Escape from Evil? Notes on Capacity, Tragedy, Coding and Non-Destructive Immortality Projects

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Abstract

Like James Hardie-Bick's (2015) contribution this paper elaborates on the importance for socio-legal studies of Ernest Becker's (1924-1974) work on the destructive consequences of human … all too human forms of death denial. With Becker, it makes an attempt to think through the question, 'Is it possible, in the light of the human condition, to escape evil?' Terminally ill by the early 1970s, Becker himself was left no time to complete his thoughts on this matter. Focussing on the point where Becker left the discussion when he died in 1974 we make an attempt here, still with an eye on the aforementioned question, to explore the work of a number of philosophers whose work we know Becker was familiar with: Benedictus de Spinoza, Henri Bergson, and Albert Camus. In their work, it is argued here, one could find elements towards thinking through the question of evil, and the (im)possibility of escaping it.

Key words

Ernest Becker; evil; non-destructive immortality projects; human capacity; coding as tragedy

Resumen

Al igual que el artículo de James Hardie-Bick (2015), este artículo profundiza en la importancia que tiene para los estudios sociojurídicos el trabajo de Ernest Becker (1924-1974) sobre las consecuencias destructivas del ser humano… y la tan humana negación de la muerte. Con Becker, se realiza un intento de reflexionar sobre esta pregunta: "Es posible, a la luz de la condición humana, escapar del mal? Enfermo terminal a comienzos de los años 70, el propio Becker no tuvo tiempo de completar sus pensamientos sobre este asunto. Centrándonos en el punto en el que Becker dejó el debate, cuando murió en 1974, y sin perder de vista esta pregunta,

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se intenta analizar el trabajo de una serie de filósofos, con el que estaba familiarizado Becker: Benedictus de Spinoza, Henri Bergson y Albert Camus. Se defiende que en su trabajo se pueden encontrar elementos que hacen pensar sobre la cuestión del mal, y la (im)posibilidad de escapar de él.

Palabras clave

Ernest Becker; mal; proyectos de inmortalidad no destructiva; capacidad humana; codificación como tragedia

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1. Introduction: Ernest Becker

Ernest Becker died in 1974, aged 50. At the end of his life he began to contemplate the possibility of what one might call non-destructive immortality projects. Having spent more than two decades piercing through what he thought formed the core of the human condition, Becker, facing the inevitable, must have felt that a more hopeful note on the plight of humanity was due. Indeed, Becker's fundamental diagnostics were very bleak. Without wishing to rehearse his deep insight into the predicament of human being (but see Hardie-Bick 2015) I may perhaps be allowed to phrase Becker's ultimate insight as follows: 'Human beings are compelled to deny their slimy origins. They cannot help but deny their own mortality since it is death that not just reminds them of their own undignified origins but that also will lead them back to the latter. Human beings, then, are to achieve symbolic immortality, either by submission to belonging, or by heroism. It is this aspiration, so typically human, that underpins humanity's tragic journey from atrocity to atrocity. This human desire for symbolic immortality is at the root of all evil'. This insight in what it means to be human was most forcefully developed in his *Denial of Death* (Becker 1973).

The following question then arises: is there any escape from evil? In his final book, *Escape from Evil* (Becker 1975), Becker ponders this question. But no real answer actually materialized there. The book remained unfinished, and Becker himself did not wish for it to be published posthumously, which ultimately it was, his wish notwithstanding. In the book Becker seems to conclude (if we're allowed to use that word in regard of an unfinished book) that human beings should learn to engage with and indeed accept their own mortality if they want to escape from evil. But that of course is easier said than done, particularly if, as Becker argued, the near incapacity or at least inability of so many human beings to do exactly that is, and remains, the crucial problem in the first place. That which makes us human is also that which prevents us from accepting the more or less slimy aspects of our condition and those include the fact that we are all going to die ungodly, pitiful deaths. However, a more appropriate question could be posed. That question would locate the escape from evil in the possibility of there being non-destructive symbolic immortality projects. Is it even possible to think, or imagine, non-destructive symbolic immortality projects? And if so, which conditions would have to be in place for such non-destructive immortality projects to be even remotely possible?

It is to this question that I hope to be able to contribute in this essay. The aim is to use philosophical concepts, ideas or works which Becker himself was aware of and which he might have been able to explore in more depth if only he was allowed more time. Indeed it would make little sense to try and answer the aforementioned question here by mobilizing sources which were either unavailable or unknown to Becker. Three philosophers in particular, so I will argue in the remainder of this essay, are worth mentioning, i.e. Benedictus de Spinoza (†1677), Henri Bergson (†1941) and Albert Camus (†1960). Becker knew the work of these philosophers but referred to their ideas and insights only sporadically. Unlike other philosophers (e.g. Søren Kierkegaard, †1855, or Erich Fromm, †1980) whose work and inspiration figure predominantly in Becker's thought, Spinoza, Bergson, and Camus appear only in epigraphs or in short and quick passages, in fleeting citations and quotations. And yet, their work could have led Becker to think through the question about a possible escape from evil more thoroughly.

2. Non-destructive immortality projects?

Even in his final book, i.e. the one on *Escape from Evil*, the bulk of materials is taken up by Becker's relentless diagnosis of the human condition. The emergence of the human condition, in evolution, constitutes a tragic event. Evolution "created a limited animal with unlimited horizons" (Becker 1975, p. 153). It gave this human

animal the capacity to imagine, and reflect upon its slimy origins and its inevitable demise. At the heart of the human condition, then, one finds a tremendously deep dread. This prevents humans from being fully 'human'. Man cannot be human. "Man is not human", writes Becker, "because he is a frightened creature who tries to secure a victory over his limitations" (Becker 1975, p. 169). This desperate attempt to "secure a victory" leads Man to construct safe havens (however illusory those may be in the face of his creature-like condition) in meaning giving systems (e.g. hero worship, the group, or 'culture', and so on) that somehow promise redemption and, ultimately, immortality. "We can see that what people want in any epoch", Becker concludes, "is a way of transcending their physical fate, they want to guarantee some kind of indefinite duration, and culture provides them with the necessary immortality symbols or ideologies; societies can be seen as structures of immortality power" (Becker 1975, p. 63). All this is about the "perpetuation and redemption of the individual life" (Becker 1975, p. 64). This desire for perpetuation and redemption is the source of evil for one's own perpetuation and redemption must be accomplished through the destruction of the other. The blood of the other is what gives life to one's own. But in trying to heroically destroy evil (i.e. the other who threatens our very existence with their slimy chaos and the multiplicity of their impure, alien symbols and meanings) Man brings evil into the world (Becker 1975, p. 136). Indeed, "men have been the midwives of horror on this planet because this horror alone gave them peace of mind, made them 'right' with the world. (...) It seems perverse when we put it so blatantly, yet here is an animal who needs the spectacle of death in order to open himself to love" (Becker 1975, p. 116).

But if this is what it means to be human, how then could we possibly *escape from evil* indeed? Becker himself only had time (at least that is what I assume to have been the case) to express the hope that, if only we fully realized "that we ourselves hate because of the same needs and urges to heroic victory over evil as those we hate", then there might "perhaps (be) no better way to begin to introduce milder justice into the affairs of men" (Becker 1975, p. 145). But how could this happen if the human condition is such as it is? Human beings do have these "unlimited horizons". Human beings cannot help but transcend themselves. One could of course argue here for a Buddhist-type renouncement of this typically human desire for transcendence. But such a move would itself be fully part of the desire for transcendence. Moreover, Becker himself did not opt for this particular escape route. In a number of passages he managed to stress the need for any route out of evil to still allow for "life-enhancement" and "creation" (Becker 1975, p. 162), or "self-expansion" and "furtherance of life" (Becker 1975, p. 145). We have to accept the inevitable human need and desire for immortality. We cannot rid ourselves of our "unlimited horizons". But can we think of (symbolic) immortality projects that are not destructive? Is it possible to imagine "life-enhancing", "creative", "expansive", "furthering" human ventures that do not require us to wade through rivers of blood? At this point we need to have a closer look at the work of a few of Becker's background muses: Spinoza, Bergson, and Camus.

3. The Earth's potential (I): substance and greater perfection

Spinoza's main problem, in his *Ethics* (published posthumously in 1677), is to think how the capacity of the earth, its potential if you wish, can be increased, or brought to "greater perfection". The universe (or Nature, or God: all these terms are interchangeable according to Spinoza) is of one "substance". This one substance though appears in an infinite number of modes. Out of the substance of the universe, bodies (a particular form of modes) appear. All bodies have the capacity to act ("power of acting", says Spinoza), that is, the capacity to affect each other, and they do, in chains of cause and effect that originate in the vast, infinite ocean of space and time, and that lead back there. The issue, explains Spinoza, is thus to make it so that the capacity of bodies to affect, and be affected, increases continually. The higher the capacity of a body to be affected is, the higher its

capacity to affect. To increase bodies' capacity to affect, and be affected, and to ultimately increase the potential to affect of, or in, the world, of course excludes destructiveness. One could never increase a body's potential by harming, let alone destroying, it.

The question then arises: how to achieve this? Spinoza himself believed that an increase in bodies' capacities to act (to affect and be affected) could only come about through reason. Only reasoned insight into the causal chains through which bodies actually affect each other will make the body that is generating this insight less of a toy bobbing dependently upon the massive waves of those affectations. In the process of acquiring reasoned insight, their capacity to affect and be affected will have increased. Bodies that have little or no such insight, i.e. that are unable to generate insight into and thus acquire knowledge of the Universe/Nature/God, will have little or no "power of acting". They will have only little or no capacity at all to affect and be affected. Through them the waves of pure affectation travel unhindered from the very depths of infinite time and space, and back again. But they themselves will have little or no capacity to affect or be affected at all.

Now, Spinoza was himself very much aware that absolute insight into the infinite chains of causal affectation within the Universe/Nature/God was, and will always remain, impossible to achieve. Since the Universe, or Nature, or God, is infinite, any body or combination of bodies therein that is capable of generating "ideas of bodies" could only do so partially, very partially. Neither the totality nor the complexity of the infinite chains of affectation could ever be grasped by an "ideas" generating body which, by definition, will be finite. However, even though the road to absolute perfection is an impossible one, there are many that lead to "greater perfection". It will always be possible to achieve "greater perfection". It will always be possible to increase bodies' and indeed the world's capacity to act.

None of those roads, according to Spinoza, include harm or destruction. Conflict itself is useless. Conflict does not lead to greater insight. It does not increase bodies' capacity to affect and be affected. It does not increase bodies' "power of acting". One could of course object by claiming that if one were to destroy a passionately delusional or bigoted body, or collection of bodies, then surely that would ultimately be beneficial to the remaining bodies (Becker's core problematic may come to mind here). But one would be mistaken. Indeed, by destroying the delusional or bigoted bodies one immediately also destroys their 'potential', their 'capacity' for travel on the road to "greater perfection". That in itself already is a very serious problem. Their destruction however also deprives the remaining bodies of possibilities for further insight into the causal chains of affectation in Nature/God. And the very fact that the conflict had to take place at all, mobilizing destructive energies from all bodies involved, will as such have drained the world's potential even further. This is why Spinoza advises us to avoid conflict, indeed to simply walk away from it. On many occasions he demonstrated this during his own life. His correspondence (Spinoza 1664-5) with the Dutch intellectual Willem van Blijenbergh is a case in point. This correspondence, now known under the title *Letters on Evil* (in Dutch: *Brieven over het Kwaad*) shows a Spinoza diplomatically putting an end to the discussion at the point when he realized that his opponent was immune to argumentation and may have had ulterior motives in contacting Spinoza in the first place. Spinoza simply walked away, and moved on to the next of his many other correspondents.

The capacity to walk away from conflict, Spinoza argued, rests upon "nobility". And nobility in acting bodies will in turn affect other bodies in such a way as to increase their own nobility, their own capacity to walk away from conflict. "By nobility", he writes, "I understand the desire by which each one strives, solely from the dictate of reason, to aid other men and join them to him in friendship" (Spinoza 1996, p. 103). This notion of noble friendship, if perhaps basic, is actually very important to anyone who, like Becker, is contemplating the sheer possibility of creative, life-

enhancing and yet non-destructive immortality projects. What Spinoza is adding to the debate is this: non-destructive immortality projects are possible wherever and whenever ideas generating bodies, through reason, avoid conflict, and instead engage in reasoned noble friendship with other ideas generating bodies that are prepared to act likewise. This is actually a very deep insight and it has had a huge impact on later philosophers. Those include as complex and multi-faceted a mind as Friedrich Nietzsche's (e.g. 1908). For the purpose of this essay though I shall, in both subsequent sections, focus on philosophers who stayed as close as possible to the Spinozist world view, i.e. Henri Bergson and the later *deleuzoguattarians* (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari most notably of course). Becker was probably not aware of Deleuze and Guattari's work which was only just emerging at the time of his writing. But since their work develops Spinoza's notion of friendship whilst drawing very considerably on Bergson's, I believe that it may shed additional light here on the topic of Becker's conundrum.

4. The Earth's potential (II): intensive assemblages

In his *Creative Evolution* (published originally in 1907) Bergson adds to Darwin's theory of evolution. Evolution is not just adaptive, Bergson argues. It is creative. It has a forward-thrusting momentum. It incessantly and relentlessly thrusts forward, making the world become ever anew. Ultimately it generates life which itself of course will also have this forward-thrusting momentum. Bergson calls this the "élan vital", or life force. From the infinite depths of time and space the élan vital thunders forth and traverses all matter, i.e. all that is. In so doing it inevitably generates effects. It *creates.* The creative effects of this thundering and indeed *mattering* forth of the élan vital in turn resonate back into the world where, for all time and throughout the infinite vastness of space, that is: 'durably', they will remain available as potentiality. This is what Bergson calls 'duration'. Already there is a very serious echo of Spinoza's thought to be noticed here.

But there is a lot more Spinozism to be had in Bergson. According to the latter, the élan vital is indivisible and continuous. It is impossible to draw a circle around it, or around parts of it. It is utterly continuous in time and completely, absolutely indivisible spatially (or vice versa). It traverses matter continuously and indivisibly. That means that whenever and wherever it impacts on matter, re-assembling bits of matter in the process, it does so by involving and mobilizing the whole infinity of 'duration' at any particular point of impact in the time-space continuum. That which actualizes as a result of the process of mattering forth of the élan vital (i.e. re-assemblages of matter) is just that: actualized effects of the élan vital; actualized in the extensive dimension of mere matter. Extensive matter itself, and all the re-assemblages that the élan vital manages to churn up whilst it traverses the former, is not the élan vital itself. It's just … mere matter. The close and rigorous study of matter will not allow us to grasp the nature of the élan vital itself. Matter is just a collection of reflections (poor reflections at that), in the sphere of the extensive, of the workings of the élan vital which itself is pure, indivisible, continuous movement in the sphere of the intensive. The élan vital is pure, unformed, un-coded intensity. It is pure intensity. And that, i.e. pure intensity, knows no boundaries. Pure intensity flows infinitely in time-space. It cannot be grasped. When we grasp matter we do not grasp the intensity of the élan vital. We only grasp partial, fragmentary reflections of it in the sphere of the extensive. And the images that we produce when we try to grasp matter (our sensory impressions, our ideas, our concepts, our theories, and so on) are even more fragmentary and partial. Those images are even further removed from the intensive workings of the élan vital. Spinoza might have said: one could never grasp the infinite intensity of Nature/God.

According to Bergson the élan vital generates effects through its workings in three successive spheres, i.e. the intensive, the virtual, and the extensive. This is the insight which would later be developed very considerably by Deleuze and Guattari (1972 and 1980, but see below). A few preliminary words can be said here. At the

most fundamental level pure, formless intensities flow. This is the level of pure potentialities. When intensities combine they may form constellations, or clusters of virtual possibility (which Deleuze (1988), following Foucault, would later call diagrams). Those virtual diagrams of possibility are not yet actualized. The possibilities in them can still go in any number of directions. Only when the élan vital travels yet further, into the realm of the extensive (i.e. matter) will some of those possibilities actually … *actualize* in extensive assemblages or re-assemblages of matter.

In his final book, *Les Deux Sources de la Morale et de la Religion* (published originally in 1932), Bergson argues how, in human being (or in human beings), the élan vital has struck gaps between experience and image (or imagination). In human beings the élan vital has ultimately created a particular capacity i.e. the capacity to imagine that which is not (or not yet). All human beings have the capacity to live this very gap between on the hand their experience of the world and, on the other, the images of the world that they are able to generate. This gap is what makes them human. Human beings fill this gap with what Bergson calls "fabulation". Fabulation occurs whenever and wherever images are formed (e.g. divinities, scientific theories, rituals, or any other meaning systems, to recall Becker) that fill the very gap at the heart of human being, i.e. the anxiety generating gap between experience and imagination. Fabulation provides human beings with a certain modicum of reassurance. At the same time fabulations (which are of the order of the extensive) form the fundamental objects around which the social dimension of human life crystallizes. But fabulations only provide temporary reprieve of course. They could never close the gap. The gap is what makes humans human. The élan vital will keep bursting forth, from the very depths of the intensive, through the sphere of the virtual, into the realm of the extensive, where it will keep hitting and unsettling any fabulation that it brought about perhaps only moments earlier. Out of a gap of anxiety fabulations came. As mere extensive fabulations they are bound to return there, all temporary reprieve notwithstanding.

But not all hope is lost here. The question now arises (and again it is at heart a question shared by both Spinoza and Becker): how can human beings fabulate in such a way as to "creatively" "further life". In other words, e.g. Martin Heidegger's (1960): how to *add to the world*, how to increase its potential, in a non-destructive way? Bergson's answer does not refer to friendship as such (we'll be revisiting this notion in the next section) but involves a *mystical* (Bergson's own word), counter-intuitively Buddhist-inspired move. Re-assemblages in the sphere of the extensive are good but, writes Bergson, they do not really add to life in any fundamentally creative way. Re-assembling fabulations within the sphere of the extensive can bring newness in the world. It can add to life and to the world. But for real, genuine newness to be brought about by human beings, more is needed. It involves a gradual dismantling of the extensive collection of fabulations that we call the 'self', followed by the slow descent into the world of virtual, diagrammatic possibility, and beyond, into the sphere of the purely intensive, that is, into the realm of pure potential. This is a mystical move. It should however allow for deep and therefore real, genuine re-assemblages of intensities at the most fundamental level. This in turn should open up new bundles of possibility in the sphere of the virtual, and ultimately, new actualizations (e.g. new fabulations) in the sphere of the extensive. The latter should then at least carry traces of the genuine newness that emerged when at the level of intensities fundamentally new connections appeared. The locations where such creative, generative capacities are present, Bergson calls *genius*. Genius has the capacity to bring about deep, genuinely new connections beyond that which currently is (extensively) and even beyond that which is currently possible (virtually). Such a mystical move is all about increasing the world's creative capacity whilst at the same time avoiding the many conflicts that so often surface when one tries to re-arrange fabulations merely extensively. Let us

now have a look at the work of Deleuze and Guattari who have made serious attempts to combine Bergson's mysticism with Spinoza's notion of noble friendship.

5. The Earth's potential (III): friendship

Deleuze and Guattari wrote some of their best work (Deleuze and Guattari 1972 and 1980) together. They did that on purpose. On a number of occasions they stated that the insights and resulting concepts in their work resulted from their collaboration. Each of the authors fed constantly from the materials provided by the other, but at the same time also added to them. In a way Deleuze and Guattari were just putting in practice the kind of 'noble friendship' that Spinoza was writing about. But the contents of their joint work too were seriously influenced by the Dutchman's insights.

They also adopted Bergson's notion of the three spheres of what they call "desiring production". At the most fundamental level there is the "plane of immanence". This is the realm of pure intensities. Following Nietzsche, those intensities are nothing but flows of desire ("will to power", Nietzsche would have said). Flows of desire may connect and when they do they thus form virtual clusters of possibility ("abstract desiring machines", later called "diagrams" by Deleuze, see supra) that have the capacity to produce extensive outcomes (e.g. forms of organization, normative and behavioural codes, law, and so on). In all this desire flows rhizomatically. That is, it flows like a rhizome: irregularly, indeed enigmatically, almost untraceably, and highly unpredictably. There is a lot of Spinoza and Bergson in all this.

But *deleuzoguattarism* is also a political project. More recent authors such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004) for example have been focusing precisely on that aspect. Deleuze and Guattari themselves targeted dominant ("molar", they said) structures, or codes, of thought and organization. The problem with dominant structures is that they are … dominant. Being dominant they no longer add to the world. They no longer allow for attempts at reaching "greater perfection". In fact they tend to constantly over-code whichever alternative that threatens to emerge. The point, however, argue Deleuze and Guattari, is not to wage a full-on war against dominant structures or codes. There is little point in draining energy and potential through war. The point is to make oneself as small as possible ("becoming molecular"), as imperceptible as possible ("becoming imperceptible"), whilst joining forces with others ("becoming other") with an eye on adding to the world by generating new ("minor") knowledge and alternative forms of life. The closer this takes place to the plane of immanence the better. So here again we notice traces of Spinoza's and Bergson's original insights. Like Spinoza, Deleuze and Guattari advise us to simply 'walk away' from full-on conflict or war. Flee from dominant coding, they say, on "lines of flight". Connect your desires onto those of others. Become other in the process. Think new thoughts. Generate alternatives. Add to the world.

6. Zarathustra and Sisyphus: tragedy

The human condition, however, is a tragic one. Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* (the book was published originally in 1883-5) of course knew this very well. All human attempts to achieve ultimate, absolute redemption are destined to fail. The gap between our "unlimited horizons" and "creature-like limitations" (to paraphrase Becker) is unbridgeable. The human road towards "greater perfection" is a never-ending one. It is, as Albert Camus wrote, a work of Sisyphus (the *Myth of Sisyphus* was published originally in 1942). Life is a tragic succession of absurdities which we may not hope to resolve once and for all. Life is a labour of Sisyphus. There is no point in moaning about it. Rather than feel sad about it, we should feel joyous (like Sisyphus, Camus surmises). Why should we moan about life's inescapable tragedy if at the same time this tragedy means that life is ultimately unfixable, but therefore, and precisely for that reason, also full of openness and full of

possibilities? Spinoza already knew: 'sadness' won't increase the capacity of bodies. Only "joy" (this is another of Spinoza's terms) holds this promise. One should not allow oneself to be dragged down by life's inescapable paradoxical absurdities. Life is about learning to live with those absurdities as creatively as possible.

Becker was well aware of Camus' work but mentioned it only sporadically. Although Camus's work has to be placed in a tradition that could hardly be called neo-Spinozist ('existentialist' would be more fitting, even though Camus himself always refuted the label), there is more than enough Nietzschean inspiration in it to warrant mention in the essay at hand. In much of his work (his plays in particular) Camus was preoccupied with the death-producing and indeed, death-expressing, nature of ethical and political systems. By 'death' here is not necessarily meant physical death. Physical death is only one form of the type of death that occurs whenever and wherever ethical and political systems cast their code in supposedly universal stone. More common forms of death perhaps are the death of spontaneous moral reflexivity, or the death of the self as it submits to the universal code in whose name it then becomes a mere pawn. This is the kind of death that results whenever and wherever a dominant power claims that absolute perfection, or at least the road to it, has been reached, and that there is no longer any need for "greater perfection"; no need to add to the world. Camus wrote against those kinds of death, nowhere more explicitly, I believe, than in his play *The Just* (Camus 1950).

Camus was of course aware of the human tragedy. He knew that all attempts at revolting against such deaths carry in them the seeds of their own downfall. Each of those attempts will be built around its own code, or combination of codes which, each, have the potential to grow into dominant, death-expressing or death-producing ones. At which point the whole Sisyphus cycle will have to start all over again. Like Nietzsche though, Camus sees no reason for despair in the tragedy that we call the human condition. The very fact that no death-producing or death-expressing code will be able to hold eternally is reason for "joy". It incites us to roll the stone up the mountain, time and time again. It invites us to keep on trying to add to the world, to increase the world's potential, to increase bodies' capacities. To use Becker's own words: the tragedy of the human condition provides us with "unlimited" opportunities to embark upon "life-enhancing", "creative", "expansive", "furthering" projects. In his final book, *Escape from Evil*, Becker cited one of Camus' post-war lectures: "This is the great moral that Albert Camus drew from our demonic times, when he expressed the moving hope that a day would come that each person would proclaim in his own fashion the superiority of being wrong without killing others than being right in the quiet of the charnel house" (Becker 1975, p. 145).

7. Excursion: can one *code* for the absence of evil?

Let us, building on what has been explored above, attempt to answer this question. Let us begin with mortality awareness. Becker's work lays bare a serious problem with mortality awareness. On the one hand the absence of mortality awareness is problematic. This is where Heidegger, the philosopher, and Becker, the anthropologist, would agree, albeit perhaps for different reasons. For Heidegger the absence of mortality awareness generates and perpetuates inauthentic and therefore non-creative lives. The 'They' rule. For Becker, repressed mortality awareness (or death denial) often underpins destructive immortality projects. However, for Becker, mortality awareness itself is equally problematic. Although mortality awareness is a necessary precondition for human beings to be able to accept death and subsequently also reject destructive immortality projects, reminders of death and dying may, and as Terror Management research has shown, often *do* lead to a more forceful consolidation of those very projects.

The question, as we have seen, then arises as to the possibility of non-destructive immortality projects. Can we plan for the absence of evil? Can we organize it? Can we code for it? There is a certain tradition in philosophy and social theory which would be inclined to answer this question skeptically, if not negatively. Much of Zygmunt Bauman's work for example on the often quite disastrous consequences of modern organizational life (e.g. Bauman 1989, 1993 and 1995) would indeed stress the deeply a-moral dimensions of systematic, organized ethical rule and organizational procedure as such. In Becker's work though there is a glimmer of hope. Despite his painfully uncompromising insight in the almost inevitable destructiveness of the human condition, Becker is desperately looking for ways out of this destructiveness. Ultimately he believed in the possibility of non-destructive forms of human life, indeed of organized life. The *conditio sine qua non* though, in Becker's view, for anything like non-destructive organizational life to become possible, includes, first and foremost, the recognition that it is the heroic desire for symbolic immortality and the need to deny death that often underpin destructiveness, organized or coded destructiveness in particular.

But can one code for the absence of evil? In other words: can one systematize or structure life in such a way (i.e. by 'coding' it) so that evil will disappear? Let us approach this question slightly differently. Any code, or collection of codes, is only going to be one amongst an infinite number of potential others. This potential is not limitless (earth, nature, life, and human beings are not limitless), but the number of potential codes that, potentially, it could generate, is infinite. Coded order is emergent, i.e. in a state of constant becoming. Some of the potential that is available at the location of emergence will of course have been actualized and indeed spent, in the code or set of codes that have crystallized at the location of emergence. But an infinite remainder will not, and will remain as the condition of possibility/impossibility for current and future codes. Any code or set of codes thus only floats on the very ocean of potentiality whence it came. The potential that remains available in the ocean of potentiality is also, and simultaneously so, the source of attempts to de-code, un-code, re-code, or even over-code that are bound to follow. This source stretches across an infinite number of potential zones of life and activity. It is, quite simply, the potential that underpins *all* life, *all* activity. Its potential is, potentially, available in all imaginable zones of life and activity.

All coded order is therefore necessarily partial and fallible. Not only do codes emerge out of an infinite ocean of potentiality that also generated the earlier codes that they (i.e. the newly emerging codes) are in the process of re-coding or over-coding. They inevitably do so partially. That is: *as codes*, they could never mobilize and actualize all available potential into coded order. There will always be an infinite remainder of potential available at any given location of emergence, lurking immanently underneath all emerging code.

One could argue, in a Spinozist and Nietzschean vein, that the aim of increasing human potential is, ultimately, beyond the code's reach. Codes and coding are then actually opposed to the increase of human potential. In this view organizations are all about the restriction of human potential. To be sure, there is a productive dimension to the code, and to coding. But coding, ultimately, is over-coding, and implies destruction. In a way codes and coding are, to use Nietzsche's words, "crimes against life" (Nietzsche 1992, p. 101). Indeed, they represent "death". They never really *add* to life. At the very best they lead to zero sum games. In other words: all codes, and all coding, have something 'evil' about them.

8. Conclusion

Cancer never gave Ernest Becker the time to answer the question that he posed in his last book. Can humanity escape from evil? How to think immortality projects that are non-destructive? Given time a theorist and scholar of Becker's stature would have been able to formulate answers to the above question. I have, in this

essay, tried to do this using philosophical materials that were available to Becker, and that we know he was aware of. The thread that runs through this essay is provided by the notion of 'adding to the world' which connects philosophers such as Benedictus de Spinoza, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson (and the *deleuzoguattarians*), Albert Camus and …. Ernest Becker himself as well of course. Of one thing I am certain though: my exploration of the topic could never have met the extremely high standards which the great anthropologist Becker set for himself. Moreover: physicists, pointing to the law of the conservation of energy, may now be shaking their heads. But that is the topic of another paper.

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