

A HEROIC VISION

by Sally A. Kenel

Abstract. Although the empirical studies of Terror Management Theory lend support to Ernest Becker's anthropology, they hardly provide a vision with the power to inspire late twentieth century humanity. Becker's own dark view of what it means to be human is, at least in part, to blame. On the basis of an exploration of the positive implications of the religious symbol of creatureliness, an alternative social theory, that of ecologico-social democracy, is proposed as a vision that requires and may even inspire heroism.

Keywords: Becker; creatureliness; ecologico-social democracy; heroism.

Well, America is very much looking for heroes, isn't it? I think one of the tragedies of this country is that it hasn't been able to express heroics. The last heroic war was World War II. There we were fighting evil and death. But Vietnam was clearly not a fight against evil. It is a terrible problem and I don't pretend to know how to solve it. How does one live a heroic life? Society has to contrive some way to allow its citizens to feel heroic. This is one of the great challenges of the 20th century.

—Ernest Becker, quoted by Sam Keen, *Psychology Today*

The validity of speculative, comprehensive views of what it means to be human is seldom, if ever, demonstrable; and for some this renders such views invalid. By calling his anthropology “a science of man,” Ernest Becker made his work particularly vulnerable to the charge that the untenable is the untenable. Yet, some twenty years after his death, the experimental social psychologists Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski claim to “have acquired a large body of experimental evidence in support of Becker's central claim that concerns about mortality play a pervasive role in human affairs” (Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski 1998, 10). Supported by data collected through numerous creative and precisely designed experiments, and humble enough to acknowledge that

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more research is needed, these psychologists argue that their “Terror Management Theory” supports Becker’s understanding of what it means to be human.

Although, as a longtime student of Becker, I was intrigued to learn of empirical investigations that not only examine his views but substantiate them, in reviewing the claims of Terror Management Theory I found myself humming a line from a song—“Is that all there is?” Analysis of my intuition of lacunae led to the conclusion that I consider the implications of Becker’s view of humanity worthy of considerably more attention than, understandably enough, Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski give them in the succinct conclusion to their study. Moreover, while their brief presentation of the personal implications is generally congruent with Becker, the social implications, it seems to me, fall far short of the heroic vision for which Becker longed.

At least in part, the failure to provide a vision of society capable of inspiration may lie in the psychologists’ clear, steplike analysis of Becker. There are undertones and overtones in Becker’s view of what it means to be human—some of which are best discerned in his own life story. Knowing that Becker was a theist with a rich spirituality sheds light, for example, on his concept of creatureliness, as does his admission that his dark view of life was, in part, offered as a corrective for the mindless cheer he saw around him. Whether a revised understanding of creatureliness can succeed in offering the kind of heroics, the inspirational vision, for which Becker yearned remains to be seen.

IMPLICATIONS OF “TALES FROM THE CRYPT”

At the conclusion of their study, Solomon et al. reiterate Becker’s claim that humans are religious in the sense of being grasped by ultimate concern. According to Becker, this ultimate concern need not be expressed in traditionally religious terms; but throughout history creative individuals as well as cultures have propounded and espoused numerous variations. Common to all is a vision that permits an individual or society to manage terror, to deal with the uniquely human awareness of death. Some of these symbols of immortality, or “illusions” as Becker sometimes called them, work better than others, and he was committed to searching out the best, the most life-enhancing, the one that provided the most “freedom, dignity and hope” (Becker 1973, 202).

Claiming *Escape from Evil* (Becker 1975) as their guide, Solomon et al. propose three criteria for evaluating specific cultures: how well they “provide for the material needs of their members given their current level of technology and resources; provide social roles that allow as many people as possible to obtain and maintain self-esteem; accomplish these first two

goals without undue harm to others inside or outside of the culture” (Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski 1998, 40).

Before concluding that, particularly for democracies, such criteria would hardly be impossible to meet, one would do well to evaluate the criteria themselves in light of Becker’s own words in *Escape from Evil*. The introductory chapter depicts humanity as so complex that the aforementioned criteria for evaluating cultural worldviews appear simple, and, to an extent, inadequate.

In terms of society meeting the material needs of its members, the first criterion, we read: “Man transcends death not only by continuing to feed his appetites, but especially by finding a meaning for his life, some kind of larger scheme into which he fits” (Becker 1975, 3). Thus, although one cannot dismiss the criterion that society provide for material needs, Becker gives it a perspective missing from Solomon et al., that having one’s material needs met is of importance within the framework of finding meaning in life.

It would seem also that an explication of *need* is necessary to prevent the meeting of material needs from being transformed into an ethos of materialism. Solomon et al. provide an example of such alteration in their comment: “Today of course, there is no such stigma attached to the infinite pursuit of material wealth. Indeed, in America wealth is a central means (along with physical attractiveness) of acquiring self-esteem” (1998, 15). Becker was keenly aware that meeting material needs could become confused with the meaning of life and attributed such confusion to the loss of the transcendent: “Modern man cannot endure economic equality because he has no faith in self-transcendent, otherworldly immortality symbols; visible physical worth is the only thing he has to give him eternal life” (1975, 85).

The second criterion of Solomon et al., providing social roles that allow as many people as possible to obtain and maintain self-esteem, also pales in light of the complexity of Becker’s view. He claims that “what man really fears is not so much extinction, but extinction *with insignificance*. Man wants to know that his life has somehow counted, if not for himself, then at least in a larger scheme of things, that it has left a trace, a trace that has meaning” (1975, 4). This, then, is the self-esteem that social roles must provide.

The psychologists admit being disturbed by the conviction that underlies this criterion: “Although self-esteem is an individual psychological attribute, it is ultimately culturally constructed in that there is no straightforward way to feel good about oneself in the absence of socially prescribed standards of right and wrong; and there are consequently no absolute and transcendental standards by which human beings can ever differentiate between good and evil” (Solomon, Greenberg, and

Pyszczynski 1998, 15). I, in turn, am troubled by what they consider the consequence of self-esteem being achieved by meeting social standards of right and wrong—that there are no absolute and transcendental standards by which humans can differentiate between good and evil. Even if one accepts this view, it is hardly a consequence of what precedes it. Moreover, many ethicists who agree that there are no absolute moral norms make it clear that they are speaking of material norms related to specific behaviors, not formal norms related to character. In other words, they would argue that there are permanent, enduring, transcultural norms—what are traditionally called virtues—but that these take various expressions in particular cultures and historical epochs (Gula 1982, 54ff).

Becker makes it clear that self-esteem, as he sees it, is not merely feeling good about oneself or comfortable with one's actions. Indeed, he decries human heroics that are achieved by the mediocre masses who “humbly and complainingly follow out the roles that society provides for their heroics and try to earn their promotions within the system: wearing the standard uniform—but allowing themselves to stick out, but ever so little and so safely, with a little ribbon or boutonniere, but not with head and shoulders” (1973, 6). In other words, one must remember that self-esteem is constituted by the “perception that one is a *valuable* member of a *meaningful* universe” (Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski 1998, 13). Unless social roles are in the service of a meaningful universe, any self-esteem garnered through their fulfillment will be ephemeral and this second criterion rendered ineffectual.

Finally, the third criterion for evaluating cultures—accomplish these first two goals without undue harm to others—points to a paradox that Becker highlights in his discussion of evil: “In seeking to avoid evil, man is responsible for bringing more evil into the world than organisms could ever do merely by exercising their digestive tracts. It is man's ingenuity, rather than his animal nature, that has given his fellow creatures such a bitter earthly fate” (1975, 5). If, as he claims, the more humans succeed in developing cultures that meet the material needs of their members and provide social roles that guarantee self-esteem, the more evil they inflict, then compliance with the third criterion of Solomon et al. may well be a recipe for mediocrity.

In addition to these criteria for evaluating cultural worldviews, based on the results of their mortality salience testing which indicated that liberal Americans like conservatives better after death reminders but that conservatives like liberals less, Solomon et al. offer as a “hopeful possibility” a “*liberal* worldview that places a high value on tolerance, open-mindedness, and respect for those who are different” (1998, 40). Here, although they are willing to prescribe formal norms that should characterize worldviews, they endorse virtues that cannot stand alone. While it is

easy to condemn the opposites of the qualities they recommend—the vices of intolerance, close-mindedness, and bigotry—should we not be equally careful of their excesses—license, detachment, and permissiveness? The recommended “liberal” worldview hardly provides a vision that inspires heroism. Indeed, it seems but a variation of what Becker judged deplorable in the contemporary world:

Modern man is drinking and drugging himself out of awareness, or he spends his time shopping, which is the same thing. As awareness calls for types of heroic dedication that his culture no longer provides for him, society contrives to help him forget. Or, alternatively, he buries himself in psychology in the belief that awareness all by itself will be some kind of magical cure for his problems. But psychology was born with the breakdown of shared social heroism; it can only be gone beyond with the creation of new heroisms that are basically matters of belief and will, dedication to a vision. (Becker 1973, 284)

BECKER'S PERSONAL HEROISM

Biography often gives us insight into theory, and this is certainly the case with Becker. After finishing *The Denial of Death* and before it received the Pulitzer Prize, Becker was diagnosed with cancer. Interviewed by Sam Keen (1974) just months before he died, Becker disclosed his own method of dealing with life and death. In response to Keen's comment that his personal philosophy of life seemed to be a “Stoic form of heroism,” Becker responded, “Yes, though I would add the qualification that I believe in God.” Later in the interview, he traced his religious journey in more detail: “I came out of a Jewish tradition but was an atheist for many years. I think the birth of my first child, more than anything else, was the miracle that woke me up to the idea of God, seeing something pop in from the void and seeing how magnificent it was, unexpected, and how much beyond our powers and ken. But I don't feel more religious because I am dying” (1974, 79). Nor did the nearness of death eliminate his agnosticism with respect to life after death:

Sitting here talking to you like this makes me very wistful that I won't be around to see these things [the effects of his books]. It is the creature who wants more experience, another ten years, another five, another four, another three. I think, gee, all these things going on and I won't be part of it. I am not saying I won't see them, that there aren't other dimensions in existence, but at least I will be out of the game and it makes me feel very wistful. (Keen 1974, 80)

It is obvious, then, that although Becker acknowledged intellectually that the ultimate concern need not be God, experience had made him a theist. In his correspondence with Harvey Bates, a Protestant minister, there are some clues as to the nature of this God he believes in—the God of Israel as described in the Psalms, especially Psalms 10:17–18, 11, 51, 131, and 138. He writes to Bates:

Every morning I read a psalm or two, and I find I agree with your list of outstanding ones. But occasionally I am struck by one you didn't note; for example, today, Psalm 131. The thing that is truly impressive about them is that they are genuine: when you get to a crucial spot, you always find the *right word*, and not the one you might expect if your religion was not authentic. Notice that Psalm 131, for example, ends with "hope" in the Lord; any other ideas [sic] would have been less than perfect. What can man do when he has seen his own pitiful smallness, his inability to do and to understand, except "hope"? (Bates 1977, 218)

In addition, Becker inquires if Bates is familiar with Kierkegaard's *Prayers*, (LeFevre 1956) and singles out Prayer 91, "O Holy Spirit," as conveying both what Kierkegaard knew ontologically and experienced personally (Bates 1977, 219). One can conclude that it expresses as much for Becker: "O Holy Spirit—we pray for ourselves and for all—O Holy Spirit, Thou who dost make alive; here it is not talents we stand in need of, nor culture, nor shrewdness, rather there is here too much of all that; but what we need is that Thou take away the power of mastery and give us life" (LeFevre 1956, 109).

This glimpse of Becker's spiritual life is helpful in clarifying several issues, not the least of which is whether Becker's anthropology is one marked by the philosophical concept of finitude or the religious symbol of creatureliness, a concern raised by Jane Kopas. Although reading Becker's work might incline one to decide in favor of finitude, Becker's relationship with God indicates that creatureliness is more apt. Kopas herself admits: "As his spirituality has shown, creatureliness was not merely an academic issue with Becker but the intersection of intellectual and existential concerns for which he had to find a credible scientific explanation." However, she recognizes also that Becker does not spell out the nature of this creatureliness: "But even with his solution to that issue he leaves us with an open question: 'How does one lean on God and give over everything to Him and still stand on his own feet as a passionate human being?' He is asking nothing less than how one can be a creature and a creator at the same time or how one can surrender control without surrendering responsibility" (Kopas 1982, 36).

If the key to answering Becker's question is, as Kopas claims, the key to understanding Becker's heroism in the face of death, then we are compelled to consider her recommendation that "the question needs to be taken up again in a comprehensive treatment of the religious symbol of creatureliness" (Kopas 1982, 36).

RESURRECTING CREATURELINESS

Although most world religions give us perspectives on what it means to be created, inasmuch as Becker's spirituality had a Judeo-Christian bias and he explored the Christian notion of creatureliness in his works, a study of

creatureliness from the Christian perspective seems most appropriate. Becker summed up his view of Christian creatureliness and how it had served to deal with mortality as follows:

When man lived securely under the canopy of the Judeo-Christian world picture he was part of a great whole; to put it in our terms, his cosmic heroism was completely mapped out, it was unmistakable. He came from the invisible world into the visible one by the act of God, did his duty to God by living out his life with dignity and faith, marrying as a duty, procreating as a duty, offering his whole life—as Christ had—to the Father. In turn he was justified by the Father and rewarded with eternal life in the invisible dimension. (1973, 159–60)

Because the earth and this life are but transitional stages, sufferings of every kind are to be expected and endured until the goal, heaven, is reached. For Becker, this is the ingenuity of Christianity: “It could take slaves, cripples, imbeciles, the simple and the mighty, and make them all secure heroes, simply by taking a step back from the world into another dimension of things, the dimension called heaven. Or we might better say that Christianity took creature consciousness—the thing man most wanted to deny—and made it the very *condition for* his cosmic heroism” (1973, 160).

Although Becker speaks of Christianity in general here, it should be noted that he differentiated various forms. In *Beyond Alienation*, he distinguished three main paths the ideal of freedom could follow. First, there was the path of the Catholic Counter Reformation, in which case “man was free here on earth only to guarantee the salvation of his everlasting soul. He was ‘free’ to comply with Church authority.” Second was the path of Protestantism as interpreted by Zwingli and Calvin whereby “man was ‘free’ here on earth in order to prove that he was elected and predestined by God. And the way to show that one had merit was to pile up the visible earthly signs of merit.” Third was the path of Luther—“the path that seemed like no freedom at all. Man’s will was bound; nothing depended on him, and as Luther so powerfully put it, he was a mere mask for the workings of God. . . . The most that man could hope to become, he could only become by grace: an open vehicle for the workings of the divine spirit” (1967, 207f.). Alongside this third path, however, Becker pointed out the “trail” of the Evangelical Radical sects, which, although rooted in Luther, embraced the socialism of the nineteenth century, resulting in, for example, the social gospel movement. It is along this trail that Becker found what he considered “true freedom”—“freedom to realize the divine design in nature, a freedom in which man would serve as a vehicle for higher powers. And true to the post-Enlightenment, man would bring his best reason to bear on the problem of man in society, in order to help make himself a perfect vehicle for these powers” (1967, 209f.).

Although his comments on these major paths of Christianity are so brief as to risk being dismissed as caricatures, Becker's point is clear. True freedom can be found, not in obedience, nor in predestination, nor, more surprisingly, in faith alone. True freedom will be found in a dialectic of faith and works. This view, in that it reflects God's design, has implications for Becker's view of creatureliness as a religious symbol.

Becker's correspondence with Bates, however, indicates that he had not reached this point in his own spiritual life. His letter of 20 September 1965 discloses a more Lutheran perspective: "At least I have been fortunate to learn that we do not achieve anything; that anything that is achieved, [is achieved] by grace. This is an immense discovery to me that is slowly transforming my whole world." Yet the transformation was not complete, for Becker continued: "Your view of Christianity as a self-discipline which grows out of thanksgiving for what has already been given, and not for what is to come, is perhaps the highest one could achieve. . . . It is gratitude for being born to serve. Evidently, the genuine Hebrew religiousness—and Buber's—is very similar: the belief that when man had done all he could, then God would do the rest, he would act" (Bates 1977, 219).

What Becker called "gratitude for being born to serve" may well be the dimension to which Kopas referred in her comment on Becker's contention that "Christianity took creature consciousness—the thing man most wanted to deny—and made it the very *condition for* his cosmic heroism" (1973, 160). She remarks that "Becker does not note that it [creature consciousness] was the condition for cosmic heroism because it was first the condition of a self-esteem that did not have to be earned" (1982, 31, n. 23). Or, to put it in the language typical of some Counter Reformation Catholic theologians, "the human person, created in the image and likeness of God, might lose that likeness, consisting of original justice and holiness, but retained [sic] the image of God" (Himes and Himes 1993, 33). Humanity, after the Fall, is still humanity, created by God in the image of God and, therefore, in essence good; and like the trinitarian God, social and capable of self-gift—clearly, grounds for self-esteem.

This picture of humanity that roots self-esteem in creatureliness, in being made by God, sheds light on Sebastian Moore's comment: "Becker's concept of the human being as radically unconvinced of his or her value and driven to *acquire* value, to build a livable lie, is in fact a description not of the human reality but of the cancer of sin that 'eats away the self'" (1981, 236). In other words, an anthropology based on creatureliness, rather than being an anthropology of depravity and corruption, is an anthropology of relationship and self-gift. Or as Moore puts it, "One glory of Christianity is: that which the world calls reality it calls sin" (1981, 236).

IMPLICATIONS OF CREATURELINESS

Identifying humanity as essentially good and social has implications for one's understanding of society. Although careful to note that they do not intend "to suggest that a theological doctrine can determine or explain the political and economic history of a nation," Michael and Kenneth Himes go on to argue that one's position on original sin nonetheless offers an insight into social thought (1993, 29). They connect the Protestant view of original sin and its pervasive corruption of humanity to society as conceived by Hobbes and Smith—a community based on self-interest. They offer no general social theory, however, for the view of original sin that leaves humanity's basic goodness intact; instead, they call attention to a fundamental principle of Catholic social teaching—"stress on the necessity for persons to express their social nature through the institutions they create to order their lives" (1993, 35).

While it would be possible to follow this lead and to examine and develop a more refined Catholic social theory, the sectarian nature of such an effort, were it successful, restricts its usefulness. Becker pointed us in an alternate and, it seems to me, more worthwhile direction with his assertion that "Christianity is in trouble not because its myths are dead but because it does not offer its ideal of heroic sainthood as an immediate personal one to be lived by all believers. In a perverse way, the churches have turned their backs both on the miraculousness of creation *and* on the need to do something heroic in this world" (1975, 164).

Largely through the ecological movement, Christian theology is rediscovering the mystery of creation, which for all too long has been slighted by a focus on redemption. Creatures, human and nonhuman alike, are seen as interrelated: diverse and at the same time one—the work of a God who is Trinity, three in one. Sallie McFague proposes the metaphor of the world as God's body to promote an understanding of the relationship between God and the world—which, she makes clear, is not one of pantheism but of panentheism: everything is not God, but God is in everything and everything is in God (McFague 1993, 149f). One of the important effects of panentheism in general, and the metaphor of the world as God's body in particular, is the elimination of a dualistic relation between God and the world, for the world is in God and God is in the world. Once this dualism is eliminated, others such as body-spirit, individual-social, and male-female are eroded as well. In this context, dualisms of whatever stripe must be considered the fruit of sin.

Becker, then, in remarking on the loss of the "miraculousness of creation," may have pointed to the weakness of his own anthropology—as an anthropology of sin, not creation, it is tainted by dualism. Becker, it should be noted, when asked by Keen if he had not overstressed the terror of life and undervalued its appeal, responded: "Well, all right. I think that

is very well put. I have no argument with it except to say that when one is doing a work, one is always in some way trying to counter prevailing trends." Giving his reason for choosing to accent the dark side of life, he continued: "If I stress the terror, it is only because I am talking to the cheerful robots. I think the world is full of too many cheerful robots who talk only about joy and the good things. I have considered it my task to talk about the terror. There is evil in the world" (Keen, 1974, 74).

Yet, it is the darkness of his view that makes it unpalatable to many. Certainly not one to deny evil, Latin American liberation theologian Leonardo Boff takes a different tack, one that grows out of a theology of creation characterized by the awareness of the interrelatedness of all things. Consider, for example, this passage, which, aside from its conclusion, could have been written by Becker:

The ecological crisis reveals the crisis of profound meaning in our way and system of life, and in our model of society and development. We can no longer base ourselves on power in the sense of domination, and on the irresponsible greed of nations and of individuals. We can no longer pretend to stand as gods above all other aspects of the universe; we must advance hand in hand with life itself and promote what is truly living. (Boff 1995, 37)

It is, moreover, the positive dimension of Boff's thought, the fostering of life, that gives rise to his proposal of a new, more integrative way of organizing society. "Ecologico-social democracy," as he calls it, "is a democracy that accepts not only human beings as its components but every part of nature, especially living species" (Boff 1995, 89). The three requirements that he designates as minimal for such a democracy provide a sharp contrast with the criteria for evaluating culture proposed by Solomon et al. The first requirement/criterion demands nothing less than an ecological vision of society that "requires that we humans should advance beyond our anthropocentric viewpoint, which is deeply embedded in Western culture and continually reaffirmed by a certain type of interpretation of the Hebrew and Christian religious traditions, which see human beings as lords of creation and the universe" (Boff 1995, 85). Such a view of the relations between humans and all other creatures demands that we renounce the view that "knowledge is power and that power is domination." It calls for the rejection of relations characterized by aggression whether against humans or nonhumans. It is nothing short of the recognition that "what does exist is an equilibrium between life and death and an interplay of relationships embracing all beings, since some have need of others to exist and subsist" (Boff 1995, 87).

The second characteristic Boff considers essential is ecological justice, which flows from acceptance of the other. Here he claims that the right of all to continued existence "produces a corresponding duty in human

beings to preserve and defend the existence of every being in creation” (Boff 1995, 87).

Third, an ecologico-social democracy must be marked by social justice, a basic constituent of ecological justice. Their relationship, according to Boff, “can be seen in the imposition by social ecology of the requirement of generational solidarity. Future generations have the right to inherit a conserved earth and a healthy biosphere. Those who come after us have the right to a future” (1995, 88).

What attitudes or virtues will be required for the establishment of such democracies? The ethic Boff outlines is nothing short of heroic: “We urgently need to develop an attitude of respect, of veneration, of compassion, of brotherhood and sisterhood, and of tenderness and fellowship with the whole of creation in its infinite grandeur, infinite smallness, and infinite variety” (Boff 1995, 90).

THE CHALLENGE

Are Americans still searching for a vision? Former governor Mario Cuomo, among others, answers with a resounding yes. His recent speech to the American College of Trial Lawyers articulated a view startlingly reminiscent of Becker:

Isn't America searching for something? Despite all the wealth that is so apparent, insinuating itself is a feeling that something's missing. There's no hero, no heroine, no great cause, no soaring ideology. We are riddled with political answers that seem too shallow, too short-sighted, too explosive, too harsh. We need something real to believe in, to hold onto. Something deeper, something grander that can help us deal with our problems by making us better than we are—instead of meaner. That can lift our aspirations instead of lowering them. (Lewis 1997, 15A)

If, then, the need is still there, does the understanding of creatureliness that promotes the notion of an ecologico-social democracy provide a vision with the potential to inspire humanity in the waning years of the twentieth century? If so, “perhaps then the human race is not doomed to self-extinction. Perhaps a refined understanding of *why people do what they do when they do it* will ‘introduce just that minute measure of reason to balance destruction’” (Becker 1975, 170; cited in Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski 1998, 41). Perhaps we can recognize that “we are co-citizens of the same planet.” Perhaps we can feel that we are “brothers and sisters in the same cosmic adventure.” Perhaps we can live “surveyed by the fatherly and motherly eyes of God” (Boff 1995, 90). Perhaps.

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