
The Melancholic Existentialism of Ernest Becker

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Since a recent documentary film based on the work of psychoanalytic anthropologist Ernest Becker, *Flight From Death: The Quest for Immortality* (<http://www.flightfromdeath.com>), is evoking a good deal of interest these days, it is perhaps worthwhile to have another look at his Pulitzer Prize winning monograph, *The Denial of Death* (1973). The following critique is in no way intended to apply to Becker's total *oeuvre*, but is restricted to what I see as the excessive pessimism of *The Denial of Death*. Becker's *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (1962), for example, represents a classic contribution to philosophical anthropology that offers insights that mainstream psychoanalysis has yet to fully appreciate.

Based primarily on the work of Otto Rank (1932, 1936, 1958) and Norman O. Brown (1959), Becker's work elaborates an existential psychology in which human beings suffer from a primary death anxiety that is, *contra* Freud's view, irreducible to infantile fears. Like Pascal, Kierkegaard and others in the existentialist tradition who write of our constant need for diversion from the dismal reality of our condition, Becker argues that our primary death anxiety necessarily and quite literally drives us to distraction. Repression, if not imposed by civilization, would be self-imposed due to our need to deny the body that, in a variety of ways, especially in its anal functions, is a constant reminder of the mortality we cannot face. Society offers a range of possibilities for heroism in which death is denied and an illusion of immortality constructed. The traditional psychoanalytic animus against Marxism here reaches a new pitch of intensity as Becker asks what new distractions a revolutionary society would offer its liberated proletarians to keep them from going mad.

Following Rank, Becker offers an existential psychoanalytic apology for religion as the least destructive form of the universal and necessary denial of death. Man needs his illusions we are told. His situation is so terrible that without them he must go mad. The despairing schizophrenic is in some ways more honest than we self-deceived and adjusted ones. In this view, the fundamental contradiction undermining the therapeutic project of psychoanalysis lies in the fact that the analysis of defences and illusions that is supposed to liberate us in reality exposes us to unbearable truths in the face of which defences and illusions are indispensable.

A decade before Becker worked out his psychoanalytic version of melancholic existentialism, Peter Berger (1963, 1965) had developed a sociological version. Although Berger defined sociological consciousness as relativizing and inherently debunking, an application of the "art of mistrust" characteristic of the Western "tradition of suspicion," his theoretical perspective failed in its own terms in that it did not consistently practice the relativizing it advocated.

While criticizing the "epistemologically privileged position" adopted by others--e.g., the Freudian who fails to produce a psychoanalysis of psychoanalysis, or the Marxist who fails to do a Marxian analysis of Marxism--it at the same time epistemologically privileged and exempted from relativization the *anomy* that it saw as the unbearable underlying truth, the terrifying meaninglessness and chaos characterizing human existence in this world, against which society defends us by means of the "shield against terror" that is the socially constructed "nomos" or social order constituting the "precarious vision" of meaning and order in a meaningless and chaotic universe.

Like Becker, Berger grounded his perspective upon the theory of neoteny or postnatal foetalization, the image of man as the instinctless and world-open animal. In this perspective, man's very freedom from instinctual preadaptation conditions the helplessness anxiety of the uprooted human creature that enters the world in a painful state of anomy or chaos--Lacan's (1977) "le corps morcele" or originary fragmentation--from which it ever after seeks to escape through the use of various personal and social mechanisms that function as defensive "shields against terror." The social construction of reality is viewed as the creation of a *nomos* or social order in the face of chaos and anomy and this *nomos* is supported and legitimated by being seen as grounded in and in harmony with a sacred *cosmos* whose structure, pattern and laws it reflects (the process of *mimesis*). In this way, religion, the positing of a sacred cosmos, is seen as the fundamental support for the precariously constructed social world that, in the face of secularization, is increasingly threatened with the anomy underlying and perpetually threatening it.

In reading both these authors one soon becomes aware of the one-sided nature of their argumentation. For Becker, not only death, but man's anality, the human body and life itself are for the most part represented negatively as frightening, disgusting or absurd phenomena and seldom is there recognition that sometimes people delight in their bodies, secretly enjoy their anal functions and, if not exactly "half in love with easeful death" (Keats, *Ode to a Nightingale*), at least having managed to achieve what Erikson (1968) describes as "integrity versus despair and disgust" and having fully lived, are able to face the prospect of personal extinction with acceptance. In its rejection of all such attitudes as "healthy-minded" forms of denial or outright Pollyanna-ism, and in its depressed and angry bitterness toward human existence, Becker's work might better have been titled "the denial of life."

This epistemological privileging of existential anxiety and refusal to recognize the other side of the ledger of human experience in which we find despair countered by delight, pain with pleasure, hate with love, and bitterness with thanksgiving, calls to mind Nietzsche's (1886) view of philosophy as a "disguised subjective confession." Becker and Berger appear to work with depression as their major unquestioned premise. Dismissing all positive attitudes toward human existence as founded upon denial and illusion, they inevitably fail to question their own negative postulates. Why was Becker unable to recognize the one-sidedness of his attitude of despair and disgust? Why was Berger unable to see that *anomy* is itself another

nomos--an interpretation of experience as vulnerable to relativization as any other? If the psychoanalytic relativization of false claims to universal validity by tracing them to their origin in particular attitudes of specific personalities was ever necessary, it is called for here. For while capturing many valid insights into the dark side of the human condition, these perspectives become increasingly unreal in their exclusive adherence to a one-sided construction of reality.

In seeking to deconstruct Becker's ontology of anxiety or basic mistrust and his melancholic outlook--as well as his gnostic type of religiosity that from a biblical point of view is heretical in its devaluation of the Creation--I in no way intend to reject his existentialist understanding of the unique predicament of man as a symboling and self-conscious being, but only his one-sided interpretation of the human situation. In viewing, as I do, the "rapprochement crisis" as the "fulcrum" in psychological development (Mahler et al, 1975; Blanck & Blanck, 1979) in which the human subject emerges from the pre-biological (World I, inorganic, *lithosphere*) and biological (World II, organic, *biosphere*) levels of being into the post-biological (World III, superorganic) realm of the *noosphere* as a symboling being self-consciously aware of its separateness and impending demise, I in no way regard such awareness as intrinsically unbearable, let alone as justification for a "leap" into a consolatory and gnostic religion of illusion. For the same symbolic consciousness that awakens us to a knowledge of our separateness and ultimate death at the same time awakens us to a knowledge of our connectedness and of the gift of life.

Just as for the Lacanians--William Richardson (1986) proving the exception in this regard--the *Real* is usually associated with horror and seldom with the sublime and awe-inspiring, so for Becker, the reality outside socially and personally fabricated illusion is usually associated with terror and seldom with awe or joy. But while certainly opening up the potential for despair, symbolic consciousness at the same opens up the possibility of *jouissance*. Although in earlier sections of *The Denial of Death*, Becker does write of the awe-inspiring aspect of reality encountered outside repression and denial, he at the same time regards this as overwhelming and paralyzing and needing to be defended against by the individual simply in order to function. As his argument proceeds, this positively overwhelming aspect of the *Real* is increasingly displaced by its negatively overwhelming aspects--its association with disintegration, anality and death.

In my view, Becker's ontology of anxiety is a contemporary manifestation of the gnostic heresy that Judeo-Christianity has always sought to reject (even while being infected by it in the process). According to the Bible, the Creation is good, but for Becker it is a meaningless, chaotic realm of disorder, disintegration and death against which human beings need to be protected by illusions of meaning, by a gnostic religion positing another, more orderly and meaningful world, "beyond" this vale of tears. This gnostic devaluation of the Creation, together with its splitting of the realms of darkness and of light, has always been resisted by Judeo-Christian monotheism. Not only orthodox versions of Christianity, but also its

demythologized, existentialist and "religionless" variations are capable of affirming *both* Good Friday *and* Easter Sunday, both *Thanatos* and *Eros*, without privileging either over the other--that is, of transcending paranoid-schizoid splitting and part-object functioning for the whole object orientation of Klein's so-called depressive position.

It is often overlooked that Freud himself contributed to an existentialist perspective while developing an argument for his sociological views that is quite distinct from his instinctualism. In his later works, especially in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) and *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930, ch.2), even while advancing what Erikson (1950, p.192) described as his "centaur" model of man as a creature torn between the forces of nature (id) and the claims of culture (ego and superego) and his psychobiological view of the mind as a control apparatus for the management of "the beast within," Freud at the same time draws attention to the problem of anxiety, not in the face of man's instincts or their punishment by the superego, but to his creaturely anxiety in the face of disease, accident, aging, the cruelty of others and finally of death itself. Here is the all-too-seldom recognized existentialist Freud who, aside from all instinctualist and biologicistic considerations, is calling our attention to man's ontological predicament. Earlier, in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926), Freud had taken a giant step away from his instinctualist psychobiology when he replaced his earlier view of anxiety as transformed libidinal energy with a humanistic theory of anxiety as an intelligible human response to a danger situation and went on to enumerate the archaic fears of loss of the loved object, loss of the object's love, castration and superego condemnation.

Freud (1923, pp.64-66; 1926) argued that since the nature of death must of necessity remain a mystery to the living thinker, whatever attitudes we have toward it are likely to be influenced by unconscious phantasy and, hence, will tend to vary with the nature of the phantasy underlying them. When death is phantasied as the ultimate abandonment and helplessness, it assumes a terrifying aspect in light of our displaced separation anxiety. Similarly, when phantasied as the ultimate castration or superego punishment (or, to add a Kleinian perspective, as a persecutory attack by an all-bad part-object), death becomes an uncanny and horrifying prospect. But sometimes death is phantasied in much more positive terms as we saw above: as reunion and refusion with the primal mother or other lost objects; as the eternal bliss of oneness with God in Heaven; etc. One need not minimize the significance of man's unique situation as an animal burdened with the knowledge of its impending demise in order to accept the psychoanalytic idea that our attitudes toward our mysterious fate are significantly influenced by unconscious phantasy.

The fact that Ernest Becker and Peter Berger produced such one-sidedly dark and pessimistic visions of human existence suggests the nature of the persecutory phantasies that may have gripped them. This might explain their essentially nihilistic and cynical view of religion as necessary illusion. Like T.S. Eliot (1959), these authors believe "human kind cannot bear very much reality" (*Burnt Norton*, No. 1 of "Four Quartets") and, like Miguel de Unamuno's

Saint Emmanuel the Good, Martyr and Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor (*The Brothers Karamazov*), they would gratify mankind's alleged need for consoling illusion, "magic, miracle and authority." According to Paul Tillich (as quoted by D. Mackenzie Brown), "History has shown that the Grand Inquisitor is always ready to appear in different disguises, political as well as theological." Today, he appears in the guise of "therapists" who, in the name of empathy and compassion for human weakness, seek to support or even join, rather than resolve, defenses (self-deception) and the resistance to facing inner and outer reality. In defiance of Christ's assertion that "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (*John* 8:32), the Grand Inquisitors, old and new, patronize humanity, offering us consoling illusion rather than liberating truth, while seeking, as always, to crucify those who would undermine their compassionate work.

Conceiving religious faith in Hellenistic terms as *belief* rather than in Hebraic terms as *trust* (in the sense of Erik Erikson's (1950) attitude of "basic trust"), and focusing almost exclusively on its literalistic and supernatural rather than demythologized forms, many post-Enlightenment Western thinkers find themselves unable to embrace what they view as sheer wish-fulfilling illusion, however much they, like Rank and Becker, may regard such illusion as indispensable to mental health. If, in addition, they suffer from some degree of personal depression and experience of life as persecutory, they will be unable to summon an attitude of trust and gratitude.

But while the bad part-object certainly exists, so also does the good part-object. When splitting is overcome and ambivalence (Klein's misnamed "depressive position") achieved, when the forces of love (*Eros*) are dominant over the forces of envy and hate (*Thanatos*), these part-objects are integrated into a whole, creatively repaired, good object. Confidence in one's capacity to love and make reparation for one's hatred and destructiveness establishes this whole good object, identification with which makes possible an equally holistic and integrated sense of self. Though "fallen" and "broken" and perpetually falling back into paranoid-schizoid dynamics, the self comes to be experienced as capable of repairing and of being reparable and, hence, as fundamentally good. Here is the basis for an attitude of basic trust in the goodness of existence and of the self. This is the essence of a mature faith and is no illusion.

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