

NOTES FROM: *Escape from Evil*, by Ernest Becker

SUMMARY: Ernest Becker won the Pulitzer Prize for his book, *The Denial of Death* (one of my favorite books of all time), which showed how most of human achievement, conflict, and striving is rooted in the subconscious fear of death.

Escape from Evil is Becker's follow-up to *The Denial of Death*, the last book he published before his own death in 1975. It's quite a bit darker than *Denial*, and more explicitly focused on how the human, subconscious fear of death leads to evil on a cultural and historical scale. Essentially, it's Terror Management Theory before it was cool.

The basic argument is this: Humans are the only creatures on earth who are *aware* of the fact that they're going to die, and that they are relatively powerless against the awesome forces of Nature.

In the cosmic scheme of things, a human lifetime simply isn't long enough to achieve anything that's going to survive the silence and indifference of the universe. Armed with this realization, culture, religion, status, and wealth become psychological shields against that fear of irrelevance. *Symbolic immortality* is what people are after, according to Becker.

We "earn" our immortality by identifying with something larger than ourselves, and, viewed in this manner, we can see the entirety of culture, religion, morality, and nationalism as a *collective delusion* with the sole purpose of helping people cope with the (very real) idea of their inevitable death.

Oh, you thought this was a comedy?! *Escape from Evil* is something else *entirely*. Agree or disagree with Becker's cosmological viewpoint, but it's because our death-anxiety is so unbearable to us that we project evil *outward* onto others. Onto other threats to our "immortality projects" that we've set up as psychological defences.

Constant warfare *isn't* the daily reality on this planet anymore, of course. Most of us - the *civilized* ones, at least - have learned to live with one another. But the evil has to be projected onto *something*; our egos have to be protected *somehow*.

Which is why, according to Becker, consumerism and status consciousness step in as *new* immortality projects when our old ones prove unworkable: people chase legacy, wealth, and recognition as cheap substitutes for spiritual salvation and transcendence.

Part of the problem that Becker identifies (correctly, I believe) is that society generally lacks productive outlets for the subconscious forces of human nature. There are so few avenues for *genuine heroism*, no options open for heroic transcendence of the human predicament. A near-total lack of *personal courage in the face of death*.

Overall, this is a pretty dark book. I'm sure I don't have to point that out! But even though Becker was pessimistic about the chances that most people would ever overcome their fear of death and live authentically and courageously within an uncaring universe, he wasn't *cynical*. He actually *enjoyed* being alive!

In fact, he was *so beloved* by his students at San Francisco State that when the university terminated his teaching contract, they banded together and offered to *pay his salary out of their own pockets*.

You can probably see why he's one of *my* favorite people too, and why his books are among my absolute favorites. This one, but also *The Denial of Death* and *The Birth and Death of Meaning*. Because Ernest Becker didn't hate humanity - he *loved* people. And through his books, he taught us that *evil is not invincible*. It's *within* us, but not a *permanent part* of us. And most importantly for our future prospects of global peace and understanding, we now realize that the root of evil *isn't* hatred. It's *fear*.

“There is nothing in man or nature which would prevent us from taking some control of our destiny and making the world a saner place for our children.”

“There is a distinct difference between pessimism, which does not exclude hope, and cynicism, which does.”

“If at the end of each person's life he were to be presented with the living spectacle of all that he had organismically incorporated in order to stay alive, he might well feel horrified by the living energy he had ingested.”

“Each organism raises its head over a field of corpses, smiles into the sun, and declares life good.”

“Once the organism is satiated, this becomes its frantic, all-consuming task: to hold onto life at any cost - and the costs can be catastrophic in the case of man.”

“Prosperity is the universal ambition of human society.”

“In man, the search for prosperity (food and water) has become conscious, and he knows what will happen when he doesn't achieve prosperity.”

“Thus, disease and death have become conscious evils that either destroy prosperity while one is alive, or cut it off coldly.”

“Man transcends death by finding a meaning for his life, some kind of larger scheme into which he fits. Spirituality is not a simple reflex of hunger and fear. It is an expression of the will to live, the burning desire of the creature to count, to make a difference on the planet because he has lived, has emerged on it, and has worked, suffered, and died.”

“What man fears is not so much extinction, but extinction with insignificance.”

“Since men must now hold for dear life onto the self-transcending meanings of the society in which they live, onto the immortality symbols which guarantee them indefinite duration of some kind, a new kind of instability and anxiety are created. And this anxiety is precisely what spills over into the affairs of men.”

“In the world of ritual, there aren't ever any accidents, and accidents, as we know, are the things that make life most precarious and meaningless.”

“Primitive ritual manufacture of life may not have actually controlled the universe, but at least it was never in any danger of destroying it. We control it up to a point - the point at which we seem to be destroying it.”

“We trust our technology in the same way as primitives trusted their rituals, and we are dismayed to find that accidents are sometimes caused by machine failure and not by human error.”

“Man cannot impart life to himself, but must get it from his fellow man.”

“To be outshone by another is to be attacked at some basic level of organismic durability.”

“To lose, to be second rate, to fail to keep up with the best and the highest sends a message to the nerve centre of the organism's anxiety: ‘I am overshadowed, inadequate; hence I do not qualify for continued duration, for life, for eternity; hence I will die.’”

“It is only by contrasting himself and comparing himself to like organisms, to his fellow men, that he can judge if he has some extra claim to importance.”

“The dualism of organizational society is a stroke of primitive genius because it sets up society as a stage for self-aggrandizement.”

“Man cannot impart importance to himself. Importance equals durability equals life.”

“Men in society manage to give to each other what they need in terms of good organismic feeling by codes that allow people to compare their achievements and virtues so as to outshine rivals, and also by codes that support and protect tender human feelings that prevent the undermining and deflation that can result from the clash of organismic ambitions.”

“Primitive society was a formal organization for the apotheosis of man.”

“We are shocked by the vulgarity of symbols of death and the devil and sexual intercourse in primitive ruins. But if your theory is to control by representation and imitation, then you have to include all sides of life, not only the side that makes you comfortable or that seems purest.”

“No longer was man an animal who died and vanished from the earth; he was a creator of life who could also give eternal life to himself by means of communal rituals of cosmic regeneration.”

“The unfolding of history is precisely the saga of the succession of new and different ideologies of organismic self-perpetuation - and the new injustices and heightened destructiveness of historical man.”

“Since nature gave freely and abundantly to man, gods were set up so that the debt could be repaid. Gods received gifts to give the illusion that the debts of primitive man were repayable.”

“The original sacrifice is always food because that is what one wants from the gods as the basis for life.”

“The greater the expenditure, the more the power flowed, and the more that everyone received from the gods and from nature.”

“This feeling of expenditure as power is not strange to us moderns.”

“Like the primitive, modern man feels that he can prosper only if he shows that he already has power.”

“Man, the animal who knows he is not safe here, who needs continued affirmation of his powers, is the one animal who is implacably driven to work beyond animal needs precisely because he is not a secure animal.”

“The origin of human drivenness is religious because man experiences creatureliness; the amassing of a surplus, then, goes right to the heart of human motivation, the urge to stand out as a hero, to transcend the limitations of the human condition and achieve victory over impotence and finitude.”

“In the eyes of culture, to live is a crime. In other words, to live is to stick out, to go beyond safe limits; hence it is to court danger, to be a locus of the possibility of disaster for the group.”

“Society, in other words, is a dramatization of dependence and an exercise in mutual safety by the one animal in evolution who had to figure out a way of appeasing himself as well as nature.”

“If there is a class which has nothing to lose but its chains, the chains that bind it are self-imposed, sacred obligations which appear as objective realities with all the force of a neurotic delusion.”

“The origins of inequality rest on personal differences and differences in station and merit, rather than exclusively on wealth.”

“The person who was a strong individual gained influence in primitive society, and started the rise of inequality.”

“This is the basic role and function of the hero in history: he is the one who gambles with his very life and successfully defies death, and men follow him and eventually worship his memory because he embodies the triumph over what they fear most, extinction and death. He becomes the focus of the peculiarly human passion play of the victory over death.”

“Man never was free and cannot be from his own nature.”

“Man carries within him the bondage that he needs in order to continue to live.”

“Primitives were frank about power, and in a spiritual cosmology power is relatively undisguised; it comes from the pool of spirits and ancestors. In our society, power resides in technology, and we live and use the artifacts of technology so effortlessly and thoughtlessly that it almost seems that we are not beholden to power - until something goes wrong with an airplane, a generator, a telephone line. Then you see our ‘religious’ anxiety come out.”

“Power is the life pulse that sustains man in every epoch, and unless the student understands power figures and power sources he can understand nothing vital about social history.”

“One of the first things a child has to learn is how much power he has and how much exists in others and in the world. Only if he learns this can he be sure of surviving; he has to learn very minutely what powers he can count on to facilitate his life and what powers he has to fear and avoid in order to protect it. If you are wrong about power, you don't get a chance to be wrong about anything else. The study of life, people, and the world, then breaks down into an alertness for the distributions of power.”

“Nothing strikes greater terror into man's heart than to witness an eruption of power from the depths of nature that he cannot control or understand.”

“Each organism is in a struggle for more life and tries to expand and aggrandize itself as much as possible.”

“Evil is ‘neutral’ in origin, it derives from organismic robustness - but its consequences are real and painful.”

“All power is sacred power, because it begins in the hunger for immortality; and it ends in the absolute subjection to people and things which represent immortality power.”

“People take the overwhelmingness of creation and their own fears and desires and project them in the form of intense mana into certain figures to which they then defer.”

“There is something in human nature which invites inequality no matter what we do.”

“Men fashion unfreedom as a bribe for self-perpetuation.”

“But now a married couple, completely shorn of sacred status, does not live in a sacred house, belong to a holy clan, or possess the secret technology for the renewal of nature. Which means that it is face to face with the state but with no real powers of its own. As the modern married couple does not understand the high estate from which it has fallen historically, it can be quite content to regenerate nature in the person of a child and to renovate prosperity by working in a factory. Needless to say, these are activities for the promotion of life which have quite different qualities and intensities, and one of the great lessons that historical psychology can teach is what new ways man has had to invent for the pursuit of life after the disappearance of the primitive world picture.”

“Societies can be seen as structures of immortality power.”

“Every conflict over truth is in the last analysis just the same old struggle over immortality.”

“Each person nourished his immortality in the ideology of self-perpetuation to which he gives his allegiance; this gives his life the only abiding significance it can have.”

“If your adversary wins the argument about truth, you die. Your immortality system has been shown to be fallible, your life becomes fallible. History, then, can be understood as the succession of ideologies that console for death.”

“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, whether it seems that way or not, whether they admit it or not, whether the person knows it himself or not.”

“Men seek to preserve their immortality rather than their lives.”

“Often, the kings and priests were solidly allied in a structure of domination that monopolized all sacred power, and this evidently continues today.”

“The failure of democracy to reduce economic inequality is a major factor in the continuance of violently competing immortality ideologies.”

“Modern man has also thus-far failed to control nature, and is in his search destroying the only theatre we have for self-perpetuation, the earth itself.”

“Gold and other valuables were associated with life-giving power, just like the sun in ancient ritual.”

“The first mints were set up in temples, like the temple of Juno Moneta (where the word ‘money’ comes from), and only priests were allowed to handle it.”

“A new man emerged in the ancient world, a man who based the value of his life - and so of his morality - on a new cosmology centered on coins.”

“Just like colonialism shattered the immortality ideologies of the primitives, any species that might land on earth and impress us with futuristic technologies and abilities would see billions renounce their faiths and find their institutions discredited.”

“No wonder economic equality is beyond the endurance of modern democratic man: the house, the car, the bank balance are his immortality symbols.”

“In other words, 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. No wonder that people segregate themselves with such consuming dedication, that specialness is so much a fight to the death: man lashes out all the harder when he is cornered, when he is a pathetically impoverished immortality seeker. He dies when his little symbols of specialness die.”

“After Augustine, time was firmly set in a linear way while waiting for the end of the world. We are still today ticking off the years, but we no longer know what for, unless it is for compounding interest. Compounding interest is one of the few meaningful things to do in an irreversible time stream that is wholly secular and visible.”

“By continually taking and piling and computing interest and leaving to one's heirs, man contrives the illusion that he is in complete control of his destiny. After all, accumulated things are a visible testimonial to power, to the fact that one is not limited or dependent. Man imagines that the causa sui project is firmly in his hands, that he is the heroic maker and doer who takes what he creates, what is rightfully his. And so we see how modern man, in his one-dimensional economics, is driven by the lie of his life, by his denial of limitation, of the true state of natural affairs.”

“History is the tragic record of heroism and expiation out of control, and of man's efforts to earn expiation in new, frantically driven and contrived ways.”

“The twin fears from which we suffer are life and death.”

“It is the idea of repression that can explain how well men can hide their basic motivations even from themselves.”

“The guiding principle of all human ideology: ‘We are not animals.’”

“Politicians, who represented structures of immunity power, lied to people about the real and the possible and launched mankind on impossible dreams which took impossible tolls of real life.”

“Once you base your whole life-striving on a desperate lie and try to implement that lie, try to make the world just the opposite of what it is, then you instrument your own undoing.”

“The split-off sense of inferiority and animality is projected onto scapegoats and destroyed symbolically with them.”

“The thing that makes man the most devastating animal that ever stuck his neck up into the sky is that he wants a stature and a destiny that is impossible for an animal.”

“The state ‘solved’ its ponderous internal problems of social justice by making justice a matter of triumph over an external enemy.”

“Soldiers are obliged by the state's power to offer their lives for its own diversionary ceremony, just as were the ancient Egyptian slaves.”

“The megamachine represents the major historical challenge facing western man; to see through it and get control of it is the focal problem of human survival in our time.”

“One is transcended by the unspeakable majesty and superlativeness of the natural and cultured world, against which one feels realistically humbled; by giving, one draws oneself into that power and merges one's existence with it.”

“Men use one another to assure their personal victory over death.”

“What we are reluctant to admit is that the admiration of the hero is a vicarious catharsis of our own fears.”

MK: Just like a herd of gazelles when the cheetah picks only one of them, watching the news and seeing others die is a natural release of tension for modern man.

“If the killing of a captive affirms the power of your life, how much does the actual massive staging of life-and-death struggles affirm a whole society?”

“For man, maximum excitement is the confrontation of death and the skillful defiance of it by watching others fed to it, as he survives, transfixed with rapture.”

“When man sees that he is trapped and excluded from longer earthly duration, he says, ‘If I can't have it, then neither can you.’”

“In times of peace, without an external enemy, the fear that needs war tends to find its outlet within the society, in the hatred between classes and races, in the everyday violence of crime, of automobile accidents, and even the self-violence of suicide.”

“Guilt, sacrifice, heroism, and immortality are the key concepts for the science of man that is emerging in our society.”

“Watch for the secular equivalents of the theological formula of victimage and redemption.”

“Culture is a lie about the possibilities of victory over death.”

“Evil rests on the passionate person motive to perpetuate oneself, and for each individual this is literally a life-and-death matter for which any sacrifice is not too great, provided it is the sacrifice of someone else and provided that the leader and the group approve of it.”

“Since there is no secular way to resolve the primal mystery of life and death, all secular societies are lies.”

“History is the saga of the working out of one’s problems on others.”

“Each society elevates and rewards leaders who are talented at giving the masses heroic victory, expiation of guilt, and relief of personal conflicts.”

Rousseau: “Only the strong person can be ethical, not the weak one.”

“The driving impetus that underlies all evil is man's hunger for righteous self-expansion and perpetuation.”

“The paradox is that evil comes from man's urge to heroic victory over evil.”

“The human face, being such a fantastic creation of nature, and having the same ideas and thoughts as you, gives such absolute righteous conviction, especially when there are thousands of you gathered together.”

“The individual gives himself to the group because of his desire to share in its immortality; we must say, even, that he is willing to die in order NOT to die.”

“If we could, we would certainly want to avoid raising generations of young people who respect computers more than they do others.”

“Most men will not usually kill unless it is under the banner of some kind of fight against evil.”

“There is nothing in human nature that dooms in advance the most thoroughgoing social changes and utopian ambitions.”

“A hate object need not be any special class or race or even human enemy, but could be things that take impersonal but real forms, like poverty, disease, oppression, natural disasters, etc.”

“Disgust and cleanliness are related to life and death and the striving for immunity.”

“One knows that his life has had vital human meaning if it has been able to bring real benefits to the life of mankind.”

“By his own death the hero secures the lives of others, and so the greatest heroic sacrifice is the sacrifice of the god for his people.”

“It is almost pathetically logical how man, the supremely vulnerable animal, developed the cult of the heroic.”

“The tragedy of evolution is that it created a limited animal with unlimited horizons.”

“We can ask about any epoch: ‘What are the forms of social heroism available?’”

“Christianity was a sort of antiheroism by an animal who denied this life in order to deny evil.”

“Neurosis is always, at bottom, only incapacity for illusion.”

“Self-knowledge is the hardest human task because it risks revealing to the person how his self-esteem was built: on the power of others in order to deny his own creatureliness and death.”

“The task of social science would be to expose both structural and psychological unfreedom in society.”

“The leader lives with his head full into the clouds of the cultural symbols; he lives in an abstract world, a world detached from concrete realities of hunger, suffering, death; his feet are off the ground, he carries out his duties much like funeral directors or executioners - in a kind of emotional and psychological divorce from the realities of what he is doing.”

“The gauge of a truly free society would be the extent to which it admitted its own central fear of death and questioned its own system of heroic transcendence.”

“Nothing is theoretically more powerfully liberating than the thorough self-revelation of the fictional nature of human meanings.”

“Men need desperately to make panic look like reason.”

“If men kill out of animal fears, then conceivably fears can always be examined and calmed.”

“When all is said and done, there is no advice to be given.”