Guest Editor's Introduction

Just after U.S. forces compelled the Japanese surrender by the use of nuclear weapons, Albert Einstein, in 1946, cautioned that the release of atom power changed everything—everything, that is, except our way of thinking. Einstein saw that the central human problem has always been located in the collective heart of humankind.

Ernest Becker was troubled by the same realization. He always pushed the question of why people act the way they do, particularly why human actions, no matter how heroically well-intended, seem to revolve around a fascination with power and violence. His investigation of human motivation led to an astonishing and seminal synthesis of science, psychology, and religion. While Becker ended his life's work in an appropriate state of caution concerning human possibilities and the human future, his work provides substantial new ground for hope that ways around the unintended evil within the human heart may be found. As Becker wrote in *Escape from Evil* (p. 169), "evil itself is now amenable to critical analysis and, conceivably, to the sway of reason" (see "An Ernest Becker Bibliography" in this issue of *Zygon*, pp. 87 ff.).

Many readers of *Zygon* will already be acquainted with at least the bare-bones outline of Becker's theory: that the overwhelming anxiety of death awareness occupies a central place in the human heart. His claim is, in fact, that the energy seething under the surface of the psyche is not primarily sexual urgency or aggression drives or evolutionary selfishness but rather mortality awareness itself. Aggression, the will to power, the drive to accumulate are all case examples in particular contexts of strategies for coping with an even deeper-seated need to deny the reality of death.

Understanding repressed death fear is crucial in deciphering our need to dehumanize others, to scapegoat, and to pseudospeciate so as to create the we-they classifications of good guys–bad guys. This is the mind-set of violence, prejudice, and enmity. Although other theoretical perspectives purport to explain this kind of mind-set, only Becker's theory can adequately account for recent laboratory findings. *Zygon* is an ideal forum in which to broadcast beyond the confines of experimental social psychology that there now is strong, sophisticated, empirical scientific evidence that substantiates Becker's basic insights.

Becker's scholarly reach insistently spanned the social sciences and the study of belief systems. This same interdisciplinary range, however, left

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his work largely unheralded among specialists and condemned him to the life of an academic nomad. It was not until just after his early death at age forty-nine that his book *The Denial of Death* won the 1974 Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction. This caused a brief worldwide surge of interest in his work. Yet, the 1975 posthumous publication of the manuscript *Escape from Evil*, which though left in unfinished form has nevertheless been considered by many (including myself) to be his magnum opus, did not receive even close to the attention it deserved.

Now new generations of working scientists, philosophers, social critics, and theologians are reviving his project. Although his quest was for a unified "science of humankind," Becker himself was a "library anthropologist." His dialogue was with other authors and their ideas. He was aware of some early laboratory testing of death denial, but it is doubtful that he foresaw experiments exploring his central ideas deep in the unconscious. That, however, has been the project of a richly gifted network of young scientists.

In 1980, Sheldon Solomon, a fledgling professor fresh from rigorous training and a Ph.D. in experimental social psychology based "on method alone, free of content," started to read Becker and couldn't put him down. He took a year of academic leave to contemplate the effects Becker's writings were having on him. He consulted with his two best friends from graduate school, and together they outlined a program to subject Becker's central ideas to the experimental methodology they knew so well. They designed a research tool, "mortality salience," to probe the unconscious for the universal inflexible motives Becker "found in the work of [Otto] Rank, in his insistence on the fundamental dynamic of the fear of life and death, and man's [sic] urge to transcend this fear in a culturally constituted heroism" (*Escape from Evil*, p. xvii).

The lead article by Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski presents a spirited overview and interpretation of the great body of empirical evidence they have found with their pioneering probes using increasingly sophisticated experimental deftness. Following this centerpiece, three scholars then offer contributions and commentaries.

Daniel Liechty, a clinical social worker, holds doctorates in historical theology and in pastoral counseling and has recently written two books on Becker, one in theology and one in psychotherapy (see Becker bibliography). Liechty's paper makes the case that the demonstration of the scientific strength of the empirically testable aspects of Becker's central ideas lends credibility to the general theory of death denial as an organizing and integrating principle for a broadly interdisciplinary social science of human behavior, including, it should be said, politics and religion.

Sally Kenel, a former science teacher and now professor of theology, published a 1988 dissertation on Becker, entitled *Mortal Gods*, as a source

for modern fundamental theology (see Becker bibliography). Kenel's perspective on Ernest Becker is strongly informed by systematic, philosophical concerns. She draws on recent ecological streams in her extension of Becker's treatment of human creatureliness, suggesting this exploration could be less of the "dark" side of sin and more of creation itself. This change of emphasis, in turn, fosters connections between Becker's thought and, for example, the "ecologico-social democracy" of liberation theologian Leonardo Boff. Kenel's essay echoes a common initial reaction among readers of Becker: that his philosophy is too pessimistic, too dark, too focused on the negative. While agreeing with this criticism, Kenel points out how close Becker's supposed deep pessimism is to more positive positions and ecumenically leaves it to a politician, Mario Cuomo, to offer the benediction.

Eugene Webb's background is in comparative literature, and he is the founder of the comparative religion program at the University of Washington. His most recent books have deeply and clearly explored consciousness in the context of the thought of philosophers and psychologists, so he is well positioned to offer an overview.

Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski follow Becker in harnessing for service Freud's original formulation of psychological defenses. They use this as a heuristic device to generate testable hypotheses for teasing out the psychological processes that underlie their empirical findings. In his essay, Webb examines this investigational tool not as a heuristic device but in regard to a second claim: that, in addition to finding strong empirical support for Becker's ideas, they are also proving Freud's theories of the dynamic unconscious. This context enables Webb to discuss the criticism that Becker is too dark and to consider whether the scientists interpret their results positivistically. Viewing the possibilities of these stark categories, he draws attention to the dangers they pose and, briefly considering other theoretical and empirical work, offers a broad view of inclusivist positions. Some of these, perhaps all, could be accommodated in the research program of Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski, given their existentialist and fallibilist commitments.

In reflecting on the scientific substantiation of Becker's work, which, it should be noted, none of the essayists questions, I ponder the criticism that Becker is too dark, too deeply pessimistic. The empirical finding that certain groups of people are less given to pseudospeciation and enmity for different others does indeed give us hope that some worldviews are more able to foster peace or at least place rational limits on violence than others. But Becker watched (as did I) as World War II started, with Neville Chamberlain representing, to all appearances, just such a way of thinking. Back then, of course, he did not have a depth understanding of mind-sets, neither his own nor—and this is more to my point—the mind-set of

Adolf Hitler and his followers. Will our deep knowledge of human unconscious motivation, which is now being confirmed empirically, help us to avoid such horrors?

At the close of this bloodiest of centuries, I can well appreciate why Becker ended on a cautious note of hope. Despite the potent prescription he found for the problem of the heart that so troubled Einstein, Becker's prognosis for human possibilities and the human future isn't sanguine, and yet it isn't indelibly dark. Good is conceivable. It is conceivable, Becker wrote, that the sway of reason could prevail over evil. That is our hope, but as Sam Keen says in a superb new foreword for the 1997 printing of *Denial of Death*, it is "a hope that is terribly fragile and wonderfully potent."

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READERS' INTERNET RESPONSES ENCOURAGED

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