

# DENIAL OF DEATH AND THE NOBLE LIE

by Neil J. Elgee

*By the Grace of Guile: The Role of Deception in Natural History and Human Affairs.* By LOYAL D. RUE. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994. 306 pages. \$27.50.

*Keywords:* Ernest Becker; death; denial of death; humor; religion.

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Early in *By the Grace of Guile*, Loyal Rue observes that “deception has commanded as much aversion as death itself” (p. 6). He then proceeds to look at deception with exhaustive attention to everything but death. The perspective of this review is that knowledge of the inevitability of death—and the deep repression of this knowledge—is a universal in human nature so powerful in its effects that it must be the central focus of any study of deception and self-deception. We can perhaps interpret Rue’s omission as a clear demonstration of denial of death at work! Not even nihilists are immune to death-aversive behavior.

## DEATH-DENIAL AS A UNIVERSAL MOTIVATOR

As Ernest Becker pointed out in *The Denial of Death* (1973) and *Escape from Evil* (1975), the very idea of death, the dread and terror of annihilation, of extinction, is a mainspring of human activity: avoidance of even the contemplation of death is a universal motive. Unique to humankind, this motivator operates well beyond our standard animal instincts of self-preservation. It seethes out of sight and sound, working deep in the unconscious to influence our actions while numbing us to the terror. We do not feel threatened by death: we deny it.

This mechanism of denial can no longer be dismissed as mere speculation in “works of imaginative literature” (p. 6). There is now

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[*Zygon*, vol. 29, no. 3 (September 1994).]

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good scientific evidence that Becker is right in asserting that unconscious death denial is always turned on down there in the dark, influencing, motivating, working on our lives without our knowing. It works in all realms: the quotidian and the transcendent, in our therapies and in our politics.

With our death dread safely buried out of consciousness, we endow our projects with meaning, purpose, and vitality and deny Rue's nihilism, certain that our universe is not "dead and void of meaning" (p. 3). Our personal lives and our cultures are immersed in the denial of death, what Becker calls the "vital lie" (Becker 1973; 1975). I will look at the data supporting this observation later on and, meanwhile, see what the omission of this concept has done to *By the Grace of Guile*.

#### MOTIVATIONAL SYSTEMS IN RUE AND BECKER

Rue says that the self is constituted by a trinity of motivational systems: curiosity, pleasure/pain, and self-esteem. Perhaps he would subsume death-denying activity under a combination of these headings. However, to give death denial its proper trump position, Becker adds two more categories, the "twin ontological motives"—the *heroic* and *epigonic* modes of striving for immortality. Mere self-esteem is too weak a concept to capture the spirit of the insatiable will to more life that drives a self-conscious, death-aware animal. The biological goals of survival and reproduction are insufficient to encompass our dreams. The darkly hidden death-denial motivator leads us beyond biological life to a search for transcendent meaning. Otto Rank, Becker's muse, goes so far as to say that the priorities of this unconscious system are to preserve our immortality rather than our lives (Becker 1975, 65).

Rue, in contrast, asserts that all human behavior and culture "stand ultimately in the service of survival and reproduction" (p. 127). He reaches this conclusion after offering, in the first half of *By the Grace of Guile*, a brilliant review and interpretation of deception in Western history and philosophy and in evolutionary biology, including sociobiology. In the service of these biological ends, the achievements of personal wholeness and of social coherence are penultimate goals. The next two sections of Rue's book examine the roles of deception in these two categories.

Becker's books (1973; 1975) also examine these same two goals. He sees them, however, as the agencies through which we endow our universe with meaning—ultimate meaning—beyond biology, to satisfy our "twin ontological motives."

*The Heroic Ontological Motive.* One route in the search for immortality is to attempt it on one's own. One is, after all, a creature with a name who lives in a world of symbols and dreams. The natural yearnings for organismic activity and the pleasures of incorporation and expansion can be limitlessly fed in the domain of symbols. Thus one can, in a sense, enter into immortality. "The single organism can expand into dimensions of worlds and times without moving a physical limb; it can take eternity into itself even as it gaspingly dies" (Becker 1973, 3). The press for such experience may be described as the heroic ontological motive. Writing books, especially controversial ones, can work to satisfy the heroic urge.

*The Epigonic Ontological Motive.* The other of the twin motives is embedded in the life of a coherent society. The individual gives over some or all of the immortality project to culture and lives as an obedient participant, a follower in its belief system. The heroic and epigonic overlap in the immortality quest because cultures seek the perpetuation and redemption of the individual life and thereby serve as sacred immortality systems. As Becker says, "Culture *means* that which is *supernatural*; all culture has the basic mandate to transcend the physical, to permanently transcend it. All human ideologies, then, are affairs that deal directly with *the sacredness of the individual or the group life*" (Becker 1975, 64).

#### UNDERSTANDINGS OF DENIAL IN RUE AND BECKER

For both Rue and Becker, the focus is on deception. They have no quarrel with the central place of falsehood in human affairs, or about the history, evolution, biology, or sociobiology of deception. They differ principally in that Becker rejects nihilism, taking instead a considerable interest in the mythico-religious perspective. Rue, by contrast, ignores the unconscious with its "vital lie," the ghost in the machine that spawns immortality-seeking belief systems and their inevitable strife (Elgee 1989). Both men are concerned with denial. An exploration of its ramifications offers entrée to their contrasting worldviews.

Denial has become a common "pop" diagnosis in our culture, and that is not necessarily bad. One result, however, is that explanations of immortality-striving—inevitably obscure because the unconscious is involved—are now muddled by confusion with the vernacular. When people on talk shows describe themselves as being "in denial," they acknowledge self-deception on a level that is not really beyond consciousness—in the Freudian sense of *unconscious*—but

which may best be described instead as in the *subconscious*. At this level one can, with conscious effort, admit one is lying to oneself. In the medical world I encounter this level of self-deception in many situations, most notably in alcoholic and drug-addicted patients and in the denial phase (as described by Kubler-Ross) that dying patients go through. These forms of denial are not the same as immortality-striving death denial. They are more akin to the “pop” variety than to the deep, powerful motivator denial Ernest Becker and I are talking about and which so profoundly affects the *daily lives of healthy people*.

The truly unconscious denial of death that Becker described may be seen in the commonplace assertions of people who say they accept death and have no fear of it—and who do, in fact, die gracefully. The unconscious death-denial program of these healthy-minded people is in place and working well. And the place in which it is working is deep in the unconscious, where it not only shields us from the terror of oblivion but programs us to strive for ultimate meaning and immortality through both personal wholeness and social cohesion.

The very idea of an unconscious motivator goes against the grain; despite our debt to Freud for persuading us of its reality, we are very dubious that it applies *to us*. Support from the intellectual community is grudging: it is estimated that 90 percent or more of tenured psychologists still do not believe in motivational expressions of the unconscious.<sup>1</sup> But this difficult concept, which many have taken to be discredited, is indeed what I am talking about: old-fashioned Freudian repression way down in the unconscious.

In the Rue taxonomy, denial and repression and even suppression are all lumped together as common examples of evasive self-deception. However, in his Deconstructive/Perverse/Self-deceptive category, he does take a bit of a look at “‘anti-negative’ illusions which help to deconstruct the conditions of self-annihilation” (p. 173), phenomena we would describe as vital lies of death denial. Rue acknowledges that “the assumptive worlds of most people contain both illusions of control and illusions of invulnerability” (p. 174). He discusses the fantasy worlds of children (where, I would point out, human self-consciousness, first narcissistic, starts to struggle with the unbearable prospect of extinction and quickly gets that material buried in the unconscious). Then two very important means of escape from vulnerability, the realms of religion and humor, get brief attention.

## REALMS OF ESCAPE: RELIGION AND HUMOR

*Religion.* The grace of communion with divine reality (perhaps a variant on *By the Grace of Guile*), can, according to Rue, immunize the naive believer against ultimate vulnerability. He feels no need to dwell on Saint Paul's famous rejection of death's sting, suggesting merely that the promise of immortality is there "if one is anxious about death" (p. 175)—as if that certainly were an exceptional circumstance. Now it is true that repression of the idea of death is indeed deeply unconscious and well beyond anxiety awareness in many, if not most, "normal" people (but not beyond the probe of the modern explorer of the unconscious, and not separated from active motivation and intervention in the everyday world, as we shall see). Neither death concern nor religion is as easily dismissed as Rue suggests. Becker attempts to integrate grace and guile, religious and secular belief systems, personal wholeness and societal coherence: "Since there is no secular way to resolve the primal mystery of life and death, all secular societies are lies. And since there is no sure human answer to such a mystery, all religious integrations are mystifications" (Becker 1975, 124). I suspect Rue would concur. But Becker and I would acknowledge the mystery in an open lie, and Rue wants a closed one.

*Humor.* Without humor, a self-conscious immortality-striver is dead to life, "as good as dead" from depression, or perhaps even worse than dead, suffering in Kierkegaard's "sickness unto death." Somehow, as evolution brought us to self-consciousness (and death awareness) it managed also to give us a saving sense of humor. If we had not attained the one along with the other, we would not have made it. A sense of humor is crucial to a successfully operating death-denial system. A seldom-cited paper by Alexander (1986) makes a convincing case for the positive contribution of humor to natural selection and reproductive success. Standard ostracizing humor puts victims down and enhances the humorist. Affiliative humor is "focused on creating or maintaining group cohesiveness" (Alexander 1986, 105) and can strengthen the in-group genetically. Both forms of humor can put down out-groups and thus enhance the spirits of the in-group. The distinctions made by humor are often tricks, deceptions, and exaggerations, as both Rue and Becker would agree. But the in-out dichotomy, the vengeful manifestation of the ghost in the unconscious cultural machinery, emerges to haunt utopian schemes like Rue's liberation movement model.

## RESEARCH IN DEATH DENIAL

The ghosts in the unconscious have recently been sighted and interrogated, as I have been announcing, and they appear to be universal. Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (1991) compared matched groups in standard protocols. In a preliminary "personality profile" inventory, individuals in one group were asked to write a few sentences about what they thought would happen to them when they physically died and the emotions that the thought of their own death aroused in them. Control subjects responded to parallel questions about innocuous concerns. Then both groups completed self-report affect scales to assess the effect of the mortality salience manipulation on mood and subsequently responded to identical test material. For example, twenty-two municipal court judges, both male and female (I have been questioned about this) were asked to set bond in a standard case of prostitution. The bond assessed by the eleven in the death-cued experimental group averaged \$455; that of the control eleven, \$50. This is unconscious motivation in defense of the cultural worldview, the immortality-striving ghost at work. My reprint file has inches of reports of similar work by this group of experimental psychologists, all with similar results.

Neil Postman dismisses these data as just commonplace (Postman 1993, 144-45). He knew it all the time. I wonder. I suspect he may not understand that there is a profound difference between the deep denial of death, about which the researchers above were concerned, and what I have called "pop" denial.

## RECONCILIATION AND DIVERGENCE

Rue and Becker are so close in so many ways that I had hoped for reconciliation at the end, and there is indeed some. Rue's call for a federation of meaning that endorses science—the new naturalism—and advocates an ecologically informed economy and morality, all leading to a biocentric myth, does not conflict with what I know of Becker, as far as it goes. But, as I have argued elsewhere, even if the cause of the environment is seen as a superordinate goal, the ecological needs of the in-group will still trump those of humankind in general in immortality-striving belief-system theory (Elgee 1989). And there remain, in addition, other substantial differences and incommensurables between Becker and Rue.

Becker evidences no need to oppose the "truths" of postmodernism by labeling them lies. Rue, on the other hand, ignores the vital lie of the unconscious. Becker thinks that the exposure of the vital lie will help tame the evil it causes, while Rue wants to hide his Noble

Lie from our eyes and sees global social chaos without such blinders. He would have us deny that there is a lie behind his utopian biocentric myth. So we have different lies, one to be revealed and the other to be hidden. Neither prescription is easy because the lie in the unconscious is to be exposed, while the lie to be veiled is a product of conscious human reason. And yet, it's fair to say, they may be much the same lie!

Rue is trying to build his myth in full view of its conflict with his own belief system. He agrees with his fellow nihilist Richard Rorty that personal wholeness and social coherence are incommensurable, and yet their commensurability is intrinsic to the myth he wants to construct.

There are incommensurabilities in Becker's account somewhat comparable with Rorty's. For example, the creation of in-groups and out-groups is inevitable when sacred immortality-striving ideologies test their election, for such ideologies are incommensurable (Elgee 1989). If the belief system of the "other" is "true," then yours is not, and you die. But Becker and I, unlike Rue, want to confront such incommensurabilities and expose them to the full glaring truth of the vital lie of death denial.

As for the denouement, I am very much in favor of nondestructive myths, but I am still waiting for a global one, one that doesn't create in-groups and out-groups. I find the Rue models of world federalism and liberation movements painfully oblivious of this problem. It is the unconscious lie of immortality-striving that powers belief systems, both ideological and religious. Liberation movements, for example, are clearly based in belief systems. We are accustomed to the vying and dividing of religious fundamentalisms and the Armageddons they bring down. When we appreciate that parallel phenomena devolve from nonreligious (but equally sacred) belief systems, such as liberation movements, we may be able to construct myths that better serve the biocentric worldview of the new naturalism.

A vital set of data for the full development of my argument in this commentary is missing, but I intend to correct that lack as soon as I can persuade the investigators to do the experiment. We will need twenty-two nihilists.

#### NOTE

1. Drew Westen, Director of Psychology, Harvard Medical School, "Freud's Theories of Motivation and Development," recorded on audiotape in 1992 for the SuperStar Teachers program of The Teaching Company.

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