, in *The Denial of Death*, Becker seems to be more despairing of the possibility of human enlightenment than he is in the posthumously published, *Escape From Evil.* To offer ourselves and our labors up as gifts to the cosmos to do with as it may seem an act of faith, not of reason and intentional action. But here, it is possible, and perhaps appropriate, to place a speculative Rankian interpretation over the kind of experiences Becker himself may have had toward the end of his life and which coincided with “the deepening” evident in his work. In his striving and suffering at this time, Becker may have experienced an elevated recognition of his own rendering of Rank’s creative tensions, those surrounding his fears of living and dying, separation and union, fear, and guilt. If interpreted in this way, perhaps Becker, as he lived his life toward his death, was able to “yield up his mortal ego for a moment, fearlessly and even joyfully, to receive it back in the next, the richer for this universal feeling” (Rank, 1932/1989, p. 110), a process Rank understood as emotional and relational as much or more than intellectual (see Kramer, 1995). In saying this, what Rank was proposing is an analogy between an artist putting everything she has into a work which represents her soul, and then finding it again in the enjoyment of others, a process Rank likens to one in which “the believer finds his soul in religion or in God, with whom he feels himself to be one” and in this process of “dissolution of . . . individuality in a greater whole [achieves] a high pleasure, the personal enrichment of that individuality through this feeling of oneness” (Rank, 1989, p. 109). Indeed, there is a hint of something like this (which might also be interpreted as a

kind of Tillich-like spiritual existentialism in which revelatory answers to questions of human existence are "spoken from beyond") in the wistfulness that Becker, as he lay dying, expressed to Sam Keen when he spoke of giving himself "over—when there's nothing left—to the tremendous creative energies of the cosmos to be used for purposes we don't know" (Keen, 1974, p. 78). If so, Becker died the Rankian artist's death. In the words of his friend and SFU colleague Karl Peter, after visiting Becker in the hospital and being told by Becker that he intended to die with dignity:

> I came home and I looked at his book [*The Denial of Death*] again. It became clear to me that what Ernest was doing was writing a final chapter of his book. He wrote it while living it . . . the chapter that he was able to compose and to live once he was down, naked, stripped of his health; there was nothing left but his personality and his intellect, and he lived that chapter—a chapter of the acceptance of death. (SFU Archives)

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Note

1. As one anonymous reviewer of this article aptly put it, Becker "feared as he aged that even existential-humanistic psychology would one day succumb to Californian cliché, routine, and dilution.

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