

The background of the cover is a solid teal color, densely populated with various dark teal silhouettes of animals. These include mammals like monkeys, kangaroos, giraffes, and deer; birds like penguins, storks, and various songbirds; and fish. The silhouettes are scattered across the entire page, creating a rich, textured pattern.

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If “Denial of Death” Is a Problem, Then “Reverence for Life” Is a Meaningful Answer: Ernest Becker’s Significance for Applied Animal and Environmental Ethics

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Abstract: Ernest Becker analyzed human death anxiety and explained how it governs our ideologies and behaviors—something now confirmed by thousands of psychological experiments in terror management theory. This anxiety is managed through what he terms “hero systems,” cultural ideals we create to give us a sense of meaning. Most hero systems deny that we are, like all animals, creatures in a mortal body. This denial of our basic biological nature has caused humans to stand against their world, leading to an assault on the planet and nonhuman animals. Becker believed pacifism/nonviolence was the only hero system capable of keeping humans from destroying the earth and each other. But “reverence for life” transcends concern for humans alone and extends safeguards to all life, making it a vital solution to many of our modern problems.

Key Words: animal ethics, environmental ethics, terror management theory, self-esteem, pacifism, death anxiety

[Man] is not just 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. (Becker, 1973, p. 139)

In his 1974 Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Denial of Death*, cultural anthropologist and multidisciplinary theorist Ernest Becker provides a somewhat bleak, though highly accurate and compelling description of humans and the unique challenges we face as a species. He confronts us with an obvious, though mostly overlooked, fact: Like all other sentient beings, humans are creatures who must exist in a limited, decaying body; clutch on to life at all costs while alive [will-to-live]; and then die. And as Becker alludes to above,

comparatively speaking, humans are rather vulnerable creatures: We are not particularly fast, are not impressive in size, are relatively ill-equipped with inborn physical defenses, and are the only species on the planet who, due to our intestinal and dental makeup, must cook animal flesh to avoid the threat of contracting diseases after eating it—a point highly relevant to the thesis of this article.

Despite all these seeming shortcomings, we are unique due to our cognitive complexity, ability to creatively (and destructively) transform the world, and acute awareness of our existence and mortality (mortality salience). Much of Becker's work focuses on how mortality salience creates in all humans a deep-seated, though mostly unconscious, terror or death anxiety: "And so we can understand what seems like an impossible paradox: The ever-present fear of death in the normal biological functioning of our instinct of self-preservation [will-to-live], as well as our utter obliviousness to this fear in our conscious life" (Becker, 1973, p. 17). In other words, our fear of death is decisive yet primarily unconscious. So while our complex consciousness is in many ways an evolutionary gift to humanity, Becker stresses how we must wrestle with two factors arising from it: (a) the despair of our ultimate demise and (b) its opposite, an acknowledgment and appreciation of the miracle of life itself. As he points out,

When man [*sic*] emerged into self-consciousness he could no longer . . . *take creation for granted*. The miracle of created nature, and of his own creation, also became a particular problem for him. He would now have to bear *the awareness* of the miraculous. . . . But, still being an animal, he still had to live like one. Again a terrifying paradox, and a superhuman burden. (Becker, 1962, p. 143)

In many of the world's problems today we see a relative failure of humanity to deal either with the despair of death or to appreciate the miraculousness of life. As a species, we have evolved vast technological powers; these powers now force us to act in bold, courageous ways to deal with the threatening realities we continually produce. In short, our complex consciousness comes with a price that is built into our dual nature—the possession of an expansive *symbolic* self that is, unfortunately for us, encased in a limited *bodily* self. As Becker (1973) describes it, our specialness allows us to ponder the vastness of the universe and create in almost unlimited ways, giving us the "status of a small god in nature" (p. 26). But despite our uniqueness, we know we must one day die and disappear forever. It is a dire dilemma to be faced with, and most people don't want to contemplate such a reality.

Whether or not we consciously accept these facts, Becker joins a large number of existentialist philosophers and experimental psychologists who have shown that humans are motivated in their actions by the anxiety surrounding their inevitable death (Solomon et al., 2015). This anxiety colors all facets of our personal, social, spiritual, and material/ecological relations with the world.

I will cover some of Becker's more salient theories and then show the relevance of his thought to an issue that is gaining significance with each passing generation, namely, humanity's relationship with, and treatment of, nonhuman life. We'll see that psychological repression of the basic fact that we, too, are animals embedded in nature is causing

devastating moral, health,¹ and ecological consequences.² Becker's theories provide a sound basis for better understanding these phenomena.

RELIGION, HERO SYSTEMS, AND THE ESCAPE FROM ANXIETY

According to Becker, one primary method humans use to cover over death anxiety, and thus attempt to transcend our animal condition, is through the invention and perpetuation of culture—something he sees as an elaborate defense mechanism. Now, if Becker claimed that human culture is *nothing but* an attempt at terror avoidance, we'd have a right to be skeptical of his suppositions; for culture and inventiveness are also natural elements of our cognitive endowment. Becker is aware of this, yet he is right to emphasize the level to which humans will go to create cultural distractions to hide us from our death fear. These efforts culminate in what he calls "hero systems," or "immortality projects": human-generated values, meanings, and myths meant to establish us as significant, both in history and, more importantly, beyond our mortal lives. In short, since we know our bodies and minds will perish, we seek to create and participate in something eternal that will outlast our limited time on earth.

The philosopher-theologian Paul Tillich had a significant impact on Becker's thinking, so it's no surprise that, like Tillich, Becker thinks all humans are essentially religious:

Society is a codified hero system, which means that society everywhere is a living myth of the significance of human life. . . . Every society thus is a "religion" whether it thinks so or not: Soviet "religion" and Maoist "religion" are as truly religious as are scientific and consumer "religion," no matter how much they may try to disguise themselves by omitting religious and spiritual ideas from their lives. (Becker, 1973, p. 7)

Becker's concept of hero system in some ways mirrors Tillich's "Ultimate Concern," which expresses that since everyone has to confront the bodily challenges of life in the material world, the moral demands of society, the deep existential questions of life's meaning, and eventually our own deaths, we are all driven (consciously or unconsciously) to be religious. In short, there is some principle or concern of ultimate significance to our core sense of being, and our lives are qualified by attempting to manifest this. For some this is Truth, for others it is Reason, Love, Creativity, or any number of compelling principles that can grasp and then characterize a person's strivings and actions in life. Whatever this reality is becomes "God" for them—the symbolic word we use for the Ultimate, or the transcendent element in our psyches (souls) drawing us toward ultimate meaning.

What often happens, however, is that in trying to seek some transcendence of mortality, people end up using things in the physical world as a transference object, which always ends in disappointment on an existential level. Such transferences are seen in, for example, obsession with sports, material consumption/financial accumulation, technological obsession, social and political power, beautification of the body, and sometimes even in religion itself. Here, transitory, superficial concerns take the place of true ultimate concerns, and people are kept from experiencing the depth of life, becoming, as Kierkegaard (1954) put it, "tranquilized with the trivial" (pp. 174–175). When people

remain consumed by such fleeting pleasures or distractions, an authentic concern about life itself is lost, often resulting in a crippling sense of meaninglessness—unfortunately, a hallmark of our modern age. This is significant because

the anxiety of meaninglessness is anxiety about an ultimate concern, of a meaning which gives meaning to all meanings. This anxiety is aroused by the loss of a spiritual center, of an answer, however symbolic and indirect, to the question of the meaning of existence. (Tillich, 1952, p. 47)

For both Becker and Tillich, humans are best served by acknowledging their existential anxiety, taking it into themselves in courageous and healthy ways and, through this, transcending as best they can the uncritical thought programming and cultural patterning that keep them from facing the stark realities of life and death. When this is accomplished, more authentic connections are made with the self, other people, and the natural world; a personal centeredness and strong sense of self-esteem develop; and an ability to transcend the narrow cravings of the ego then opens one up to some felt sense of an ultimate meaning in life.

While this can come through positive engagement with a particular religious tradition, we also know that religions are sometimes limiting cultural creations themselves, often faltering by offering simplistic moralizing and/or literalistic, antiscience doctrines that don't square with how we know the natural world works. Even worse, religions can arouse the urge to denounce, and even harm, others when their views aren't what we consider "true" religion. Religion then fails to provide a meaningful grounding for a person's life and hinders the actualization of love, tolerance, understanding, reason, and forgiveness that should serve as its foundation. This is when religion is not self-transcendent and healing but, rather, is grounded in egoism, fear, and/or existential anxiety about one's mortality.

TECHNOLOGY, HEROICS PROJECTS, AND THREATS TO PSYCHE AND NATURE

Today, we face two primary heroics projects arising from a fear of death and a desire to escape the challenges of organic, material existence. One is religious and the other is scientific/secular—both threaten to drive the world into more destruction and alienation. The religious hero system, most evidenced in Christian fundamentalism, is what I term *supernatural escapism*. It promises the adherent an otherworldly bodily existence above the "cursed," "sinful" world. In its focus on a future "real" life after death, it calls for a turning away, or escape, from this world and its problems. Conversely, the scientific/secular hero system, which I call *technical utopianism*, believes in endless technological "progress." Exemplified by artificial intelligence (AI) and biotechnology, its goal (ultimate concern) is to automate all elements of existence. One of its most recent developments, for instance, is virtual reality goggles that show images of green pastures to extract more milk from stressed-out factory-farmed cows standing on concrete slabs in their own urine and feces. Overly optimistic about the cleverness of human reason, it necessitates the extraction of vast amounts of natural resources for its synthetic creations, and it tends

toward psychological estrangement from the natural world due to its hyper-focus on all things human made. Because of a fervent belief in the ultimate significance of its projects, it has a quasireligious quality (Yunt, 2017, pp. xxi-xxii). Quite ironically, we are seeing some of its creators now raise warnings about the potential for AI to take on a life of its own and lead to the potential destruction of human life as we know it.

Becker sees other troubling factors in such human efforts to stand above nature and avoid the fact of our creatureliness (basic animal nature). As he points out, when we (humans) try to escape the fact that we are animals, we tend to destroy the life we are part of—to profane life rather than respect it. Becker (1975) explains this in *Escape From Evil*, where he presents an interesting thesis: as humans attempt to transcend their animal natures and shift their concerns and aspirations into the “higher” realm of culture, they bring about more evil and suffering into the world (pp. 136, 140–141). In other words, as humans create and then heavily invest in their cultural and religious symbols, these transferences actually bring into being a new anxiety that is then projected out into the world in destructive ways. This idea might seem counterintuitive. How could humans, in the process of trying to “better the world” through culture and religion, actually end up causing more harm and suffering to themselves, others, and nonhuman beings? To answer that question, Becker scholar Daniel Liechty (personal communication, February 2023)³ brilliantly summarizes his theory:

Most hero systems offer a temporary escape from anxiety, but because hero systems are human constructions, they are easily subject to deflation and defeat, thus plunging the “believer” right back into the anxiety and despair the systemic transference had promised to alleviate. Even worse, when our transferences are threatened, we are unlikely to give up easily but, rather, desperately seek to shore up our transferences by whatever means available to us. It is during such periods when much of the most hideous of human actions occur, under the guise of “escape from evil”; that is, under the illusion that we can defeat the defeat of our transferences by defeating those who threaten our transferences.

We can find support for Becker’s theory by looking no further than the “good” Nazis thought they were bringing into the world, the centuries of religious wars perpetuated by humans, or all the advanced technologies today that threaten the integrity, and even existence, of the earth’s ecosystems. As Becker (1975) put it, “It is man’s ingenuity, rather than his animal nature, that has given his fellow creatures such a bitter earthly fate” (p. 5). All this exemplifies the ways hero systems can blind humans to the unforeseen consequences of their industriousness. For example, after creating such things as “technology” and “the economy,” humans become ideologically captured by them and fail to see how these constructs can undermine personal, social, and ecological health. Modern dilemmas arising from technology are widely known, and research shows that the more humans objectify and commodify nature—transforming everything into an edifice of human culture—the more we lose contact with the life-giving powers of the world we are embedded in. And this drive to stand above nature places humanity in a very untenable existential position—something devilishly ironic since humans are the self-professed “most intelligent” species. As one philosopher put it:

That which constitutes man's power and glory, that which lies at the very heart of his power to be lord over things, namely his capacity to transcend himself and his immediate situation, is at one and the same time that which causes the fragility . . . the anguish of our human lot. (Barrett, 1958, p. 246)

THE UNIVERSAL WILL-TO-LIVE AND “REVERENCE FOR LIFE”

Becker (1975) admits that throughout his work he's “sketched a rather pathetic portrait of [humanity]” (p. 146), and in reading him one can't help but feel a sense of hopelessness for our species. We've evolved into an intelligent animal adrift in an anxiety-ridden world, largely unable to establish and then follow a universal moral principle, and seemingly doomed to create more and more intractable problems—despite efforts to somehow improve the conditions of our world. And so he draws a clear line between our inability to accept our mortality *and* the bitter, unnecessary cruelty we rain down on our fellow beings:

Mortality is connected to the natural, animal side of his existence; and so man reaches beyond and away from that side. So much so that he tries to deny it completely. *As soon as man reached new historical forms of power, he turned against the animals with whom he had previously identified*—with a vengeance, we now see, because the animals embodied what man feared most, a nameless and faceless death. (Becker, 1975, p. 92; emphasis added)

Relating to “reverence for life,” this is where Becker's warnings on the dangers of hero systems become very interesting; for although he focused primarily on the human psyche and its anxiety about death, he also clearly saw death anxiety expressed in every sentient animal's *will-to-live*: “All organisms want to perpetuate themselves, continue to experience and to live . . . we are amazed, as we try to club a cornered rat, how frantically he wants to live. All animals are this frantic” (Becker, 1975, p. 148). As we'll see, reverence for life acknowledges this basic biological fact and then seeks to highlight its significance for our moral evolution.

Essentially a spiritual concept, “reverence for life” was coined in 1915 by the medical doctor, philosopher, theologian, musicologist, and 1952 Nobel Peace Laureate Albert Schweitzer. He states: “A man is ethical only when life, as such, is sacred to him, that of plants and animals [as well] as that of his fellow men” (Schweitzer, 1949, pp. 156–159). This is a radical notion that goes beyond just eliminating the unnecessary suffering and death of sentient animals. That said, and as Becker alludes to above, the reason we should prioritize *sentient* life in our ethical considerations is that nonhuman animals have a conscious will-to-live rooted in their ability to cherish life; they seek, just like humans, to avoid suffering and death. Right now, we are witnessing exponential growth in the adoption of a more secular attunement to these facts, as veganism⁴ gains more credence worldwide as a critical moral philosophy. This shift in consciousness is brought on partly by our living in the “Ecological Age,” a period of human evolution when we start facing the planet's material limits *and* our many forms of biological and emotional relatedness with other nonhuman life-forms. Not surprisingly, Rachel Carson's 1962 publication *Silent*

Spring—viewed as the primary catalyst for the modern environmental movement—is dedicated to Schweitzer.

Though Becker (1975) never went so far as to embrace reverence for life, he intuited the need for something that would push us toward it: “Today we are living in the grotesque spectacle of the poisoning of the earth by the nineteenth-century hero system of unrestrained material production. This is perhaps the greatest and most pervasive evil to have emerged in all of history, and it may even eventually defeat all of mankind” (p. 156). Out of such an insight, in his book *Escape From Evil*, Becker makes a somewhat surprising pivot away from his often pessimistic tone about the evil humans are capable of bringing into the world through their hero systems. He does this by pointing to the one heroics project that, unlike all others, he felt could significantly mitigate the destructive impulses of humanity. Here, he delivers an unequivocal affirmation of pacifism⁵—a weaker, though important, precursor to reverence for life:

And I know no psychology, and so far no conditions on this earth, which would exempt man from fulfilling his urge to cosmic heroism, which means from identifying evil and moving against it. In all cases but one this means moving also against individuals who embody evil. *The one case, of course, is the teaching of the great religions, and in its modern guise pacifism, or nonviolence.* (Becker, 1975, p. 142; emphasis added)

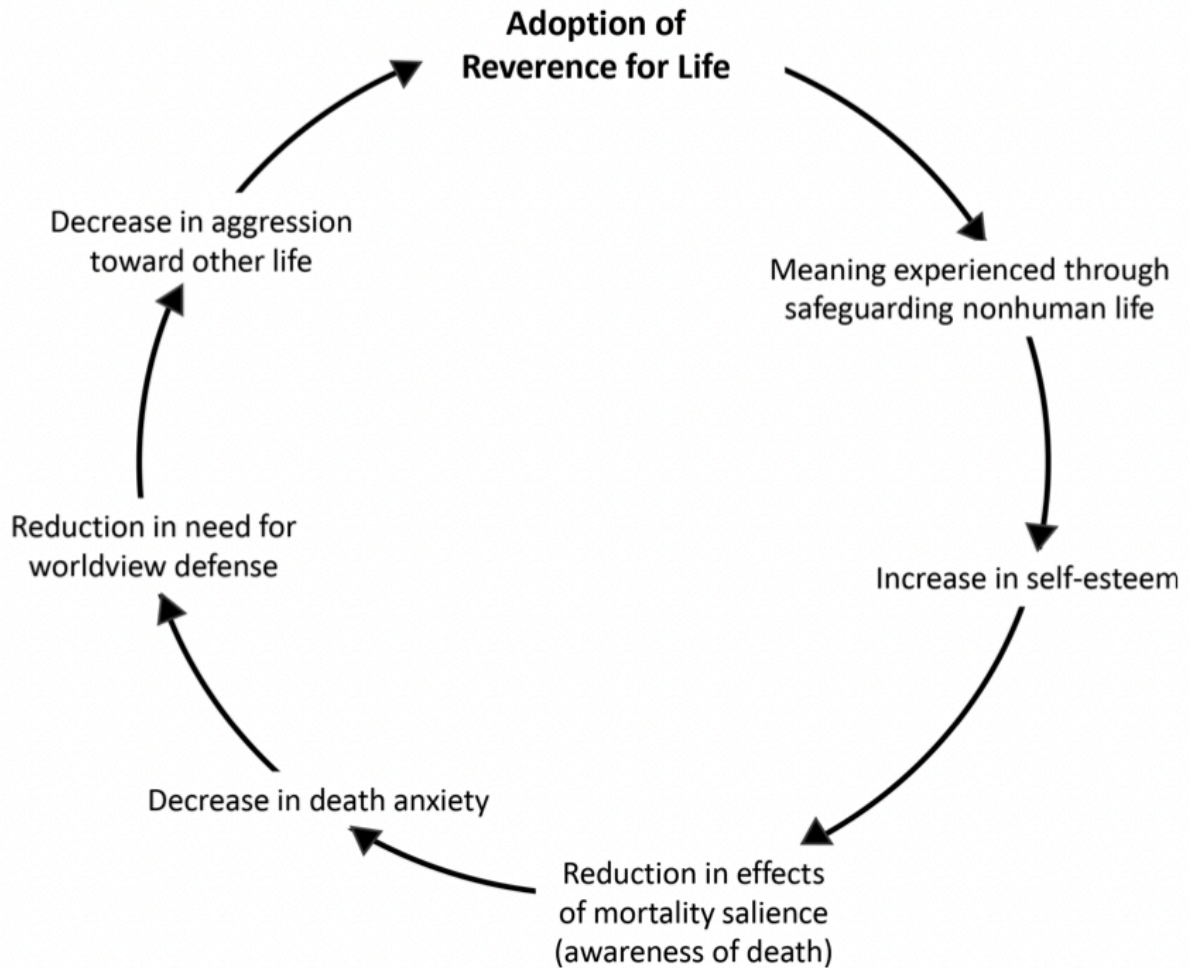
Becker alerts us to the life-affirming force of pacifism because, as he states quite clearly, it is the only heroics project that does not lead to a desire to cause suffering or death to other human life. In the case of reverence for life, this commitment to non-violence applies to all humans, *but then goes further* to include all of organic nature. Liechty (personal communication, February 2023) does an excellent job of clarifying the significance of them both in the context of Becker’s thought:

Reverence for life and pacifism are transferences (hero systems) that already incorporate the defeat of the transference into the hero system itself. In this way, any “threats” to the transference are not countered by the urge to eradicate the source of the threat (in Becker’s *Escape From Evil*) but instead act as motivations to move more deeply and fully into the transference itself. This has the benefit of making the “defense” mode impossible to produce violence and aggression, since the move to violence would itself undermine the viability of the transference. (see Figure 1)

REVERENCE FOR LIFE, MORTALITY SALIENCE, AND A “DEATH INSTINCT”?

What’s compelling about reverence for life is that it has the power to supersede all other ethical principles humanity has adopted throughout its evolution (Yunt, 2019, p. viii). As an ideal that places safeguarding life itself as its foundational normative principle, it denounces every bias underlying the violent forms of injustice we see in the world: race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, tribe, and even species are all rejected as grounds for oppression or abuse. As Becker often points out, history is replete with examples of humans “othering” people and animals as a means to stave off their death anxiety, and

“Reverence for Life”: A Meaningful Heroic System



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FIGURE 1. “Reverence for Life”: A Meaningful Heroic System.

reverence for life confronts this tendency head-on. As an ontologically grounded principle, reverence for life grants ethical standing not based on a life-form’s special attributes, such as advanced cognitive ability, cultural complexity, or abstract language skills—things humans possess—but simply on the fact that something, or someone, exists. As one philosopher put it: “The basis of justice is the intrinsic claim for justice of everything that has being” (Tillich, 1954, p. 63). This makes reverence for life qualitatively different from other heroic systems, in that it arises more as a precognitive, trans-ego “realization”—from a felt sense of one’s life being embedded within life as a whole—rather than as an additional

worldview tacked onto one's self-identity. In this way, it is somewhat like what Buddhists term *satori*: the realization of the true nature, or essence, of existence.

Beyond the most practical core of reverence for life—the simple fact that humans have *no vital need* to cause suffering and death to other sentient beings to live a healthy, good life—it might be helpful to ask why we should care about other nonhuman life in the first place. The most acknowledged, albeit anthropocentric, reason is that a great number of our most pressing ecological and health problems are directly related to our use (and abuse) of nonhuman animals for food and other purposes: climate change, habitat destruction, water and land pollution and waste, and health epidemics and viral pandemics—to name a few.⁶ Scientific data show us that animal agriculture (particularly factory farming) is devastating not just to the billions of individual animals in this system⁷ but also to our own bodily and planetary health. Conversely, we know that when humans avoid killing other sentient beings, there are significant ecological, health, humanitarian, and ethical benefits (see, for example, Robbins, 1987). A study out of the University of Oxford, for example, shows that plant-based diets have about 75% less greenhouse gas emissions and land use compared to a diet with high meat consumption, as well as 54% less water use (Scarborough et al., 2023, pp. 565–574). It is hard to overestimate the significance of these statistics when we consider that about half of the world's habitable land is used to feed humans (Ritchie & Roser, 2013).

Despite such moral reasoning and scientific data, many argue against reverence for life and/or veganism because they believe humans have the right to kill anything other than another human simply because we are the most advanced species, or perhaps because we even have an inborn desire, or instinct, to kill. Freud ascribed to this latter view and then described it in his theory of the “death instinct.”⁸ He states that, in light of “the ubiquity of non-erotic aggressivity and destructiveness, I adopt the standpoint . . . that the inclination to aggression is an original, self-subsisting instinctual disposition in man” (Freud, 1987, pp. 311 and 313). Becker (1973) strongly disagreed; for him, killing is not a natural human instinct brought on by our *wish* to die but is instead an unconsciously motivated *protest against* one's own fear of death: “Killing is a symbolic solution of a biological limitation; it results from the fusion of the biological level (animal anxiety) with the symbolic one (death fear) in the human animal” (p. 99). In other words, killing is simply an acting out of the “death fear” of the ego—or at least a weak transference attempt to stave it off. As such, killing seems to manifest physically as a form of human strength, but it can be regarded as lacking in existential courage because of its hopeless, mostly unconscious, belief that the *ritual* act of killing will somehow alleviate our *actual* anxiety of death. It is a case of projecting our psychological vulnerability onto other beings through violence, rather than using courage to face anxiety and take it into the self with resoluteness and empathy.

As we saw in the epigraph to this article, Becker warns of our unconscious exertion of power over other animals; believing this dominance will confirm our own significance *and* lessen the existential terror of our mortality is an illusion. To prove this, Becker's theories have now been tested in thousands of experiments relating to the psychological triggers surrounding our fear of death, and the results are shocking. As he hypothesized,

contemporary terror management theory experiments show that “humans are prone to distancing themselves from animals and nature, especially when existential anxieties are aroused. After being reminded of their mortality, people take vigorous exception to the claim that humans are animals, have more negative attitudes towards animals, and report higher support for killing animals in general” (Solomon, 2020, p. 413). These studies reflect why Becker saw real value in coming to terms with our creatureliness and mortality, which, as we’ll see, ultimately leads to something quite significant—a healthy sense of self-esteem.

REVERENCE FOR LIFE, SELF-ESTEEM, AND OUR MORAL EVOLUTION

At the heart of reverence for life is a felt sense that when one honors our shared mortality with other beings, there is a partial liberation from the existential fear underlying our infliction of suffering on nonhuman life—putting one in touch with a “feeling of kinship with the All” (Rank, 1936, p. 219). Becker (1975) spoke precisely of this by giving the example of St. Francis, who, through embracing reverence for life, overcame the terror of his own death: “Remember the awesome fascination of St. Francis with the revelations of the everyday world—a bird, a flower. It also meant the unafraidness of one’s own death” (p. 163). In addition to St. Francis, many other historical figures embraced pacifism but then took it to its logical conclusion and extended it to all sentient beings: Cesar Chavez, Leo Tolstoy, Albert Einstein, Jane Goodall, Nikola Tesla, Dick Gregory, George Bernard Shaw, and Leonardo da Vinci—to name just a few. Even the pessimistic 19th-century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (2005), the earliest Western thinker seriously engaged with Buddhism, went against the grain of his time and insisted: “The assumption that animals are without rights and the illusion that our treatment of them has no moral significance is a positively outrageous example of Western crudity and barbarity. Universal compassion is the only guarantee of morality” (p. 115). And more recently, in the Foreword to Becker’s *The Denial of Death*, psychologist and philosopher Sam Keen intimates the power of a universal ethic such as reverence for life:

There are signs—the acceptance of Becker’s work being one—that some individuals are awakening from the long, dark night of tribalism and nationalism and developing what Tillich called a transmoral conscience, an ethic that is universal rather than ethnic. Our task for the future is exploring what it means for each individual to be a member of earth’s household, a commonwealth of kindred beings. (as cited in Becker, 1973, p. xv)

Unfortunately, we know it’s a tall task to courageously confront human mortality and vulnerability and not project it onto the world and other beings through violence. As research in terror management theory shows, when humans don’t develop a healthy sense of self-esteem and constructively confront their fear of death, this often leads to psychological trauma and then societal violence (Pyszczynski et al., 2004). One key finding appears again and again: having the experience that one is a valuable contributor to a meaningful universe (self-esteem) has the effect of buffering anxiety in general, and

about death in particular (Pyszczynski et al., 2004). As a result, self-esteem reduces interpersonal and societal violence by lowering physiological arousal in response to threats to cherished worldviews (hero systems)—and this fact provides scientific grounding to the very thesis of Becker’s *Escape From Evil*. As it relates to our death anxiety, and ultimately to the preservation of life, these findings are not insignificant:

Self-esteem is more than a mere mental abstraction: it is felt deeply in our bodies. . . . [S]tudies have shown that feelings of self-worth also diminish defensive reactions to thoughts of death. . . . Self-esteem takes the edge off our hostile reactions to people and ideas that conflict with our beliefs and values. (Solomon et al., 2015, p. 45)

On the individual level, humans who embrace reverence for life bring directly into consciousness the fact that suffering, though inescapable and undesirable, is something they have some sense of control over. Since suffering and death are the last things humans desire for themselves, by extension, they are the last things humans should want for any living being with the capacity to experience what they avoid. This is why reverencing life is such a revolutionary act. When humans engage in empathic behavior and respect the will-to-live in other beings by refusing to kill or harm them, they take in, or “own,” more of the nonbeing and anxiety that has a claim on them. In this act of ethical restraint, the ego is relativized, an expanded sense of the self as a *being-in-the-world* (as opposed to a being *above* its world) is experienced, and a deep, authentic relation to Life is more likely to be attained. Based on the research mentioned above, we can surmise that embracing something like reverence for life can lead to an increase in self-esteem: knowing that one’s decisions are saving other sentient beings from suffering and death; helping to lessen ecological damage, climate change, and waste due to animal agriculture; and increasing personal bodily health can all contribute to an expanded sense of self-worth.

Since the very ethical foundation of reverence for life revolves around lowering aggression, we can also intuit the evolutionary and moral importance of sensing and caring about other life-forms. When humans acknowledge the commonality of their threatened existential situation with other living beings, and then act on this by extending empathy to all life, they reinforce prosocial behavior that is advantageous for all species (Yunt, 2019, pp. 27–34). This is why biological anthropologist Richard Wrangham contradicts Freud’s theories on human aggression when he explains the evolutionary significance of taming violence on our path toward becoming the moral beings we are today:

Homo sapiens is a species characterized by the suppression of reactive aggression, as a consequence of the suppression of the alpha male. And the story of our species is the story of how the beta males took charge and have been responsible for the generation of a new kind of human and, incidentally, for imposing on the society a new set of values. (as cited in Fridman, 2021)

THE APPLIED ETHICS OF REVERENCE FOR LIFE

The goal of reverence for life is to engage in an active empathy as an antidote to humanity’s antagonistic stance toward the world and nonhuman life. It requires confronting

the aggression underlying the ego's defense mechanisms, which, as we've seen, is mostly repressed and then activated by our fear of death. Becker points out that psychological defenses like repression serve in humans as a replacement for the instincts other animals use—both are methods of self-protection against threats to life and psyche. But in humans these defense mechanisms can have the effect of narrowing down one's relation to life; in this sense, they are a withdrawal from one's being and the world. And when one withdraws in fear this often leads to objectifying, and/or reacting antagonistically toward, all matter outside one's self, leaving it increasingly difficult to perceive the depth and meaning in one's existence as well as in existence itself.

In his critique of the history of Western philosophy, this is a central point Heidegger tried to drive home. We see it expressed in our common use of words like “the environment” and “nature”—terms showing the abstraction, or removal, of ourselves from our world. Rather than seeing humans

as worldless intellects making abstract assertions about external objects, Heidegger defined humans as being already involved in myriad practices. . . . [He] emphasized the practical dimension of human existence by defining the very being of Dasein as “care.” To be human means to be concerned about things and to be solicitous. (Zimmerman, 1993, pp. 246–247)

Today, however, in humanity's single-minded focus on rationality and technicity—where all meaning and truth reside within the human ego—humans *forget being* and lose astonishment with the fact that *we exist* and that we are inseparable from every other element in the world. This resonates with Becker's belief that humans have lost consciousness of life's *miraculousness*. As Becker (1975) sadly but accurately points out,

Man has always casually sacrificed life for more life. . . . Probably more to the point, man has always treated with consideration and respect those parts of the natural world over which he has had no control. As soon as he was sure of his powers, his respect for the mystery of what he faced diminished. (p. 24)

For Heidegger, when we break out of this anthropocentric worldview and come to terms with the limits of reason and the *angst* of our limited, mortal condition, we reclaim a sense of awe that *we are*. From this develops a draw toward “letting things be,” where humans forge an authentic relation to Being and a desire to deeply *care* about life. This is the heart of existentialism, where abstraction recedes and a new openness to life causes one to consider *this* being, in *this* place, at *this* time, in *this* situation. As we have seen in the case of reverence for life, *this being* need not just be a human, and this brings us squarely to the applied ethics of reverence for life.

Throughout the world, raising, killing, and consuming animal flesh is considered normal because more than 95% of humans engage in one or all of these practices. So it's easy to see why a viewpoint like reverence for life, which seeks to abstain from killing and consuming other life-forms, has been seen as strange or abnormal—even though almost everyone claims to “love” nonhuman animals. This contradiction, known as the “meat paradox,” places most humans in a moral quandary: For how does one justify lov-

ing a dog, cat, or dolphin and yet kill and eat a pig? We know pigs are smarter than dogs, and they feel just as much pain. Part of the answer is that we live in cultures saturated by speciesism and carnism—a term coined in 2001 by psychologist Melanie Joy (for an extended discussion, see Joy, 2009).

Carnism is a dominant cultural narrative that says artificially raising (literally artificially inseminating and bringing into existence roughly 80 billion land animals every year), slaughtering, and then eating these sentient beings is the natural state of affairs.⁹ Ironically, the vast majority of people who deem killing and eating animals “natural” are the same people who will recoil when they witness the slaughter of an animal. It’s quite apparent that if people had to do the killing themselves, very few would be up to the task. This exposes why the carnist belief system is so unconscious, culturally ingrained, and ultimately rooted in denial. It’s a thought process that allows humans to reduce the lives of billions of emotional, sentient beings into objects whose only inherent worth is in serving human cravings—regardless of the known and observable pain and suffering they endure. Exhibiting the stark power of cognitive dissonance, humans deal with their repressed guilt and horror of this by concealing the killing of the animals inside factories carefully closed off from public scrutiny. They then create “ag-gag” laws—statutes crafted by large agribusiness corporations to keep the public from discovering the dark secrets of the meat and dairy industry: animal cruelty, unsafe working conditions of slaughterhouse workers, ecological damage, and the highly unsanitary nature of the industry.

All these facts raise some serious questions, mainly: How could a rational, moral animal such as humans embrace a mode of food production and nutritional sustenance that systematically destroys the ecology of its own home (Earth), leads to global health epidemics and viral pandemics, wastes vast amounts of food (and other resources) that could feed starving humans, and necessitates the hiding of this very system from public view because it’s so morally reprehensible to those engaging in it?

CONCLUSION

As an anthropologist, Becker was concerned with understanding the cultural forces that, as highlighted in questions such as the ones above, lead to what he called “social illusions.” These are belief systems keeping humans from understanding “the interrelationships of things not only in the physical world but also and especially in the social and personal world” (Becker, 1962, p. 157), which are often “killing . . . society from within its own institutions” (p. 159). For Becker, the goal of the social sciences is to expose what is limiting and illusory in human narratives and actions. As someone deeply concerned for the fate of humanity, he wanted to find ways of overcoming such illusions so that we could fulfill our dual task: (a) to accept the fact that we are animals—frail, often unconscious in our behavior, and mortal—and yet (b) to strive to become fully human by confronting and transcending those primitive forces keeping us from forging authentic, meaningful, and compassionate ways ahead as a species.

Becker was aware that science can tell us more *about* the physical world than anything else, but he knew we needed more than science to tell us *how to be* in the world. This is why, for all their encumbrances, he was convinced that religious myths and teachings could give humans access to a deeper understanding and appreciation for the miraculousness of, and meaning in, life. He spoke about how if one is “a servant of divine powers everything one does is heroic” and that, under this consciousness, meaning can reach up “to the cosmic, eternal level, and the problem of highest heroism is solved” (Becker, 1971, pp. 124–125). For Becker, there clearly was value for humans to have an eternal, or transcendent, orientation toward life. Contemporary research now provides the scientific grounds for his conviction; beyond of the veracity of any of its metaphysical claims, we know the power of religion to assuage death terror and provide meaning and health to humans. Renowned neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky (2017) acknowledges this when he describes the pragmatic effectiveness of religious belief:

What is infuriating to me as an utter, complete atheist is a very, very solid literature showing the health benefits of religiosity. . . . If it is a totally heartless, indifferent, apathetic universe out there, you are far more at risk . . . to conclude it is an utterly depressing universe out there. Rates of depression are much higher among atheists.

Becker’s pragmatism allowed him to see hero systems including an eternal dimension as offering someone an *immanent* guide to concerns and actions in this life—contrary to *otherworldly* religious doctrines that seek a timeless, bodiless existence beyond the world and all its problems.¹⁰ For him, such hero systems provide a viable path toward overcoming social illusions and also, however ambiguously or fragmentarily, a sense of healing or saving power. And if we understand the etymology of the word “salvation” (*salvus*: to heal and make whole), then we see its relevance to Becker’s quest for a “science of man.” We all need ways to cope with the anxiety of our mortality, to find wholeness and meaning in our short time on earth, and perhaps to even eliminate some unnecessary suffering to other humans and nonhumans along the way. Becker (1975) envisioned just this when he revived William James’s concept of the “moral equivalent of war”:

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

In this article, I hope to have provided a solid rationale for adding “unnecessary suffering and death to other sentient beings” to Becker’s list of “hate objects.” Were he alive today, and based on what I’ve presented here, I’d like to think he would concur. As we move deeper into the “Ecological Age,” it seems prudent and morally consistent to avoid separating our treatment of the earth and other nonhuman life from our own lives and fate; for the harm we inflict upon ourselves when we profane nonhuman life is becoming increasingly clear. While Becker realized that pacifism is a radical step toward redressing humanity’s destructive impulses and illusions, we can also see how pacifism falls short by limiting its safeguarding of life to just human life. Reverence for life corrects this limitation

by expanding the definition and valuation of life outward in all directions. In doing so, it confronts many of humanity's pressing social and ecological problems, provides a deep sense of self-esteem to those embracing it, and gives a meaningful, existential answer to the problem of our denial of death.

In the closing pages of *The Denial of Death*, Becker again leans on Tillich when he points us toward a concept that grasped and informed his efforts of exposing illusions and healing society, namely, the "New Being." For a world desperately in need of a new vision toward life and our place in it, it's a highly relevant and useful ideal:

Consider Paul Tillich: he too had his metaphysic of New Being, the belief in the emergence of a new type of person who would be more in harmony with nature, less driven, more perceptive, more in touch with his own creative energies, and who might go on to form genuine communities to replace the collectivities of our time, communities of truer persons in place of the objective creatures created by our materialistic culture. (Becker, 1973, pp. 277–278)

Notes

1. The rise in zoonotic viral diseases—such as mad cow (BSE), H1N1 swine flu, MERS, AIDS, avian influenza, the Nipah virus, and Ebola—can be directly linked to our increasing encroachment on other species (habitat destruction), our intensified farming techniques (factory farming), trade in wild and domestic animals, and the unsanitary conditions in "wildlife" (wet) markets. In these markets, blood, bodily fluids, and manure from slaughtered animals become disease vectors carrying animal microbes to humans.

2. While estimates vary, a 2006 United Nations Food and Agriculture report titled *Livestock's Long Shadow* estimated that about 18% of greenhouse gases were attributable to animal agriculture—more than all transportation sources on the planet combined (Steinfeld, 2006). Clearing land to graze animals, feeding these animals with energy-intensive inputs (instead of feeding humans directly with the plants), and the vast amounts of liquid, solid, and gaseous waste (flatulence and burps containing methane) all exacerbate ecological damage.

3. Professor of social work at Illinois State University and editor of *The Ernest Becker Reader* (University of Washington Press, 2004).

4. Veganism is defined as "a philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude—as far as is possible and practicable—all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing, or any other purpose" (from the Vegan Society, founded in the United Kingdom in 1944 by Donald Watson). Unfortunately, many people today are turning veganism on its head and making it about themselves, mistakenly referring to it as a "diet" or "lifestyle." Instead of focusing on what veganism really is—a moral philosophy seeking to eliminate the unnecessary abuse and killing of animals—this distortion of veganism is turning it into another egocentric fad.

5. There are many understandings of what pacifism is, and one can't be exactly sure how Becker understood it. I'll define it as "the conscious intent to not cause any unnecessary harm or death to another person, while still maintaining the right to use force or violence to protect the life or safety of one's self, or another person, who is being physically threatened or harmed."

6. For instance, it's estimated that animal agriculture is a greater contributor to climate change than all transportation emissions (boats, cars, trains, airplanes, etc.) combined. It also takes roughly 2,500 gallons of water to produce one pound of beef. For a large selection of scientific data outlining these issues, see www.cowspiracy.com. See also Reddy & Saier, 2020, pp. 2–8.

7. It's estimated that about 70–80 billion land animals worldwide are fed crops and then killed each year, and yet about 800–900 million humans do not have enough food to eat.

8. Freud (2015) first introduced this controversial theory in his 1920 essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

9. This is in stark contrast to subsistence hunting and eating (e.g., the Inuits, who must hunt to sustain themselves).

10. “Even if the so-called arguments for the ‘immortality of the soul’ had argumentative power (which they do not have) they would not convince existentially. For existentially everybody is aware of the complete loss of self which biological extinction implies” (Tillich, 1952, p. 42).

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