Chapter 16

Ernest Becker and Emmanuel Levinas: Surprising Convergences

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The work of Ernest Becker has yet to receive the substantive attention it so clearly deserves from the philosophical community, particularly in the highly compatible continental tradition. In this chapter, I hope to make a tiny dent in rectifying this unfortunate neglect by bringing Becker's thinking into conversation with that of Emmanuel Levinas, one of the more enigmatic, yet important post-phenomenological thinkers in twentieth-century European philosophy.

Becker wrote about the importance of such interdisciplinary dialogue as a way of countering what he saw as the most paradoxical maladies of our age: the "useless overproduction" of truth, of knowledge that is compartmentalized and "strewn all over the place, spoken in a thousand competing voices" (Becker 1973, x). Here I hope to indicate some areas of striking kinship between Becker and Levinas and bring them into a momentary face-to-face "conversation" that might raise them for an instant out of the buzzing maelstrom of "competing voices" in contemporary anthropological reflection.

THE BECKER-LEVINAS DIALOGUE: AN ORIENTATION

Why choose Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995), the Jewish-Lithuanian born, Russian, French, and German educated post-phenomenologist and Talmudic scholar, as a philosophical conversation partner for Ernest Becker? First, despite its origins, the mature work of Levinas does not come out of the existentialist tradition with which Becker was familiar and from which he drew substantial inspiration; it comes out of a background of sufficient "strangeness" to make the conversation fresh and challenging. Unlike the many broadly existentialist twentieth-century philosophies (obvious starting points for establishing a dialogue with mainstream continen-

tal philosophy) the mature work of Levinas cannot be easily located with respect to the general tenor of Becker's ideas. Consequently, coming to grips with the challenge of Levinas from a Beckerian point of view (and vice-versa) would appear to be an important moment in the attempt to bring together the scattered wisdom of recent anthropological reflection. Furthermore, if Becker's contribution is to grow in recognition across disciplines, it is essential that his work be brought into the mainstream of the contemporary scholarly debate, a conversation in which the work of Levinas is certainly a key player.

Second, once one moves beyond obvious differences between Becker and Levinas, several areas of intriguing convergence concerning the key motifs and contentions of the two bodies of work begin to emerge, correspondences that cry out for further exploration. Thus, without minimizing the gulf that clearly separates their thought at a variety of points, this chapter aims to tease out aspects of each approach that may be seen, in some respects, as bearing directly on the interests and contentions of the other.

In what follows, I will structure the encounter between Levinasian and Beckerian thought along the lines of two major themes that in very different contexts emerge and register in their work. These two themes, the nonreflexive and the reflexive consciousness, revolve around the subtle dialectical interplay that runs throughout the thought of both Levinas and Becker: the switching between internality and externality, nonrational and rational; otherness and sameness; life and death. Their ideas about nonreflexive consciousness relate to their convergent claims about the nonrational primal human substrate characterized by global vulnerability, awe, and guilt, especially before the face of the other. Their analyses of reflexive consciousness relate to the problematic ideal of the free, self-constituting and self-mastering individual and the impetus located therein toward the repression of what is other to this self. The question that remains, and forms a robust basis for ongoing debate, is whether and to what extent, following Levinas, sources of compelling ethical value might be legitimately understood as emerging out of Becker's conception of primordial human vulnerability and, if so, how. In such a short venue as this chapter, one is obviously limited in ability to do real justice to the scope and richness of the source material at issue. In touching on some of the many possibilities for dialogue, therefore, I hope to inspire further participation in this important conversation.

THE NONINTENTIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS: HUMAN PRIMORDIALITY AS GLOBAL VULNERABILITY

Hidden amidst the brilliant and many-faceted analyses concerning the programmatic problem of heroism and the repression of the death anxiety in Becker's *The Denial of Death* (1973) are passages dealing with a phe-

nomenon that appears still more primordial: the individual's "natural feeling of inferiority in the face of the massive transcendence of creation; his real creature feeling before the crushing and negating miracle of being" (49). Drawing on Otto Rank, Abraham Maslow, Rudolf Otto, and others, Becker characterized this as the "fear of life," coupling it with the other great primal human anxiety, and the one to which his work gives primary attention, the "fear of death" (53). Notwithstanding his over-riding emphasis on the latter, and hence the psychodynamics of heroism, there are key passages where Becker hinted at the larger picture. He spoke, for example, of the "twin ontological motives" in connection with transference (150 ff). Furthermore, in *Escape from Evil* (Becker 1975), his analysis of ontological guilt led him to refer to "heroism and repentance" as "the two sides of man" (66 ff).

Clearly, Levinas, too, had an interest in "both sides" of human consciousness. However, in what follows, I want to suggest that perhaps the richest possibilities for a fruitful dialogue between Becker and Levinas stem from their shared focus on the more understated of Becker's interests in this regard; that is, the mode of consciousness that "precedes" (however this is understood) the emergence of the ego and with it the possibility of self-expansive heroism.

The account Becker gave of the globally vulnerable consciousness is overwhelmingly couched in terms of the world of the infant child; that is, "the attempt by the child to deny the anxiety of his emergence, his fear of losing support, of standing alone, helpless and afraid" (Becker 1973, 54). Yet it is clear that Becker intended this to be far more than simply a piece of pediatric psychology; he assumed the fundamental psychoanalytic view of the human person in which the child lives on within the adult, repressed for the most part, but of constitutive importance in determining behavior. Such applications allowed Becker to dramatically extend the impact of his analysis: "[The infant's] world is a transcendent mystery; even the parents to whom he relates in a natural and secure dependency are primary miracles. How else could they appear? The mother is the first awesome miracle that haunts the child his whole life, whether he lives within her powerful aura or rebels against it" (54).

Notwithstanding its emergence from a very different intellectual tradition, Levinas's rich and densely packed little essay "Ethics as First Philosophy" provides a strikingly comparable discussion of the elemental human experience of global vulnerability through his analysis of what he referred to as the nonintentional consciousness. Drawing on his prolonged engagement with Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology (in contrast to the psychoanalytic and Ottoian roots of the Beckerian concept), Levinas's core post-phenomenological position is to oppose what he saw as the dominant Western understanding of knowledge as "an intellectual activity of seizing something and making it one's own" (Levinas 1989, 76). When knowing

becomes a grasping of things in the world, what is "known" is denied any otherness to thought itself; understanding becomes simply a process of making the real immanent to thought. Accordingly, Levinas saw phenomenology's great strength (overcoming of the dualism between the subject and the world through the intentionality of the former's consciousness) as simultaneously its greatest danger: that the world becomes constituted by the transcendental subject through its intentionality. In this way, knowledge becomes "re-presentation, a return to presence, and nothing may remain other to it" (77). For Levinas, intentional consciousness, indeed self-consciousness, is epistemological imperialism; all that is perceived, all that is other to the self, is stripped of its alterity and converted into self-sameness.

This scenario is contrasted with nonintentionality. Like Becker's globally vulnerable consciousness, Levinas's nonintentional consciousness relates to a putative state prior (logically as much as chronologically prior) to the reflexivity of consciousness that establishes the ego in its self-confident freedom. Thus, nonintentionality corresponds with total vulnerability, an utter openness before the other, which precedes all possibility of ego-logical contrivance or projection of status. Echoes of Becker's concept of the moment of the infant's naked, natural awe clearly ring through in Levinas's description: "The non-intentional . . . has no intentions or aims, and cannot avail itself of the protective mask of a character contemplating in the mirror of the world a reassured and self-positing portrait. It has no name, no situation, no status. . . . It has not yet been invested with any attributes or justified in any way" (1989, 81).

It is difficult to think of a better encapsulation than this of the Beckerian idea of the state of natural awe prior to the heroic reflex by which the individual marks out a "name" and "status" for itself: the side of human nature that, bereft of the "protective mask of a character" (as Becker would put it) is terrified of isolation and seeks agape-merger with the cosmos. But Levinas went on: This portrait of the nonintentional evokes the image of "the stranger or 'sojourner on earth,' as it says in the Psalms, the countryless or 'homeless' person who dares not enter in." It is "being without insistence . . . being that dare not speak its name . . . being that dare not be," and he concluded, "one comes not into the world, but into question" (1989, 81). By-passing for the time being the ethical significance of this idea of being "put into question," the overlap with Becker's notion of the fear of life is striking. That is, it is through the development of the symbolic trappings of self-worth that the individual removes itself from the glare of "the question," thereby entering into the halls of the righteous—those who have heroically established their "right" to be. The logic of the egoist response is thus clear: to prove that one is not a waste of space, but a valuable being whose contributions to the world reflect one's self-evident value.

Like Becker, far from positing this elemental state as a stage in devel-

opment, which is duly cancelled by the onset of self-consciousness, Levinas insisted that the nonintentional, which is prior to the intentional consciousness, remains beneath, or behind, this intentional overlay. In Becker's psychoanalytic terms, we might say that the nonintentional is repressed beneath layers of character defense, which in turn prop up the "lies of character" of the self-conscious subject. Importantly, Levinas couched this insight in terms of the motif of the face: "Prior to any particular expression, and beneath all particular expressions which cover over and protect with an immediately adopted face or countenance, there is the nakedness and destitution of the expression as such, that is to say extreme exposure, defenselessness, vulnerability itself. . . . This is the hidden human face behind perseverance in being . . . [behind] the miracle of ego" (1989, 83, 85). This programmatic motif of the face is characterized by several great paradoxes, one of which is of great interest here. The face shows itself simultaneously in its poverty and height. The former has already been indicated and is emphasized in Levinas's discussion of the nudity and poverty of the face, which is undisguised by any pose (Levinas 1985, 86), and of the destitution and hunger of the other, which exposes itself in the nakedness of the face. (Levinas 1969, 200). Try as it might to "cover [itself] like a mask," Levinas contended, invariably, that "the face shows through these forms" (Levinas 1989, 82–83). Just as important, however, is the face's height. That is, the face of the other (understood in the nonempirical and nonphenomenological sense Levinas intended) "infinitely overflows the bounds of knowledge" (Levinas 1996, 12), and thus, the face's height is precisely in its "uncontainab[ility]" (Levinas 1985, 87). Seen with the eyes of nonintentionality, then, the face both commands from its height and pleads from its destitution.

It is no accident, I suggest, that the motif of the face is repeated in Becker's reflection on the world of the infant. In his own psychoanalytic framework, the face of the mother, the "primary miracle," is the face of primordial otherness par excellence, particularly in its height; a face and a touch that are the prime locus of the meeting of the agape-merger needs of the infant. But the faces of others are also, in their inaccessible and incomprehensible height, the occasion of the arousal of the child's fears of both life and death, of the highlighting of its global vulnerability.

The superordinancy of [the child's] world intrudes upon him in the form of fantastic faces smiling up close through gaping teeth, rolling eerie eyes, piercing him afar with burning and threatening glances. He lives in a world of flesh-and-blood Kwakiutl masks that mock his self-sufficiency. (Becker 1973, 54)

Interestingly, Becker extended the notion of the strange otherness of the face to the individual's awe before its own visage. In terms of its experience of its own symbolic selfhood, its own body, and the strange relationship

between the two, the individual experiences its own presence in the world as an unanswerable question, an inexplicable presence that requires justification.

There is no secure answer to the awesome mystery of the human face that scrutinizes itself in the mirror; no answer, at any rate, that can come from the person himself, from his own center. One's own face may be godlike in its miraculousness, but one lacks the godlike power to know what it means, the godlike strength to have been responsible for its emergence. (54–55)

Finally, the idea of natural guilt flows easily from this idea of global vulnerability. According to Becker, "we feel ourselves in many ways guilty and beholden to others, a lesser creation of theirs, indebted to them for our very birth" (48), and this guilt is experienced "as 'unworthiness' or 'badness' and dumb inner dissatisfaction" (154). As early as his book *Angel in Armor* (1969), Becker described the globally vulnerable consciousness—in which the individual feels its precarious existence to be without ultimate justification or significance—in such terms:

Natural and symbolically unresolvable guilt . . . is a deep feeling that one's own existence is transcended by the priority of all of creation: If we open our sensitivities to the majesty and miracle of creation, then we must 'truly' crumble to our knees in palpitating fear and smallness, and in some kind of gratitude for having been given the transient 'privilege' of just being a spectator. (50)

The dimensions of this idea converge at numerous points with Levinas's notion of intrinsic guilt and in important ways that go beyond the scope of this chapter. Suffice to say that in its felt lack of justification, the individual, said Becker, "experiences guilt because he takes up space and has unintended effects on others" (Becker 1975, 33). Here, in embryo, are two key aspects of Levinas's understanding of guilt, which lead directly into his programmatic ethical conception. First, from the point of view of the nonintentional consciousness—and by virtue of its unjustified existence—its place in the world is also the "usurpation" of the place of the other (Levinas 1989, 82). But second, the nonintentional guilt of the individual is infinitely multiplied once the perspective is broadened from the intimacy of the one-to-one relation to society at large. In this context, "I act in a way that escapes me" (Levinas 1987, 31). Or, as Becker put it, "we hurt others without intending to, just by being what we are" (Becker 1975, 33).

EGO AND INTENTIONALITY: THE *CAUSA-SUI* PROJECT AND THE SUPPRESSION OF ALTERITY

Just as there are marked parallels between Becker's category of the globally vulnerable consciousness and Levinas's category of nonintentional con-

sciousness, there are also extensive possibilities for dialogue between the Beckerian notions of the heroic-reflex, or *causa-sui* project and Levinas's contentions about the nature of intentional consciousness. Throughout Becker's mature work, the logic of heroism, with its death-denying teleology, is closely associated with the ubiquitous human *causa-sui* project: the unconscious attempt to symbolically ground one's own free and self-sufficient subjectivity. According to Becker, the emergence of the symbolic self and its orientation toward heroism is the result of nothing less than the wholesale denial of the globally vulnerable consciousness. "One of the first things a child has to do," he contended, "is to learn to abandon ecstasy, to do without awe, to leave fear and trembling behind. Only then can he act with a certain oblivious self-confidence, when he has 'naturalized' . . . [that is,] falsified . . . his world" (Becker 1973, 55). This central claim about the unnaturalness or dishonesty of the birth of the self-conscious and self-confident ego lies at the heart of Becker's contentions. It is to assert that leaving behind the natural awe of the globally vulnerable consciousness is of itself a falsification or denial; a "vital lie" upon which psychological "normality" is built.

The great boon of repression is that it is possible to live decisively in an overwhelmingly miraculous and incomprehensible world, a world so full of beauty, majesty and terror that if animals perceived it at all they would be paralyzed to act. . . . [After all, man] is not a naturally and lustily destructive animal who lays waste around him because he feels omnipotent and impregnable. Rather, he is a trembling animal who pulls the world down around his shoulders as he clutches for protection and support and tries to affirm in a cowardly way his feeble powers. (50, 139)

For Becker, the free, self-sufficient, and heroic individual is an edifice absolutely built on sand, and while not sharing the psychoanalytic form of such an argument, Levinas's conception of the birth of the intentional ego may be understood in an analogous fashion. As already seen, Levinas provided a thorough critique of egoistic subjectivity by which intentional thought desires to conquer the world through the onward rush of self-consciousness. What is more, he linked the regal solitude and disinterested self-sufficiency of the intentional consciousness (modern man as such) to the notion of its unquestioned "freedom" (Levinas, 1989, 77; Cohen 1986). Like Becker, however, Levinas pointed to the threat of death as the "worm at the core" (Becker 1973, 15) of such pretensions to free, sovereign, and self-sufficient being. The difficult truth is, Levinas maintained, that "death renders meaningless every concern that the ego would like to take for its existence and for its destiny" (Levinas 1987, 138). Further, death, more than being simply an "insurmountable, inexorable and fundamentally incomprehensible" obstacle to freedom (Levinas 1989, 78), is an immanent

and menacing reality that is "inscribed in the fear I can have for my being" (78). It is in this idea of the individual's "instinctive knowledge of death" (78), by which the psychic *causa-sui* is undermined (Levinas 1969, 235), that Levinas came very close to a Beckerian conception of the effect of the death anxiety.

In any case, in directing the reader to consider the realm prior to self-consciousness, Levinas pointed out the deeply derivative status of the so-called freedom of the intentional consciousness. Intentionality, with its fixed self and egoist perspective, is blind to the fact that it is constituted through the primordial relation with the other that precedes it and makes it possible. This is to equate the coming of freedom specifically with the calling into responsibility for the other; it is to understand freedom as an "investiture" by the other (Levinas 1969, 84). Contrary to the notion of the ego as arbitrarily "for itself," it is to understand the relation with the other as being the place where freedom gains its substantial and directed meaning. In this way, another paradox of the face of the other is highlighted: that the encounter with otherness both founds the freedom of the ego (and thus the possibility of its separate flourishing) and through its height calls this freedom into question through the revelation of its limited nature.

Notwithstanding such contentions, Becker and Levinas shared a not dissimilar view about the "natural" expansiveness of the ego in its day-to-day "healthy" utilization of the world. There is certainly a sense in which both saw a basic level of organic, material, and symbolic flourishing as essential and inevitable. Particularly in the second section of *Totality and Infinity* (1969), Levinas emphasized the subject's self-sufficient enjoyment of its world, its utilization and consumption of what is other to it, "living from" the world, a being affirmed in its sovereignty by this "very pulsation of the I" (113). Becker expressed a similarly Spinozan view of the basic *conatus* of the human organism: the general biological law by which organisms are naturally orientated toward the preservation of their own "physiochemical identity . . . [and] integrity" and seem "to enjoy [their] own pulsations" as they expand themselves into the world, "ingesting" it (Becker 1973, 2). In this way, he saw "a working level of narcissism" as being eventually "inseparable from self-esteem, from a basic sense of self-worth" (3). Falsification it may be, but the denial of the terror of life and death functions is a "vital lie," which makes normal psychological functioning possible.

Yet equally, for both Becker and Levinas, at a certain point the "pulsation of the I" spills over into a self-championing aggression that seeks to crush whatever opposes its sovereignty, and accordingly, they shared an intense focus on the origin of interpersonal violence. Becker's final work was dedicated to fleshing out precisely this problem, its socio-anthropological and historical analyses climaxing in an investigation of the "logic of killing others in order to affirm our own life" (Becker 1975, 110)

and to protect our personal and corporate immortality schemas. For Levinas, the impulse to murder was contained in embryo in the very definition of the freedom and sovereignty of the imperialistic intentional consciousness, which "suspends all independence in the world other than that of consciousness itself" (Levinas 1989, 79). For both Becker and Levinas, violence paradigmatically takes place in a context in which the self's global vulnerability is denied and the sovereignty of the self-conscious ego is proclaimed.

CONCLUSION: ETHICS AS THE RETURN TO PRIMORDIALITY?

Unfortunately, space does not allow an exploration of how the many points of convergence explored here might be brought together in a consideration of the relationship between Beckerian thought and Levinas's ethical contentions: a fascinating and important topic for another occasion. A few brief observations must suffice.

If the claims of Levinasian ethics are to have any solid point of reference with Beckerian thought, the most fertile possibilities revolve around the idea of connecting again in some sense with primordial global vulnerability. That is, not only for Levinas is the ethical relation "a movement that is more fundamental than freedom" (Levinas 1996, 20), but the responsibility for the other that flows from this relation is intrinsically bound up with the founding of subjectivity. Thus, "morality begins," he said, "when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent" (84).

In essence, Levinas appears to be calling the self back to the primal truth of its being: to the globally vulnerable state of nonintentionality. What this means in practice, of course, is another matter, but clearly a central tenet must be the general idea of acting not out of strength, but out of vulnerability. There certainly appears to be at least a *prima facie* point of reference here in what Becker described as the "main self-analytic problem of life": the need "to become conscious of what one is doing to earn his feeling of heroism" (Becker 1973, 6).

Of course, what this cannot mean is any conception of the subject's reversing the eclipse of the nonintentional consciousness, "seeing again with non-intentional eyes"; or in Beckerian terms, of un-repressing the "lie of character." Such an approach is unacceptable from either standpoint. Not only would the Levinasian idea of the self's natural flourishing be thereby rendered impossible by the demand that the self remain in a hypothetical nonintentional state, but one also only need recall the passionate arguments Becker put in the closing pages of *The Denial of Death* concerning the intractability of repression and of the devastating consequences that any collapse of the characterological framework sustaining the healthily func-

tioning individual might have. Indeed, such an interpretation would, by Becker's reckoning, make Levinas one more "revolutionar[y] of un-repression" (Becker 1973, 265), which is clearly inaccurate.

Doubtful though it may be that the dark optimism of Levinas's ethical vision is reconcilable with Becker's radical insistence on the deeply anxiously driven and narcissistic nature of the individual, the extent of their broad agreement opens many unexpected avenues for further reflection. Specifically, the intriguing question is raised as to whether in Becker's own over-riding and programmatic interest in the heroic side of human nature, the implications of his own understated twin theme of global vulnerability, might not have been somewhat marginalized. If so, perhaps the recovery and amplification of this theme would bring with it a rediscovery of latent potential for an ethical perspective developed along analogous lines to Levinas's approach. At the very least, dialogue with Levinasian thought certainly clears a surprising opening in Beckerian anthropology that deserves further consideration.