

ERNEST BECKER AND STANLEY MILGRAM Twentieth-Century Students of Evil

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Both Stanley Milgram and Ernest Becker studied and theorized human evil and offered explanations for evil acts, such as those constituting the Holocaust. Yet the explanations offered by Becker and Milgram are strikingly different. In this essay, brief biographical records of their lives are provided. Differences in their research methods and theories are then examined and traced to relevant differences in their lives, education, and careers. Especially important in this regard were their personal experiences of evil and the scholarly practices and traditions of social scientific and humanities scholarship that characterized their graduate education and scholarly work. The final parts of the essay are devoted to a comparative and integrative analysis of their respective approaches to the question of evil, especially as manifest during the Holocaust, and a brief exegesis of their disciplinary commitments.

Keywords: historical biography, psychology of evil, Ernest Becker, Stanley Milgram, Holocaust

Evil is seldom the explicit target of investigation in the social sciences. The few treatments of evil that do exist (e.g., Baumeister, 1997; Diamond, 1996; Katz, 1993; Oppenheimer, 1996) tend to adopt either psychological approaches (offering explanations in terms of biochemistry, neurophysiology, abnormality, or unfortunate, unhappy life experiences) or sociological approaches (offering explanations in terms of social conditions and institutional practices). In this broad context, the works of Ernest Becker and Stanley Milgram, which relate directly to the question of evil, stand out for very different reasons: Becker's because of its unexpected combination of cultural and existential explanans; Milgram's because of its theatricality, coupled with supposed experimental rigor.

As most readers of this journal are psychologists, they can be expected to be familiar with

Stanley Milgram's work on obedience to authority. There also is little doubt that Milgram's fame, connected directly to his obedience experiments, exceeds that of Ernest Becker, at least among psychologists. However, Becker's renown should not be underestimated. His 1974 Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Denial of Death*, has been lauded by individuals from Woody Allen to Bill Clinton, and his work frequently is used and referenced by psychologists with an existential humanist orientation. As noted by Mendelowitz (2006, p. 389), "Amid a resurgence of interest in Becker's life and work, [*Denial of Death*] still staggers the mind in its ability to see straight through to the heart of things." Part of this perceived resurgence is a result of the work of The Ernest Becker Foundation in applying Becker's ideas to contemporary concerns related to climate change, economic inequality, aging populations, and right-to-die legislation (Liechty, 2005). For the past few decades, terror management theory (e.g., Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Chatel, 1992), based on Becker's ideas concerning human reactions to mortality, has become a highly popular field of social psychological experimentation. On May 7, 2015, a Google Scholar search indicated 5,082 citations of Becker's *Denial of Death*, eclipsed, but certainly not entirely overshadowed.

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owed, by 6,869 citations of Milgram's *Obedience to Authority*.

In what follows, I summarize the lives and works of Milgram and Becker; provide a comparative analysis of their academic identities, theories, and methods related to their studies of evil; and offer historical, biographical explanations of these very different theoretical and methodological approaches and the different ways in which they illuminate the nature of human evil, using the Holocaust to focus my analysis. By applying their ideas to the Holocaust, I hope to demonstrate the different, yet possibly complementary, strengths of their theorizing concerning sources of evil. The importance of my project is underscored by the fact that both Becker and Milgram were Enlightenment scholars, in the sense that they both believed strongly in the possibility of human progress through the application to human affairs of enhanced understandings of human beings and the human condition, and both sought such understanding as a primary goal of their own scholarly work. Both scholars took a broad view of the importance of making social science relevant to the improvement of human societies. Both Milgram and Becker believed that an understanding of human evil is directly relevant to combatting it. The facts that the theories of Milgram and Becker are so different and yet, as I shall show, potentially complement each other, further enhance the likelihood of advancing our understanding of evil and its possible curtailment through an historical and theoretical comparative consideration of their ideas.

It is helpful for the reader to have a clear sense of the kinds of difference in life experience I will emphasize as particularly important for understanding and appreciating the works of Milgram and Becker and their differing interpretations of human evil. I will demonstrate that differences in their ages, personal experiences of evil, and their graduate education and disciplinary commitments interacted in powerful ways with their theories about, and methods of inquiry into, human evil. Within these important areas of difference, I will argue further that Milgram's adherence to the experimental methods of social psychology and Becker's more wide-ranging interdisciplinary studies, which included a broad purview of the social sciences and humanities that extended to philosophical and religious studies, are directly traceable to

differences in their early experiences of evil and differences in their experiences during their university graduate educations. As will become clear, these differing experiences provided them with very different orientations to the study and understanding of evil. The unique contribution of this essay is to demonstrate how the life experiences and disciplinary contexts of these two 20th-century students of evil, in ongoing interaction with their developing sense of themselves and their projects, enabled and restricted their scholarly methods and theories. This is a contribution that is made possible through the kind of historical, joint biographical approach taken herein. It is only through a juxtaposing of their life positionings and identities, methods, and theories that important determinants of their contributions to our understanding of human evil are revealed and sourced.

Life Experiences Leading to the Study of Evil

Both Becker and Milgram were born into first-generation, lower-middle-class Jewish families. Their parents had immigrated to the United States from Europe. Becker's family was more orthodox than Milgram's, and Becker was the older by almost 10 years, being born in 1924 in Springfield, Massachusetts, compared with Milgram's birth in 1933 in the Bronx. In their childhoods, both boys displayed a fondness and flair for experimentation and demonstration. In Milgram's case, this often took the form of scientific experimentation. Blass (2004) reports how Milgram and his childhood buddies lowered "a large flask containing sodium into the Bronx River" and caused an explosion that had "fire engines and worried mothers" (p. 4) rushing to the site. Marie Becker (personal communication, 2012) recalls a preteenaged Ernest and a friend throwing pennies, which they had accumulated and hoarded for some considerable time, outside a Springfield bank to observe the scurrying acquisitiveness of its customers and passers-by.

Given their European origins and relatives in Europe, both families followed the growth of National Socialism during the 1930s and the terrible aftermath of that growth prior to and during the Second World War. As an adult, Milgram frequently recalled how he had listened to the radio with his family for news that might directly affect members of his father's and mother's families in

Europe, some of whom had been in the camps and came to stay briefly with Milgram's family after the war. Milgram's brother Joel recalls "reading the numbers on their arms" (Fermaglich, 2006, p. 100). Soon after the end of the war, the 13-year-old Milgram, speaking at his Bar Mitzvah, said,

Perhaps this 13th year of my life will be even more significant as marking the beginning of a new era for the Jewish people, an era of justice and liberty and a homeland. . . . May there be an end to persecution, suffering and war. (Blass, 2004, p. 8)

A year earlier, Becker, as an infantryman in the U.S. Army, had "witnessed directly the human tragedy and toll of the Nazi concentration camps" (J. Martin, 2014, p. 69). Liechty (2005, p. 13) states that Becker "was part of a regiment that liberated a Nazi concentration camp," but does not provide the name of the camp. Like many others, "Becker seldom spoke about this part of his life, but there can be little doubt that his army life influenced his intellectual interests and work" (J. Martin, 2014, p. 105). For example, the only book by Heidegger (1965) in Becker's considerable library of interdisciplinary works, which remains accessible today and contains many volumes of Continental philosophy, is a small volume of excerpts from Heidegger's speeches, statements, and appeals in the 1930s and early 1940s, selected and translated by Dagobert Runes, in which Heidegger spoke in favor of National Socialism and Hitler.¹

Thus, it is clear that the early lives of both Becker and Milgram were saturated with more and less direct personal experience of evil. Whether or not Becker's more direct experience might explain some of the notable differences in their respective approaches to the topic is difficult to determine with certainty, but seems very likely. What seems even more likely is that the very different educational and employment paths of these two men had a direct bearing on the kinds of theories and methods of inquiry they developed and employed in their subsequent intellectual work, as the following summaries of their higher educational and employment histories reveal.

Milgram's Path to His Research on "Obedience to Authority"

Milgram's undergraduate work was in political science at Queens College. Dissatisfied with the philosophical approach that characterized his undergraduate studies in political science, Milgram, when told by a Queens dean

about the Department of Social Relations at Harvard University, researched and then applied to that department for graduate work in social psychology. The attractions of the Department of Social Relations were that it promised a scientific approach to topics of interest to Milgram, including leadership styles and mass persuasion, research being conducted at Harvard by social psychologists at the forefront of their discipline. The problem was that Milgram had absolutely no undergraduate coursework in psychology per se, and his initial application to Harvard was rejected. With the encouragement of Gordon Allport, who chaired the graduate program in social relations, Milgram took and excelled in five undergraduate courses in psychology (from three different New York colleges) during the summer of 1954, leading to his admission to Harvard that same fall as a special student. Allport, who "was to become the most important person in Milgram's academic life and a constant source of encouragement" (Blass, 2004, p. 16), was impressed by Milgram's "limitless drive and persistence in the face of obstacles" (p. 16). Allport also arranged financial support for Milgram's studies, and for much of Milgram's career, provided wise and effective counsel.

During his time at Harvard, Milgram thrived on the diverse intellectual riches provided in the Department of Social Relations, which drew its curriculum and faculty from social and clinical psychology, social anthropology, and sociology. His outstanding performance during his first year of graduate work made him a regular full-time student during the 1955–1956 academic year. Interacting with scholars like Allport, Roger Brown, Talcott Parsons, Jerome Bruner, and visiting professor Solomon Asch, Milgram

really fell in love with the discipline and . . . [vowed] to follow through to a Ph.D. in Social Psychology and then, probably, secure a position with a psychology faculty of a fair sized university, where I would teach and engage in research. (quoted in Blass, 2004, p. 24)

¹ I am indebted to Marie Becker, who preserved Becker's library, and Jim Swift, who has provided accommodation on the shores of Lake Samish in Washington State for Becker's library and for Becker scholars who wish to examine its contents.

As Asch's assistant in 1955–1956, Milgram became immersed in Asch's experimental approach and the methods Asch used to study conformity. The basic approach was to place an individual in group contexts, populated with confederates of the researcher, in which she finds that her judgments concerning simple tasks such as estimating the length of lines, which are clearly of dissimilar length, are inexplicably at odds with those of her supposed peers. Asch's methodology also involved conducting a number of variations on this basic set-up, changing the size and degree of unanimity of the majority group, the difficulty of the judgment task, the lengths of the lines, and so forth. Buoyed by his successes as a Harvard student, Milgram's characteristic chutzpah was much in evidence as his graduate program advanced. He improvised skits and parodies as occasions warranted, interacted on a first-name basis with junior faculty, and "unveiled an unbuttoned persona, marked by spontaneity, imaginative whimsy, and uninhibited sociability, a wry sense of humor, and sometimes cockiness" (Blass, 2004, p. 29).

Milgram's dissertation was a cross-cultural comparison of Norwegian and French students and workers on a variety of Asch-style conformity tasks that Milgram designed, executed, and analyzed with his characteristic precision and attention to detail. The work was chaired by Gordon Allport, who was famously tolerant in allowing students to follow their own inclinations and methods. Arriving back in the United States, brimming with confidence, Milgram accepted a 1-year position at Princeton University to assist Asch, who was a visiting fellow at the Institute of Advanced Study, on condition that he also be allowed to write up and polish his dissertation. What promised to be a wonderful year transitioning from doctoral student to neophyte academic turned out otherwise. Milgram was not able to work on his dissertation as much as he wished and his relationship with Asch was not as he expected. Nonetheless, Allport succeeded in keeping Milgram's spirits up, so that in the late spring of 1960, his dissertation was completed and, again with Allport's backing, he obtained a junior faculty position at Yale University.²

Milgram's education positioned him firmly in the Lewinian tradition of social psychological research as controlled demonstration (Korn,

1997; Patnoe, 1988) that involved the use of carefully constructed and staged experimental settings and procedures. His methodological mentor was Solomon Asch, who worked directly within the tradition of social psychological inquiry established by Kurt Lewin. This was a way of conducting social inquiry that was intended to be both scientific and highly relevant to important social matters. For example, Asch (1956) interpreted his conformity research, which so influenced Milgram, as investigating the kind of self-reliance and independent judgment that democratic citizenship required. By education and inclination, Milgram was an innovative, experimental social psychologist, positioned and equipped as such by his experiences with Allport, Asch, Brown, Bruner, and others in Harvard's Department of Social Relations.

Milgram arrived at Yale in the fall of 1960. While at Princeton, he had determined how he would make his mark, and he was anxious to put his plan into action. Around this time, according to Blass (2004), Milgram had "told Roger Brown that he hoped to find a phenomenon of great consequence such as Asch had done, then 'worry it to death'" (p. 62). The program of research Milgram had in mind was the study of obedience to authority, for which he received funding from the National Science Foundation (NSF). This famous program of research eventually ran to 24 variations of the basic method Milgram devised to study the willingness of ordinary Americans to deliver what they were supposed to believe were highly dangerous, perhaps lethal, electrical shocks to volunteers like themselves. Asked to play the role of "teacher" to what they thought were peers in the role of "learner," the "teachers" were commanded to deliver increasingly painful and dangerous shocks (using Milgram's famous "shock machine") whenever the "learners" failed to recognize any of the second words they previously had attempted to memorize from a quite lengthy list of two-word pairings (see Perry, 2012, for a comprehensive description and discussion of the 24 experimental variations). Milgram commenced this research on August 7,

² Unless otherwise indicated, the summary of Milgram's graduate and early career experience is drawn primarily from Blass (2004).

1961, and completed it during the summer of the following year.

Although there were very few explicit mentions of the Holocaust, or any recognition of his Yale studies as studies of evil, in his NSF applications or in the vast majority of his letters and notes written from 1960 to 1962,³ later in his life, Milgram increasingly identified the explanation of evil, especially that of the Nazis during the Holocaust, as the most important goal of his program of research. He highlights this theme in his first published account of the obedience experiments (Milgram, 1963) and elaborates it in his full, book-length account of his experiments 11 years later:

The question arises as to whether there is any connection between what we have studied in the laboratory and the forms of obedience we so deplored in the Nazi epoch. The differences in the two situations are, of course, enormous, yet the difference in scale, numbers, and political context may turn out to be relatively unimportant as long as certain essential features are retained. The essence of obedience consists in the fact that a person comes to view himself as the instrument for carrying out another person's wishes, and he therefore no longer regards himself as responsible for his actions. Once this critical shift of viewpoint has occurred in the person, all of the essential features of obedience follow. (Milgram, 1974, p. xii)

Later still, Milgram, in his *The Individual in a Social World* (Milgram, 1977), is unequivocal in making the connection between Nazi evil during the Holocaust and his own laboratory studies:

But the laboratory paradigm merely gave scientific expression to a more general concern about authority, a concern forced upon members of my generation, in particular upon Jews such as myself, by the atrocities of World War II. . . . The impact of the Holocaust on my own psyche energized my interest in obedience and shaped the particular form in which it was examined. (pp. 92–93)

Almost all Milgram's biographers and students of his life and work accept his obedience studies as an attempt to explicate the nature and causes of human evil, especially as manifest in the Holocaust (whether or not they agree with the validity of such an explanation). Numerous critical questions and assessments of Milgram's experimental methods and theories as relevant to the question of evil have been raised and elaborated (e.g., Mastroianni, 2002; Nicholson, 2011a, 2011b; Reicher, Haslam, & Miller, 2014; Stam, Lubek, & Radtke, 1998).

Unlike the work of Becker, Milgram's work related to evil was completed early in his academic career. He subsequently held positions at Harvard, where he failed to obtain tenure (at least in part because of the ethical controversies swirling around his previous work on obedience to authority; cf. Blass, 2004) and The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, where he was awarded a tenured, distinguished full professorship. In these positions, Milgram conducted several other highly innovative and widely recognized programs of research, but none of them was as clearly connected to the study of evil per se as the obedience studies he conducted at Yale in 1961 and 1962. Milgram died, following a succession of heart problems, at the relatively young age of 54, but continues to be one of the most widely cited and recognized social psychologists in the history of psychology.

Becker's Path to His Existential Anthropology (A New Science of Man)

Ernest Becker's path to the study of evil was much more indirect and interrupted than that of Stanley Milgram. It also featured a wider range of experiences of likely relevance to his study of evil. After completing high school, with a focus on the kinds of practical subjects favored by his parents, Becker enrolled in the U.S. Army and saw action during World War II that gave him immediate and personal experience with its atrocities. After the war, Becker took advantage of the GI Bill that made university education available to returning veterans. However, before he could do so, he spent a year living with his parents in Springfield, Massachusetts, completing additional high school courses required for university entrance (J. Martin, 2014). In September of 1947, Becker entered Syracuse University as a student in the Department of Anthropology, where he spent the next 3 years, graduating with a bachelor of arts degree (*magna cum laude*) in anthropology in June 1950. Becker, fluent in French (as Milgram was also), then worked in the U.S. Embassy in Paris. During this time, Ronald Leifer, later a close friend of Becker during his time at the State

³ This assessment is based on the author's own perusal, in March of 2014, of The Stanley Milgram Papers housed in the Yale University Archives, Sterling Memorial Library.

University of New York, Syracuse (SUNY, Syracuse), maintains that Becker also worked for the CIA, “meeting with his Russian counterpart in the Toulerie (sic) Gardens and relaying what he learned back to Washington” (Leifer, 2013).

When the diplomatic life proved stifling to Becker, he returned to Syracuse University in 1956 to pursue a doctoral degree in social and cultural anthropology, under the supervision of the anthropologist and Japanese expert, Douglas Haring. Perhaps, at least in part, because of his age and maturity at the time of his graduate education, Becker’s teachers gave him a great deal of freedom in his education and scholarly work. For example, Haring did not require Becker to take the required courses in field work that were demanded of all doctoral students, arguing that Becker’s experiences in the U.S. Army and the U.S. diplomatic corps be counted as equivalent. Consequently, Becker was comparatively free to formulate his own topics and methods of inquiry. As Ron Leifer (personal communication, April 29, 2015) attests, Becker was “very self-confident and self-directed.” He read widely and attempted to position himself within the thought and projects of those past and present scholars whose work he most admired. He wanted “to stand on the shoulders of giants” and “synthesize and extend” their ideas. Whenever he discovered or was introduced by others to a new author whose ideas he could resonate to, Becker was “like a boy who found a toy” (Leifer, personal communication, April 29, 2015).

Becker’s dissertation was a rational critique of Zen beliefs and practices. During his doctoral studies, his growing interests in the interdisciplinary and cross-cultural study of human beings established him as a philosophical anthropologist, working within the general framework laid out by Freud and Marx, but he was also influenced by the ideas of John Dewey (J. Martin, 2013). From that time onward, Becker’s life project was to develop a synthetic understanding (one that pulled from American pragmatism, psychoanalysis, history and social studies, philosophy, and existentialism) of human nature and the human condition capable of supporting a genuinely interdisciplinary science of persons (Liechty, 2005; J. Martin, 2013).

When Becker graduated with his doctoral degree in 1960, Haring, who also taught anthropology and sociology to medical students in the

Department of Psychiatry at the SUNY, Syracuse assisted Becker in obtaining a faculty position there, essentially replacing Haring himself. At SUNY Syracuse, Becker became an active member of a group of young and widely read scholars who clustered around Thomas Szasz. Here, Becker experienced the kind of intellectual company he hungered for (especially in the seminars he attended that were led by Szasz—seminars that included junior faculty and medical residents in psychiatry, like Ron Leifer). Becker was able to use his teaching, studying, and conversational experiences at SUNY Syracuse to write two books unrelated to his doctoral research: *The Birth of Meaning: A Perspective in Psychiatry and Anthropology* (Becker, 1962) and *The Revolution in Psychiatry: The New Understanding of Man* (Becker, 1964). In 1964, Becker’s position was terminated when he supported Thomas Szasz, who was censored by the psychiatric profession and the SUNY Upstate Medical University for his public denunciations of the practice of involuntary commitment of psychiatric patients (Liechty, 1995).⁴

Becker’s experiences at SUNY presaged a peripatetic career on the fringes of the tenured professoriate. Following a recuperative stint traveling and living in Europe (Rome in particular), Becker taught at Syracuse University in the Departments of Anthropology and Sociology, before his outspokenness against corporate and military funding of university research, necessitated a move to the University of California, Berkeley during the summer of 1965, likely facilitated by Erving Goffman (J. Martin, 2014). At Berkeley, Becker’s unwillingness to restrict his highly popular teaching to sociological or anthropological topics alone and his general disdain for what he regarded as overly narrow programs of empirical social science made it impossible for him to obtain a permanent position, despite his publication of another book (*Beyond Alienation: A Philosophy of Education for the Crisis of Democracy*; Becker, 1967). At this time, an article in *Time Magazine* (“A Class

⁴ Ron Leifer (personal communication, April 29, 2015) disputes Liechty’s account, arguing that although Becker did support Szasz, Becker’s dismissal from SUNY Syracuse was primarily a consequence of his abrasiveness in interacting with other faculty and administrators whom he regarded as insufficiently scholarly in their work and attitudes.

Hires,” 1967) lauded Becker’s interdisciplinary tackling of important matters of social relevance, noting that “there is rarely a niche for such freewheeling scholars in the modern, highly compartmentalized university.” A similar pattern repeated itself when he moved across the Bay in the fall of 1967 to take up a professorship in social psychology at what was then San Francisco State College. Two years later, Becker once again found himself unemployed early in 1969, this time resigning in disgust at President Hayakawa’s calling in the National Guard to quell student disquiet and in support of protests related to civil rights and the war in Vietnam (Liechty, 1995), both causes that Becker backed, despite not considering himself an activist and generally not engaged in radical politics. In fact, it is quite arguable that Milgram, who frequently wrote letters to politicians advocating for specific positions, was politically the more active and radical of the two men.

It was not until the fall of 1969 and the publication of two more books (*The Structure of Evil: An Essay on the Unification of the Science of Man* [Becker, 1968] and *Angel in Armor: A Post-Freudian Perspective on the Nature of Man* [Becker, 1969]) that Becker finally settled into a university position in which he would be tenured, this one outside of the United States at Simon Fraser University in Greater Vancouver, Canada. By this time, Becker had published many articles and six books, but still had not managed to make the kind of mark he so desired for his synthetic rendering of human nature and the human condition. While at Simon Fraser, initially in the Department of Education and later in the interdisciplinary Department of Political Science, Anthropology, and Sociology, Becker published the last four of his books. However, it was the final two books, *The Denial of Death* and *Escape from Evil* that he considered his best and most complete statements of his theory (Liechty, 2005; J. Martin, 2014).

A month before he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction in 1974 for *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker died of cancer in Vancouver General Hospital at the age of 49. Like Milgram, he had managed to accomplish a great deal in a relatively short life span (J. Martin, 2014). However, unlike Milgram, the study of evil was an integral and increasingly important part of Becker’s academic and life project to the very end of his life. Nonetheless,

although well-known and influential, Becker’s work has not received the widespread recognition that Milgram’s work continues to command, especially among psychologists, despite the ongoing efforts of *The Ernest Becker Foundation* to promote and apply Becker’s ideas to contemporary social issues. Among psychologists, Becker’s work remains at the margins of the discipline.

Summary of Important Life, Educational, and Career Differences

Despite obvious similarities in their family backgrounds and childhood experiences, Becker was almost 10 years older than Milgram, and some of the most dramatic differences in their early lives—differences that clearly are reflected in their different approaches to the question of human evil—were directly connected to this difference in their ages. From 18 to 20 years of age, Becker served in the U.S. Army during WW II and witnessed events in Europe firsthand. Moreover, after completing his undergraduate degree in social and cultural anthropology, Becker worked for several years for the CIA while he was employed in the American Embassy in Paris. Milgram, 10 years Becker’s junior, had no similar direct experiences with the actuality and politics of evil, although he was not without exposure to the effects of the Holocaust, as he passed without pause from high school to college/university education and into an academic career.

The other major difference in the life experience and positioning of Milgram and Becker concerned the nature of their graduate education and career paths, especially with respect to their disciplinary attachments and methods of inquiry. Milgram was positioned by his education as an Ivy League social psychologist, with both the entitlements and responsibilities that status bequeaths, including a more or less direct path to a conventional university professorship in social psychology. Becker’s more self-directed and interdisciplinary graduate school experiences left him not quite sure where he fit, but with a clear sense of what he wanted to do and understand. Milgram’s entire career was spent in the confines of social psychology programs, even if, at Harvard and later at CUNY, these were situated within an interdisciplinary department and graduate center, respectively. Becker

held a variety of academic positions in Departments of Sociology, Anthropology, Social Psychology, Education, and finally, at Simon Fraser University, in the interdisciplinary Department of Political Science, Sociology, and Anthropology. Moreover, whatever his formal position, Becker did not restrict himself, in his teaching or research, to work in the social sciences, but ranged widely across ideas and approaches drawn from philosophy, literature, theology, and cultural studies.

Milgram was an *insider*, highly innovative in his work, but clearly belonging to a well-respected and rapidly evolving tradition of what was broadly understood in his circumstances and experiences to be a realistic and relevant social psychology. Becker, on the other hand, was much more of an *outsider*. He was 36 when he received his doctoral degree, almost a decade older than Milgram when the latter received his doctoral degree at the age of 27. Moreover, Becker had seen and interacted a great deal within the wider world and some of its atrocities, which, to Milgram, were influential in a much less direct way. From their letters and accounts of their lives in graduate school and during their initial academic appointments, it seems clear that Milgram was excited about establishing himself and making an impact as a well-known, imaginative researcher capable of conducting work that would really turn heads. In contrast, Becker, although no less driven, seemed intent on gaining an understanding of why human beings do the (sometimes terrible) things they do. Nonetheless, both men believed strongly that their work on evil (whether in the form of obedience to authority or in the form of intolerance and aggression toward antithetical others) could serve to educate us about its sources, and so help to diminish its proportions.⁵

Methods and Theories

Both Milgram and Becker were socially oriented scholars who were intent on explaining psychological and behavioral phenomena, including evil acts, in terms of social and cultural circumstances and conditions. Nonetheless, their theories and methodologies varied greatly. In what follows, I describe and interpret the different methodological and theoretical approaches of Milgram and Becker in consider-

ably greater detail, continuing to argue that these differences are directly traceable to their life, educational, and career experiences as described thus far. Milgram's identity as an innovative, yet rigorous, social psychological experimentalist contrasted dramatically with Becker's identification as a self-styled, grand synthesizer of past and contemporary attempts to articulate an existential, humanistic portrait of human nature and the human condition. Once again, these self-positionings are consistent with their previous life and educational experiences.

Milgram, the Innovative Experimenter: Empirical Demonstrations and Related Theory of Evil

In Milgram's obedience studies, 23 variations of the basic "teacher-learner, shock-machine" set-up were conducted, involving a total of 780 participants—typically 40, but in seven cases, only 20, participants per condition, including one condition with 40 female participants (the only women who participated; see Perry, 2012, pp. 304–310, for a summary of all experiments and their conditions). The core, and best known, condition and procedure (actually the second experiment run in 1961) has already been described briefly. In several of the conditions in which this basic setup and procedure were employed without much alteration, 60% to 65% of the participant "teachers" continued to shock the "learner" to the maximum and dangerous level of 450 V (with the ongoing encouragement, commands, and reassurances of the experimenter). This is the result that is most often reported by Milgram and others in support of Milgram's theory of obedience. In the different variations, this percentage ranged from 0%—when there were two experimenters, who each delivered conflicting orders to the teacher, telling him both to stop and continue—to 100%, when the learner, actually a confederate of the experimenter, says he will take on the role of learner only if the experimenter tries it first. In this staged role-play, the experimenter agrees, is

⁵ Despite this shared purpose, there is no evidence to suggest that Becker and Milgram knew each other. There also are no references to one in the works of the other and no links can be found in their correspondence or informal papers.

strapped in the chair, and given shocks from the teacher, while the learner in the role of experimenter encourages the teacher. In a condition in which the teacher was allowed to choose any shock level he desired, only 2% of participant teachers went to 450 V. Also of considerable importance, the more proximate the learner to the teacher and the less proximate the experimenter to the teacher, the lower the number of participants who administered shocks to the 450 V level.

Turning to Milgram's theory of obedience, it is striking that Milgram did not articulate a definite theory to explain his results until the publication of his 1974 book, *Obedience to Authority*. This observation has concerned and convinced several commentators not only to decry what they regard as the immoral and unethical conduct of Milgram's experiments but also to suggest that Milgram's experiments were motivated by his desire for fame and penchant for showmanship (e.g., Baumrind, 1964; Nicholson, 2011a, 2011b; Perry, 2012). Even some of Milgram's most staunch supporters (e.g., Blass, 2004; Miller, 1986) and others who seem "on the fence" (e.g., Lunt, 2009) agree that Milgram's (1974) theorizing is both "tacked on" and unconvincing.

Lunt (2009) is one of those who understands Milgram's methods, as well as some of his theorizing, as grounded in the tradition of social psychological demonstration and experimentation pioneered by Lewin and extended by Sherif, Asch, and others. In addition to this palpable methodological influence, Lunt also traces Milgram's theorizing about his results and the nature of evil more generally back to his undergraduate studies in political science of "a group of writers of social and political theory . . . including Adorno, Arendt, Fromm, and Weber" (p. 23). Of course, almost all Milgram scholars recognize the influence of Arendt, especially her volume *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Arendt, 1963), as especially influential on Milgram's theorizing. However, by including a critical theorist like Adorno, a humanistic psychoanalyst like Fromm, and a philosopher and sociologist like Weber, Lunt positions Milgram's theorizing in a way that invites comparison with the theorizing of Ernest Becker.

To understand Milgram's privileging of method over theory, it is helpful to recall that

his university education positioned him primarily as an experimental social psychologist steeped in a situationist perspective. He was primarily interested in gathering empirical demonstrations of the power of immediate situations to affect individuals. As a prototypic social scientist of this stripe, Milgram claimed neutrality concerning his research as he was proposing it, and surprise at his results as these appeared. His core experimental methods and procedures place each participant in the dilemma of adhering to the directives of a socially sanctioned, scientific authority whose detached demeanor seems increasingly at odds with a situation that unfolds as one that involves the physical torture of a fellow human being. As noted by Lunt (2009, p. 25), "Milgram adopts a forensic, experimental approach in which he manipulates situational factors that might induce obedience in individuals in order to reveal the psychological dimensions of the experience of obedience to a malevolent authority."

Facing an increasing barrage of ethical criticism of his experiments, and sometimes responding in ways that seemed to blame his obedient subjects for their callous willingness to inflict suffering, Milgram was under increasing pressure to provide a theoretical justification for his research⁶ (cf. Blass, 2004; Miller, 1986; Perry, 2012 for details). Finally, in Chapter 10 of his *Obedience to Authority* (Milgram, 1974), he provides such a theory. In this chapter, Milgram interprets the results of his obedience experiments as demonstrating disquieting levels of obedience. He infers that obedience to authority is the common reaction of human beings, even when they find the demands of authorities unsettling. The explanation he offers is biological, social, and, ultimately, psychological. Biologically, animals, including humans, have evolved throughout our natural history to live successfully in dominance hierarchies. At the same time, social rituals and submission cues gradually emerged as means of maintaining order in such hierarchical structures without the necessity of undue injury and death. In this way, Milgram proposes that the human tendency to challenge, then submit to, dominance

⁶ See Blass (2004), Miller (1986), and Perry (2012) for more detailed discussions of Milgram's struggles, between 1962 and 1974, to explain his results.

and authority is part of our natural biological and social order, one that ensures smoothly functioning groups and societies. However, Milgram adds, the particular manner of submission, especially the extent to which it is manifest in passive obedience, is largely a matter of socialization and situation. The psychological part of all of this then takes a cybernetic turn. For Milgram, human conscience is a self-regulating mechanism capable of resisting and overcoming societal demands. Putting all this together, Milgram envisions a self-conscious individual capable of some degree of autonomous self-regulation of her obedience to the systems of authority in which she finds herself. Ultimately then, moral reflection and the organizational needs of the social system are in a constant state of adjustment. Individuals are agents, but their agency always must operate within hierarchical systems. Self-control constantly interacts with social authority. Both are necessary and can shift with situations and individual psychology.

The central idea that Milgram derives from the foregoing theoretical formulation is what he terms “the agentic state,” which, contrary to what one might think, does not describe a self-determining, psychological agent, but a state of being under the control of an external agent. Milgram applies this idea to his experiments by suggesting that the participants (the “teachers”) in his studies undergo an “agentic shift,” one that moves them from acting as self-regulating persons to acting as social beings controlled by the social situation. In this context, the agentic state is characterized by a narrowing of attention to the tasks and role of “teaching” as directed by the experimenter. Anything else, including the “learner’s” apparent pain, is ignored. According to Milgram, when in this agentic state, the participant in the obedience studies “defines himself in a social situation in a manner that renders him open to regulation by a person of higher status. In this condition the individual no longer views himself as responsible for his own actions but defines himself as an instrument for carrying out the wishes of others” (Milgram, 1974, p. 134). Inclining to what he understood to be Arendt’s view of Eichmann, Milgram (1974) believes that in such situations, the individual becomes an automaton:

The behavior revealed in the experiments reported here is normal human behavior but revealed under conditions that show with particular clarity the danger to human survival inherent in our make-up. And what is it we have seen? Not aggression, for there is no anger, vindictiveness, or hatred in those who shocked the victim. . . . Something far more dangerous is revealed: the capacity for man to abandon his humanity, indeed, the inevitability that he does so, as he merges his unique personality into larger institutional structures. (p. 188)

Most Milgram scholars, even those supportive and sympathetic to him and his work, question both his description of his results and his theoretical explanation for them. Many of Milgram’s subjects did not appear to experience Milgram’s “agentic shift.” Some directly confronted and refused to obey the experimenter, whereas many others, even those classified as obedient, attempted various forms of decidedly un-Eichmann-like protest. Moreover, several participants obviously saw through or doubted the attempted experimental manipulations and the “reality” they presented. And, of course, Milgram’s attempt to link his results and ideas to the Holocaust has been received with derision by his critics, many of whom also have vigorously protested the ethics of his studies (cf. Mastroianni, 2002; Nicholson, 2011a, 2011b; Perry, 2012; Stam et al., 1998). And yet, for many, there is a lingering sense that Milgram’s obedience studies, even in the context of these often convincing and vigorous attacks, nonetheless say something important about the human capacity for evil, and in so doing support the possible relevance of Milgram’s kind of social psychological experimentation to penetrate it (Blass, 2000; Miller, 1986).

Becker, the Grand Synthesizer: Interpretive Analysis of the Human Condition and Explanation of Evil

Unlike Milgram, Becker did not employ experimentation or any other methods of empirical inquiry favored by most social scientists, including social and cultural anthropologists. For Becker, a true science of man is not just biological, social, psychological, and historical, but also ontological. Becker’s philosophical anthropology is his attempt to articulate such an ontology. In his last works (*The Denial of Death* and *Escape from Evil*), Becker maintains that the most significant failure of social science has

been its inability to recognize and understand the problem of human evil. This problem is central to Becker's theory of persons and their condition. In his attempt to confront and resolve this problem, Becker believed he had achieved a clear picture of the nature and condition of the evolved and cultured human being. This is a picture that must accommodate the empirical realities and evidence of evil, but is derived from a synthetic mixture of theoretical, philosophical, historical, and anthropometric methods that are not themselves strictly empirical in the sense of contemporary social science empiricism. Becker's methods are those of reading, studying, thinking, analyzing, and combining insights and conclusions based on everyday observations and the works of others. His library consisted of approximately 600 volumes, many of which are heavily annotated, some with the insertion of handwritten and typed pages sized to fit and secured to the inside covers of the books. Additional notes in files of index cards cross-reference ideas, discussions, arguments, and disputations found in two or more of these volumes and other volumes and journals housed elsewhere. Whereas Milgram worked primarily in his laboratory, Becker worked in his library. Milgram was a social scientist; Becker was a theoretician, interpreter, and synthesizer.

In his writings prior to *The Denial of Death* and *Escape from Evil*, Becker believed that what he referred to as "the principle of self-esteem maintenance" could explain human motivation. However, in his final two works, he realized that "the principle of immortality striving" is more encompassing. This principle holds that all individuals seek immortality, at least in some form of significance that marks their passing, and identify with ideologies of self-expression that they believe grant such immortality. Historically, so as to escape the tenuous and terrifying nature of existence as self-conscious, yet mortal beings, people have created societies and cultures consisting of norms, rituals, institutions, artifacts, practices, and traditions that provide meaning and succor to balance fears of insignificance and demise. Both self-esteem and immortality striving are buoyed by cultures, understood as shared immortality projects. Becker uses the principle of immortality striving to explain our fetishized attachments to our groups, communities, societies, and cultures, and our capacities for destructiveness and

evil in support of these attachments. The ultimate irony is that our highest needs and virtues, those associated with our belongingness, our sacrifices, our worth, our heroism, and our religions, may be recruited in atrocities committed against others. When endowed with a supernatural significance, culture becomes a death-defying system of beliefs and structures that will perpetuate and redeem its members in the face of their mortality. Understood in this way, culture enables a unique form of development for human beings. The reason that social scientific research programs and theories that focus on child care, troubled experiences, aggression as an animal instinct, frustrations, and so on all end in failure is that they are not animated by an adequate ontological theory of human nature and the human condition, one that is capable of understanding human evil and its sources. Whatever truths such undertakings point to are comparatively trivial. What such research cannot begin to contemplate and what Becker's principle of immortality striving claims is that under its sway, "men kill out of joy, in the experience of expansive transcendence over evil" (Becker, 1975, p. 155).

It is only human persons, even and sometimes especially those with highly cultured natures, who derive satisfaction from destruction. As self-conscious creatures, Becker claims that human capacities for both heroic self-transcendence and violent evil are grounded in attempts to deny our creatureliness, insignificance, and ultimately the inevitability of death. The "idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is the mainspring of human activity" (Becker, 1973, p. ix). It is by erecting cultural symbols and artifacts that humans achieve the promise of infinity. For Becker, all of culture, religious or not, is supernatural in assuring its members of the transcendence of death: "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" (Becker, 1975, p. 3). Faced with any perceived threat to their culture, humans will kill and destroy—"the logic of killing others to affirm our own life" is the paradox which unlocks much that puzzles us about the history of evil (Becker, 1975, p. 110). Unfortunately, our "search for immortality is most often worked out as a frenzied and fetishistic escape from

mortality and weakness through victory over an enemy, a hate object” (McCarthy, 1981, p. 50). In Becker’s own words (Becker, 1975, p. 116), “Victimage is a universal human need. And the highest heroism is the stamping out of those who are tainted.”

For Becker, neither science nor religion can provide a solution to the human condition that occasions evil. The best Becker can offer is a vague assertion that the kind of cosmic heroism he thinks humans seek will require a merger of idealized scientific and religious perspectives. Such heroism must be based on a careful meditation and confrontation with the reality of our circumstances, nature, and limitations: “Science [informed by Becker’s theoretical methods] paints the grim but objective picture of man’s propensity for evil; religion redeems science from cynicism and despair by demanding of man hope—even when that hope is an illusion” (McCarthy, 1981, p. 57).

Although Becker’s ideas achieved a good deal of popular recognition following his receipt of the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction in 1974 (shortly after his death), his work generally has not received anything like the widespread excitement and concern that greeted Milgram’s obedience studies.⁷ Today, Becker’s work languishes in comparative obscurity, especially in social scientific circles, despite several claims of a recent resurgence of interest stimulated by social psychologists who have developed a more traditional social scientific method to study some of Becker’s ideas concerning mortality awareness, reframed in what they call “terror management theory” (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1998). For most social scientists, Becker’s work and ideas lack the scientific rigor and support they desire and use to separate their undertakings from what they seem to regard as merely speculative philosophizing, especially when that *bête noir* of many contemporary empiricists, psychoanalysis, is part of the mix (Danziger, 2000; Teo, 2005).⁸

Understanding the Holocaust

By examining the applications of Milgram’s and Becker’s theories to understanding the atrocities of the Holocaust, it is possible to reveal the precise nature of their thinking and its relevance for understanding and constraining

human evil. Milgram’s demonstrative laboratory research and explanation of his results are starkly different from Becker’s library-informed study and reflection and his theory of evil as linked to the immorality projects of individuals and cultures. For Becker, evil begins in individual and cultural strivings and limitations. It is an inevitable consequence of our personal and collective searching for meaning, self-respect, and significance in our life experiences. In this scenario, broad social and cultural differences threaten the security and correctness of culturally sanctioned worldviews and practices. These are sociocultural and psychological realities that are extremely difficult to construct convincingly in an experimental con-

⁷ I used the internet tool Ngram Viewer to chart and compare the relative percentages of total references with authors in a wide sampling of published books from 1960 to 2008. My findings indicate a consistent advantage of Milgram over Becker, except for the decade of the 1980s, during which time Becker’s proportion of citations closely equated with, and in 1981 and 1982, actually exceeded, those of Milgram. This general equivalence during the 1980s follows a steep increase in Becker’s proportion of citations following his 1974 Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction. Since 1990, Milgram’s proportion of citations has mostly steadily increased, while Becker’s has shown a steady decline, despite claims of some authors and members of the Ernest Becker Foundation that Becker and his oeuvre currently are experiencing a revival of social scientific and popular interest. Nonetheless, Ngram Viewer is only one imperfect resource and currently contains no data for years after 2008. Historical popularity often waxes and wanes, so Becker’s popularity might yet experience a significant upswing, as might that of Milgram.

⁸ Even amongst many secularists and theists who welcome his form of interdisciplinary synthetic thinking, Becker’s rendering of the human condition is considered much too dark and overwrought (Carveth, 2004; Levitt, 1974). Additionally, like Freud’s, Becker’s oeuvre also has been attacked as overly patriarchal and overgeneralized from his own life experiences. Nonetheless, Becker is not without his admirers and followers, especially since the making and showing of the award-winning documentary film by Patrick Shen and Greg Bennick, *Flight from Death: The Quest for Immortality* (Shen & Bennick, 2005), which places Becker’s work in a contemporary context of concerns about right-to-die legislation, cultural conflict, and environmental concern. Whether or not “Terror Management Theory” and the empirical testing of its “Mortality Salience Hypothesis” will eventually lead to a wider acceptance of Becker’s ideas amongst social psychologists and others is yet to be determined.

text. Given his strong attachments to such settings, it probably was necessary for Milgram to disregard these matters and experimentally probe the conditions under which experimental subjects, whom he seemed to regard as readily manipulable, engage in actions that might be considered evil.⁹

A number of Holocaust scholars have made reference to Milgram's research on obedience to authority, a relevance that Milgram (1974) himself promoted—"the Nazi extermination of European Jews is the most extreme instance of abhorrent immoral acts carried out by thousands of people in the name of obedience" (p. 2). However, contrary to what is claimed by many critical commentators (e.g., Mastroianni, 2002; Nicholson, 2011a), Milgram also noted that his research did not speak directly to or explain important aspects of Nazi hatred and evil:

The mechanisms binding the German into his obedience were not the mere momentary embarrassment and shame of disobeying but more internalized punitive mechanisms that can only evolve through extended relationships with authority. . . . To resist Nazism was itself an act of heroism, not an inconsequential decision and death was a possible penalty. Penalties and threats were forever around the corner, and the victims themselves had been thoroughly vilified and portrayed as being unworthy of life or human kindness. Finally, our subjects were told by authority that what they were doing to their victim might be temporarily painful but would cause no permanent damage, while those Germans directly involved in the annihilations knew that they were not only inflicting pain but were destroying human life. So, in the final analysis, what happened in Germany from 1933 to 1945 can only be fully understood as the expression of a unique historical development that will never again be precisely replicated. (Milgram, 1974, pp. 176–177)

Nonetheless, Milgram (1974) is equally clear that "the essence of obedience, as a psychological process, can be captured by studying the simple situation in which a man is told by a legitimate authority to act against a third individual" (p. 177), as was the case in his obedience to authority experiments.

The specific manner in which most Holocaust scholars use Milgram's research is to connect it to the thought and writings of Hannah Arendt, especially her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Arendt, 1963). This is true whether such scholars agree or disagree with the relevance of Milgram's exper-

iments to the Holocaust and to other subsequent displays of evil (e.g., the My Lai massacre; the Khmer Rouge killings; the genocide in Rwanda, Abu Ghraib, and many others).¹⁰ As is well known, Arendt's book created heated controversy by implying that Nazis such as Eichmann had engaged in evil in a thoughtless bureaucratic manner in the absence of hateful anti-Semitism. In short, they were "just following orders." Of course, both Arendt and Milgram recognized the limits of such a view and did not believe it explained all of Nazi and other evil. However, they did think it captured an important psychological essence or ingredient of how ordinary people, especially if they were acting under the authority of others, could balm their guilt and shame when perpetuating, tolerating, or ignoring evil deeds. Moreover, it is highly likely that Milgram was excited by what he understood as Arendt's endorsement of the relevance of his research. Such a sense of encouragement, given his own liberal leanings, may also have encouraged Milgram to interpret his experiments as demonstrating that ordinary "Americans, just like people of all nationalities, could be complicit in war crimes" (Fermaglich,

⁹ One consequence of the somewhat socially and culturally decontextualized settings that Milgram employed in his research is the wide flexibility such decontextualization affords the experimenter's interpretation of results. For example, some commentators have noted, given the experimental situations he concocted to produce his findings, that it would have been just as reasonable for Milgram to focus on the disobedience of his subjects as on their obedience (cf. Miller, 1986). An important consequence of Milgram's *agentic state* explanation of his results was to shift the locus of obedience and evil to the experimental situation—a situation to which some of what he assumed to be otherwise appropriately self-regulating participants temporarily succumbed.

¹⁰ Nicholson (2011a, 2011b) has raised perhaps the strongest objections to Milgram's studies of obedience as pertinent to the Holocaust, arguing that they say much more about the dramatic and potentially dangerous masculinity of Milgram himself and of mid-twentieth-century America during the cold war. Without denying the likelihood of Nicholson's assertions, it nonetheless is the case that Milgram's studies frequently have been interpreted by many others as important clues pointing to the psychology of Nazi perpetrators and sympathizers. This being said, Nicholson certainly makes a convincing case for positioning Milgram within the predominately masculine and self-searching social, political culture of 1960s and 1970s America.

2006, p. 93). Understood in this way, Milgram was able to use his experiments as support for his own liberal positions and causes, and many of Milgram's readers were encouraged to believe that they were learning something potentially important to themselves and others by studying Milgram's research. This latter point is one that [Stam et al. \(1998\)](#), despite their dismissal of the ecological validity of Milgram's experiments, have emphasized as an important reason for the continued popularity of Milgram's work among social psychologists.

Although many of Milgram's theoretical and interpretive statements concerning the results of his obedience studies have been criticized and debated (e.g., [Miller, 1986](#)), one matter that deserves particular consideration is the highly variable rates of subject compliance (i.e., willingness to obey) across the different experimental conditions. Given that in several of these conditions, no or almost no participants who acted as "teachers" continued to shock the "learner" to the maximum levels, there is considerable evidence to support Milgram's "situationist" interpretation of his results. That is, the evidence across all experimental variations suggests that it is the particular situation in which people find themselves that is mostly responsible for the extent of their obedience. Several of Milgram's most vociferous critics have taken him to task for not emphasizing this important trend in his findings, claiming that "Milgram had largely ignored the [participants] who disobeyed" and commenting on "his tendency to make statements about humankind by generalizing from a 65 percent (and in some variations, even lower) obedience rate" ([Perry, 2012](#), p. 258). Because this is a matter that relates directly to both the relevance of Milgram's findings to the Holocaust and to Milgram's objectivity, it is interesting that Milgram himself, in the preface to the French edition of his book *Obedience to Authority* ([Milgram, 1979](#)), issued the same charge against the popular press, and perhaps, by extension, as a rebuke to some of his critics:

The degree of obedience varied sharply depending on the exact manner in which the variables of the experiment are arranged in a experimental condition . . . Yet, in the popular press, these variations are virtually ig-

nored, or assumed to be of only minor importance. (pp. 7–8)

Despite continuing controversy over the relevance, methodology, theoretical adequacy, ethics, and meaning of Milgram's work on evil, it has come to occupy an important and controversial place in the thought and writings of historians, psychologists, philosophers, and other social scientists in the area of Holocaust studies (see [Fermaglich, 2006](#), Chapter 3; [Lunt, 2009](#), Chapter 4, and [Miller, 1986](#), Chapter 7, for nicely balanced, comprehensive, and well-researched discussions). That the same is not true of Becker's work on evil is somewhat puzzling, but quite readily understood, given the foregoing differences in the life positionings of these two students of evil.

Milgram situates evil within the social situations in which perpetrators find themselves. In his theory of an "agentic shift," his experimental subjects succumb to the social demands of the evil experimenter by temporarily abandoning their usually well-intended self-regulation. In contrast, Becker is interested in the ultimate sources of evil, within the wider existential condition of human beings as uniquely self-conscious creatures for whom their lives matter deeply. Both men clearly are situationists, but Becker's situation is the existentially "original" condition, in which all of us find ourselves, mostly unwittingly engaged but in more reflective moments, shockingly exposed. Although what sometimes has been referred to as Milgram's "existential behaviorism" (e.g., [Fermaglich, 2006](#), p. 95) may be understood as touching on such a broader interpretation, Milgram's specific experimentation and theorizing do not extend in this way.

For Becker, evil is resident in the human condition writ large, in our inevitable confrontation with the unyielding fact of death that awaits all our personal and collective efforts to extend our symbolic powers and sense of our own significance. Rather than accept insignificance and demise, we are willing to inflict pain, suffering, and death on those who would deny our deepest cultural attachments and achievements. Cultures provide conceptions and avenues for heroism, which can be taken up in ways that advance them to the detriment of others. Heroic acts are demonstrations of a

power that courts immortality, thus counteracting threats of insignificance and the inevitability of death:

The hero is, then, the one who accrues power by his acts, and who placates invisible powers by his expiations. He kills those who threaten his group, he incorporates their powers to further protect his group, he sacrifices others to gain immunity for his group. . . . From the head-hunting and charm-hunting of the primitives to the holocausts of Hitler, the dynamic is the same: the heroic victory over evil by a traffic in pure power. And the aim is the same: purity, goodness, righteousness—immunity. Hitler Youth were recruited on the basis of idealism; the nice boy next door is the one who dropped the bomb on Hiroshima; the idealist communist is the one who sided with Stalin against his former comrades: kill to protect the heroic revolution, to assure the victory over evil. (Becker, 1975, p. 150)

Thus, through their cultural narratives, practices, institutions, symbols, and ways of living, humans counteract their fears and insecurities by the perpetration of evil on those others they fear and suspect of evil intentions directed toward themselves.

In his understanding of history as a succession of human societies and cultural practices and systems of meaning that protect us from our fears of insignificance and obliteration, Becker imbued all cultures with a sacredness through which they address the perpetuation and redemption of human life. From Becker's existential, psychoanalytic, and sociocultural perspective, all cultures attempt to transcend the physical:

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 himself knows it or not. (Becker, 1975, p. 64)

Yet despite all of his provocative and intellectually stimulating writings and ideas concerning such ingredients of human evil as scapegoating, sacrifice, social evil, and crowd psychology, Becker's theorizing about evil, unlike Milgram's work, has mostly escaped the purview of Holocaust studies until recently, when applications of Becker's ideas have begun to appear (e.g., Bartlett, 2008; S. Martin, 2009). Such applications are easy to grasp given the seemingly direct relevance to the "thousand year Reich" of Becker's understanding of the nation state as needing to represent "victory and immortality" or having "no mandate to exist"

(Becker, 1975, p. 117), or the direct relevance of Becker's analysis of "the heroic" to the "Führer Cult" (Bartov, 1992).

The comparative neglect of Becker's work on evil by Holocaust scholars for much of the past half-century can perhaps be illuminated by Fermaglich's (2006) positional analysis of many twentieth-century American Jews, especially Jewish scholars, as "insiders" and "outsiders," terms I have used herein to describe Milgram and Becker, respectively. Of direct relevance is Fermaglich's positioning of Stanley Milgram as an intellectual insider who generally was welcomed into elite intellectual settings, despite some difficulties stemming from the controversies over his research on obedience to authority. Interestingly, Fermaglich's positioning of Milgram outside of the academy is much more complicated. Although experiencing little in the way of direct anti-Semitism in his youth, having grown up in predominately Jewish neighborhoods, Milgram nonetheless experienced himself as outside of conventional, mainstream American society, as a result of the struggles of members of his extended family during and after WWII. By comparison, Ernest Becker must be classified as both an intellectual and societal "outsider," or, at the very least, as someone who certainly did not experience the perks of conventional "insider-ness." His experiences as a soldier and spy and his somewhat convoluted route to a permanent position in the academy clearly assailed both his personal and intellectual sense of belonging, even as they may have fueled his unconventional, self-directed education and career accomplishments.

When considered together as possible explanations for the Holocaust, Becker's theoretical edifice adds dehumanization and unfettered hatred and aggression to the bureaucratic numbness of Milgram's "agentic state" explanation. Understood in this way, a synthetic explanation that combines these aspects of Milgram's and Becker's perspectives on evil captures much of what Holocaust scholars have labeled intentionalist versus functionalist/structuralist interpretations of the Nazi's Final Solution (cf. Fermaglich, 2006, pp. 114–116). If the idea of "gradualism" is added to the mix, as portrayed in productions such as *The Pianist*, many of the

sociocultural and psychological ingredients for evil come into view.^{11,12}

For many, the Holocaust defines both evil and the ultimate failure of ideas of enlightenment and human progress. In viewing the Holocaust as a prototypic rather than a unique evil, both Milgram and Becker also open the way to understanding evil in ways that might lead to its reduction, if not its eradication. In the words of Kirsten Fermaglich (2006),

By treating the Holocaust as an exclusively Jewish subject, one that is somehow so unique that it cannot be compared with other historical phenomena, we impoverish our political and intellectual landscape . . . and foreclose real [alternative] possibilities for . . . politics and thought. (p. 173)

In the epilogue to his first book on evil, *The Structure of Evil*, Becker (1968) states that a genuine science of human beings must “explain evil credibly, and offer a way to overcome it” (p. 375). However, it was not until his final works that Becker believed he had moved some useful way toward this goal. In the epilogue of *Escape From Evil*, and after quoting concentration camp survivor Elie Wiesel’s comment that “Man is not human,” Becker (1975) sums up his treatment of evil by saying “it is one thing to say that man is not human because he is a vicious animal, and another to say that it is because he is a frightened creature who tries to secure a victory over his limitations” (p. 169). Then, after suggesting that even an aging Freud, so well-known for his pessimism about the human condition, had conceded that future cultural developments “might make it possible even to renounce age-old instinctual satisfactions,” Becker concludes that “it is even easier to speculate about cultural developments that might influence the fear of death and the forms of heroism, and so blunt the terrible destructiveness that they have caused” (p. 169).

Concluding Remarks

Both Stanley Milgram and Ernest Becker grew up in lower-middle-class Jewish families in the northeastern United States. Both were deeply affected by their direct and vicarious experiences of the Holocaust, experiences that animated their concerns about evil and its promulgation. Both were intellectually ambitious and focused on cultivating careers of significance in the academy.

Despite these similarities, their approaches to the question of evil differed dramatically as a consequence of the exact nature of their experiences of evil in their youth (differences that were clearly age related), and the different disciplinary practices and attachments that characterized their graduate educations and very different career trajectories. Their developing sense of themselves as particular kinds of scholar with valuable insights to offer about the nature and containment of human evil emerged through and interacted in complex ways with their personal circumstances and scholarly careers, with Milgram positioning himself as an innovative experimentalist within the mainstream social psychology of his day, and Becker simultaneously suffering and thriving outside of the traditional disciplinary divisions of American and Canadian universities.

In contrast to Milgram’s staunch support for the experimental empiricism of social psychology, Becker was strongly opposed to what he regarded as a narrowly scientific and staged social psychology that typified the social scientific inquiry of his time:

¹¹ There, of course, have been many explanations offered for scholars in the humanities and social sciences for the evils of the Holocaust. Gerhard Besier’s (2014) *Neither Good Nor Bad: Why Human Beings Behave How They Do* offers an extended discussion of such explanations applied both to the Holocaust and to other past and contemporary examples of human atrocity. Interestingly, one of the most important arguments in recent holocaust research is captured in an ongoing exchange between Christopher Browning (e.g., Browning, 1992) and Daniel Jonah Goldhagen (e.g., Goldhagen, 1996), with Goldhagen positing the sole cause of Holocaust atrocities as German and Nazi anti-Semitism against Goldhagen’s endorsement of a variety of causes, including bureaucratic obedience to authority and group pressure. In this general context, combining Milgram’s and Becker’s explanations for the evils of the Holocaust and other human atrocities holds considerable appeal. However, to pursue this matter further is beyond the scope of the current article.

¹² Fermaglich (2006) also describes how the field of Holocaust studies has itself changed over time in ways that have interacted, and continue to interact, with a more or less positive reception of Milgram’s work as a credible basis for understanding Nazi evil. Given the different emphases of Becker and Milgram, combining insights drawn from their programs of work also might contribute to a more sustained understanding of atrocities such as the Holocaust, or at least contribute to the articulation of a range of alternative explanations that might be weighted and elaborated against and with contemporary and future events and interpretations.

The problem with all the scientific manipulators is that somehow they do not take life seriously enough . . . I think that taking life seriously means something such as this: that whatever man does on this planet has to be done in the lived truth of the terror of creation, of the grotesque, of the rumble of panic underneath everything. Otherwise it is false. . . . Manipulative, utopian science, by deadening human sensitivity, would also deprive men of the heroic in their urge to victory. . . . It means the end of the distinctively human—or even, we must say, the distinctively organismic. (Becker, 1973, pp. 283–284)

Although he believed that much social psychological experimentation lacked imagination and relevance, Milgram's methodological commitments would never tolerate such an expansive critique of empirical social science.¹³ One of the strange historical anomalies of Becker's legacy is that he now is most frequently associated in the minds of many social scientists with a program of empirical research in social psychology labeled "terror management theory" (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1992), which consistently lends empirical support to the idea that experimentally induced "mortality salience" intensifies negative reactions to differently socialized and cultured others who threaten one's worldview. It is extremely doubtful that Becker would find such confirmation reassuring or even relevant to his ideas, so great was his mistrust of empirical social science methodology.

The fact that Milgram prioritized and advanced his empirical demonstrations before he had formulated an adequate theory of obedience to authority speaks volumes concerning the major difference in practical scientific understanding and practice of our two students of evil. Well positioned inside his discipline of social psychology, even as he worked to expand the relevance and dramatic force of its methodological tool kit, Milgram was a staunchly empirical disciplinarian, despite the relative expanse of his interdisciplinary scholarship. Becker, on the other hand, was an academic outsider, largely self-motivated—a self-directed scholar driven by his apparently lifelong interest in questions of life and death, with little or no positive commitments to any of the established social science methodologies. It is extremely difficult to imagine Milgram or any other social scientist of his time asking how social science might go beyond what religious faith had provided in the way of cultural projects to bolster human resolve in the face of insignificance and demise.

For Milgram and most social psychologists then and now, such thoughts, especially any mention of religious conviction or faith, were for the dust bin, or more charitably, the drawing room, not the departmental office and certainly not the laboratory and research report. In an increasingly secular society, the kind of respect that Becker accorded religious belief and practice may strike many as inappropriate for a social science worthy of its name.

The key difference between Milgram and Becker concerning the conduct of their studies of evil was methodological. Given that methodology has in large part defined the social sciences and separated them from the humanities, this probably is not surprising. That this divide has itself grown substantially during the last decade of the 20th century to the present, in both the academy and the broader society in the United States and other Western nations (cf. Small, 2013), may help to explain the continuing marginalization of Becker's work during much of this same period of time, at least in the social sciences, and perhaps especially in experimentally oriented social psychology.

Unfortunately, such a continuing marginalization may prevent appreciation of the possibility of using the works and ideas of both Milgram and Becker to better understand and resist human evil. This would be especially deplorable if an adequate explanation of evil requires a conjoining of the methods of both the social sciences and the humanities. Given that social science, if it is to be of value, inevitably must work within everyday language and socio-cultural practices, it cannot divorce itself from the concerns of the humanities, even as it devises and employs its own techniques, proce-

¹³ Milgram distrusted theoretical research because it seemed to him that it inevitably resulted in a continuing rehearsal of opposing ideological and philosophical positions, whereas proper scientific experiments with experimental procedures and controls allowed for ideological neutrality (cf. Lunt, 2009, pp. 26–27). As Alexandra Milgram noted, her husband "firmly believed that if an experiment produced results different from what was predicted, it would indicate a significant finding. This was certainly the case with the results of the obedience experiment" (A. Milgram, 2000, p. 5). Nor did Milgram's penchant for dramatic demonstration weaken his faith in scientific experimentation. Quite the opposite, in that, in the words of Ian Nicholson (2011b, p. 243), "In what has come to be known as 'the obedience to authority paradigm,' Milgram found his spectacle."

dures, and operations. Perhaps Becker's free-ranging, everyday empiricism, which he deployed as he observed himself and others struggling with the challenges of living and dying, might be productively joined to Milgram's social psychological experimentalism to yield a multifaceted empiricism capable of examining important questions of human meaning and experience that thus far have mostly resisted the inquiries of psychologists.

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