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Expanded Transference: A Humanities Perspective on the Generative Core of Ernest Becker's Theory of Human Nature

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Expanded Transference: A Humanities Perspective on the Generative Core of Ernest Becker's Theory of Human Nature

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Abstract

The death anxiety thesis is widely considered to be Ernest Becker's primary contribution to social theory and is associated with his most widely read book, *The Denial of Death* (1973). This essay suggests Becker is understood in a more sophisticated and nuanced way when his death anxiety thesis is situated in the context of his earlier work in the humanities and social sciences. The death anxiety thesis itself is one component of a much broader theoretical conceptualization of expanded transference, a constant thread through all of Becker's writings from his doctoral dissertation through his final posthumously published works. Furthermore, the contention here is that this conceptualization of expanded transference provides a far more comprehensive and complex interpretation matrix for the understanding of human motivation, as well as cultural and political phenomena, than the death anxiety thesis does in isolation.

Keywords

transference, Ernest Becker, death anxiety, existential psychology

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Introduction

Despite a very short academic career, Ernest Becker's work has had an out-sized and continuing influence. By far his most referenced books are *The Denial of Death* (Becker, 1973), which he completed just before receiving a diagnosis of late-stage cancer, and the posthumously published *Escape from Evil* (Becker, 1975). These two books were originally conceived and significantly written as one project. However, on the advice of his publisher, Becker submitted the chapters for what became *The Denial of Death* separately. The chapters and chapter sketches that became *Escape from Evil*, according to the prefatory note of the volume (p. xv), were completed and published as an independent book thanks to the work of Becker's wife, Marie, and his literary editor, Robert Wallace. *The Denial of Death* subsequently went on to win a Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction. It emerged as a long-standing pillar in the field of thanatology and death education and has served as one of the fundamental texts in the existential reinterpretation of psychoanalysis. Both books have remained continuously in print for the last 50 years.

These two volumes far outshined Becker's earlier work in terms of exposure and readership, and decades of observation of the Ernest Becker Foundation's online discussion board suggests that a good many people who consider themselves well versed in Becker's death denial thesis have read almost none of Becker's other eight books, not to mention the dozens of articles and lectures he published in various professional journals prior to 1973 (Liechty, 2017). A significant source of this neglect is, perhaps ironically, exactly the success of terror management theory (TMT) in social psychology. TMT was derived originally from an interpretation of Becker's death anxiety thesis, operationalized in TMT as the mortality salience hypothesis. Although many TMT researchers have been clear about Becker's influence on their theorizing (Solomon et al., 2015), many others know of Becker's ideas all but exclusively through the lens of TMT.

While the widespread success of TMT has undoubtedly brought attention to the importance of Ernest Becker's work, its focus is exclusively on aspects of Becker's ideas that emerged in his final published books, with side glances at best to his earlier writings. Nonetheless, a large part of responsibility for neglect of his earlier work must be laid at Becker's own front door, for in the preface to *The Denial of Death*, Becker wrote ". . . I feel that [this book] is my *first mature work*." (p. xi, emphasis added). This can be read as a direct invitation from the author himself to view the earlier work as prolegomena, at best, to understanding his "mature" ideas. Unfortunately, too many otherwise thorough and careful writers accept at face value that invitation to neglect the earlier work.

The contention here is that Becker's earlier work is not only useful but absolutely essential for understanding and interpreting the later work, and for grasping the generative nuances of the death anxiety thesis in particular. Per Liechty (1995):

> . . . the development of Becker's thought does not progress in a simple linear direction. I have found it more useful to conceive of its development on the model of a conch-like spiral. The same core issues of human behavior and motivation remained throughout the corpus of his work. Each time he returned to a particular problem, he incorporated what he had written before and expanded it with new readings, new metaphors, and new angles drawn from a wide sweep of materials from various disciplines. Therefore, for example, while he began by referring to "low self-esteem," which in later writings became "behavioral poverty," then "alienation," then "sin," and finally "death denial," he was speaking of the same human problem and simply using the language of his current interlocutors to express it." (ix)

The death anxiety thesis is but one end of a thread that runs throughout Becker's work. It is, of course, possible to read the thread of continuity in Becker's work backwards; that is, to read a nascent death anxiety thesis back into Becker's earlier work. That exercise might even have some value to it, highlighting aspects of his earlier work that might otherwise be overlooked. However, it is much more legitimate to read his work forward, thus coming to understand the death anxiety thesis as the end of an interpretive thread that runs throughout his work. This perspective moves interpretation of his ideas beyond the genetic, biological, and social constraints of empirical academic psychology, emphasizing the generative character of his death anxiety thesis. The interpretive thread suggested here is the concept of expanded transference.

The Concept of Expanded Transference

Transference as a clinical concept dates at least back to observations made by Freud and the early circle of psychoanalysts, that analysands tend to develop extremely strong, emotionally charged, and unrealistic mental pictures of their analysts (Freud, 1912, 1913). Patients displace earlier wishes, emotions, perceptions, and fantasies onto their analysts. They misunderstand and misperceive their analysts and expect them to gratify and resolve past needs, deprivations, and conflicts. Thompson (2017) describes the classical analytic position: "transference is conceived as a rarefied, trance-like state of child-like hypnotic regression" (p. 127). The perceptions are illusory and even hallucinatory (Nunberg, 1951). The transference is "an unconscious

misunderstanding of the present in the sense of the past" (Fenichel, 1945/1996, p. 506). Analysts become a "reincarnation of the parents" (p. 559). As Barratt (personal communication, December 29, 2023) explained, "transference is a projection of a representation of someone else" misperceived in the other. Or more recently from an attachment perspective, transference involves "that what may be excluded from conscious awareness . . . the aspect of the self that is aroused and unregulated" (McLuskey & O'Toole, 2019, p. 23). And there are often multiple simultaneous transference fantasies that layer and occlude one another (Barratt, 2019, p. 74), overdetermined by "a multiplicity of internal object relations at a variety of developmental levels" (Ogden, 1989, p. 134).

The transference makes the analyst into a fantasy, as patients distort the intellectual wisdom, emotional maturity, compassion, powers of insight, and depths of comprehension and understanding of their therapists. The analyst sometimes becomes something of a prosthetic ego for the client, providing ego strength where the client lacks it, or is alternately manifesting the same fantasized qualities (and deficits) of the parents or caregivers. This repetition of past perceptions and fantasies makes the analyst into a parental surrogate who affirms, supports, judges, or condemns the patient. The patient recapitulates dependency needs, bestows parental authority on the analyst, and experiences the analytic encounter as a repetition of all the earlier yearning, dependency, conflict, wounds, and relationship dynamics. Although this concept is rooted primarily in psychoanalysis, professional psychotherapists and counselors across the spectrum recognize this tendency in their clients, and many articles, books, magazines, and workshops have been devoted over the decades to topics of how to recognize and work therapeutically with transference dynamics in the clinical setting (Bauer, 1994; Ellman, 1991; Esman, 1990; Stern & Hirsch, 2017; Thompson, 2004).

One major approach is to "analyze the transference," that is, interpret the transference as providing key insights into the particular problems the client might be facing. For example, were the transference that of picturing the therapist as a strong parental figure, this might be a clue to the lack of strong parental experience in the life of the client and the need to fill that absence in the present with the image of the therapist. Likewise, a transference image of extreme caring and compassion projected onto the therapist might be an indicator of a lack of care and compassion in the experiential history of the client.

Even when clients remain totally unaware of the deficits in their experiential history and narrate their experiential history in diametrically opposite terms, the content of the transference in a particular case may well provide the therapist with key insights into client needs about which the client is

otherwise completely silent or would deny outright in the verbal exchange of therapy. In effect, the transference dynamic often points most directly to the "deficit holes" in that person's experiential history, even when the conscious narrative the client provides would lead listeners in a very different or even opposite direction.

It should be noted that conceptualizations of transference have evolved significantly in the last 50 years, but this paper remains focused on the ways Becker expands our understanding of human motivation, desire, belief, ideology, fantasy, and devotion. To set the stage of this essay, it suffices simply to remind ourselves of what we already know about the concept of transference from our clinical training and practice. Keeping that in mind, even in his earliest publications, Becker moved this basic concept beyond the confines of therapy, with the observation that very similar dynamics of transference found at the individual level in the therapeutic dyad are also recognizable on the public level of interpersonal and collective social interactions and largely characterize the relationships individuals maintain with people, places, and things in the general social world. Just as the client in therapy draws on the projected powerful image of the therapist for courage and buoyancy for living, so do we all draw on our own projected images for living our everyday lives.

Stating of the case this bluntly may provoke initial skeptical resistance, but what Becker is suggesting is that all of us as individuals have "deficit holes" in our psycho-emotion make up and experiential histories. While we have our strengths, we also feel ourselves in places to be weak, inadequate, in need, lacking in something (we don't necessarily know what), and in general, we strive to keep these feelings of need and inadequacy hidden from others and (perhaps especially) from ourselves. To maintain our self-esteem, the sense of forward movement in daily life, we habitually look to sources of power, wholeness, and completion outside of ourselves, and find strength for living in identification with such sources. Objectively, this strength, power, wholeness, and self-sufficiency we see in our "transference objects" are largely projections of our own making; we attach ourselves to them through vicarious identification, thus drawing on the sense of power and perfection contained by these projections to fill our deficit holes and complete us as human beings.

The key thread running through Becker's writings is this concept of expanded transference, the habitual projection of images of wholeness, power, and perfection onto external objects, and then, by vicarious identification, drawing on those very objects for strength to live in the present. Such transference objects may be persons, places, or things (or even intangibles such as ideologies or professional titles and personae), and we seek antidotes for our own conscious and unconscious inadequacies by embracing

identification with the wholeness, power, and perfection of our projected images. This ceaseless impulse provides feelings of security, significance, and meaning in our lives, in fusion with grander sources of power and purpose.

Consider this concept in one quotidian context outside of therapy. Looking through any magazine or other media exhibiting the products of our multi-billion-dollar advertising industry, we see a simple and very repetitive set of visual images that convey the inadequacy of the reader and then present readers with panaceas to attain full and verdant lives antithetical to their own feared and hidden defects. These advertisements work because people are desperate to rescue themselves from inadequacy and insignificance, and people throw themselves into magical solutions enabling them to feel important, significant, special, beautiful, and desired, beyond the ignominious anonymity of multitudinous nobodies.

Fusing their identities with their wealth, possessions, trappings of success, and prowess enables people to imagine they can transcend their pathetic insignificance. People can invest themselves in pseudopodal extensions of their egos: Ideologies, groups, and material objects are all symbols of fusion with something dominant and momentous. Hence, for Becker (1971, 1973, 1975), one's fantasy of personal value and superiority can be demonstrated, for example, by joining a formidable movement. Or one can become the agent of some powerful executive or political leader, now appointed with divine importance and righteous power. Or one can fuse one's identity, self-worth, and superiority with the exorbitant electric car one can parade before others. This transferential expansion of the self is subsequently seen in the catastrophic shattering of identity when such fusions fail: when the sanctimonious group is defeated, the leader humiliated, or the exorbitant chariot scratched. Then one falls weeping into the bosom of one's mother (or surrogate), or lashes out vehemently.

Examination of almost any aspect of the human pageant will illustrate this dynamic of expanded transference. We think offhandedly here of religion, entertainment, professional sports, business politics, and really all areas in which admiration of and vicarious identification with heroes plays a large role. But for our purposes here, these cursory examples should suffice to give a good idea of what the concept of expanded transference looks like.

Expanded Transference in Becker's Writing

At the very time he completed his final books, Becker said this in a dialogical interview about his self-analysis and basic orientation:

> I think that [my self-analysis process] was a big event in my life, lasting over a period of years. In my mid-30s, I suddenly started to experience great anxiety, and I wanted to find out why. So I took a pad and pencil to bed and when I would wake up in the middle of the night with a really striking dream, I would write it down, and write out what feeling I had at certain points in the dream. Gradually my dream messages, my unconscious, told me what was bothering me—that I was living by *delegated powers*. My power sources were not my own and they were, in effect, defunct. I think if you are talking about analysis what you are revealing to the person is his lack of independence, his conditioning, his fears and what his power source is. (Keen, 1974/2005, p. 228, emphasis added)

Living on delegated powers, powers that are not his own; this is a striking encapsulation of his concept of expanded transference, even more noteworthy because it was made in an interview from a hospital bed, just weeks before he died, and just after he learned that his book, *The Denial of Death*, had been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. He spoke with Keen about his death anxiety thesis, clearly not as a self-contained idea but rather as a point to which his previous work had led him thus far.

Like all of his ideas, Becker's concept of expanded transference developed and evolved. In his first book, *Zen: A Rational Critique* (1960), it appeared as a recognition that there is a very direct analogy between the transference dynamics found in psychotherapeutic dyad and between the Zen Master and students. In the first edition of *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (1962), and in *The Revolution in Psychiatry* (1964), the embryonic concept of expanded transference appeared in the exploration how the human personality is built from the outside in–in relationships with others in a social context. What is crucial here is the ways that the developing self is so dependent on the love and affirmation of others that we remain relatively fragile creatures throughout life, desperate for the emotional nourishment that sustains us, and extremely vulnerable to anxiety, terror, fragmentation, and collapse when deprived of our sources of meaning and significance. From Becker's perspective even those who seem autonomous and inwardly sustained have still derived that sustenance from others, while most of us are desperate to absorb some kind of strength and support from others, and by extension, those groups, ideologies, objects, and exhibitions of prowess suggested earlier.

Deserving special attention here is Becker's book *Angels in Armor* (1969). While often overlooked as a sort of hodge-podge of collected essays, this is the book that really bridges the span between his early writings and the powerhouse books that would soon follow. The various chapters of *Angels in Armor* present the concept of expanded transference directly. The opening

chapter, "Everyman as Pervert" (pp. 1–38), connects the need to draw powers for living from external objects outside of oneself, and this is then connected to the so-called sexual perversions, most particularly fetishism. The psycho-analytic concept of fetishism suggests that the fear of sexuality requires sub-stitute objects that escape and diminish the threat and thereby enable fulfillment. Becker applies this to life outside the boudoir. Human beings experience life as menacing and require forms of armor to make themselves feel secure enough to live. The fetishist is the ordinary person drawing power from external sources out of insecurity and anxiety, and assimilating such energy from the fetish is a perfect symbol of the way people absorb strength from external sources to endure and sustain their lives. Becker characterizes this as "the pathology of normalcy" (pp. 14ff).

In a chapter entitled "Paranoia" (pp. 121–154), Becker examines the psy-chological and emotional consequences of losing connections to those we have relied on as a secure power base:

> If I were asked for the single most striking insight into human nature and the human condition, it would be this: that no person is strong enough to support the meaning of his life unaided by something outside him. But this is the last thing the individual will admit to himself, because to admit it means to break away the armored mask of righteous self-assurance that surrounds his whole life-striving. And it is just this that would push him to the brink of desperation and disintegration. To drop the pretense of self-sufficiency is to destroy the laboriously built-up social self; and if we destroy it we must build an entirely new one, on entirely new foundations of meaning and self-worth. (pp. 130ff)

And in the final chapter, "What is Basic Human Nature" (pp. 157–192), Becker introduces the idea of human character as a vital lie, an attempt to present oneself as strong and autonomous yet in constant need to draw the power for living from external sources.

This short rehearsal of highlights demonstrates that the thread of expanded transference runs through Becker's writings. This thesis was already intro-duced in recognizable form in the second edition of *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (1972) and comes together most forcefully in *The Denial of Death* (1973). Becker devotes all of chapter 4, "Human Character as a Vital Lie" (pp. 47–66), to further exploration of the idea that there is a fundamental illu-sion of autonomy at the core of the human psyche. To maintain that vital lie as firmly, plausibly, and enduringly as possible, the human being will try to negate consciously and unconsciously perceived weaknesses through trans-ference relationships and actively abjure and avoid relationships, situations, and experiences that threaten exposure of this vital lie. Essentially, an indi-vidual character is sculpted not only by the relationships, situations, and

experiences the individual has chosen but also by the relationships, situations, and experiences one has guarded against and refused to acknowledge. We move toward the elements in the environment that support the desired transference affect and away from those which undermine it, a kind of socially expanded application of the *Lustprinzip*.

In chapter 7, "The Spell Cast by Persons—The Nexus of Unfreedom" (pp. 127–158), Becker lays out the concept of expanded transference very explicitly in the context of examining the relationship between the crowd and the leader. The crowd looks to the leader as a transference object on which to project their need for security, strength, direction, wisdom, courage, and guilt atonement. This is something noticed by many researchers in politics, philosophy, social sciences, and religion. Becker breaks new ground in this discussion by emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between the leader and the crowd.

The crowd needs the leader as a transference object capable of diminishing the collective reservoir of doubt, weakness, fear, guilt, and inferiority. The actual qualities of the leader are unseen and immaterial here, as the only quality really essential is the ability to convincingly play the required role and make the projection seem plausible. Projecting fantasies of phenomenal prowess onto the leader, the identity followers adopt vicariously frees them from their own sense of insignificance, weakness, anxiety, and unworthiness. But the leader is equally desperate for the continuing adulation of the crowd to remain free of his own self-doubt, fear, guilt, and worthlessness, which lurk under the surface of his psyche. This mutual need for each other bonds the leader and crowd, and the extremes they will pursue to maintain that bond exemplify the poles of expanded transference, the fear of life, as well as the fear of death.

The final chapter, "Psychology and Religion: What is the Heroic Individual" (pp. 255–285), is Becker's culminating discussion of expanded transference. He advances the view that the need for transference objects, for projecting power for living onto external sources such as people (leaders, heroes of all sorts, family patriarchs/matriarchs), ideas (ideologies, political parties, professional identities), places (the homeland, the shrine, holy ground), and things (possessions, fetish objects, good luck charms), is utterly endemic to the human condition. Human beings simply cannot rid themselves of their transference objects and continue to live a human life.

We can relinquish one particular transference object as we slowly come to recognize that the psychological, emotional, social, or economic costs of maintaining and defending its plausibility are too exacting. But we surrender one transference object only by exchanging it for another one perceived as even more valuable, more powerful, more able to sustain us in living than the

now devalued and demythologized transference object we formerly coveted. This is not to imply that the process is quick and easy; writing in a time before the boom in brain chemistry research, Becker's descriptive understanding of clinical depression (Becker, 1964) is largely that of a picture of human existence in the time between the failure of previous transference objects (depression) and attainment of new ones to replace them (recovery).

The solution to the human condition Becker finally poses in *The Denial of Death* is not primarily one of reason, insight, or independence. One is not consciously demythologizing, eschewing, and walking away from recognition of the reality of one's need for an adequate transference object necessary to sustain existence. It is not as though merely seeing through the dynamic is sufficient to neutralize it. Becker argued unequivocally that it is impossible for human beings to live apart from the dynamics of expanded transference. This is what we must endure as conscious, mortal, fragile beings suffering awareness of our vulnerability and mortality.

The dilemma and culminating challenge Becker finally poses in the book most strongly delineating his death anxiety thesis is simply this: At what level of projective imagination (abstraction) will we seek our transference objects? That is to say, what kind of transference object(s) most unambiguously enhance and promote human life and dignity? Will we continue to remain satisfied in maintaining the characterological vital lie of autonomy through the vicarious identification with idols, fetishes, ideologies, hero worship, and self-aggrandizement of the material-level transference objects, despite their instability, and thus demand ever-greater sacrifices of actual living to maintain their plausibility? Or will we keep pushing deeper into our individual and collective imagination for transference objects that continually transcend and constantly expand, rather than shrink, our mental, emotional, and spiritual horizons?

Becker saw only pursuit of the latter type of transference object as worthy of human striving. Significantly, dying of cancer, Becker accepted Sam Keen's characterization of his view of life as "Stoicism," but Becker quickly added ". . . with the qualification that I believe in God" (Keen, 1974/2005, p. 225). What Becker *means* by God is however another discussion. Since Becker dissected religious belief and worship as forms of fantasy, immortality ideology, death-denying illusion, social neurosis, and transference, whatever he meant by the God he believes in must be understood as something radically "other" than literalistic belief in a divine entity. Unlike the literalistic deities inspiring submission, genuflection, dogmatism, fanaticism, idolatry, coercion, crusades, inquisitions, and holy wars, Becker's God is a deliberate transference illusion devoted to enhancing and promoting human life and dignity (cf. Liechty, 2004; Piven, 2002, 2018).

"My First Mature Work"

So what then did Becker mean when he wrote in the Preface to *The Denial of Death*:

> A second reason for my writing this book is that I have had more than my share of problems with this fitting-together of valid truths in the past dozen years. I have been trying to come to grips with the ideas of Freud and his interpreters and heirs, with what might be the distillation of modern psychology—and now I think I have finally succeeded. In this sense this book is a bid for the peace of my scholarly soul, an offering for intellectual absolution; I feel that it is my first mature work. (Becker, 1973, p. ix)

By now, we can dismiss the idea that he was signaling his earlier work was on a wrong path, unnecessary or even surpassed. Quite the contrary, if you read the quote in its entirety, rather than only the much-quoted last sentence, Becker was clearly indicating that he saw significant continuities running throughout his body of work. He pointed directly at "*trying to come to grips with the ideas of Freud and his interpreters and heirs*" as a most important theme running throughout his writings. What was the importance that Becker placed on this and how does *The Denial of Death* bring at least some peace to his scholarly soul?

More than anything else, Becker conceived of himself as an *Enlightenment* scholar, heir to a tradition of humanistic endeavor dating back to Rousseau, Voltaire, and the Age of Reason. In the tradition of humanistic Enlightenment scholarship, Becker closely identified not so much with particular intellectual giants of the history, although he investigated and wrote on many of them, including a number of the more obscure figures often overlooked by others. Rather, Becker identified closely with what he understood as their overarching motivation for learning and education: to critically examine human life and society and to provide tools, ideas, and avenues for the improvement of human society. Becker's own heroic self-image was gained through his identification with this tradition of learning and scholarship, a tradition that examined human misery and held up the amelioration of human misery as its guiding light. We make the elements of human misery our objects of study, and thus, we are also able to formulate concrete, empirically based ideas and experiments for ameliorating those forces of human misery.

Becker was very well aware of his identification with the humanistic tradition of Enlightenment scholarship and wore it quite explicitly as a badge of honor. In his early work, Becker was vociferously optimistic about the prospects of post-Freudian-tinged social efforts as the pathway to bring this

humanistic Enlightenment vision to fruition. He was completely immersed in an ongoing project of combining Marx and Freud (sociology and psychology, broadly interpreted) in just the right measure.

In Becker's own writings, this early optimism visibly peaks in the "alienation curriculum" outlined in *Beyond Alienation: A Philosophy of Education for the Crisis of Democracy* (1967). That book was a fuller-length treatment of ideas Becker first published in an essay, "Personality Development in the Modern World: Beyond Freud and Marx" (1963). These works brim with Becker's optimism about human prospects. Strong and persistent advocacy for what, in our current parlance, we would call progressive social policy fairly characterizes this early half of his professional career (*circa* 1960 until 1967).

In the second half of Becker's career, roughly from 1968 until 1974, shifts and serious doubts start to creep in. Especially in *The Structure of Evil: An Essay on the Unification of the Science of Man* (1968), we find Becker wrestling more soberly with the long history of revolutions, revolts, and social utopian experiments aimed at implementing some of the key humanistic ideas stirred up by the Enlightenment. Optimistic, hopeful, and rooted in solid empirical-critical theory, Becker had to reckon with the fact that, from Bentham's Panopticon, to the rise of the Napoleonic Empire, to the show trials of Stalinism, to the Cuban dictatorship of Castro, not even to mention all of the small-scale experimental utopian communities that sprouted up across America in the 19th and 20th centuries, all of our best human ventures to implement humanistic Enlightenment ideas and policies failed miserably, often leading to results diametrically opposite to their supposed intentions.

It must be remembered that Becker himself was living through the experience of watching the "brightest and the best" leadership that American democratic meritocracy had to offer lead the nation directly into Cold War policies of militarism and the nuclear arms race, the morass of Vietnam, and the deep social divisions that continue to this day and seem like recurring *déjà vu*. Even the post-Freudian humanistic social psychology, the civil rights movement, and the youth free-speech movements on which Becker had placed considerable hope were visibly devolving into cults of personality, widespread drug use, racial and ethnic separatism, and increasing violence on campuses and in the streets–from Flower Power to Charles Manson, as we might say.

Clearly something was deeply wrong, and the questions that began haunting Becker at this time revolved directly around his ongoing intellectual battle with Freud. Through his studies of Plato and others, Becker recognized a strongly pessimistic undercurrent in Western thought, inferring that what human beings seem to want more than anything else is to be ruled over by a powerful entity, whether a dictatorial ruler or a savior-redeemer figure. We

hope for a benevolent ruler, but to stave off incipient anarchy, we accept those who does not hesitate to use force to maintain social order. People have a longing to be hypnotized, to seek visions of salvation and redemption (sacred or secular), to rage against ideas and beings that menace them. They crave leaders who will obliterate evil and willingly relinquish their freedom and autonomy to be protected and delivered from evil by that savior. Becker resisted this stream of thought and held valiantly to the Enlightenment vision of human betterment and liberation. But if this more pessimistic view pointed toward an unmovable fact about human nature, then the humanistic Enlightenment vision of a people engaged in ongoing democratic self-governance was largely doomed from the start.

This focused Becker's attention squarely on the issue of the moral foundations of human nature. Is human nature at its deepest roots selfish, evil, and violent, and therefore in need of constant strong-arm policing and discipline? Or is human nature at deepest roots positive, good, and generous, and thus mainly in need of creating and encouraging social conditions in which such naturally pro-social characteristics can flourish?

In his early writings, Becker leaned easily toward the more positive view of human nature, opting, we might say, for Locke over Hobbes. In contrast, Freud leaned strongly in the Hobbesian direction and tried to construct a psychology fully compatible with the (then new) Darwinian understanding of human development through the struggle for survival. Freud insisted that human beings are animals and that the higher aspects of the human character–the aspects we associate with "civilization," such as conscience (superego), not to mention rationality, esthetic appreciation, and spirituality–are not innate but secondarily inculcated through a painful and damaging socialization process and maintained throughout life by application of strong covert and overt social force.

In Freud's view, human beings are driven by id impulses, by selfish, pleasure-seeking drives. We harbor aggressive, antisocial wishes. But we are also vulnerable beings who are desperate for love and fear abandonment. Our needs, vulnerabilities, and fears also render us susceptible to trauma, wounding, defensiveness, and homicidal rage. Secretly, we wish to murder our fathers and lynch our neighbors whenever they thwart our selfish desires. Socialization forces moral strictures upon us, demands the renunciation of wishes, frustrates our desires, and inflicts the terror of punishment, hatred, castration, loss of love, unrelenting guilt, and threat of retaliation for our own malignant wishes (Piven, 2004). We even form groups to regress in infantile dependence on parental surrogates, but in those groups, anonymity protects us from moral culpability, as we seek to act out our forbidden and malicious thoughts (Thompson, 2004, 2017). We displace our fear and rage outward,

finding enemies to destroy. And we force our children and citizens into a mutually coercive, repressive, guilt-inducing compliance that renders whole societies neurotic. We become more privately pathological and socially delusional than integrated or mature (Freud, 1908, 1912, 1921, 1930, 1939).

Freud insisted that any compromise of this view of the higher faculties of human nature was a lapse into a pre-Darwinian mysticism, which animated the pre-scientific psychology he resisted mightily. Later writers in the post-Freudian tradition agreed with Freud that human beings are animals and that our higher faculties are derived from more primal urges and desires. In that sense, they also worked within the Darwinian picture of human development, which Freud insisted was the *sine qua non* of a scientific psychology. But those post-Freudians also drew upon the notion that human beings are object seeking, not just pleasure seeking. Our development, potentials, and deficits are derived from problems in loving, in the ways we are nurtured, and the ways we internalize the psychological presence of loved ones, who can either sustain or wound us from within.

This is the view of root human nature Becker gleaned from the post-Freudians, especially Fromm and later Rank, as well as compatible psychologists outside of the psychoanalytic tradition, such as William James. From this point of view, the main problem human beings face is coping with external conditions that foster selfishness, defensiveness, and aggression, snuffing out, as it were, the original pro-social impulses and nurturant disposition of our deepest nature.

The ongoing battle that Becker carried on with Freud during the entire corpus of his work centered exactly on this issue of disposition of the deepest levels of human nature. Becker clearly saw that if Freud (1930) were correct that at our core, we harbor selfish, malicious, homicidal, antisocial impulses and that few of us actually escape the ravages of a deeply injurious socializing and civilizing process, then the humanistic Enlightenment vision is a farce, and we are doomed to repeatedly build up our humanistic efforts only to see them crushed, often violently, as the fruits of our deepest nature reemerge, as *Lumpenproletarian* meanness, bitterness, and selfish tribalism.

> The thwarting of these [selfish] drives in childhood [would lead] to such a residue of bitterness and antisociality that the world would always be peopled by a type of animal that resented what it had done to him, what it had deprived him of. He would be a mean animal, deep down, one who felt cheated, one who harbored choked-up feelings and desires. He might on the surface be pleasant enough, responsible, creative; but underneath it all was a residue of trashiness that threatened to burst out and that in any event would somehow work itself out on others or on himself. (Becker, 1973, p. 60)

Yet the psychoanalytic point of view did point toward a method of therapy for the human condition, placing front and center the concepts of *insight* and *transformation*. Through the therapeutic analysis, one can begin to fathom how he or she has been shaped by the forces of early upbringing, socialization, and subsequent life experiences. And through the therapeutic alliance, one can experience a palpable shift in experience, perception, relatedness, and self (Barratt, 1984, 1993, 2019; Khan, 1974/2005; Thompson, 2004). The goal of analysis is to make the unconscious conscious. In early psychoanalytic thoughts, this could mean abreacting symptoms when the repressed becomes conscious. Later the psychoanalytic theory explores "working through" unconscious conflicts and resolving painful experiences through the transference. In Freud's (1933) famous characterization of the goals of analysis, "Where id was, there ego shall be" (p. 80). Nonetheless, in Freud's (1930) view, only a very select segment of human beings would ever be able to attain this level of truly "civilized" living without debilitating inhibition and guilt.

Among the masses of human beings, pro-social morality was a very thin veneer over the morass of ugly psycho-emotional content, which could only be kept in check with menacing social norms, severe policing, swift punishment, and the mutually reinforced psychosocial infliction and coercion of threat, fear, inhibition, shame, and guilt. The ugliness is always just under the surface, and when given opportunity, when the fabric of social control is weakened in any way (such as in times of social crisis and war), it quickly gushes out into the open in all manner of ferocious violence and sadism.

Given that Freud was a Jew in turn-of-the-century Vienna–in which the nakedly antisemitic politics of the Karl Lueger administration ruled, with The Big War just over the coming horizon, and then with the subsequent rise of Nazism and a second world conflagration to come–it is not difficult to understand Freud's pessimism and downright horror at the prospect of extending "human freedom." In better times, Becker fairly brushed off Freud's drive theory of human nature and sided in favor of the more optimistic post-Freudian view. Becker thought he had adequately come to grips with Freud by the time he wrote the first edition of *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (1962) and *The Revolution in Psychiatry: The New Understanding of Man* (1964).

In these books and writings of this early period, Becker presented his "fully transactional" view of human nature and socialization that emphasized a positive, or at least a neutral picture, of human nature. This nature is not set in stone but malleable and open to new experience. As with Becker's own dream analysis, what is mostly required is insight into the fact that we live on borrowed powers from outside of ourselves. Once we know this, there is nothing stopping us from taking control of the helm of life and society and moving in completely new directions reflecting our most pro-social desires.

Freud could be mined for helpful ideas and techniques, but in terms of depth psychology, Becker felt his "fully transactional" view refuted Freud's pessimistic picture of human nature.

But as Becker began to more closely study the consistent failures of human history–as he watched the freedom movements of his time devolve into sectarian infighting and intoxicated isolation, as the Cold War and the hot war of Vietnam dragged on, and reports of the truly vicious nature of what had occurred in Nazi Germany and in Hiroshima began to sink in deeper–the pessimism of Freud's psychoanalytic perspective on irrationality, aggression, and death started to seem more realistic.

This was not simply an intellectual exercise for Becker. His entire heroic sense of himself as a representative of the ongoing humanistic Enlightenment tradition of scholarship hung entirely on Freud being wrong on this point about basic human nature. For if Freud were right, and people really are incapable of governing themselves without inflicting violence and psychopathologies on themselves and one another, then a strong police authoritarian state reigned over by (at best) a philosopher king or an elite oligarchy would be about the best we can do. One must imagine that this struggle against the Plato-Augustinian-Calvinist-Hobbesian-Freudian view was foremost in Becker's mind when University President S. I. Hayakawa invited the National Guard to patrol the San Francisco State University campus in 1969. Despite having no prospects at all of gaining a position elsewhere, Becker summarily resigned his teaching post. His act of protest was clearly insignificant in terms of university policy itself and came with a potentially very high cost to Becker and his family. But here, we get some sense of Becker's impassioned *cri de coeur* at that time.

The post-Freudian psychotherapists, social psychologists, and social philosophers following the Enlightenment tradition had been supplying the human race with cogent and convincing insights on the ways coercive social policies and social arrangements thwart our better nature and what we can do about it. Outlining these accrued insights in systematic fashion is the essential heart of Becker's (1967) "alienation curriculum" presented in *Beyond Alienation*. Yet time after time after time, our best efforts come to nothing, often spreading even more evil and oppression in the name of social improvement. And Becker wanted to understand why these vaunted insights were such inadequate tools for social improvement.

Conclusions on Transference and Emancipation

It is in this context that Becker's comment on human animalism and antisociality mentioned earlier must be placed to understand the complexities and nuances of his thought. Becker had long known the side of human nature that

seeks to immerse itself in the crowd, to be told what to do and when to do it, to be ruled. This was, after all, at the very root of his concept of *expanded transference*. He had thought that insights into this dynamic process could and should be enough to free us from it. After all, don't we actually value autonomous freedom more than slavish obedience? Aren't we somewhat embarrassed to have it exposed when we are simply marching to someone else's drumbeat? What's the problem here then that causes us to be bound to an endless rinse-and-repeat cycle of human violence and viciousness?

It was only as Becker struggled to formulate his death anxiety thesis (which he ostensibly learned through a deep revisiting the work of Rank) that it became increasingly clear to him exactly *what is at stake* in the dynamics of expanded transference by which we live our lives. It is not simply a matter of seeing through the puppeteer's strings to which we are connected and thus, following that insight, to break free of those strings. It is not simply a matter of intellectual choice.

What is truly at stake is our self-image as beings worthy of immortality itself, as beings who participate as meaningful actors in an ongoing pageant of social drama of transcending importance. The vital lie of individual psychology is that we are strong and autonomous, if even only by vicarious identification and proxy. The corollary vital lie of collective life, the underlying theme of all viable cultures, is that our life here on earth is of eternal and cosmic significance and value. Strip that away through insight and what are you left with? Only the realization that you are a worthless, meaningless bit of nothingness! *That you die!*

Insight here is simply not a sufficient motivating force to encourage people to strip themselves so thoroughly of the comfort of the vital lie and to stand that psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually naked before themselves and others. Per Ogden (1989), insight gives way to further resistance and misrecognition when confronting terrifying truths and the pain of relinquishing vital lies. The absolutely axiomatic inadequacy of insight to free us from our tenacious clinging to illusion and dogged denial of reality itself, and the electric power Becker experienced when he comprehended it, only really makes sense when it is seen as another significant chain link in the concept of expanded transference.

If we isolate the death anxiety thesis and lift it out of this associational context, we may have something of value in its own right, but we risk bypassing the sophisticated richness of Becker's elucidations of human culture, history, religion, and politics and the intricacies of our desires, frailties, achievements, failures, and potentials. A reductionist approach to Becker would be a glaring irony for someone devoted to the multidisciplinary science of humanity. Isolating the death anxiety thesis itself violently reduces the "complex symbol" of death to a static corpse of a concept. Becker wrote

of the subtle evolution of death anxiety from infantile fears of separation, bodily weakness, and abandonment into a complex matrix of psychological and existential angst about intimacy, love, the body, transience, and loss of identity. For Becker, the fear of death was not merely anxiety about dying someday or one single identical noisome ubiquitous horror that is the same for all of us. It was about a multiplicity of possible annihilations, experiences equated with death, symbolic death equivalents. To omit that opulence and complexity from his thought would be to ignore an immense body of insight into human motivation and suffering.

This intricacy deserves further exploration, not omission and reduction. There is more to Becker that needs to be pursued. Beyond merely being an endemic human fear of mortality, what else induces the dread of annihilation, and how are such terrors symbolized and inflicted on others? When people fear death, what are the precise signifiers and fantasies that presage such terror of annihilation? And if insight alone is insufficient to relieve our angst and ignorance, are we consigned merely to vital lies and transferences? Is an immersion in benign transferences that fashion something for the life force the only hope? Or might there be ways of resolving and transforming those transferences? How might important research and revisions to the concept of transference over the 50 years since Becker's death modify our understanding of transference phenomena in relation to our beliefs, ideologies, and social and group dynamics? We leave it to Becker scholars to explore such possibilities and implore researchers not to ignore such profound dimensions of his thought.

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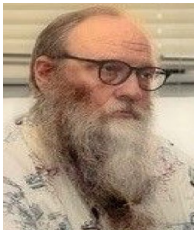
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