Necessary Illusions: Life, Death and the Construction of Meaning

JAMES HARDIE-BICK[*]

Abstract

This paper introduces the work of the late cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker. Becker argued that the cause of human suffering is directly related to the strategies people use to cope with their mortality awareness. By concentrating on his last two books, *The Denial of Death* (1973) and *Escape from Evil* (1975), the aim of this paper is to provide an overview of Becker's mature theory to show how his work on destructiveness is necessary for developing a socially engaged social theory. Whilst his theory on the human condition explores some of the darkest aspects of human existence, by examining why people are capable of extreme forms of cruelty Becker directly encouraged an honest dialogue concerning our existential predicament. This paper highlights the necessity of Becker's theory of evil for opening up new possibilities for living in a more humane world.

Key words

Ernest Becker; evil; existentialism; death; immortality

Resumen

Este artículo presenta el trabajo del antropólogo cultural Ernest Becker. Becker argumentó que la causa del sufrimiento humano está directamente relacionada con las estrategias que usan las personas para hacer frente a su conciencia de mortalidad. Analizando sus dos últimos libros, *La negación de la muerte* (1973) y *La lucha contra el mal* (1975), el objetivo de este artículo es ofrecer una visión general de la teoría madura de Becker para demostrar cómo su estudio sobre la destructividad es necesario para desarrollar una teoría social socialmente comprometida. A pesar de que su teoría sobre la condición humana explora algunos de los aspectos más oscuros de la existencia humana, Becker directamente fomenta un diálogo honesto sobre nuestro predicamento existencial, examinando

[*] James Hardie-Bick is Lecturer in Sociology and Criminology at the University of Sussex. His research interests include social theory, self-identity, violence and transgression. University of Sussex. School of Law, Politics and Sociology. Friston Building. University of Sussex. Brighton. BN1 9SP United Kingdom. J.P.Hardie-Bick@sussex.ac.uk

por qué las personas son capaces de formas extremas de crueldad. Este artículo destaca la necesidad de la teoría de Becker del mal, para facilitar nuevas posibilidades de vivir en un mundo más humano.

Palabras clave

Ernest Becker; mal; existencialismo; muerte; inmortalidad

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1. Introduction

The work of the late cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker (1924-74) explored why people are motivated to 'act the way they do' (Becker 1971, p. vii). His conclusions are both insightful and distressing. Becker argued that the root cause of human suffering and cruelty is directly related to the strategies people employ to cope with their mortality awareness. Human beings have to live with the knowledge of their own impending death and it is precisely the implications that arise from this distinctly human form of self-awareness that concerned Becker. This paper provides an overview of Becker's main strands of thought in his last two books: *The Denial of Death* (1973) and *Escape from Evil* (1975). These two path-breaking books build directly on the psychological, philosophical, social and cultural themes addressed in his earlier works. Although Becker's thesis on the human condition has been criticised for being overly pessimistic, my intention is to show the necessity of his work on destructiveness for developing a socially engaged social theory. By examining why people are capable of extreme forms of cruelty Becker hoped to encourage a critical and honest dialogue concerning the potential of living in a less destructive and more humane world.

2. Mortality awareness

There are a number of researchers who are now recognising the importance of addressing issues arising from mortality awareness. For example, Bell and Taylor (2011) have provided a persuasive critique of the psychological stage models of grief that have dominated death research. They show how a continuing bonds perspective questions and challenges the cultural separation between life and death. Not only do we need to acknowledge that death is an inescapable part of the human condition, but we also need to recognise that 'when people die they are not gone because their identity leaves a record' (Bell and Taylor 2011, p. 6). The necessity and importance of both arguments are fully addressed by Becker. Indeed, according to Becker (1975, 1997), living with an awareness of the inevitability of death explains *why* people need to feel they can continue to have influence after they have died.

In a similar way to Bell and Taylor, Becker is also arguing that we need to pay close attention to death and question our cultural beliefs concerning this inevitable part of human life. The problem is that our cultural beliefs surrounding death are so deeply embedded that thinking about our own demise has the potential to generate uncomfortable feelings of existential anxiety and ontological insecurity (Giddens 1991). Research has consistently shown that people have difficulty contemplating their mortality and become insecure when reminded about the inevitability of death (see Solomon *et al.* 1991, Pyszczynski *et al.* 2003).

Bauman (1992) also discusses how people try to ignore their own mortality to escape from confronting the absurdity of the human predicament. Humans may well be finite beings, yet 'there is hardly a thought more offensive than that of death; or, rather, of the inevitability of dying' (Bauman 1992, p. 12). Unable to believe in the possibility of their own death, people have become competent in the arts of distraction. People lie, cover up and deceive themselves by immersing themselves into their everyday projects and concerns. As Bauman argues, society encourages individuals to wage 'war on everything firmly anchored in the "mere present", in the material being of the world' (Bauman 1992, p. 67). In other words, mortality is denied in our individual and collective attempts to achieve symbolic immortality.

3. Heidegger, death and authenticity

Despite the difficulties of fully acknowledging 'that we will grow, blossom and, inevitably, diminish and die' (Yalom 2008, p. 1), a number of philosophers and psychotherapists have explored the importance of experientially confronting death

for living a more vital and authentic existence (see Heidegger 1962, Yalom 1980, 2008, Greening 1992). Yalom (1980) discusses how psychotherapists can use 'existential shock' therapy to specifically encourage people to critically reflect on their own mortality. For example, during therapy clients may be encouraged to write their own obituary or epitaph in order to provoke critical reflection on previously unexamined aspects of their lives. Yalom provides an example of the type of structured exercise some psychotherapists use with their clients:

> 'On a blank sheet of paper draw a straight line. One end of that line represents your birth; the other end, your death. Draw a cross to represent where you are now. Meditate upon this for five minutes.' (Yalom 1980, p. 174)

Yalom argues that the results of such 'awaking' exercises 'almost invariably evokes powerful and profound reactions' (Yalom 1980, p. 174). The positive effects of taking a more mindful approach towards our own mortality has also been noted by Schmitt (1976) and Noyes (1981). Their research suggests that encouraging people to think about their own inevitable non-being can be beneficial for encouraging people to challenge and change their everyday behaviour. The philosophy of Heidegger is also central to these debates. Heidegger called death an 'existential phenomenon' and believed that people should have the courage to contemplate the finitude of existence. Heidegger made a distinction between the everyday mode of Being-towards-death with the ontological mode. The everyday mode reveals 'an untroubled indifference towards the uttermost possibility of existence' (Heidegger 1962, p. 299). In the everyday mode people avoid acknowledging their own death by distracting themselves with trivialities and idle talk. Although death is clearly 'encountered as a well-known event occurring within-the-world' (Heidegger 1962, p. 297), the possibility of death remains concealed:

> 'This evasive concealment in the face of death dominates everydayness so stubbornly that, in Being with one another, the "neighbours" often still keep talking the "dying person" into the belief that he will escape death and soon return to the tranquillized everydayness of the world of his concern. Such "solicitude" is meant to "console" him...while in addition it helps him to keep his ownmost non-relational possibility-of-Being completely concealed' (Heidegger 1962, p. 297-298).

The inauthentic everyday mode offers a constant 'tranquillization about death', whereas an authentic Being-towards-death provides 'an impassioned freedom towards death' (Heidegger 1962, p. 311). Heidegger encouraged people to live with an authentic Being-towards-death. Rather than relying on the everyday illusions of the 'they' that encourages the idle forgetfulness of the everyday mode of Being-towards-death, Heidegger urged people to have the courage to be open to the possibility of their own death by honestly examining their lives. Heidegger's approach to living with an authentic Being-towards-death raises important questions in relation to how our lives should be lived and how we relate to others. An awareness of death allows people to question their usually unquestioned norms and values and prioritise the choices people make in their everyday lives (see Reedy and Learmonth 2011).

Heidegger's main idea, or perhaps hope, is that mortality awareness would prompt one to realise the finite nature of life and therefore opens up the possibility of living a more authentic existence. Becker, whose whole oeuvre is focused on death and the denial of death, raised important objections against this Heideggarian position. Becker argued that mortality awareness does not necessarily lead people to live an authentic life and an authentic life does not necessarily lead to an ethical life. On the contrary, Becker argued that mortality awareness can have disastrous implications. His work draws attention to how our symbolic immortality projects can take shape and wreak social, cultural and psychological havoc. As Becker states, it is 'man's ingenuity' for defending against 'his fear of his ultimate end' (Becker 1975, p. 5) that is responsible for bringing evil into the world. Becker argued that death denial is at the core of the human dilemma.

4. A terrifying dilemma

Becker starts his analysis by recognising that human beings are self-conscious animals. Not only are we aware but we are also aware of our own awareness. In a similar way to the existentialists, Becker recognised that human beings are self-conscious beings who can think and take a step back from themselves to monitor their own feelings, beliefs, thoughts, values, desires, intentions and behaviour. In this respect, as Korsgaard has recently argued, '[H]uman beings are *condemned* to choice and action' (Korsgaard 2009, p. 1). This capacity for self-conscious reflection opens up a new world of actions, experiences, challenges and possibilities (also see Leary 2004). Self-conscious agency allows us to look back and reflect on our past experiences and to contemplate our present circumstances. At the same time we can also imagine future possibilities by looking beyond our immediate situation. In Becker's words we have:

> '[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 self-consciousness gives to man literally the status of a small God...' (Becker 1997, p. 26).

Human beings are transcendent beings who have the freedom and imagination to project and make plans about future courses of action. In this respect 'each person is already somewhat "ahead of himself"' (Becker 1975, p. 34). At the same time, however, human beings are also aware of something terrible. They are aware that their symbolic self is 'housed in a heart-pumping, breath-gasping body' that 'aches and bleeds and will decay and die' (Becker 1997, p. 26). Those familiar with the work of Erich Fromm will notice his direct influence on Becker's existential approach. In *Man for Himself* (1949) and *The Sane Society* (2008) Fromm discusses how human beings are aware of their existential separateness and aloneness. Unlike other animals, human beings are in the unique position of being 'partly divine' and 'partly animal', 'partly infinite' and 'partly finite' (Fromm 2008, p. 24). Fromm acknowledges how human existence is both a blessing and a curse and explains how our imagination and self-awareness creates insolvable dichotomies that no other animal has to contemplate. He maintained that human existence is in a constant state of disequilibrium:

> 'Self-awareness, reason, and imagination have disrupted the 'harmony' which characterizes animal existence. Their emergence has made man into an anomaly, into the freak of the universe. He is part of nature, subject to her physical laws and unable to change them, yet he transcends the rest of nature. He is set apart while being a part; he is homeless, yet chained to the home he shares with all creatures. Cast into this world at an accidental place and time, he is forced out of it, again accidently. Being aware of himself, he realises his powerlessness and the limitations of his existence. He visualises his own end: death. Never is he free from the dichotomy of his existence; he cannot rid himself of his body as long as he is alive...Man is the only animal for whom his own existence is a problem which he has to solve and from which he cannot escape.' (Fromm 1949, p. 40)

Fromm's work on our existential predicament can be seen as an important influence on Becker's approach. Although Becker became critical of Fromm's political optimism (see Becker 2005a), both theorists addressed the basic and unavoidable dichotomies of human existence. Human beings have to live with an overall sense of powerlessness concerning 'the accidentalness' of their temporary existence (Fromm 2008, p. 29) and have 'to live a whole lifetime with the fate of death' (Becker 1997, p. 27). It is the dualism of having both a symbolic inner self and a material body that provides the terrifying dilemma of being 'simultaneously worms and gods...gods with anuses' (Becker 1997, p. 51). This is the unique existential paradox that humans have to contend with.

5. Two forms of defence

In order to escape this 'excruciating dilemma' people build defences to disguise and deny their fate. The vital lie of character provides the first line of defence against the fear of death. The vital lie of character 'is a necessary and basic dishonesty about oneself and one's whole situation' (Becker 1997, p. 55). When individuals strongly identify with their social roles they are rewarded with a sense of self-worth that protects against feelings of existential insecurity and anxiety. It is understood to be a *necessary* lie, as living a life without the protection character armour provides would make 'routine, automatic, secure, self-confident activity impossible' (Becker 1997, p. 60). Without this necessary dishonesty people would see the world as it actually is and be forced to confront 'the full realization of the true human condition' (Becker 1997, p. 57). This 'character armour' provides people with a powerful sense of self-worth and keeps the terror of death unconscious. Living without this defence is both devastating and terrifying as it would make routine *thoughtless* living impossible.

The second line of defence is provided by society. According to Becker, all societies are 'symbolic action systems' that allow people to believe they can transcend death by contributing to the cultural 'hero-system'. This immortality ideology protects individuals with a living myth and provides a sense of meaning, purpose and stability to their lives. Becker claimed that what people really fear 'is not so much extinction, but extinction *with insignificance*' (Becker 1975, p. 4). People need to believe they live in a world of meaning with a clear 'structure of statuses and roles, customs and rules of behaviour' (Becker 1997, p. 4). People also need to believe they are valued participants, that their lives count, and that they have the potential to make 'a truly distinctive contribution to world life' (Becker 1997, p. 163). People can continue to influence people after they have died by contributing to something they believe will have lasting value and importance. As Becker notes, a 'true hero' may have triumphed over disease or want and demonstrated their life has made 'a difference in the life of mankind' (Becker 1975, p. 149). Drawing on a wide range of anthropological and historical sources Becker argues that all cultures have their own way of providing viable hero systems that allow people to symbolically transcend death.

Heroic acts protect people from the terror of death and contribute to the 'living myth of the significance of human life' (Becker 1997, p. 7). The codified hero-systems provide a sense of unshakable meaning, but there can be disastrous implications that accompany this search for purpose, stability and self-esteem. Becker explains how our imaginative desires and hopes for enduring immortality symbols also generate feelings of instability and existential insecurity. Understanding the problem of heroics sheds considerable light on questions concerning human cruelty and viciousness. History has shown that once people are persuaded of the legitimacy of the cause they are fighting for, they can 'kill lavishly out of the sublime joy' of heroically fighting evil (Becker 1975, p. 141). Becker's contention is that most people bring evil into the world out of the good intentions they have to identify and eradicate evil. The problem of heroics is the central problem of life:

> 'It explains almost all by itself why man, of all animals, has caused the most devastation on earth – the most real evil. He struggles extra hard to be immune to death because he alone is conscious of it; but by being able to identify and isolate evil arbitrarily, he is capable of lashing out in all directions against imagined dangers of this world. This means that in order to live he is capable of bringing a large part of the world down around his shoulders. History is just such a testimonial to the frightening costs of heroism.' (Becker 1975, p. 150)

One of the most significant aspects of Becker's work is to create a theory of human evil that explains why people can be responsible for horrendous acts of violence and still firmly believe they are acting to make a world a better place. People can

commit atrocious acts of violence in their attempts to heroically triumph over evil and this universal urge towards heroism should be understood as a response to the fear of death. People need to feel their lives have made a difference in order to 'guarantee some kind of indefinite duration' (Becker 1975, p. 63). The 'need for heroism' may not be easy to admit but understanding and becoming 'conscious of what one is doing to earn his feeling of heroism is the main self-analytic problem of life' (Becker 1997, p. 6).

6. Terror management theory

Although during his own life Becker's work was largely marginalised, there are now an increasing amount of academics that are recognising the significance of his work on the human predicament (i.e. Lifton 1979, Liechty 1995, 2002, Elgee 1998, Schneider 1999, Halling 2000, Loy 2003, Pyszczynski *et al.* 2003, Strenger 2011). There are also a number of empirical studies that have demonstrated the pervasive role mortality awareness has on our everyday experiences. The social psychological research carried out by Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski and Sheldon Solomon (Greenberg *et al.* 1986, Solomon *et al.* 1991, Solomon *et al.* 1998, Pyszczynski *et al.* 2003) has directly examined the consequences that can arise from this distinctly human form of awareness. Inspired by Becker's work, the main proposition of Terror Management Theory (TMT) is that all cultures provide highly sophisticated ways to live with the fear of death by providing an ordered and meaningful worldview. These meaningful worldviews have an important psychological function: they distract people from acknowledging the terrifying nature of existence and provide a powerful sense of ontological security. Cultural worldviews serve to disguise, distract and manage the unsettling fear engendered by living with an awareness of our own mortality. Solomon *et al.* (1998) argue that worldviews provide universal answers to existential questions:

> 'Cultural worldviews facilitate effective terror management by providing individuals with a vision of reality that supplies answers to universal cosmological questions such as Who am I? Where did I come from? What should I do? What will happen to me when I die? in ways that imbue the universe with meaning, permanence, and stability and give hope of symbolic and literal immortality.' (Solomon 1998, p. 13)

TMT maintains that alternative worldviews are psychologically problematic. People with different death denying worldviews directly challenge and have the potential to undermine the anxiety-buffering capacity of our own cultural beliefs and values. TMT asserts that the repressed fear of death can help to explain why people tend to scapegoat and dehumanize different others (see Pyszczynski *et al.* 2003).

A number of social psychological experiments have now been carried out to test this theory (see Rosenblatt *et al.* 1989, Arndt *et al.* 1997, Florian and Mikulincer 1997, Harmon-Jones *et al.* 1997, Dechesne *et al.* 2000, Greenberg *et al.* 2001). Terror management studies on mortality salience have been particularly innovative. In these experiments participants contemplate their own death. After reflecting on their own mortality, participants are required to make judgements about others who either support or violate important aspects of their own worldview. The first experiment on mortality salience, for example, involved twenty-two municipal court judges in Tuscon, Arizona (Rosenblatt *et al.* 1989). The judges were asked to complete a set of personality questionnaires and were informed that they were taking part in research investigating personality traits, attitudes and bond decisions. The researchers used these questionnaires to deflect attention from the true nature of their research. Unknown to the judges, the researchers were primarily interested in their unconscious reactions to mortality awareness. Within the questionnaires, eleven of the judges were provided with a Mortality Attitudes Personality Survey. This survey included the following questions: 'Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you' and 'Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen when you die and once

you are physically dead.' (Solomon *et al.* 1998, p. 26). The remaining judges did not receive the mortality survey and served as the control group.

After completing the questionnaires, all the judges were asked to consider a hypothetical legal case. The case stated that a person had been arrested for prostitution, a crime that typically 'violates important moral convictions of the average citizen in our culture' (Solomon *et al.* 1998, p. 27). Based on the information provided all the judges were asked to complete a form to determine the bond they would set for this defendant. The aim of the research was to look for any differences between the judges who had completed the mortality survey and the control group. Although the respondents did not report to being upset or anxious after taking the mortality attitudes survey, the judges who completed this survey recommended much higher bonds than the control group. The judges who completed the survey set an average bond of $455, whereas the average bond of the judges in the control group was only $50. In accordance with their theory, the evidence suggests that mortality salience does create 'a greater need for death-denying cultural worldviews' and also 'provokes more vigorous reactions to moral transgressors' (Solomon *et al.* 1998, p. 27). These findings support their hypothesis concerning mortality awareness and other equally innovative experiments with a variety of nationalities and age groups provide further support to their initial research. Terror Management Theory has provided empirical support to Becker's original theory concerning the unconscious fear human beings have of their own death. Their research has also highlighted the social problems that can arise from this uniquely human predicament.

7. Immortality projects

Becker's work together with the subsequent empirical TMT studies reveal the disastrous consequences that can arise from mortality awareness. Despite his focus on the darkest, most destructive aspects of human existence, Becker also addressed the possibility of developing non-destructive and more dignified immortality projects. The question is not whether it is possible to abandon heroics, but rather *how and in what ways can one be heroic?* By confronting our need for cosmic heroism and by recognising our urge to feel that we have made a lasting contribution to life it may be possible to make our immortality projects more noble, generous and humane. Although difficult to acknowledge, there is an urgent need to admit to these heroic desires. We need to become consciously aware of the ways in which we achieve a heroic image of ourselves. Rather than our urges for heroic victory being unconsciously satisfied by 'narcissistic scapegoating', once acknowledged, we have the potential to pragmatically choose how to make a difference that is both dignified and meaningful. We can address the crises of heroism by arguing for myths that are life-enhancing rather than thoughtless and destructive. Becker hoped to encourage a critical and realistic dialogue concerning the need for developing an 'objective' hatred and of the possibility of designing victorious yet non-destructive types of social systems:

> 'A social ideal could be designed that takes into account man's basest motives, but now an ideal not directly negated by those motives. In other words, a hate object need not be any special class or race or even human enemy, but could be things that take impersonal but real forms, like poverty, disease, oppression, natural disasters etc.' (Becker 1975, p. 144-145)

Becker encouraged a critical dialogue concerning the possibilities of living with non-destructive immortality formulas. We cannot abandon the myths and illusions necessary to satisfy our heroic desires. Yet there are different kinds of myths – there are dangerous and sadistic myths that victimise, marginalise, derogate, humiliate and exclude different others, and there are the more creative and life affirming myths that have the potential to enhance the overall quality of life. His work encourages people to recognise and critically examine the deadly and self-

defeating immortality strategies that people rely on to provide their lives with a sense of purpose, stability and existential security.

8. Conclusion

Whilst there are many writers who discuss the importance of mortality awareness for living a more rewarding or authentic life, Becker's work focuses on death denial to explore some of the darkest aspects of human existence. Our need to feel heroic is directly related to our fear of death and protects people from confronting their existential helplessness. Hero systems provide an important form of defence as they offer individuals the chance to feel they can make a positive and enduring contribution to life. Living myths provide a powerful sense of meaning and ontological security, but as I have shown, it is precisely this search of achieving a heroic image of ourselves that has unleashed so much suffering and cruelty into the world. As Becker states:

> '[T]he driving force behind evil in human affairs stems from man's paradoxical nature: in the flesh and doomed with it, out of the flesh in the world of symbols and trying to continue on a heavenly flight. The thing that makes man the most devastating animal that ever stuck his neck up into the sky is that he wants a stature and a destiny that is impossible for an animal; he wants an earth that is not an earth but a heaven, and the price for this kind of fantastic ambition is to make the earth an even more eager graveyard than it naturally is' (Becker 1975, p. 96).

The Terror Management research on mortality awareness provides empirical support to Becker's theory, but it would be a mistake to believe that Becker's work on the human condition is overly pessimistic. Towards the end of his life he started to imagine the possibilities of non-destructive myths, hero-systems that are creative and intelligent rather than the unexamined hero-systems that can cause so much death, misery and destruction (also see Lippens, this volume). These are indeed 'gigantic' and even perhaps 'unanswerable' problems, but they should be seen as 'the authentic problems of a fully critical and introspective modern consciousness' (Becker 2005b, p. 236). Becker's work sheds considerable light on how people can act so inhumanly towards one another, but at the same time, his work should also be seen as opening up new possibilities for living in a more humane world.

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