Denial, Illusion, and Evil: Ernest Becker and the Tragedy of Consciousness[1]
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As Nietzsche (1873) writes, if people wish to strive for peace of soul and pleasure, then they will believe. If people wish to be devotees of truth, then they inquire (p. 29). These last bellicose individuals, consequently, have been the rarest and most heretical, deviant, and threatening. Whence our need to believe? What is so frightening about ideas? Why do we need *illusions*? Why does truth have such a quiet breast?[2] The poets knew the trepidations of uncertainty. They knew that men were of flesh and blood, and apprehensive,[3] that pomp, rule, and reign were but earth and dust,[4] and that man can call nothing his own but death.[5] And yet it is our consciousness that makes cowards of us; the world must be deceived with ornament.[6] Why does conscious awareness react to reality with fear and trembling? What is it about reality which makes it so unacceptable that human consciousness cannot endure it without the deception of ornament? Why must the world be a mirage, fantasy, or desperate lie?

In *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker (1973) asserts that illusions are virtually ineluctable. We dread our mortality, the ravagement of our bodies by decay, and the loss of our being, and therefore cannot survive without fantasizing our way out of reality.

> The simple fact is that we live in an impersonal world, but the more sensitive among us *do not like it.* After all, what bothers us most about our strange career on this planet is that our lives are subject to complete catastrophe by the simplest accident, the merest chance occurrence. This is the first thing we can't stand.... Those among us who protest against the impersonality of their world are really trying primitively to banish some of its senselessness. (1969: 138-9)

Becker suggests that people have a false comprehension of reality simply because they are limited, fallible people who can only assimilate a finite amount of data and understand that in a correspondingly limited way. But Becker's thesis declares, more radically, that we recoil from our frailty, vulnerability, and everything that threatens us or stirs feelings of weakness or fragility—whether those are *actual* or *symbolic* dangers. From infancy onward we respond to threat and weakness by generating "character

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[1] This paper expands upon ideas presented in "Transference as Religious Solution to the Problem of Death," appearing in D. Liechty (ed.) (2002) *Death and Denial: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Legacy of Ernest Becker* (pp. 237-46) and "Death, Terror, Culture, Violence," in M. K. Bartalos (ed.) (2009) *Speaking of Death: America's New Sense of Mortality* (pp. 197-226).
[2] Cf. *Richard II.*
[3] Cf. *Julius Caesar.*
[4] Cf. *Henry VI part III.*
[5] Cf. *Richard II.*
[6] Cf. *The Merchant of Venice.*

armor," psychological fortifications that shield us from terrifying ideas threatening to splinter the comfortable fantasy world we've fashioned for ourselves.

The psyche creates defense mechanisms that deflect menacing ideas, experiences, impulses, emotions, or apprehensions. These can be repressed, dissociated, projected, denied, and disavowed so that the psyche becomes unaware and oblivious. Or the psyche can create compensatory beliefs and mirages that distort and transfigure the dangers. For Becker human beings are compulsive fetishists, for we both constrict awareness of petrifying perceptions and realities, and saturate our lives with sheer figments and fantasies about what is concretely real and meaningful. These are the only way to withstand existence.[7]

The generation of character armor to deflect the terror of vulnerability and annihilation, and the fabrication of soothing mirages to disperse the dread of death fundamentally cripple the psyche. Hence Becker describes these death-evading stratagems as neurosis. Yet Becker discerns how neurosis also seems to be a contemporary epidemic, positing that "what characterizes modern life is the failure of all traditional immortality ideologies to absorb and quicken man's hunger for self-perpetuation and heroism. Neurosis is today a widespread problem because of the disappearance of convincing dramas of heroic apotheosis of man" (p. 190). People previously had gratifying ideologies to *sustain* them. They were buoyed by sundry visions of heavens, eternities, paradises, and utopias, variegated cosmic visions to shelter them against horror and dread, to cocoon and enwomb them in amniotic asylums.

What characterizes the modern individual is estrangement and *alienation* from such immortality ideologies. As Winquist (1995) writes, we've suffered a "progressive series of losses" banishing us to a world of anomic chaos (pp. 6-7). Or as Moscovici (1988) explains, anomie and social fragmentation have become more pervasive with the fluctuation of social conditions and fundamental values of communal life. Groups lose their roots and burst apart, and societies disintegrate. Suicide increases with the collapse of collective norms (p. 107). We no longer have the luxury of divine visions that encompass our entire lives. We've ostensibly been consigned to a post "death of God" era, and we've gone mad because blithe faith is shattered by the proliferation of myriad religions, cultures, worldviews, heresies, and scientific discoveries.

Becker isn't naively saying that people were always insulated from doubt or challenges to their faith, like some idyllic community of pure piety sequestered by a mountain lake.[8] History is a palimpsest of sanctimonious coercion and slaughter, of violence against infidels, heretics, doubters, other cultures and ways of life that threatened the eternal truth of cherished dogmas. Becker is rather asserting that until recently many cultures sustained people within sacred worldviews that provided stable meaning, order, purpose, significance, and nourishment against the dread of death; and that threats could be purged (even violently) without destabilizing and collapsing the entire cultural system of meaning and salvation. But today, those ubiquitous incursions have shattered the capacity for unmolested faith in those dramas of apotheosis. We are estranged from the sublime stories that brought truth, meaning, and bliss.[9]

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[7] Cf. Becker (1969): 14, 17, 19, 85-7, and (1973): 223, 234-44. For more on the fetishization of ideas and beliefs, see Becker (1968): 179, 184-5.
[8] An allusion to Unamuno's (1931) "Saint Manuel Bueno, Martyr."
[9] Or as Bamyeh (2007) writes, one fears death more than ever before in an era of individuality and mass isolation (p. 84). Cf. also Solomon (2020): 407ff.

It is this rupture and alienation which induce *neurosis* (1975: 61). The fear of death is not absorbed by fantasies and doctrines of immortality, and hence people are nakedly vulnerable in the experience of life. We therefore close ourselves off from recognition of reality, and participation in it (1973: 230).[10] The implication is that human beings need fables and mythologies to endure existence. We need fictional realities and worldviews to survive, but when these collapse we seek or invent other ideological mirages, meanings, and myths, or hurl ourselves into obsessions that provide some glimmer of intensity, distraction, pleasure, meaning, protection, relief, or control.

Becker is aware that religious beliefs and sacred dogmas still thrive. It is not that immortality doctrines have died or disappeared. New religions, cults, fundamentalisms, and extremist movements have been germinating and spawning for years. But this is *a frantic reaction to* the collapse and dissolution of those visions of cosmic truth, meaning, significance, deliverance, and transcendence of death. In our tumultuous and progressively secular world, sacred truths often seem unstable, unconvincing, and socially incoherent. So the dread and yearning impel us to grasp desperately at figments, fragments, fantasies, and dogmas.[11] We grasp because we are frantic. The ground of reality has become unstable, we are on the precipice of falling into nothing, and crave something salvific, meaningful, sacred, flawlessly real and absolute.[12]

From Becker's perspective, these ideologies are pathological both because they are a terror-driven, frenetic, feverish compulsion to clutch and claw at what was lost, and because they radically erase, eradicate, or disrupt some perception of the world in order to make it endurable. Human beings tranquilize, anesthetize, imagine, fantasize, project, evade, delete, distort, concretize, dogmatize, deify, surrender, worship, and tyrannize our way out of reality from terror, horror, panic, and despair.

Becker considers this the state of *normalcy* in contemporary society. He deems "healthy adjustment" a defensive surrender, a form of *sickness*. Homo sapiens are unique animals that cannot tolerate existence unless our own emotions and cognition are stunted, while reality is mutilated and reconstructed with mirages. And thus for Becker (1971) "neurosis for man is unavoidable" (p. 174). Or as Becker stridently asserts "normalcy *is* neurosis" (1971: 151, 181; 1973: 269).[13]

But this seems paradoxical. The relentless compulsion to fabricate palliating illusions and delusions doesn't seem adaptive. Homo sapiens could hardly survive a perilous or predatory world if we remained oblivious to palpable dangers This reality mutilation isn't (necessarily) a complete psychotic break, where people tilt at windmill cancer or cure pandemics with rectal light sabers. We have defensive dynamics and coping mechanisms that "partialize" reality. As

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[10] Per Heidegger (1927), terror disrupts being.

[11] Cf. Winquist (1995), who writes of "the pathologizing of subjective dominance." But also, see various studies in terror management, that demonstrate how aggressive and dogmatic people become in response to death anxiety (Solomon, 2015, 2020). Of note is a particular study demonstrating that when scientific evidence disproves crucial beliefs, people become even more dogmatic because those beliefs were originally embraced to deny the terror of death.

[12] Cf. Nishitani (1982), who writes that the ground of all our beliefs and meanings is an unstable contrivance over the gaping abyss of death (p. 3ff).

[13] Fromm (1955) writes of the "pathology of normalcy" (p. 149), the subtitle of chapter 1 of *Angel in Armor* (1969).

Becker writes, "the essence of normality is the *refusal of reality*," and consequently a "vital lie" (1973: 178, 47-66).

Some denials, avoidances, and distortions become self-destructive and lethal, even pandemic or genocidal. But some reality-obliterating fantasies answer the existential despair and terror shared by others, and thus become reality for groups of people who band together in their mutual deliria to normalize, ritualize, and sanctify such hallucinosis. People may do deliriously destructive things, like mutilate their genitalia to demonstrate manhood or ensure that girls don't become monstrously ravenous sexual succubae.[14] They may avoid freaky mud bugs, pray to a geriatric figment in the sky, believe that dearth of melanin makes them supreme beings while the comparatively caliginous are the spawn of evil, or they may drink bleach, smush frog corpses onto their faces to cure diseases, or avoid going north or clipping their toenails on alternate Tuesdays.[15]

Some of these practices result in apocalyptic plagues and mass murders, but sometimes people band together in their fantasies and eradicate other populations, create power hierarchies that coerce populations into submission, and gain social admission and stature. Sometimes the very delusion that seems so self-sabotaging because reality avoidant becomes the conduit to power and safety among those who share such fear and terror that they unite to massacre an enemy, or reward others who comply. Febrile persecution and violence, pogroms and slaughters, ludicrous prejudices and deliria, are the normalcy of our past and present. Hence Nietzsche (1887) and N.O. Brown (1959) could call history a madhouse, while Joyce (1922) would call it a nightmare.

And sometimes, the most predatory, parasitic, necrophilic, necropolitical gluttony becomes the paragon of virtue, idealized and venerated, by others, blazon of status and power to be emulated, even when it exploits, demeans, dehumanizes, impoverishes, rapes, and blights individuals or hurls the planet toward irrevocable death.[16] Pathologies aren't always dysfunctional. Sometimes they unite communities in love and hope. Sometimes they unite people in fear, compliance, or docility. Sometimes they are vampiric pathways to success, and mesmerize others to commit atrocities as heroic or sacred acts.

One person's unique self-protective contortion of awareness and activity to deflect fear and angst constitute the uniqueness of individuality. As Becker writes, character itself is

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[14] Allusions to various practices of circumcision and infibulation (cf. Bettelheim, 1954, El Saadawi, 1980; Eilberg-Schwartz, 1990).

[15] Allusions to a variety of cultural beliefs and practices, including the use of frog carcass poultices to cure parasitic eye infections (La Barre, 1972), and the medieval Heian Japanese taboos against directional travel and hygiene (Morris, 1964).

[16] Necrophilia alludes to Fromm's (1973) writings on the love of violence and death, while necropolitics refers to Mbembe's (2003, 2016) writings on the political power to dictate who lives and dies. Some of the most socially predatory traits can become virtues, as if the most rapacious practices of acquiring wealth and power were signs of admirable awesomeness instead of greed or sociopathy. Exploiting, immiserating, and ruining people or the planet can be seen as normal and so obviously moral that anyone objecting is called a communist or snowflake. And some of the most sexually and socially predatory individuals can be worshipped, whether they are authoritarian dictators who have murdered and tyrannized millions, or functionally illiterate sociopaths who have bragged about cheating and grabbing pussies or killed hundreds of thousands by ridiculing pandemic diseases. The postmodern banality of evil has become rapine parasitism as ennobled alpha heroism.

character armor, and character traits are "secret psychoses," reactive mechanizations similar to obsessional symptoms (1973: 27, 38).[17] Consciousness of dissolution and mortality are eluded by the projection of fantasies and falsehoods, and this *madness* enables us to avoid the paralyzing irruption of nauseating consciousness. Fantasy, self-deceit, derangement, and reality-distortion are the lunacy that prevent us from disintegrating into madness.[18] Terror inspires the veil of hallucination necessary for humans to survive without falling into psychosis. Thus for Becker, human diversity is the eruption of insanities enabling us to avoid reality and psychic disintegration.

Becker's assertion is inherently pregnant because one of its essential tenets is that the dread of death cannot be seen in the manifest content of culture because the culture *absorbs* the fear. Culture itself is symptomatic, symbolic[19] of what we have disavowed and wished out of existence. It is not enough to state that people fear death, nor even that they employ avoidance mechanisms to protect themselves. Nor do we do merely sublimate our desires and wishes into culture. Rather our being is propelled by an inescapable defensive and desperate flight from death into symbols, fantasies, and delusions of immortality.

Terror and Heroism
If fear is our fundamental motivation, and if we are timorous cowards fleeing life and awareness (1973: 125),[20] it seems paradoxical when Becker claims that "our central calling, our main task on this planet, is the heroic" (p. 1). But this most certainly does *not* mean that people behave heroically. It means that people crave approval, affirmation, and admiration. Narcissism is not merely vainglorious self-absorption, but the anxious craving for self-esteem, self-worth, protection from feelings of vulnerability, weakness, inferiority, and humiliation. The desperate need for self-esteem and security drive our acts, as well as our *ability* to act (1969: 13).

The cognitive process itself, the activity of thinking, is modulated by anxiety-avoidance (1971: 18).[21] Again, without fetishizing the world through fantasies and restrictive evasions of perception, consciousness would be paralyzed with fear, perplexity, and terror. So when Becker (1973) claims that one's "sense of self-worth is constituted symbolically" (p. 3), he is stressing the palpable need to avoid the apprehension of menacing threats through symbolic, metaphorical symptoms, actions or beliefs (fantasies, illusions, or even delusions) which stand for attempts to protect oneself *psychologically*. The danger is symbolic, and so are the outward manifestations of the anxieties. Heroism therefore indicates the drive toward reification, empowerment, pathological defiance of one's own insignificance and helplessness.

Our ambitions, goals, aspirations, performances, and acquisitions are narcissistic inflations that give us the illusion of being something significant instead of insignificant,

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[17] This originally derives from Ferenczi (1925).

[18] The notion that forms of madness or hallucination *prevent* psychological disintegration has been advanced by contemporary psychologists such as Eigen (1986).

[19] The word "symbolic" is used here in psychoanalytic sense, which indicates not a simple equation of the sign pointing directly to the signifier (the cross indicating the four quarters, the modern symbols for male and female, or the symbol of a wheelchair indicating a reserved parking spot, for examples), but to content otherwise indirect and often disguised. For a magnificent explanation of this sort of symbolism, see Ricoeur (1970).

[20] Cf. Adler's description of neurosis as loss of courage.

[21] Cf. also Becker (1968): 36.

something of value and worth, not worthlessness. Our self-worth is invested in those performative achievements and possessions, as if they made us stand out from the infinity of insignificance. Things, belongings, and even our own children can become narcissistic self-objects whose worth is the illusory substantiation of our ephemeral, disintegrating selves. But that's why those ambitions and acquisitions are so insubstantial and fragile. Our self-esteem is invested in the performances and displays, but those gestures and objects are themselves dead and insignificant, and easily demolished.

As Becker writes in *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (1971), our attachments, attainments, and achievements become pseudopods of the ego vital to self-perception and self-esteem. Our clothes and houses, wives and children, yachts and bank accounts, reputations and accomplishments, become our self-worth and life pulse, pseudopods of that amoebic self plunging into symbolic extensions of our egos to give us feelings of value and importance. The graver the apprehension and insecurity, the deeper we plunge ourselves into these symbolic self-prosthetic ego embellishments (pp. 32-33). Appearance and social status can become so coveted with sacred reverence that burning a flag makes one scream "in soul-searing pain," and a small dent in the bumper of one's Ferrari makes a silver-templed gentleman fall into his mother's arms weeping like a child (pp. 33-4).

The soul-searing pain, tears of agony, and malignant rage erupt because those symbolic self-amplifications and delusions defend us against death and utter insignificance. This is the paradox: that perceiving the truth would drive one mad, but one is mad precisely because

> ...everything that man does in his symbolic world is an attempt to deny and overcome his grotesque fate. He literally drives himself into a blind obliviousness with social games, psychological tricks, personal preoccupations so far removed from the reality of his situation that they are forms of madness—agreed madness, shared madness, disguised and dignified madness, but madness all the same. (1973: 27)

We may imagine our own cultures the pinnacle of progress and sanity, and yet so many of us dull our senses with escapism, sensualism, hedonism, consumerism, indeed, anything that would distract us from ourselves. As Kierkegaard (1849) adduces in *The Sickness Unto Death*, we crave modes of obliviousness, distraction, acquisition, and pleasure to escape awareness of ourselves and the pain of our despair. Consequently we feel perfectly happy and justified to succeed in whatever occupation or acquisition is glorified or socially sanctioned (disparaging whatever interferes or threatens, because they are the only true evils).

Further, we engage in jingoistic, righteous ideologies, incursions, subjugations, and wars. We defend whatever ideology or fetish in which we are immersed, proclaiming this or that principle in the name of fairness and justice, always managing to find an insidious and maleficent "other" we can demonize. Seen in this light, money, status, prosperity, and celebrity are narcissistic flights from insignificance and death. Artistic, social, political, and cultural accomplishments are driven (at least in part) by the dread of annihilation and nothingness. Sky-piercing towers, expansive edifices, and shining shrines and cathedrals all stand for our frantic need to deny our transience, puniness, and inexorable disintegration. Hence Brown (1959) can write, "life remains a war against death—civilized man, no more than archaic man, is not strong enough to die—and death is overcome by accumulating time-defying monuments" (p. 286). And as Becker (1971) says, "Modern man is denying his finitude with the same dedication as the ancient Egyptian pharaohs..." (p. 149).

But surely, we might object, the pyramids, golden sarcophagi, thermonuclear weapons, tentacle porn, nekomimi, fish skin bikinis, ice cream cone rotators, hamster shredders, *War and Peace*, and *A Love Supreme* are not identical. Just because so many of our desires and compulsions are driven by the terror of death and insignificance *in no way* equates the diverse ways we struggle, flee, or cope. Personality depends upon upbringing and environment, accidental or traumatic events, wonderful and singular experiences, the supple mind of each person with individual predispositions and tendencies, while encountering life in all its manifestations and variety. One child may be born poor and another rich, yet they both may, through a multitude of experiences, come to love ballet or write brilliant novels, or yet again, they may both become obsessed with hording wealth or planting their names on buildings as antidotes to feelings of wretched worthlessness. People are not marionettes driven by the same intensity of fear or ontological insecurity, or the same remorseless gluttony or malice. Becker is however insisting that we are fundamentally assailed by the dread of death, that our desires, ambitions, and personalities are themselves manifestations of the psyche's stratagems of enduring the chaos and terror of existence.

It should not be thought that this kind of analysis is a pejorative judgment upon cultural achievements which undermines their profundity or importance. Rather, it is attempting to understand from whence cultural and character traits derive, and what they symbolize. One might even say that the value of cultural achievements lies in how they manage to create a work of beauty, insight, and profundity from internal crises, how they articulate their experience with the grave and constant in human sufferings from inchoate fears and terrors. For some people, shopping sprees, demeaning others, or demands for incessant exhibitionistic attention are their only means to attain symbols of security. For others, love and intimacy, the independent happiness of their children, or an artistic, political, or psychological confrontation with evil and injustice are required. And for most of us, the conduit to comfort and escape from conscious dread is conforming to the cultural programs that provide strategies of attaining social esteem, approval, admiration, as well as fantasies of transcending insignificance and death.

Infancy, Transference, and Violence
This frantic urge to escape death is the impetus of culture and identity, as well as all those destructive displacements that reveal our fundamental discomfort with ourselves. As Becker (1973) writes:

> If we had to offer the briefest explanation of all the evil that men have wreaked upon themselves and upon their world since the beginning of time right up until tomorrow, it would be not in terms of man's animal heredity, his instincts and his evolution: it would be simply in the toll that his pretense of sanity takes, as he tries to deny his true condition. (p. 30)

This condition is our own weakness, mortality, and inevitable putrefaction, which provoke revulsion, horror, denial, and even vengeance. The terror of death and dissolution engenders a fundamental discomfort and revulsion for life and the mortal body. Hence as Barrett (1958) writes, for millennia human beings have imagined and hallucinated paradisical escapes from the decaying body, visions of the soul's deliverance from the flesh prison, and moralities condemning, torturing, and punishing the sinful, disgusting, rutting and rotting body. The soul is purified in rebirth, shorn of the corrupt, fetid, wicked, decaying cadaver. This horror and disgust have impelled hatred, denunciation, mortification, masochism, misogyny, and a world history of violently coercive sexual morality.

Readers of Becker sometimes omit a crucial dimension of the dread of death and disgust for the decaying body. They often emphasize the curse of consciousness, as if this dread and revulsion were purely the product of an adult mind aware of the absurdities and horrors of existence. As Solomon aptly limns in his lectures on Becker, most of us recoil from the notion that we are defecating pieces of meat no more significant than lizards or potatoes.[22] We're "raw meat barely concealed under a few millimeters of the epidermis," Bauman writes (1992: 20). Beneath beauty are "phlegm and blood, moisture and bile" (p. 96). We're "respiring bits of finite flesh, and this is a disquieting realization for those whose psychological equanimity depends on denying their mortality" (Solomon, 2020: 411). Awareness of insignificance and nausea experienced by a conscious mind immersed in a defecating body induces despair, existential absurdity, and loathing for the flesh. We are gods with anuses, as Becker says (1973: 51). Yet for Becker, this disgust does not begin in adulthood or with abstract awareness of the future, or life's absurdity. It begins in *infancy* and is inextricably bound with the terrors and horrors of our bodily vulnerability.

Becker (1973) claims that all of this derives from our earliest feelings of aloneness, the dawning awareness of our helpless defenselessness that arouse visceral panic and screams of anguish. The overwhelming terror here is not abstractly conceptual, and requires no *understanding* of death. It's utter experiential horror: wracking physical pain when cut or bitten, discordant shrieks and yowls of fanged menacing dogs or enraged red-faced grimacing parents, sudden disappearance of the warm protective body of the nurturer. Children can be wracked with terror without comprehension. Children begin to understand their frailty and weakness. The parents cease to satisfy the child's every wish, and infants suffer a frightening and frustrating world without guidance or protection. Out of terror and rage, over time, they begin to seek control over their bodies and environments. They crave satisfaction, autonomy, power, and even revenge over the people who refuse, abandon, chastise, and abandon them.[23] They learn the necessity of becoming self-sustaining individuals who must learn to make decisions and think for themselves not only because they have to, but because they must also feel a sense of self-control, of power, "the conviction that she is shaping her own life" (p. 37).

This search for autonomy and independence is more fantasy than reality. The child engages in the *causa sui* "Oedipal project" of self-mastery and narcissistic inflation in desperate denial of his own frailty. For Becker, the Oedipal project is a forceful, often enraged demand for freedom and bodily control in the face of helplessness and vulnerability. Children don't traverse the Freudian (or Eriksonian) developmental stages based on instincts, drives, or progressive maturation. They become horrified of their own helplessness when suffering a defecating body soiling them, a frail mucinous body hungering, wanting, suffering, leaking, and expulsing beyond the child's desires and pathetic protests. They become horrified by their own feebleness,

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[22] Cf. also Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski (2015) and Solomon's (2021) interview with Shah. Or as Solomon (2020) puts it, "explicit self-awareness can be emotionally uplifting; in our finest moments we are sublimely appreciative of being alive and knowing that we are alive. However, explicit self-awareness also gives rise to the unsettling realization that life is of finite duration, that death can occur at any time for reasons that often cannot be anticipated or controlled, and that we are embodied creatures who are ultimately no more significant or enduring than apricots or armadillos.... the unvarnished awareness of death, tragedy, and corporeality engenders potentially debilitating existential terror" (p. 405).

[23] This was Freud's (1920) discovery in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where he observes his grandson playing a game of throwing and retrieving a spool as control and revenge against the disappearing mother.

susceptibility to injury, weakness before other people and organisms, inability to control their bodies, actions, environments, or other beings.

For Becker, the Oedipal project is a desperate and aggressive urge for control over the body and its weakness. It's also a response to the decay and death in the world around the child: the maturing disgust with his mother's viscous secretions and all manner of visible offal. To Becker, children pass through a so-called anal stage not because they are forced to endure toilet training, and not because they rebel against parental demands by controlling their own sphincters. Becker reframes anality as the denial of our "creatureliness," as the horror and rage driven revenge against disgust, the secreting and excreting body, our reeking defecations, the putridity of bloody uterine tissues. Hence for Becker, the child will generate the Oedipal project "irrespective of how the parents behave" (p. 37).[24] And instead of a series of stages where children navigate various challenges, Becker elucidates the fundamental fear, disgust, and rage emerging from childhood, inducing a fundamental ambivalence toward the body and its desires. While we love beauty and pleasure, we also suffer longitudinal contempt for the body that decomposes, seeps, and excretes.

Despite this desperation for escape and autonomy, the same dread of defenselessness and annihilation drives our yearning for love and protection. We yearn for salvation, surrogate parents who swaddle us in nurturance, meaning, order, safety, and love. And we project these prelapsarian needs into ideological, social, political, material, and religious attachments. Thus for Becker (1975), the sacred is our *culture*, a matrix of symbols and fictions which embalm us with security and protection, and without which life would dissolve into panic and pandemonium (p. 4). Anything that denies death becomes sacred, and the sacred denies death (p. 73). Even (or especially) in adulthood, our bodies reveal our fragility and feebleness against the onslaught of our own impulses and desires, against time and nature. The more we feel insignificant, vulnerable, powerless, and threatened, the more we are conflicted, compulsive, and desperate, craving deliverance from our angst and anguish.

Deliverance is sought through *transference*, the phantasmal resurrection of the parent in the other. One merges with a powerful being, an erotic partner, guru, leader, group, organization, or ideology:

> ...people have a "longing for being hypnotized" precisely because they want to get back to the magical protection, the participation in omnipotence, the "oceanic feeling" that they enjoyed when they were loved and protected by their parents. (1973: 132)

Frailty and death are dissolved and transcended through transference. This is why we are "so *eager* to be mystified, so *willing* to be bound in chains" (1975: 50). We need transference in order to endure life (p. 148). The transference is derived from despair and need, and hence the object of the transference is endowed with holiness. The transference object becomes an idol. It's deified and invested with tremendous power, authority, truth value, beauty and glory, *mana*. One depends upon this immortality figure to deny the starkest weaknesses and fears, which is why leaders can be so revered, idealized, idolized, falsified, and adorned in auras of hallucinatory divinity. Thugs, criminals, illiterates, dictators, and genocidal murderers can be cloaked in

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[24] Becker takes this quote from Brown (1959): 120.

delusions of godlike transcendence. People really can believe their leaders are destined, celestial, salvific, or sent by God even when they are despots, imbeciles, and rapists.[25]

This way of explaining the veneration and infantile idealization of leaders might suggest that such reverence and submission lead to inflicting violence at the behest of genocidal tyrants who command them to kill. And surely that longing for love and deliverance makes multitudes susceptible to outrageous commands to rampage. It surely makes people naïve, gullible, manipulable, willing to believe the most absurd mendacities, and ready to murder their beloved savior's enemies with passionate zeal.

But Becker's argument is more complicated. Since people hallucinate and divinize saviors to protect themselves from the horror of estrangement and death, they slaughter not only for his love, but because anything opposing that deity also threatens their magico-redemptive fantasies and his divine ability to rescue them from annihilation and death. Their own death-denying mirages are imperiled, and they react with terror and fuming rage. They kill not only for the leader, but because their own antidote to death is menaced. He's not only seducing and manipulating them. He's *their* talisman, redemption, and salvation from death, and people dive rabidly into the bloodbath to obliterate anything menacing their hallucinatory apotheosis and protect their immortality fantasies. From this perspective violence is a reaction to terror and a frantic flight from awareness of frailty and death. According to Becker, people trample the guts of others to surmount their own impotence against inexorable consumption.[26]

Violence is not merely a reaction to proximal or actual threat, however. We *seek out* victims in order to transcend mortality and overcome consciousness of our frailty. This makes killing pleasurable, since we allay our terror and attain the thrill of obliterating death and evil. Utter dominion over other beings, over humanity, life, and death, infuses the experience with ecstatic, orgasmic rushes of invincibility. When awakened to its seduction, people may addictively thrive on violation and victimization.

Societies can thrive on socially sanctioned forms of predation and violence, much of it unseen, unacknowledged, excused, rationalized, disguised, and displaced. This is why Nietzsche (1882, 1887) could write of sublimated malice and cruelty: *not* because they're transformed or siphoned into harmless cultural pursuits, but because hostility and malevolence can be camouflaged, spiritualized, and transmogrified into customs or passions so banal and ordinary that questioning them would seem simply weird, absurd, or insane. Diverse modes of assault become banal, sanctified, institutionalized, normalized, ordinary, and morally acceptable. Racism, sexism, xenophobia, paranoid invective against other cultures and religions, can become cultural norms or even patriotic piety so obviously and indubitably right and true that those who think differently can be considered aberrant, disloyal, or perfidiously evil.

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[25] Hence the lamentation and anguish when certain revered leaders die. The panic allayed by the transference is released. The terror of death consumes the worshipper's being, and he looks frantically for objects upon which he can vent his fear, panic, and frustration. The transference object is mourned with such solemnity and lamentation because he is the deified and hallucinated guardian against death, and with his loss comes horror, rage, and the need for victims (cf. p. 149).

[26] Cf. 1971 (pp. 171-4), and 1975 (pp. xvii, 5, 102, 108-115, 122, 135-6, 141). Cf. also 1968 (p. 303): "Aggression is an inept attempt at self-affirmation by someone who has been prevented from learning to cope with life in responsible ways."

Subtle and grotesque practices and pastimes can inflict unrecognized (or unacknowledged) aggression, including ostensibly innocuous acts of social Darwinism, capitalist acquisition, competition, and even gaming.[27] Whether or not a sound moral justification can be made for accepted corporate practices, the rapacious gorging on the goods and property finagled, pilfered, or usurped from others, the disenfranchisement, impoverishment, exploitation, and ruination of human beings and the natural environment, must be understood as not merely "ordinary" or benign, or even merely greedy, but as intensely pleasurable precisely in preying upon others. Despite the hackneyed gymnastic excuses and evasions, the capitalist game is legalized pillaging, plundering, and the exultant satiety of demeaning others through immiserating victory.[28]

Cultures and individuals also take exquisite pleasure from the vicarious and voyeuristic violence of cinema, theater, and other bludgeoning entertainment, where fictive or real bodies are concussed, disemboweled, beheaded, or vaporized in cathartic conquest. To an outsider it might seem utterly shocking how much vicarious pleasure we take in the perversely salacious, relentless, ubiquitous repetition of climactic murders where people are riddled with bullets, dismembered, or blown to smithereens. As Becker (1975) writes, "for man, maximum excitement is the confrontation of death and the skillful defiance of it by watching others fed to it as he survives transfixed with rapture" (p. 111).

Or violence can be inflicted through actual slaughter, torment, persecution, victimization, and war. The massacres are executed zealously and sanctimoniously when a leader or government ennobles the mission and thus disinhibits the salacious indulgence of our desires to destroy and conquer death.[29] Thus Becker (1975): "Men spill blood because it makes their hearts glad and fills out their organisms with a sense of vital power…" (p. 102). Sanctioning bloodshed under the auspices of religion, God, sovereign, state, obligation, necessity, or transcendent justice merely rationalizes our motives so we may inflict death lustfully and righteously. As Hume (1779) wrote, "The sacredness of the cause sanctifies every measure which can be made use of to promote it" (p. 286). The history of religious and political war is a miasma of mendacious

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[27] Cf. Huizinga (1938) and Carse (1986). We tend to think of gaming as a harmless, meaningless recreational activity, but Huizinga has aptly demonstrated that gaming is characterized by its taking place within sacred spaces at agreed times, arguably to engage in violence under conditions where its boundaries can be defined. Its temporal and spatial borders enable aggression to be expiated while yet preventing such violence from invading and disrupting the community. Gaming only seems innocuous. If we do not kill one another in our games, we should nevertheless ask whether we are engaging in displaced, aggressive activity which is not recognized as such because we have defined its parameters. If we look at the kinds of theatrical play staged by other cultures, we find not its playfulness in our sense, but a sense of ritual and acting which is sacred. Violation of borders and procedures in these cases may result in mania, retribution, death, suicide, or warfare. The playfulness is not theater for amusement, but for creation, and its meanings tend to be matters of life and death. Cf. also Becker (1968): 94.

[28] To get a glimpse of the rapacious violence driving capitalism, see "Living in Death's Dream Kingdom: The Psychotic Core of Capitalist Ideology" in Davis (2006), *Death's Dream Kingdom*. McKay's film *The Big Short* instantiates the banality of such ordinary and seemingly innocuous evil. But predation it is, even as people glut themselves *knowing* that it will ultimately cause others pain and ruin.

[29] As Shaw (1919) described the first world war: "the impact of physical death and destruction, the one reality that every fool can understand, tore off the masks of education, art, science, and religion from our ignorance and barbarism, and left us glorying grotesquely in the licence (sic) suddenly accorded to our vilest passions and most abject terrors" (p. 123).

justifications for butchery as the will of God(s) instead of their own prurient bloodlust.[30] People use their leaders as an excuse (1973: 137). They thirst for hypnosis so they can experience that mystic awe, fusion, protection, and sanction while murdering others to conquer the dread of death (p. 132).

In another sinister sense all wars *are* holy wars (1975: 115) and become sacred because they dissolve our dread of death and arouse the sublime fantasy of obliterating evil. Our terror of death and the ecstasy of murder seduce reason, render the causes honorable, imperative, sacrosanct. Sadism "absorbs the fear of death," since we "feel we are masters over life and death when we hold the fate of others in our hands" (pp. 113-4).[31] Oceans of bloodshed have been spilt under the banner of heaven or holy causes. As Becker (1973) says, it ceases to be murder; it is hallowed slaughter (p. 136).

This is why Patterson (1998) could say that communal ritual lynchings and bodily dismemberment of people of color satisfied the *spiritual* needs of the people. Lynchings were not just racist murders, but purgations of hallucinated evil. They could arouse euphoria, ecstasy, and rapturous frenzy among entire communities, led by the zealous sanctimony of local clergy, cathartically slaughtering and castrating Afro-American[32] men to punish and eradicate evil, restore justice, and hallow the righteous parish in the name of God. The bloody, severed genitalia could be passed through the hands of the jubilant crowd, and this holy event would be joyously reminisced by young and old alike. This is why violence *becomes* sacred, both when explicitly consecrated and when it becomes existentially, spiritually sublime, cathartic, and holy.

Obliterating the specter of death through bloodshed can induce such quickening rapture that it makes sadistic violence sumptuously alluring. Not only sociopaths or malignant narcissists can murder without remorse. Almost all of us, under drastic conditions, can be seduced to slaughter *with* a conscience and "*kill lavishly out of the sublime joy of heroic triumph over evil*" (1975: 141). It should therefore be no surprise that ostensibly ordinary, happy, healthy, ethical, good-natured people have been seen to enjoy killing. In times of sacrifice, war, scapegoating, and moral persecution, ordinary people do abominable things. As Becker (1973) observes, "all through history it is the "normal, average men" who, like locusts, have laid waste to the world in order to forget themselves" (p. 187). To consider them a special breed of evil or abnormal human beings distinct from "us" is to ignore the conditions that arouse the compulsion to abolish terror and the euphoric bliss caused by its eradication.

The lamentable irony here is that we are often believe that our victims are ontically evil, maleficent, threatening, demonic, and must excise, exterminate, or punish them for unassailable moral reasons. We conflate the ontological experience of fear with ontic evil, and it seems perfectly natural to ascribe deadly motives to whatever arouses that dread. Thus the irony: we kill so lavishly to champion morality and the security of our people. We are ruthless to eradicate evil, even if this is sheer fantasy or delusion:

> The paradox is that *evil comes from man's urge to heroic victory over evil.* The evil that troubles man most is his vulnerability; he seems impotent to guarantee the absolute meaning of his life, its significance in the cosmos. He assures a plenitude of evil, then, by trying to make closure on his cosmic heroism *in this life and this world.* (1975: 136)

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[30] Or as I've phrased it elsewhere, people use God as a sock puppet and become sacerdotal ventriloquists.
[31] Following Zilboorg (1943).
[32] Patterson deliberately uses the term "Afro-American" rather than "African American."

One might suggest that the *degree* of violence erupts in proportion to the need to deny one's vulnerability and mortality. The more friable and ontologically insecure the ego, the more susceptible one is to the subjective experience of feeling imperiled and threatened. The graver that (often quasidelusional) experience of terror and threat, the greater the panic, flight or retaliative reaction, zeal, fanaticism, need for a divine protector who will empower one to defy the threat of death and defeat, and intensity of violence. As Becker (1973) avers, "the less ego power one has and the more fear, the stronger the transference" (p. 147).[33] This is why such ontological insecurity, subjective (if not hallucinatory) danger, and intense need for a deified transference object leads to the unrelenting need to find and create victims and scapegoats, and the hallowing of murder.[34]

In sum, Becker's argument *seems* to be that we are fated to insane "normality," which is invariably delusional and often sadistically violent though defended by society as the paradigm of sanity and morality. The denial of reality isn't only a psychotic phenomenon, and gross reality distortion can persist alongside precise navigation of reality. Even a most empirical, intellectual conscience is often seen to adhere to beliefs or values that are abjectly fictive. For Becker normality is inexorable, pathological death denial: narcissistic inflations, self-deceptions, and reality mutilations, transference delusions, fantasies of Gods and afterlives, and myriad forms of subtle and sanctified violence.

Existential, Apophatic, and Legitimately Foolish Solutions

Where do we turn to escape our own evil? How can we prevent ourselves from destroying the world for the sake of our own compulsive denials of reality and mortality? Becker asks, "what is the heroic way out of the human dilemma of self-created meaning without dying pointlessly, without fetishizing?... What is a free man? What makes man empty, confused and impotent?" (1968: 245-7). Becker finally answers, "man is free when he enjoys a rich participation in a broad panorama of life experiences, when he dwells in an expansive present that responds to his own energies" (p. 247). One must triumph over the sense of one's own strangeness, "the feeling that throws such a dismal shadow over him: that he is an accident, his life is a whim, his face alien, his efforts unwanted and unneeded" (1969: 152).

Becker (1969) insists that there is only one solution to prevent violent fetishizations and attain unguarded self-acceptance. We must strip ourselves of character armor, pretenses of self-sufficiency, and acknowledge our excruciating powerlessness. Only with recognition of our

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[33] Note that Becker often (1971, 1973) refers to ego strength or power as the salient factor. But what this strength or power signify isn't always clear since he sometimes (1971) refers to inner impoverishment and sustainment but elsewhere (1973) writes about ego defenses. These are radically different. Cf. also Becker (1971): "the more anxious and insecure we are, the more we invest in these symbolic extensions of ourselves" (p. 33).

[34] The need to locate and invent evildoers is pandemic, and all sorts of people thrive on this in "civilized" society. The more obvious may be the paranoid militants screaming about the hordes of immigrants crossing the border, or the Muslims at perpetual war with us, or the liberal-communist-socialist-pedophile-groomer conspiracy. But that same yearning for victims and the invention/projection of evil can be found elsewhere, among those social justice warriors obsessively looking for people to blame, castigate, censure, and punish, whose own malice is opaque to themselves or mythologized as concern for rights and victims. They too can become sanctimonious victimizers. See Volkan's (1988) *The Need to Have Enemies and Allies*. Cf. also chapter 19 of Murakami's (2002) *Kafka on the Shore* and Nietzsche's (1883-85) "Tarantulas" chapter of *Zarathustra*.

impotence and the pretense of our illusions will we be able to evolve. We must confront the fact that "the whole social formation of man's physical organism, and the veneer of symbols which cloaks its striving, is a *vital lie*" (p. 186). But this is precisely the problem: how do we strip ourselves of defenses, character armor, fetishes, transferences, illusions, our vital lies, since resistance will be proportional to the vitality of those self-deceptions and desperate reality distortions? Becker argues that human beings cannot live without transferences.

According to Becker, one must renounce dependence upon others, upon real or spiritual fathers (priests, gods, leaders, gurus, teachers, therapists), upon real or symbolic mothers (ideologies, groups, country), or lovers, for one must no longer be vulnerable. One must overcome one's cultural programming, the super-ego, one's heteronomous conscience, and create one's own autonomous authority (1973: 110).[35]

According to Becker (1973), such individualism augments one's guilt, for in this infinitely large, cold, and eternal cosmos, in a violent society and a feral world, one feels the pangs of one's aloneness, one's insignificance (p. 110). One feels guilty for betraying society, parents, and peers, those who supply esteem and love. Becker rejects Freud's notion of unrepression and Brown's (1959) fantasy of orgastic emancipated animalism. Becker's solution is the possibility of dissolving defenses through humane interaction with "a community of free men, centered in God" (1968: 268) This needs clarification. Why a community centered in God?

Becker knows the dangers of fetishizing and objectifying one's locus of longing and meaning, but as just explained, he rejects the possibility that a viable solution can be found in individual struggles or achievements. It's not about the ego's apotheosis or invulnerability, but the surrender of ego inflations and defenses. The project of overcoming the guilt of one's individuality is unattainable without community, since it is the conditions of his programming that force one into supplication for self-esteem and into paralysis when he deviates. One is unable to create meanings or endure life without support:

> ...no matter how compelling is the edifice he creates, man simply cannot feel that *he has the authority* to offer up *his own* meanings.... All our meanings are infused into us from our transactions with others, which means that most of our existential authority is borrowed. (1968: 192)

One therefore abdicates the arrogant pretense of autonomy and autogeny as defensive illusions.

> The recognition of one's finitude, and his dependence on outside sources of power to sustain him, may be ideally answered by frankly throwing oneself at the mercy of the Lord of Creation. (1969: 135)

Instead of resisting transference as an adversary, Becker perceives it as an inescapable psychological reality that can become a vehicle for compassion and faith. Thus one is careful to identify one's transferences and the protean fonts of fetishizing impulses, but avoids restriction of meaning through introduction of new concepts and perspectives within a community insisting on self-critical knowledge.

One can willingly surrender to transference, humbly accepting that we all need a self-transcending power. And with one's humble recognition of finitude and the grandiosity of

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[35] The word "overcome" alludes to Nietzsche's project in *Zarathustra* (1883-1885). The term "heteronomous conscience" derives from Tillich (1951) and Fromm (1966).

creation, one reaches for his "self-transcendent divine object" (1968: 270). There one finds one's deity, *not* as the literal God of one's fathers, but as an intensely personal relationship with the divine (pp. 269-70). It must be noted that even while Becker deems dependence on God a transference, he is mindful of the perils of making God into a love object and immersing oneself in otherworldly metaphysical fantasies (p. 199). God is not some celestial source of all truth, meaning, and morality, in fact, just the opposite. As should be obvious, Becker distinguishes between neurotic, fetishizing religion and authentic, transcendent religion: "the difference between 'sick' and 'healthy' religion is a matter of whether one resolves his power problem in an open, free, critical way, or in a desperate, reflexive, deterministic way" (1969: 135).

For Becker, healthy religion is the synthesis of psychological, spiritual, and intellectual pursuits, since God comes to mean both the solution to alienation and suffering, as well as the attempt to implement this project in a way that engenders a thoughtful, creative individual. We may now redefine and reclaim religion from those seduced into objectifying and fetishizing their illusions, and understand it now as an affirmation which has no care or use for God as an entity, anodyne, or savior:

> ...we conclude that the contradictions of man's earthly situation cannot be resolved by easy belief or by reflexively relaying the meaning of it to God. Genuine heroism for man is still the power to support contradictions, no matter how glaring or hopeless they may seem. The ideal critique of a faith must always be whether it embodies within itself the fundamental contradictions of the human paradox and yet is able to support them without fanaticism, sadism, and narcissism, but with openness and trust. Religion itself is an ideal of strength and of potential for growth, of what man might become by assuming the burden of his life, as well as by being partly relieved of it. (1971: 198)

And this is achieved in a fellowship committed to the health and ethicality of its constituents. One is resurrected from a defensive, alienated individual striving against his own will and openness, into a social individual with emotional and intellectual sustenance and freedom. The community centered in God:

> ...would give support from "all dimensions" from which we seek it: from the interpersonal or "transference" dimension; from the metaphysical dimension; from the dimension of God as a true Object; from the dimension of one's inner depths, from God as a becoming subject; and finally, from the dimension of the joint activities of men in community—the support of the cultural "play-form" itself. (1968: 268)

This is (ostensibly) how a person might come to recognize one's vital lie when it was the lie itself that is sacred and arouse the greatest violence when threatened.[36] Becker envisions a fellowship where equals support and evaluate a mode of self-critique that remains vigilant of our penchants to fetishize meaning and experience. Ideas and meanings are emancipated in an open, self-critical society that hinders and diminishes fetishism through mutual sustenance and God-consciousness. Hence it dispels the need to restrain thought, perception, experience, and the

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[36] Cf. Becker (1969): "...no person is strong enough to support the meaning of his life unaided by something outside him. But this is the last thing the individual will admit to himself, because to admit it means to break away the armored mask of righteous self-assurance that surrounds his whole life-striving. And it is just this that would push him to the brink of desperation and disintegration. To drop the pretense of self-sufficiency is to destroy the laboriously built-up social self; and if we destroy it we must build an entirely new one, on entirely new foundations of meaning and self-worth. It is because Kierkegaard understood this that I would rank him as a greater psychologist than Freud" (p. 130).

transference objects individuals clutch so desperately to rid themselves of isolation, terror, and despair.

Becker further advises us to engage in productive, positive transferences under the auspices of a spiritual mentor (teacher, psychologist, rabbi, guru) *not* so that we may receive instructions as cultists and automatons, or consoling reassurances as children, but in ways fostering our development as thinking individuals without inducing guilt and spiritual isolation. Rather than an anticommunity of nihilists, ethical egoists, antisocial individualists, we would have a community of socially interactive individuals who grow through the teachings of reliable teachers. Such spiritual development leads toward openness and eros instead of guilt and resentment. Finally, this openness becomes a transference to the highest powers, toward human beings and existence. One finds one's smallness not a hindrance, but a relief and a sense of being part of a higher order in which people participate together.[37]

Becker (1973) reaches a Kierkegaardian resolution: "possibility leads nowhere if it does not lead to faith," the affirmation of a connection with the infinite. Faith is the elixir dissolving that terror of vulnerability that inhibits "shedding one's character armor" (p. 90). The individual who has renounced the character lie and embraced the possibility of cosmic heroism is therefore opening himself to the infinite, "to the very service of God," for he has linked his "inner yearning for absolute significance, to the very ground of creation" (p. 91).

> The truly open person, the one who has shed his character armor, the vital lie of his cultural conditioning, is beyond the help of any mere "science," of any merely social standard of health. He is absolutely alone and trembling on the brink of oblivion—which is at the same time the brink of infinity. To give him the new support that he needs, the "courage to renounce dread without any dread … only faith is capable of," says Kierkegaard. (p. 91)

Toward the end of his life, Becker (1975) will finally envisage the possibility that if the great insights and discoveries of Freud are integrated in their tragic and true meanings, then "perhaps it will introduce just that minute measure of reason to balance destruction" (p. 170). But we should realize that without transcendence, truth is crippling, and the necrotic lies invoked to justify violence seduce us into misperceiving acts of panic as reason (p. 169).

The remedy is a domain of "legitimate foolishness" (1973: 202). If reality is incapacitating, and we cannot endure existence without fictions, transferences, and mirages, then we must engage in "life-enhancing illusions." Having renounced pretensions of autonomy and sacrificed our vital lies, the task is now to engender illusions which at once merge us with the grounds of our creation while still being understood as myths (cf. 1975: 159). This is how Becker's God-minded community is envisioned without objectivizing or fetishizing God. The transference which was formerly a "crushing and fatal enslaver of men" now expands awe and terror to the cosmos, leading us beyond ourselves. Our ultimate concerns are now projected into the absolute, and our worth and dignity are no longer determined by the judgments of strangers inflicting guilt or demanding submission. God is *intangible*, hence we may find in the transference no lithic cosmology to direct and command us, provide moral prescriptions, exact

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[37] This closely resembles Eastern and Western ideas of becoming nothing, not in a self-demeaning or punitive way, but as liberation from the need to be someone substantial and important. This is elucidated persuasively by D.L. Miller (1995-1996) in his essay "Nothing Almost Sees Miracles: Self and No-Self in Psychology and Religion."

renunciations and sacrifice, punish or abandon us. God is the illusion that offers autonomy, dignity, and courage, dispelling neurosis and transforming it into creative experience:

> The personality can truly begin to emerge in religion because God, as an abstraction, does not oppose the individual as other so, but instead provides the individual with all the powers necessary for independent self-justification. What greater security than to lean confidently on God, on the font of creation, the most terrifying power of all? If God is hidden and intangible, all the better: that allows man to expand and develop by himself. (1973: 202)

Faith and God-consciousness thus become the epitome of mental health:

> A lived, compelling illusion that does not lie about life, death, and reality; one honest enough to follow its own commandments: I mean, not to kill, not to take the lives of others to justify itself. (p. 204)

Surrender to transference and illusion now become "a freely chosen dependency" (p. 206). God consciousness functions "not only as a regressive transference but also creative possibility" (p. 203) thriving within "an affirmative collective ideology in which the person can perform the living drama of his acceptance as a creature" (p. 198). Thus his obsessions will be channeled and neurosis dissipated by an infusion of both meaningfulness and openness (p. 199). Faith and the yearning for transcendence would then merge with the science of humanity, generating life-enhancing illusions that exalt and ennoble humanity without succumbing to derangement, delusion, or violence.

Soteriological Aporia
Certain quandaries emerge from Becker's suggestions. It is extremely questionable whether the compulsion for transference is so inexorable that we must refuse the present and displace feelings, thoughts, and conflicts previously experienced in relation to others from childhood upon people with whom we now interact (this is the *definition* of transference). Is it inevitable that we must force past wishes and conflicts onto others in such a way as to misperceive our current relations and experience them as those who neglected or persecuted us in childhood? Were we to stipulate the pervasiveness of transference, would that mean that we are all so immersed in our dependency, misperceptions, and infantile needs that we couldn't live *without* deep emotional support from higher powers? That faith, hurling oneself at the ground of creation, and God are our only solution? Here I would suggest that Becker's theological solution relies on precarious (often unknowable) premises, and a problematic understanding of the dynamics of transference as well as the internalizations that undergird the psyche itself.

Given the nightmarish history of lunatic delusions and bloodbaths, the prospect of advocating belief in illusions as a solution to psychological suffering and health is puzzling. Becker lauds faith while presuming that his form of faith is not susceptible to the very fetishization, fantasy, fanaticism, and dogmatism that respond to disbelief, contradiction, and alternate visions of reality with derangement and carnage. If Becker's religion purports to be an open, reflective, self-critical faith, this problematizes his Kierkegaardian solution (cf. Faber, 1981). For while Kierkegaard (1843, 1849) emphasizes relentless self-transparency, he also explicitly argues that faith refuses the need for reason, and propounds a teleological suspension of the ethical that utterly rejects critical examination or logical justification. And despite his criticism of fanaticism and derision toward the Punchinellos (buffoons) and hooting carnival crowds who assault heaven (1843: 79-80), Kierkegaard's faith and teleological suspension justify

pious infanticide, the absolute surrender to (one's fantasy of) divine command, the blanket rejection of ever questioning God's will, and the abject refusal to even formulate this suspension of the ethical in a way that others could understand. This is the antithesis of employing critical reasoning to select life-enhancing illusions, as though Pascal's *Pensees* had actually persuaded a person to belief in God on the basis of a rational meditation of the potential benefits and detriments. Nor can we simply will ourselves into belief or faith, succumb to transference, and then make of it a "freely chosen dependence." This is neither belief nor faith.

Becker seems to be suggesting that we can simultaneously achieve a kind of desperate Kierkegaardian transformation while remaining detached and rational enough to select an appropriate transference and then suddenly believe our "life-enhancing illusions." Becker's solution seems problematic given his scathing psychoanalytic critique of religion, the cowardice that motivates transference, and his claims that it is a desire to merge with parental omnipotence (1973: 142) and a "rebellion against reality" (p. 143). The kind of faith one might receive by dissolving oneself into the divine beyond sounds suspiciously like defensive negation and renunciation of autonomous thought and moral responsibility in the process of cocooning oneself in metaphysical reassurance and protection.

How can one advocate something that *by definition* is an unconscious reaction to fear that impels misperception and infantile dependence that *necessarily* misunderstands itself? Willing transference is *by definition* willing infantilism, immaturity, irrationality, misperception, misunderstanding, and *unrecognized* self-deception. Transference is *by definition* a state of being unaware of the illusion and unconscious of how one's perceptions, feelings, and reactions are fantasies instead of real attributes of the world or others. According to Becker (1973), it is that longing to be hypnotized that "gives rise to transference" (p. 131), so it's incoherent to pretend that the same hunger to be hypnotized that leads to infantile leader worship, idolatry, mirage, and massacre could rationally be sublimated into some kind of benign, self-aware religiosity.

If religion is (per Becker's explicit elucidation) delusion and transferential flight from reality, how can one justify the notion of merger with the infinite or find faith in the invisible? *If* religion is obliteration of awareness, individuation, and the present by willfully hurling oneself back toward the blissful oblivion of infancy, childish dependence, and fantasy, the proposed solution of then immersing oneself in faith seems rather paradoxical, if not incoherent.

Becker clearly proposes a form of religion that is *not* infantile, as it will be a mature, freely chosen dependency that affirms life and love. And indeed Becker has *not* demonstrated that all religion must be transference. Nevertheless, this is precisely what Becker explicitly argues, stating unequivocally that any belief system will be a form of transference, which renders it by definition a hallucinatory act of eradicating awareness by projecting past wishes and needs onto the present. Hence Becker's own soteriology collapses under the encumbrance of his requirement that religion inherently remain a transference.

Becker admits no possibility of easing or dissolving transference (which thus limits viable solutions), so he proposes the possibility of finding benign transference, which incoherently suggests that one can consciously choose what one's transference will be, and that one can even perceive which illusion would be benign while still immersed in the irrealities of transference. Becker is unable to explain how a person could possibly make a rational and non-hallucinatory choice about which belief to choose, since he describes it as transference. His own terminology suggests that the faith of thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Tolstoy, and Rank can only

be a leap into a transference, which must by necessity deceive them. The leap itself is explicitly an abandonment of logic and reason, and thus prevents them from perceiving or comprehending what they are leaping over, which is the same chasm of fixations, displacements, and transferences that Becker delineated so meticulously throughout his work.

Becker suggests that a supportive critical community could mutually foster self-realization, but there is no evidence to suggest that the community could or would have the capacity to perceive its illusions or fixations. On the contrary, considerable evidence suggests that groups are fervidly motivated to reject reality and communally reinforce and reify their regressive fantasies. Indeed it is the terror of death and persecutory anxiety, the desire to congregate with others who share similar needs for similar fictions, and even the craving to inflict harm in blameless, sanctimonious ways, that join groups together (Bion, 1963; Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1975; Freud, 1921; Jaques, 1955; Moscovici, 1988, Volkan, 1988).

This is an extremely slippery slope. Hypothetically, one could ideally associate with tolerant people committed to supporting an open yet critical community, but this is paradoxical, since Becker has explicitly advocated embracing transference and illusion and it is unclear when people are supposed to be rigorously critical and when they are supposed to be knights of faith. Putting aside the propensity for groups to regress, reify and venerate fantasy, project, scapegoat, and seek out victims to absorb the fear of death, one cannot reasonably claim that one can hurl oneself into faith but be safeguarded against the deleterious illusions or transferences because one's adopted community will somehow be critical while also hurling themselves into illusions, faith, and transferences. What indeed suggests that they will have the clinical experience to understand the dynamics of transference even if inclined to be critical?[38]

Perhaps the guru or teacher nurturing or presiding over the group may foster a modicum of critical thought and lead people into self-reflective meditation. Then we could have a community devoted to peace and self-reflection in the midst of a positive transference. Nothing, however, explains how we would know whether this leader were a confidence artist or wizened person, especially if we were to form a transference which, again by definition, means we are misperceiving and *misexperiencing* the reality of this guru.

How does one rationally determine the right person to whom one should surrender in transference? Does one rationally evaluate the person's qualities and then decide, ok, this person is appropriate, and now I'll succumb to irrational dependence and fantasies? Countless charismatic sages and authorities have pontificated delusional dogmas, apocalyptic ideologies, and mendacious machinations. They are often perceived as benign mentors and saviors, not wicked grifters or lunatics. Can one easily distinguish them from the rare few who may actually encourage openness and individualism (cf. La Barre, 1970)? Our understanding of transference

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[38] They could adopt mantras of pacifism, mutuality, respect, and love. Following honest intellectuals like D. Liechty, J.T. Kirk, and J.-L. Picard, they might asseverate, "We are not going to kill today" and "The line must be drawn here." But we're still left with the unanswered question of how communities of people are supposed to somehow all be immersed in transferences yet be aware enough to recognize when they are being irrational, inhumane, or injurious since, with Becker, such transferences foster that slippage into fantasies where cruelty can be imagined and hallucinated as goodness, love, healing, and holiness. The problem is again that people in the midst of transference simply have to guarantee of transcending their mirages and fathoming themselves or the world.

phenomena should teach us to be wary of our own perceptions and certainties, for we are most likely to become disciples of the *seductive* (fantasy of) truth and visions offered by the alluring savior bestowing redemption and answers, which has little to do with the actuality of his knowledge or benevolence.

Becker (1973) terms such sages and transference recipients "creative deviants" who reveal the "darkness and dread of the human condition," and mediate terror with "a new symbolic transcendence over it" (p. 220). Shamans, mystics, religious sages, as well as those in art and literature may be such transcendental creative deviants. But it's still unclear who performs these "transcendental mediations" and how one seeking the dependency Becker explicitly specifies would be able to distinguish the benign creative deviants from the manipulative psychopaths.

It is also crucial that the shamans, religious figures, and artists Becker describes are irrevocably dissimilar, and cannot fulfill analogous psychological needs or functions, manifest comparable psycho-transmutative effects, or utilize equivalent transformative strategies. Shakespeare, for example, provides a tragic affirmation, the assertion that life is full of suffering and pathos, and is to be treasured for the rare glimpses of joy we can attain. By contrast, Shoko Asahara also lamented the impermanence of life, though he promised salvation and transcendence to his followers should they join his apocalyptic cult and destroy the world. Unfortunately, Becker still has difficulty demonstrating how his religion of benign transference toward creative deviant differs from any other delirium or how one would be capable of distinguishing the benign guru from the vatic psychopath when submerged in transference mirages.

Though Becker purports to inaugurate a "science of man" and makes propositions as though one could perceive an actual reality, he still remains paradoxically ensconced within the notion that transference illusions are inevitable. The question of how one can ever know when one is or isn't immersed in transference is never answered. This is a crucial and unresolved epistemological obstacle. Again one cannot simultaneously suggest that transference illusions are ubiquitous and inescapable while making scientific claims about human nature and solutions to human violence. *If* neurosis and self-delusion are as Becker claims "unavoidable," and if one is never free from transference illusions, one can never be sure one's perceptions and "science of man" are anything more than hallucinations. Nor can one ever know for sure whether your creatively deviant guru is an artist, con artist, or megalomaniac. Becker provides no epistemic or psychoanalytic self-diagnostic that would enable people to recognize and escape their self-deceptions, since he again claims they are irrevocable and unavoidable.[39]

One could suggest that transference is *not* inevitable, and that the intensity, hallucinosis, and nature of the illusions vary immensely. One could illustrate how some in the midst of

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[39] This is an epistemological problem for anyone who makes claims about the human propensity for self-deception. It entirely begs the question of how we would hypothetically know whether our own perceptions and claims were "accurate." Unless one also postulates a coherent escape from the hermeneutic circle or techniques for recognizing one's own deceptions and delusions, one is implicitly undermining one's own claims to knowledge and assertions about the world, even the original claim that people are prone to self-deception. And this epistemic problem is rarely answered with much coherence by psychologists or philosophers who make these claims about self-deception while insisting on their own truth claims. Cf. Clark (1990), Piven (2004, 2010, 2023).

transference experience mild feelings of anxiety, while others idealize the other, fall in love, throb with intensely romantic obsessions and erotic desires, feel infantilized or abandoned, abjectly judged, despised, or ridiculed, or suffer abject paranoia and delusions of persecution. Some experience all women as harpies just like their wicked predatory mothers, while others see women as bodies and sex objects to be exploited, bask in the fantasy of all women as loving, pie-baking, nurturing mothers, or recognize women as diverse, complicated, and infinite combinations of wonderful and human qualities. Volumes of clinical literature explain how some people engage in transferences to feel loved by paternal figures, while others are terrified of individuation and force others into paternal roles, while others experience all authority as authoritarian and despotic, and yet others cringe under the timorous aloneness of life without father and must throw themselves down before God. Some reminisce warmly on fathers, and others are willing to murder to attain the hallucination of paternal love and forgiveness. The clinical literature also supports the notion that there are processes through which one could both recognize, transform, and dissolve transference phenomena.

But Becker never says anything of the kind. He maintains the inevitability of transference and expects readers to hurl themselves into benign illusions, Kierkegaardian faith, and the tutelage of benign sages without ever suggesting how we could know in the midst of these inescapable deliria what makes them any different from any others that are destructive, unless he just presumes we will know when a mentor/artist/guru is destructive, which is patently untenable and unrealistic *if* you call it a transference. It seems not to occur to Becker that some might live without transference constantly suffusing one's experience and perception, and thus that some do not require superstition, religion, or the thousand psychological palliatives that mind is heir to.

To wit, Becker's transcendent faith and "positive" transference render one submissive and dependent on the guidance of that sagacious other (or community) to whom one's ego surrenders in the need for love, affirmation, protection, security, answers, and enlightenment. Even if one accepts the notion of finding a benign creative deviant, Becker's imagination of such a figure is one of creative transformation that seems strangely static, as though one were continually being inspired and enlightened but never really changed or capable of transcending that transference. For there is never any mention that one will individuate beyond such dependency.

Contra Becker, if there is such a thing as a positive transference, it is a phase of development which helps one gestate into an autonomous individual. Someone who actually understands the dynamics of transference only encourages it so one may become aware of and work through it (cf. Esman, 1990; Kohut, 1971, 1977). The last thing it is supposed to do is keep one rooted to an authority, ideology, or psychology of submissive dependence. As Nietzsche says in *Ecce Homo* (1888) through Zarathustra:

> Now I go alone, my disciples, You, too, go now, alone. Thus I want it.
> Go away from me and resist Zarathustra! And even better: be ashamed of him! Perhaps he has deceived you.
> One repays a teacher badly if one always remains nothing but a pupil.
> You revere me; but what if your reverence *tumbles* one day? Beware lest a statue slay you.
> You say you believe in Zarathustra? But what matters Zarathustra?
> You had not yet sought yourselves; and you found me. Thus do all believers; therefore all faith amounts to so little.

> Now I bid you lose me and find yourselves; and only *when you have all denied me* will I return to you. (p. 220)

There is wisdom in the saying "when you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him." Once one transcends the transference, one encounters a world that is lonely and has no answers and no "guarantees," as Davis (2001) writes. Meaning must be created for oneself, or even with others, but not in timorous conformity or dependency. On the one side is the autonomous individual suffering for answers, who has given up his transferences. On the other side is the perpetually transferring neurotic who engages in private rituals and molds reality to conform to wishes and needs, creating illusions which veil the sources of his or her profound dread.

The possibility of dissolving transference rather opposes Becker's idealized religion, which actually relinquishes the will to perceive one's illusions, but rather embraces them. The psychoanalytic discourse on transference treats the capacity for perceiving and experiencing oneself in the act of hallucination. Moments of realization occur when one genuinely perceives that the other is not what one thought, that one can distinguish the way one had experienced the other previously from the way one experiences him or her now, that one now visualizes the way fantasies have been projected upon others, and no longer relates to others in an infantile way. Beyond the fantasy of pure unconcealment (this would be a Heideggerian hermeneutic), psychoanalysis recognizes a process where moments of clarity and fragments of realization gradually disassemble the hallucinatory process (Barratt, 1993).

The very acknowledgement of our proclivity to deceive ourselves is an inaugural stage in the process of perceiving how we create or defend our fantasies. The capacity to perceive one's own deceptions and dissolve the transference requires a willingness to encounter painful aspects of the self and noisome truths about others (whom one loves, for instance), and the world. Here the existential agon means not merely relinquishing the idea of God, for instance, but any possible illusion about oneself, others, or the cosmos. The readiness is all. For one must be prepared to sacrifice one's sacred beliefs and armoring for painful recognition. Our answers are so seductive that a real renunciation is required. "How much truth does a spirit *endure*, how much truth does it dare?" (Nietzsche, 1888: 218).

This answer is epistemological as well as psychological. Epistemologically, our truths are perspectival, limited, and defective. There is no absolute moment of truth or immaculate perception of the real. To the extent that we cannot help but interpret, the imperative here is to be as objective as possible, which is not a logically positivistic fantasy of scientific rigor or formulization, but an imaginative, open, playful, intrepid examination of elusiveness and intricacy, knowing that any answer is provisional, if not in some sense mythic. Tentativeness is a start, but intellectual rigor cannot simply acknowledge the fact that "truth" is elusive. It must be alert for lapses into pleasurable complacence, it must be suspicious of pleasing and gratifying answers, and it must withdraw the need and desire that compels us to believe despite our ideological realizations. Pyrrhonic insouciance wards off Pyrrhic failure. We should neither believe what is makes us happy nor divert ourselves from inquiry out of fear. Once again, we arrive at the conclusion that we must engage in a continual process of rending Nietzsche's (1883-1885) dragonish scales of interpretation, of realizing that we see dragons in clouds, of enduring the pain that comes with the sacrifice of our beliefs, and constantly overcoming our weaknesses and desire to believe.

Even the most diligent autopsy cannot reveal every malady. If one acknowledges the human capacity for self-deception, projection, repression, denial, and unconscious thought (which seem themselves difficult to deny intelligently a full century after the advent of Freud), one also realizes that the prospect of withdrawing projections, fathoming one's own mind, and unearthing the repressed are matters of continual, painful struggle. One cannot merely do it once and then smugly believe that one has become honest. The moment we believe that we are beyond such seductions, that others do this but we do not, that we in fact are more honest, is probably the moment when we are seduced into a complacence of bad faith, in Sartrean terms. We need the courage not to have convictions, but to relinquish and dispel them. The task is exhausting, and it is not accomplished by intellectualization alone, and nor by dependence, life-enhancing illusions, or a Kierkegaardian leap into religious faith. Sacrifice is the most painful, but perhaps the most necessary ritual for overcoming sacred truths.

The question of whether we can endure truths (as opposed to hurling ourselves into transference fantasies) requires a preliminary resolution: is our goal in life happiness, colloquially construed? Do we desire a life of contentment and pleasure devoid of struggle? Do we even wish for a life somehow free from existential dead or agonizing loss? Does one evaluate life according to how blissful it is or how much pain diminishes and tarnishes its perfection?[40] If this is the case, we should probably do what we can to distract ourselves, love our libidinous and lobotomous fixations and ideologies, our idols and occupations without questioning them honestly. The last thing we ought to do is tap on the idols to determine their hollowness or timbre if we desire peace and comfort. If we desire definitive answers which satisfy our frustrations or needs to ascribe good, evil, power or victimhood, then we ought to become lawyers (metaphorically) who will do anything to prove our case and receive the highest commission (i.e., the only reason they consider the opposing point of view is to negate it, not consider its veracity). As an existential solution, this would be an intellectual (and spiritual) failure.

Becker's belief that we must hurl ourselves at the ground of creation, become knights of faith, engage in illusions, and succumb to transference rests on a crucial aporia: the assumption that the tribulations of infancy irrevocably induce the dread of death "irrespective of how the parents behave" (1973: 37). Becker is not entirely consistent here. He clearly recognizes that parenting matters, despite the above quote.

> …some people have more of what the psychoanalyst Leon J. Saul has aptly called "Inner Sustainment." It is a sense of bodily confidence in the face of experience that sees the person more easily through severe life crises and even sharp personality changes; it almost seems to take the place of the directive instincts of lower animals. One can't help thinking of Freud again, who had more inner sustainment than most men, thanks to his mother and favorable early environment; he knew the confidence and courage that it gave to a man, and he himself faced up to life and to a fatal cancer with a Stoic heroism. Again we have evidence that the complex symbol of fear of death would be very variable in its intensity; it would be, as Wahl concluded, "profoundly dependent upon the nature and the vicissitudes of the developmental process." But I want to be careful not to make too much of natural vitality and inner sustainment…. I don't believe that the complex symbol of death is ever absent, no matter how much vitality and inner sustainment a person has. (1973: 22)

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[40] Nietzsche (1888) and psychoanalyst Michael Eigen (1999) both see this as a sign of sickness.

Thus people *can* be innerly sustained, loved and nurtured in a way that gestates an ontologically secure psyche *not* mortally wounded and manically driven by terror, not irresistibly craving hypnosis and surrogate protectors, not desperately fleeing from the horrors of reality into soothing fantasies and mirages, not eternally yearning for deliverance, destruction, and death.

Withal, since Becker deems the helplessness and dread of separation unavoidable, he concludes that the lacerations of such abject terror must be permanently embossed upon the psyche, and he unambiguously rejects the notion that parenting can do anything to siphon or quell the terror of death. It can merely *hide* the fear: "Psychiatrists argue that the fear of death varies in intensity depending on the developmental process, and I think that one important reason for this variability is that the fear is transmuted in that process. If the child has had a very favorable upbringing, it only serves all the better to hide the fear of death" (p. 23).

This inconsistency is crucial, and affects the way we understand the intricacies of death anxiety as well as possible modes of understanding ourselves, deracinating our delusions, and transforming our terror. Becker is clearly steeped in object relations theory, and he understands the psyche in terms of psychological internalizations.[41] Becker (1971) alludes to Freud's notion of the internalization of the breast as a source of psychological support, and he construes inner sustainment as the nourishment allowing a psyche to develop securely openly, with aplomb (1973: 72). He explicitly recognizes how the internalization of love and emotional nurturance are categorically different from merely hiding the fear of death. This sustenance can *dissolve* dread and engender an internal font of self-esteem that buoys one through life and renders separation and individuation pleasurable, exciting processes. This doesn't mean one never suffers from fear, but that fear isn't irrevocably the supreme impetus relentlessly catalyzing character, culture, belief, and madness. One is *not* always inescapably lacerated by dread, consumed by the fear of death, or so painfully insecure that he must desperately depend on external validation throughout his life.

Becker recognizes that the fear of death is not *merely* the fear of separation, object loss, or consciousness of death, but can also be a matter of traumatic experiences, parental neglect, abuse, threat, anger, or violent and persecutory internalizations that hound and ravage the psyche throughout life. These can produce what Rheingold (1967) calls the catastrophic death complex.[42] But in rejecting the "healthy-minded argument" (p. 13ff), Becker seems to downplay both how much experience and trauma determine how catastrophic the dread of death becomes, and how much the immensity of nurturance and sustenance can buffer and evaporate such dread, since he deems the terror of vulnerability, separation, and death unavoidable no matter how ideal the parenting. When Becker asserts that a supportive childhood can only "hide" the fear of death, his supposition is twofold: that nothing can dissolve the fear of death (as mentioned above) and that death anxiety is not derived from emotional wounds or injurious modes of socialization. Abusive parenting may *exacerbate* death anxiety, but it cannot *originate* there, since helplessness and the Oedipal project are inescapable. In contrast one could call on the findings child psychology to suggest that children are sometimes able to cope with separation and object loss without suffering the catastrophic inner dread that necessarily impels one through life, and that

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[41] Becker repeatedly refers to objects, part objects, and "object relations" throughout his work, but aside from "Inner Sustainment," he does not discuss the ways in which inner objects support or persecute the psyche.

[42] Becker cites this book, but builds his case on the basis of separation anxiety, object loss, and existential dread rather than the catastrophic inculcation of death anxiety.

death anxiety may derive from parental neglect, terror, or torture (Anthony, 1971; Bloch, 1978, Erikson, 1950; Pearce & Newton, 1963).

One might counter this by arguing that the ubiquitous death-denying beliefs and monuments through history prove the universality of death anxiety, and that it can't thus be contingent upon love and nurturance. However, one can also draw other conclusions. Historical data may imply that people have been so violent to one another throughout history that death anxiety was generated by the very cruelties that Becker writes of so passionately. There is considerable evidence, for instance, that children can grow up with self-esteem—not timorous, *not* merely hiding their terror—but that the fear of death follows from maltreatment and other widespread (but non-universal) experiences such as the repeated exposure to violence, death, and catastrophe (Binion, 2004; Kalayjian, 2002; Piven, 2003, 2004). If that suggests the unpleasant notion that parents have often been vicious throughout history, it's certainly no stranger than suggesting that the same adults have massacred one another throughout that same history, and have tortured themselves and others to eradicate the fear of death, as Becker argues.

If we follow Becker's own arguments about the ways human beings have created all manner of obsessive rituals to control death, that they have shredded, pierced, excised, mangled, and relentlessly wounded their own people, and stomped on one another's guts in death-annihilating frenzy, then it would be untenable to claim that children were somehow not utterly traumatized by such insane, shocking, incomprehensible cruelties, especially when they have so often been the recipients of ritual violence.

The cyclical, transgenerational transmission of trauma can indeed impel the repetition of cruelty and abuse. We find parents throttling their children and transmitting their own rage and dread when they themselves were throttled (emotionally or physically), not just because they feared separating from their parents (Gruen, 1987). Similarly we find that dread is catalyzed into pervasive concern, imagery, symbolism, and forms of denial when plagues, wars, and cataclysms devastate cultures (Binion, 2004).

If indeed separation and object loss *are* universal concerns, if not sources of trauma, we may also suggest not only that the life of nurturing inner objects can dissipate much of that terror, but that myriad other experiences are responsible for wreaking havoc with the psyche. One may also suggest that this also explains why so many people have inflicted violence on one another. Instead of proposing that all human beings are equally susceptible to committing violence because they fear death, perhaps one can complicate that hypothesis by suggesting that the human propensity for violence may be a combination of factors, including evolutionary modules for competition, fight-flight responses, the fear of helplessness and death, as well as reactions to the violence and trauma to which one might have been exposed or subjected, the kinds of cruelty that so ravage the psyche with rage, betrayal, humiliation, and soul murder that may then impel one to subjugate others, evacuate one's own inner shame, anger, and abjection, instill fear and misery in others, inflict on others what one experienced at the hands of others ritually, religiously, militarily, or personally (Davis, 2006; Schore, 2003; Shengold, 1989).

Further, the fear of death subjectively experienced as threat from the outer world can also be the dread of one's own desires, rage, overwhelming feelings, awareness of how one really feels about significant others, and their *internal*, condemnatory, threatening, sabotaging presences. Becker clearly knows that one can fear the super-ego, but he doesn't extend that knowledge into the recognition that the fear of the super-ego can manifest itself as the fear of

death. The ego fears abandonment, retaliation, and death from the inner world even though that may be conflated with the outer world, the way paranoiacs misperceive sources of peril. All manner of inner presences can persecute and terrify the psyche, and can exert a devastating influence on desire, self-experience, conscience, and perception of the outer world. Per Erikson (1966), "Men who fear witches soon find themselves surrounded by them" (p. 22). And as Hume (1779) writes, "does he not immediately raise up to himself imaginary enemies, the demons of his fancy, who haunt him with superstitious terrors, and blast every enjoyment of life? His pleasure, as he imagines, becomes in their eyes, a crime: his food and repose give them umbrage and offence: his very sleep and dreams furnish new materials to anxious fear..." (p. 257).

Thus when one goes through life fearing death, annihilation, or predation one may well be confusing internal disaster and menace with existential awareness of death. Existential dread may indeed mask inner dread, which then protects the psyche from realizing just who was vicious to oneself as a child. Displacing and evacuating that fear outward, into the abstract existential terror of death, or onto enemies who now become the container for one's own fear, helplessness, and anger, can thereby be a pleasurable, seductive, and psychologically *salvific* experience (Piven, 2004, 2007a,b).

Becker has taught us so much about the ways we deceive ourselves, create personal fictions, character armor, and immortality ideologies. By suggesting that human beings are so intricately self-deluding, he has undermined our subjectivity and any confidence we can have in our own perceptions. One cannot subscribe to Becker's comprehensive subjugation of subjectivity, and agree that we are deluded creatures, and then pretend that one's own perceptions are the realistic exception. (That would not only be inconsistent, it might well recapitulate the *causa sui* project as a denial of helplessness, a narcissistic defense of one's own ego, and a narcissistic fantasy of being above the delusionality of others, miraculously immune to the myriad self-deceptions Becker described.)

Thus to take Becker seriously means questioning what we believe we know, and what we believe we *fear*.[43] We can no longer assume that the subjective experience of existential anxiety is existential anxiety at all. We are profoundly motivated to deceive ourselves about what we fear from the inner world, whom we hate, what our real desires are, who has injured us, what our actual purposes are, what we accomplish when we desire or despise people in the outer world. Thus the sinister suggestion that violence can be *salvific*, because it is a delusional unknowing of the self. Bludgeoning another person can enable a person not to see that he is actually wreaking vengeance on his own despised self, the father who humiliated him, or the mother who belittled him. That kind of knowledge could be devastating, obliterating, the most painful loss. One may be violent to the self when the shadow of the object has fallen on the ego, and one can destroy another when enveloping the victim in one's own shadow.

Finally, one often deluded in love as well as in dread and hatred, which is also why Becker's vision is so precarious. Becker's fantasy of love remains infantile and hallucinatory if once again ensconced in transference. Once again, for Becker "inner sustainment" is not truly sustaining for most people because it cannot decisively mollify the soul against the terrors of separation and death. Hence Becker concludes that because one cannot bask in that inner nourishment, one must depend on others for love, and immerse oneself in some mode of sustaining ideology or faith. Becker thus again concludes that dependency is inevitable, so one

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[43] Cf. McCarthy (1980), who elucidates a similar perspective in elegant detail.

should choose the most benign transference. But as delineated above, transference by definition can only be love that is childish, immature, and illusory.

Transference spans mild misperceptions and idealizations, irate projections, and insatiable, mercurial reactions of violent anger when the reality of the person "loved" does not conform to one's archaic needs and perceptions. Transference is a demand that someone be what he or she is not. It isn't just mistaken perception and identity, or mere projection, as though one could suddenly realize he has erred in perceiving another as one's mother. Transference can also be accompanied by destructive and manipulative projective identifications, where existential wounds and inner voids seek saviors to heal them, and surrogates they wish to punish for those many wounds and miseries (Grotstein, 1981; Laughlin, 1967). Transference is often deeply manipulative, an attempt to recreate someone in another's image, a profound need to eradicate the real person and inflict one's wishes and needs on another. It doesn't just happen, as though one simply interpreted something on the basis of previous concepts and assumptions. It is an aggressive means of repeating and restoring the past to avenge losses and lacerations.

A person deprived of love from infancy may be merely lonely and sad, or one can become a pitiable, unhappy, miserable person, or worse, he may seek love desperately and suffer the agony of servility in the face of abjection and emotional collapse, at the prospect of being unloved and alone. At its most psychotic one can hallucinate lovers that do not exist, or gods who will love one if one becomes a loyal servant and fulfills the imaginary entity's needs for suffering, submission, destruction, or death. Hence transference cannot be any genuine remedy or reasonable solution to the dread of death, unless that transference is understood, transformed, and dissolved.

Conclusions

Death plagues the mind and inspires terror, dread, and despair. Human beings invent ideologies, theologies, all manner of hallucination and magic to eradicate death, obliterate awareness, annihilate its permanence, and bask in soothing fantasies of eternity, God, divine love, and life beyond decay, putrescence, and nonexistence. Human beings flee from death, repress its awareness, immerse themselves in sacred fantasies, and aggress against those whose ideas threaten their own immortality.

And yet from this perspective that human dread is universal, irrevocable, ineluctable, and knows no escape or freedom except in that oblivion or delusion. People are all terrified, and must all ensconce themselves in illusions, even if these are infinite in variety. Against massacre and violent immortality Becker offers benign transference, a religion where one hurls oneself into faith and creates something for the life force under the auspices of a benign dependency. One will succumb to transference, and cannot live without it, so one must immerse oneself in the most realistic, loving, compassionate illusion possible.

However, Beckerian transference makes no distinction between basking and languishing in oblivious dependence. The suggestion that one hallucinates yet realistically distinguishes benign from malign forms of dependency is untenable. Further, while Becker admits the possibility that people transfer with vastly different intensities and degrees of urgency, he does not seem to believe people can dissolve transferences and live without them, nor even that one can endure separation, alienation, and death without hallucinatory veils. One might rather retort, with artist and son Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses*: "But in here it is I must kill the priest and the king" (Joyce, 1922, 15:4436-7), the multitude of psychic despots and tyrants innerly imprisoning

and controlling the soul, dragging it downward, poisoning it with persecutory voices, guilt, secret archaic saboteurs, threats of ostracism, and death. Death may be horrifying, but then the dread of death may too be evoked by all manner of *inner* wreckage and void, those who ravaged and still haunt the psyche with incessant malice.

One may thus dread the death of the body and self when one truly dreads unknown inner strife, injury, and void. These may yet be exorcised. And too, one may be innerly loved and buoyed, so that death's sting may not ceaselessly wound and torment the soul. Though one need not fantasize utter immunity from fear and despair, one need not either imagine that individuation must be so horrific that only the rarest creative deviants can awake from the nightmare of history without going completely mad (2:377). Becker argues that individuation always entails guilt, but does not seem to imagine that guilt itself is part of the pathology, and transference, that can be dissipated. Individuation means *dissolution* of guilt, the exorcism of revenants that persecute from within.

Indeed, might it not be a relief and soothing release not to have to believe the lies, deceptions, metaphysics of sin, commandment, hells and holy ghosts? It may rather be a blissful enlightening not to worry about whether there is a God or devil, and that the world is laid bare to survey with joyful curiosity, free from the abysmal, somber encumbrance of religion, or any other hallucination that brings dread and demands submission. Salvation may be release from inner persecution and ravagement that leaves one free to love life, without fear of vengeance from inner or outer worlds. It may be joyous not to worry about God, but to embrace the universe without forcing God upon it.

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