Revisiting Ernest Becker's Psychology of Human Striving

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Abstract

Ernest Becker's psychology of human striving is a unique blend of pragmatic, post-Freudian, and existential thought that explicates central features of the human condition and experience. It is both a psychological and philosophical anthropology. In consequence, despite being mostly ignored by psychologists, Becker's work continues to be relevant, even instructive, to past and more recent attempts to formulate a psychology of personhood, especially one that focuses on the interactivity of persons within their biophysical and sociocultural contexts. What is offered here is an integrative explication of Becker's psychology of human striving that merges important aspects of his early and later work and points to critical considerations and possible extensions of his ideas.

Keywords

Ernest Becker, human striving

Ernest Becker died of cancer at the age of 49 years on March 6, 1974, 2 months prior to receiving the Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction.[1] During his lifetime and after his death, he and his work have been mostly ignored by psychologists.[2] Such neglect is perhaps understandable in that Becker was a

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cultural anthropologist by formal education, and his somewhat unique blend of social pragmatic, analytic, and existential thought never held much interest for mainstream scientific psychologists.[3] Nonetheless, some scholars in the humanities (e.g., Bartlett, 2008; Evans, 1992; Liechty, 1995, 2005[4]) continue to study and interpret Becker's 10 books, especially his final 2 volumes (the award winning *Denial of Death* and the posthumously published, although possibly incomplete, *Escape From Evil*). Moreover, in social psychology, Sheldon Solomon and his colleagues have developed an approach they refer to as "terror management theory," which uses many of Becker's ideas (for a summary of this work, see Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1998). Even more recently, the philosopher David Sprintzen (2009), who was one of Becker's major interpreters during Becker's academic lifetime, has published a major work that makes considerable and critical use of what Sprintzen and Rosenberg (1973) once referred to as Becker's *psychology of human striving*. I think that depicting Becker as a student of human striving is highly appropriate and, as elaborated and extended herein, helps to clarify and consolidate important links between Becker's early and later work in ways that allow a coherent theoretical integration of major ideas in both.

My intention in revisiting Becker's psychology of human striving is to offer an accessible and integrated synopsis of Becker's oeuvre for consideration by contemporary psychologists, especially humanistic psychologists.[5] My reason for doing so is that there is much in Becker's writings that is directly relevant to a reemergent interest in the psychological study of persons acting holistically within the biophysical and sociocultural world—what Martin and Bickhard (2012), in a recent special issue of *New Ideas in Psychology*, refer to as "the new psychology of personhood." As will become apparent, Becker's work combines a psychology of striving with a philosophical anthropology. More specifically, his work is an attempt to explicate a metaphysics and phenomenology of the life experiences and projects of persons striving for meaning and significance within the human condition.

An Overview of Becker's Psychology of Human Striving

During the 1960s and early 1970s, Ernest Becker probed the human condition and our collective and individual reactions to it. The central question guiding his inquiries was why we act the way that we do. To answer this question, Becker engaged in a series of interdisciplinary inquiries that crossed the social sciences and included the study of sociocultural systems of belief and practice. His approach was a unique synthesis of post-Freudian

depth psychology, pragmatism, and symbolic interactionism, naturalized existentialism, and cultural anthropology, rooted historically within the tradition of enlightenment social science.

Becker's core answer to all human striving is that it is a reaction to our awareness of our mortality. However, this realization is not a philosophical conclusion. Properly understood, it points to our existential alienation and urges a reconstruction of Western social theory and society. Such a reconstruction requires nothing less than a new science of the person, a project that Becker pursued in his 10 books. In these works, his analysis of human striving, seen in nonreductionist behavioral terms as the maximization of meaning, is central. Rooted in bioevolutionary reality, Becker's exploration of human behavior as a reaction to mortality awareness incorporates social and cultural reality in a way that is both nonreductive and integrative.

Becker's psychology of human striving can be integrated across his entire oeuvre if his ongoing concern for the *socioculturally embedded* and *biophysically embodied* interactivity of human beings is recognized. For Becker, our psychological personhood is a joint function of our sociocultural interactivity with others and our embodied being. Both are simultaneously and unremittingly necessary and deeply problematic. Together, they create a human condition in which we are driven to act to assert our being. The social interactions that constitute us as self-conscious agents constantly threaten the very agency they spawn by forcing us into existing social, cultural practices, templates, and ways of life. Our uniquely evolved bodies that enable a plasticity of self-reflective and self-regulated thought and action unavailable to other animals eventually betray us through the corporeal mortality we share with those other animals. In most of his early and middle works, Becker adopted a combination of social pragmatic and post-Freudian psychoanalytic theorizing that focused on the personal and collective challenge of providing appropriate and adequate grounds for the development of a form of self-esteem that was not enslaved to convenient and insistent conventionality. In his final works, he focused more broadly on confronting our fears about life and death, through understanding and actions that evinced an unflinching, heroic stance in the face of the impossibility of our condition—that is, the inevitability of our social constraints and bodily demise, especially in an age of secularism, marked by acquisitive materialism and instrumental individualism.

For Becker, a meaningful life was a life of constant striving (what he often referred to as "drivenness"—see Keen, 1974) in the face of our social, cultural dependence and biophysical fragility. Such a life requires a full recognition of both our sociocultural constitution and our existential circumstance as conditions of possibility for a viable personal and collective agency. This is

an agency that is simultaneously ideal and tragic. It is one that aims for the heroic and ultimately settles for a fuller recognition of human limitation in face of the awesomeness of nature and powerfully pervasive cultural forces. In what follows, I first will discuss the struggle for a clear-eyed, authentic self-esteem, as evident in Becker's work up to 1970. My next target will be heroic striving in the full face of life and death that characterized his last works, including his thoughts about heroism and creativity. I then turn to a critical discussion of Becker's psychology of human striving, a discussion that integrates his early and later ideas, and also draws on David Sprintzen's (2009) recently published critique of Western social theory. My aim is to elaborate a psychology of human striving as understood by Becker and to point to the importance of a critical continuation of Becker's project.

Self-Esteem in Recognition of Social Necessity

In his early and middle works, Becker analyses the Faustian bargain individuals forge with others and society at large. As infants and young children, we gradually learn (at first, unwittingly and prereflectively) to act in ways that our parents, guardians, and others approve in return for their affection, care, and attention. Our sense of ourselves derives powerfully from this exchange. Becker had the highest regard for the insights of American pragmatists such as John Dewey and George Herbert Mead who recognized that the origins of our selfhood lie in our applying to ourselves the attitudes and perspectives we experience with others. And yet, Becker, like Rousseau[6] before him, was obsessed with the tragedy implicit in this necessary social, psychological arrangement. For, by recognizing ourselves through taking on the perspectives that others and society direct to us, we enslave and restrict ourselves to these same understandings and to the interpersonal and social practices in which we are embedded. In consequence, we seem deprived of any possibility of achieving and enacting our own, unique personal understandings and ways of being.

Freud offered a way of considering the extent of this basic dilemma, but his early biological determinism and later social pessimism were both anathema to Becker, who remained (even in his later work) an Enlightenment scholar devoted to the improvement of the human condition through his particular version of social scientific inquiry and insight. Moreover, to Becker, Freud's unremitting emphasis on sexual forms of the psychoanalytic transference precluded the full recognition of self-esteem as the first principle of human motivation. Following Adler, Fromm, and Rank, Becker understood the child as naturally social and highlighted processes of ego weakness and

inferiority in the context of children's relationships with their caregivers. The child's needs for security, affection, and belonging, threatened by experiences of physical separation from caregivers encourage the child to maintain a sense of self-esteem that originates in physical interactivities with others but gradually manifests in more symbolic interactions. For Becker, the Oedipal transition is one in which the child learns to maintain parental involvement on a psychological and symbolic level, moving from being a predominately biological actor to a predominately social actor.

Importantly, this developmental realization of one's social being is accompanied not only by experiences of inferiority and alienation that drive the desire for self-esteem and ego expansion, but it also forces the child to confront the fact of mortality.

> The chronologically first anxiety is the anxiety of physical separation from the caregiver. As the child's ability to abstract and symbolize develops, this first anxiety is displaced by the existential anxiety of mortality awareness. From that point at which the child is able to understand that caregiver separation (object loss) = inability to thrive = death, it can be assumed that death anxiety has established itself as basic to the anxieties of abandonment. . . . The experiential dualism of the physical arena and the arena of the symbolic self and the concomitant urge to conquer death symbolically which emerges during the Oedipal transition, tends to define the problem of living itself. . . . The Oedipal transition leads into the lifelong Oedipal project. It is characterized by ego expansion on the one hand and safe anxiety avoidance on the other. (Liechty, 1998, p. 50)

With this post-Freudian Oedipal transition and project in place, the general Freudian idea of catharsis pointed to a form of educational intervention appropriate to Becker's Enlightenment conviction that human improvement was possible, even if fraught with extreme difficulty. By replacing the narrow Freudian transference with a more open-ended exploration of the social, cultural sources of both one's personhood and one's alienation, Becker (1964, 1967) was convinced that both psychiatry and education could be reformed on the basis of a newly emergent science of man,[7] an understanding that was predicated on a nonreductionistic, open exploration not only of social forces that might inhibit and oppress us, but of possibilities for living with others and ourselves that might give freer rein to our imagination and creative potential as self-understanding beings capable of reflecting and acting on our condition. To frame his Enlightenment project, Becker spent considerable

time detailing the various pathologies wrought by extreme forms of alienation—to his mind, much in evidence in the America of the mid-twentieth century: "Life in contemporary society is like an open-air lunatic asylum" (Becker, 1971, p. 150). Like Szasz, his one-time mentor and colleague at the Upstate Medical Center in Syracuse,[8] he was convinced that mental illness in its various manifestations flowed from developmental experiences of restriction that generated incapacities and ignorance about one's condition. Consequently, education and social reform were both necessary and possible.

As already stated, the social origins of our selfhood and agency were, for Becker, both unavoidable and dangerous. His solution was for human beings to attempt to "stand on their own feet"—to "be a man." As self-aware recipients of the social meanings and practices that constitute them, persons are capable of acting to produce meanings of their own, at least to some worthwhile extent—that is, to an extent worth striving for. The trick to this end is for parents in particular, and adult society in general, to allow children to develop with as little in the way of unnecessary imposition as possible, only enough to ensure their physical survival and initiate their social, psychological exploration of possibilities for enhanced interactivity in the world. Psychological problems and pathologies, for Becker, amounted to little more than stunted, worldly interactivity, what he frequently referred to as "stupidity."

> Mental illness . . . represents a kind of stupidity, a limitation or obtuseness of perception, a failure to see the world as it is (cf. Becker, 1964; Leifer, 1966). It is not a disease in the medical sense, but a failure to assign correct priorities to the real world. (Becker, 1971, p. 151)

Consequently, by assisting children to escape unnecessary social fettering, and open themselves through their activity to as much as possible of what the sociocultural and biophysical world has to offer in the way of possibilities for living, children might experience a richly textured life quilt, with the possibility of combining various threads of life into a somewhat unique life experience and contribution.

Throughout his work, Becker never loses sight of the importance of educative experiences, formal and informal, that enable us to understand the human condition in all its paradoxes, tensions, and tragic dimensions, and to use this understanding to leave our mark as having lived courageously and creatively. For Becker (1967), a proper education would equip students with "the richest possible picture of the nature of man and the possibilities of human liberation" (p. 285), giving them

a vantage point from which to examine their lives, their society, their world—if, as we say, all this falls to them, then the greatest task of all is also theirs: *They must do nothing less than build the newer and truer forms of social life.* (p. 289)

With the passage of time and what he regarded as the maturing of his own thought, aided especially by his discovery and study of the texts of Otto Rank in the late 1960s and into the 1970s, Becker began to plumb more fully, and seemingly with greater trepidation stopping just short of despair, the existential demands posed by our living and dying, and the heroic challenge of their possible transcendence, intellectually, psychologically, and culturally.

Heroism and Creativity in the Face of Life and Death

Influenced by Rousseau and Dewey, the early Becker understood the cultural world of roles and meanings to furnish and constrain the individual's self-constitution, requiring an exchange of potential and possibility for a functioning identity and self value. Life is thus a struggle for meaning and self-esteem within the dual prisons of our bodies and our cultures. We are bounded by, and suspended within, the creatureliness of animals and the symbolic practices and powers of gods, and somehow must create a self-regard adequate to living within such a perilous circumstance.

As a cultural anthropologist, Becker understood the development of food sharing, cooperative exploration of the environment, and ritualistic practices as prerequisites for social coordination and language, symbolic resources essential to fixing the experiencing subject's space–time coordinates in ways conducive to self-conscious awareness of actualities and possibilities. With such awareness comes the confrontation with bodily demise that is so basic to Becker's thought, and which takes an increasingly central role in his later, mature work. In this work, Becker understands persons as simultaneously terrorized by the necessity of both living and dying, embroiled in the guilt and shame of the former while experiencing the dread and injustice of the latter—a deeply dark perspective that has drawn the ire of both secularists (e.g., Levitt, 1974) and theists (e.g., Carveth, 2004). At this stage in his life and work, Becker no longer accepts a unifying principle of self-esteem maintenance as his fundamental organizing concept, viewing such a principle as too abstracted and lacking a required "universal, energetic content in the form of specific, inflexible motives" (Becker, 1975, p. xvii). These motives he now finds in the work of Otto Rank, "in his insistence on the fundamental

dynamic of the fear of life and death, and man's urge to transcend this fear in a culturally constituted heroism." For Becker, the problem of life and death becomes paramount when collective ideologies fail, and individuals experience the full impotence and terror of their limitations and inevitable destruction.

Toward the end of his magnum opus—what he considered to be his first truly mature work, *The Denial of Death*—Becker (1973) repeats a thematic critique of scientific social science that echoes powerfully throughout his oeuvre.

> The problem with all the scientific manipulators is that somehow they don't 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. Whatever is achieved must be achieved from within the subjective energies of creatures, without deadening, with the full exercise of passion, of vision, of pain, of fear, and of sorrow. . . . Manipulative, utopian science, by deadening human sensitivity, would also deprive men of the heroic in their urge to victory. And we know that in some very important way this falsifies our struggle by emptying us, by preventing us from incorporating the maximum of experience. It means the end of the distinctively human—or even, we must say, the distinctively organismic. (pp. 283-284).

The challenge that faces the creative person, scientist or artist, is to take life seriously and to be heroic when facing fully the daunting, unyielding nature of the human condition. For Becker, this is the central task of science, art, and life. To articulate it (Becker, 1973), he combines his own psychoanalytic, existential theorizing with his interpretation of the writings of Otto Rank, and in so doing, offers a unique perspective on human creativity.

Heroism, Creativity, and Transcendence According to Becker

The challenge of individual heroism as understood and posed by Becker is best appreciated against the background of culture as a collective heroic denial of creatureliness. Central to Becker's depiction of the condition of the modern person is his contention that the ability of culture to oppose and transcend nature is more or less effective in different epochs.

> When man lived securely under the canopy of the Judeo-Christian world picture he was part of a great whole . . . his cosmic heroism was completely mapped out, it was unmistakable. He came from the invisible world into the visible one by the act of God, did his duty to God by living out his life with dignity and faith, marrying as a duty, procreating as a duty, offering his whole life—as Christ had—to the Father. In turn he was justified by the Father and rewarded with eternal life in the invisible dimension. (Becker, 1973, pp. 159-160)

Of course, in a more secular world animated by evolutionary understandings, such a readily available, cultural, and religious heroism is lost to many. Nonetheless, tensions and fears, emanating from the human condition of existing as both creature and symbol user, continue to demand some kind of symbolic, transcendent merger with something outside of the person herself. Becker maintains that the resultant moral dependence of modern persons issues from a universal *causa-sui* project of denying creatureliness. In the absence of a religious cosmology, persons reach out to each other, to a *thou* to replace declining collective ideologies.

The most common manifestation of this other-reaching is found in romantic relationships. However, such modern relationships inevitably, according to Becker (1973), fall short of providing a secure basis for living with the terror of dying. "Sex is of the body and the body is of death" (p. 162). From an evolutionary point of view, if sex is a fulfillment of one's role in species perpetuation, one is nothing but a fornicating animal like any other, and individuality lies in defeat. However, if the romantic relationship also is one of love, confusion of love and cosmic heroism undermines love by asking too much of one's partner and undermines heroism by being too dependent on a particular other. Having said this, Becker is nonetheless respectful of the possibility that most of us succeed in functioning within such inevitable relational limits by spreading our personal supports and desires across spouse, children, parents, friends, and colleagues in ways that allow us to define ourselves situationally as minor heroes—good providers, solid citizens, and supportive parents. To be clear about this, Becker (1973) says,

> I am hardly implying that there is anything false or unheroic about the standard cultural solution to the problems of men. It represents both the truth and the tragedy of man's condition: the problem of the consecration of one's life, the meaning of it, the natural surrender to something larger—these driving needs that inevitably are resolved by what is nearest at hand. (p. 170)

But what of the creative person? Here, Becker, like Rank (1932/1968) before him, describes a much more challenging form of heroism, that of the innovative artist or scientist. This is a more dangerous heroism because it removes the person from conventional, comfortable "beyonds," and requires a strength and courage that the average person does not possess or understand. With the contemplation of such an individual, Becker (1973) states that "We have crossed a threshold into a new type of response to man's situation" (p. 171). The core reality of the creative person is that such an individual is necessarily separated from "the common pool of shared meanings" and conventional, collective "solutions" to the problems of existence (p. 171). In short, the creative person falls outside of the usual, cultural supports for living. Moreover, this state of affairs reflects both the active agency of the artist as one who is willing to step outside ruling cultural practices and ideologies, and the ongoing, never-ending conflict between artist and communal conventions, between the individual and the collective. For both Rank and Becker, this is a tension that cannot be resolved, only absolved.[9] The work of the creative individual both expresses and justifies her heroism. It is her own "beyond," a "private religion" that grants immortality (Rank, 1932/1968, p. 86). The work of the creative person is a peculiarly personal gift that cannot be adjudicated by others, but is offered to the highest powers of creation, Nature, or God.

The angst of creativity lies in the paradox of developing a "work with the full force of one's passion, a work that saves one's soul," but which requires a renunciation of oneself, one's significant others, and one's world to a higher power, for only such a power can ensure its worth and continuance against catastrophe—"the spectre of the dinosaurs still haunts man and will always haunt him" (attributed to Freud, as cited in Becker, 1973, p. 174). To create, the creative person must transcend worldly perspectives and the conditions of her own existence, and surrender "to the bigness of nature on the highest level" (p. 174). In effect, from Becker's point of view, what this amounts to is conquering symbolically by existing heroically within, one's life in the face of death. To create fully is to use one's self up, to be consumed through the creative process of making a gift of one's work and life.

> [I]n this world each organism lives to be consumed by its own energies; and those that are consumed with the most relentlessness, and burn with the brightest flame, seem to serve the purposes of nature best, so far as accomplishing anything on this planet is concerned. (Becker, 1973, p. 260)

Unfortunately, the compulsions and perversions that for Becker inevitably attend everyday life, fueled in large part by our fears of extinction, can become magnified in the creative person and her relationships with others. Indeed, such possibilities loom large in Becker's (1975) possibly unfinished and posthumously published, final book, *Escape From Evil*[10]—a text in which he argues that by shifting the fear of death onto the higher level of cultural perpetuity, new kinds of instabilities and anxieties arise that usher evil into the world. "It is man's ingenuity, rather than his animal nature, that has given his fellow creatures such a bitter earthly fate" (p. 5). And yet, Becker is neither saying that fear of death is the only motive for life and creativity nor is he prescribing traditional religion or assuming that the evil that issues from ingenuity/creativity necessarily trumps the possible good.

> [F]ear of death is not the only motive of life; heroic transcendence, victory over evil for mankind as a whole, for unborn generations, consecration of one's existence to higher meanings—these motives are just as vital and they are what give the human animal his nobility even in the face of his animal fears. (Becker, 1973, p. 268)

> Let me hasten to assure the reader that I am not developing an apologia for traditional religion but only describing the impoverishment of the modern neurotic and some of the reasons for it. (Becker, 1973, p. 201)

Thus, a person transcends death

> by finding a meaning for his life, some kind of larger scheme into which he fits: he may believe he has fulfilled God's purpose, or done his duty to his ancestors or family, or achieved something which has enriched mankind. . . . It is an expression of the will to life, 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 really fears is not so much extinction, but extinction with insignificance. (Becker, 1975, pp. 3-4)

Becker's Enlightenment Program

As previously noted, Becker's theory of human striving is built on two paradoxes—the paradox of enculturation that limits human freedom and self-esteem and inevitably courts neurosis in even the most normal individuals,

and the paradox of embodiment that limits human transcendence and heroism and inevitably courts despair. Becker's enlightenment project requires the development of a self-esteem that is neither narcissistic nor compensatory in the face of the former and a heroism that is neither debased nor deceived in the face of the latter. Despite these formidable hurdles, the achievement of self-esteem and heroism in the context of a meaningful life are the aims of all human striving, a striving rooted in our paradoxical condition with the hope of transcending it. What animates all of this striving is human nature. But this is not a nature determined by our biology or our sociology. It is an ideal animated within our active struggles to find meaning, individually and collectively, in our fractured existence.

> Nature could only respect the power that typifies a nature, and for man this must be the power to live and endure the paradoxes of his own. Such power for man must be, of course, an ideal, and an unattainable one—yet the whole sense of a human life is a struggle in that direction. Human nature is, in a word an ideal . . . Can we imagine any kind of quietude and balance between the urge to cosmic heroism and the dribbling, pink-orificed body of a primate life? . . . the theological idea of "The Fall" still serves to describe the human condition and its limitations. . . . We are after all striving organisms who must follow out the directives of our aspirations. And one of our central, historical, and human aspirations is to help bring to birth a better world . . . (Becker, 1971, pp. 178-179)

Before turning to what is intended as a constructive critique and extension of Becker's thought, one that draws heavily on the work of David Sprintzen (2009), it is important to understand how Becker's ideas concerning the human condition and human striving are related to his career-long search for a defensible, integrated social science and how such a science is, for Becker, closely allied with democracy, psychology, and theology. In many ways, Becker's project is a more contemporary take on the mutually constitutive and potentially perilous self-society relationship pioneered by Rousseau. Becker understands the major challenges facing humans to be a thoroughgoing understanding of and active resistance to all forms of sociocultural systems of proper conduct and sanctioned heroism that limit our freedom and possibilities for confronting and transcending those paradoxes of the human condition that bind us. Consequently, it is hardly surprising that he gives an activist, even revolutionary, spin to the aim of social science—"serious social science is an attempt to come to grips with the ideas, beliefs, institutions that

stifle the intelligent, responsible self-direction of people" (Becker, 1971, p. 158). Moreover, "Social science would find its natural merger with the political theory of democracy because it would find out why masses of men are swayed to and fro by demagogic leaders, why they slavishly follow power, why their institutions work against them despite their best efforts" (p. 158).

Although cultural anthropology and sociology are essential to Becker's social science, psychology holds the key to a serious and genuine science of man. More specifically, Becker employs a combination of post-Freudian, psycholanalytic (especially Fromm and Rank) and social, pragmatic psychology (James, Dewey, Mead, Royce), merged with certain insights from Karl Marx, which he believed had gained a well-deserved, greater prominence during the 1960s and early 1970s.[11] For Becker, the key insight of such a psychology is "to show how social fictions and personal fictions intimately reinforce and mutually influence one another, how certain types of social structure and social ideologies create certain types of people who perceive the world in ways that sustain and reinforce those ideologies, and who in turn pass them on to their children" (Becker, 1971, p. 160). Out of such insight, Becker believed that the findings of this "mature psychology support the ideal of democratic man and reveal to him the causes of his failure" (p. 163). Such a psychology could clarify for us "the gulf that exists between one's early training, one's basic perceptions, one's primary sense of self, and the choices, opportunities, experiences and challenges of the adult world," and, in so doing could foster the social and personal development of the kinds of adults that a democracy needs—"adults who bring something new to the perception of the world, cut through accustomed categories, break down rigidities . . . In a democracy the citizens are the artists who open up new reals" (p. 163). As Carlyle warned, Becker affirmed that everyone must think and see for himself or nations and the world are doomed.

With the foregoing linkages between social science, psychology, and democracy in place, we can appreciate better Becker's understanding of human nature in terms of our ability to reach out to the promise of an ideal adaptability to our paradoxical condition. But Becker does not stop here. He goes on to assert that we only can access "the ideal of self-reliance, openness, the power to support contradictions, the development of the broadest perceptions" (Becker, 1971, p. 181) if we add religion to his particular mix of social science, for true heroism must be cosmic and "in the service of the highest powers, the Creator, the meaning of creation" (p. 188). In short, to ensure the widest range of possibilities for adapting creatively to our situation of paradoxes and contradictions, we must open ourselves to the cosmos by making a gift of our lives to creation.

Genuine heroism for man is still the power to support contradictions, no matter how glaring or hopeless they may seem. The ideal critique of a faith must always be whether it embodies within itself the fundamental contradictions of the human paradox and yet is able to support them without fanaticism, sadism, and narcissism, but with openness and trust. Religion itself is an ideal of strength and of potential for growth, of what man might become by assuming the burden of his life, as well as by being partly relieved of it. (p. 198)

A Critical Reconsideration: Toward a Contemporary Psychology of Human Striving

For Becker, all life projects involve a striving for maximum personal and communal development. Our personal and social lives can be understood as strivings for symbolic immortality that establish our meaning, worth, dignity, and significance in the face of the realities of our limitations and mortality. To understand this human condition and strive heroically within it is what it is to be a person and a citizen. Democracy itself was conceived by Becker to be an ideal state in which each person strives to achieve maximum individuality within maximum community. Given that the idea of a fully socialized human being in most societies, past and present, is to be a person who accepts the necessity of authority, Becker considered modern liberal democracy as an experiment to test whether or not "self-governing freedom can itself function as a transference object adequate to hold a free and diverse people together in unity" (Liechty, 1998, p. 53). Liechty (1998) interprets Becker's political ideal as follows:

This experiment is of itself a heroic endeavor in which it is expected and even encouraged by the state (in the form of protection of minority rights) that individuals will participate in multiple interlinking spheres of heroic meaning that may be quite contrary to aggrandizement of the state (the state as "highest good"). At the same time, all people would share in at least one heroism together, the heroism of participation in the democratic experiment itself. This sense of personal and social heroism is the sense of mutual respect for each other as free and equal citizens and effectively curbs the urge to pursue naked self-interest at the expense of the commonweal. (p. 53)

While hardly a political activist himself, Becker thought that American democracy had been derailed by fusing the politics of liberal democracy with

free market capitalism, resulting in the hegemony of material accumulation and consumption as a predominate personal and social project. To help restore a more diverse set of projects and reinvigorate the experiment of liberal democracy, Becker (1967) proposed a unified educational curriculum that would be built on a general theory of alienation capable of explaining the evils created by human beings. Such a curriculum then could prepare students who might be able to ameliorate such human-made evils. This is the project that Becker was attempting to enable by constructing his "unified science of man"—a description of the human condition and human striving that would depict human values as they emerge and are constantly revised from one generation to the next. Students of such a science would learn how social, cultural traditions, institutions, and practices work against maximum individual and community development. By studying subjects such as psychology, psychiatry, sociology, comparative politics, aesthetics, anthropology, and economics, students could work toward a general theory of alienation that could be a unifying principle for an education aimed at a genuine synthesis of knowledge—knowledge that would explain how evil arises within the human condition defined by finitude and mortality, and how it might be resisted.

It is this same project that David Sprintzen (2009) extends in his recent book, *Critique of Western Philosophy and Social Theory*, a work in which he marries insights from Becker and others with his own critical theoretical interpretations and analyses. Sprintzen's work offers what might be regarded as a critical reworking of both theoretical and methodological aspects of Becker's psychology of human striving. As a conclusion to my revisiting of Becker's psychology of human striving, I briefly discuss what I regard as Sprintzen's critical extension of Becker's theory and project.

In a detailed commentary on Becker's psychology of human striving offered during Becker's lifetime, Sprintzen and Rosenberg (1973) argue that Becker's "analysis of the potentials of human nature and his outline of the ethical community are weakened by his neglect of the general social process by which the cultural drama becomes interiorized in the character of its members" (p. 157). As an example of the kind of work that is required in this regard, Sprintzen and Rosenberg suggest Berger and Luckmann's (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality*, which offers a dialectics of externalization, objectification, and internalization that shows how individuality and individual freedom are constituted within human-made social and cultural practices, traditions, and contexts. Sprintzen and Rosenberg also suggest that a more precise and extensive understanding of the social constitution of human subjectivity and individuality would allow Becker to describe more fully how

"the Faustian ambitions—in support of the human attempt to form the objective world—have played a formative role in propelling Western commercial-industrial development" (p. 157). They then elaborate the need for a more critical approach to social analysis and reconstruction.

> [Becker] presents a very compelling, though partial, theoretical structure for the unification of the science of man. But methodologically he seems to assume that if science were formally unified under the direction of a centralized research establishment it would necessarily embody his vision of science—which is hardly likely or even possible, given the nature of the forces presently in control of our society. In fact, Becker does mention in *Beyond Alienation* the difficulty in getting ruling élites to finance counterélite research programs and institutions—but then he passes on to an outline of his proposed educational reforms without really seeing how this fact vitiates the practical dimensions of his program and, indeed, all programs of radical educational reform. (Sprintzen & Rosenberg, 1973, pp. 157-158)

Thus, in their analysis of Becker's work during his lifetime, Sprintzen and Rosenberg (1973) already recognized that Becker's psychology of human striving required both a more theoretically robust explanation of constitutive relations connecting sociocultural and psychological phenomena, and a more critical methodology for linking theory to practice.

In his 2009 book, *Critique of Western Philosophy and Social Theory*, Sprintzen provides a detailed nonreductive metaphysics of emergence that clarifies the social origins of our individuality, together with an outline for a program of global cultural transformation that radically deconstructs and criticizes free market capitalism and atomistic individualism as exploitative forms of sociocultural competition and conflict. For Sprintzen, like Becker, our fundamental views of personal identity, economic development, sustainability, and institutional structure must be reoriented to support necessary changes to the moral character of our culture. Although beyond the scope of this article, Sprintzen backs up his call for such transformation with penetrating analyses of many aspects of our current economic and political situation, both in America and internationally.

However, at the heart of Sprintzen's (2009) analysis beats a clearly Beckerian pulse, albeit one with considerably less faith in possibilities of transcending our personal and worldly involvements.

> [H]uman self-consciousness grounds a deep sense of the tragic nature of the human condition, a pervasive however much repressed sense of

human contingency, finitude, vulnerability, and mortality. Lacking complete confidence in our capacity to assure the success of our efforts, we seem inevitably drawn toward fantasizing a preexisting supernatural power that under appropriate conditions can guarantee the ultimate success of our hopes and ideals. . . . Human history is replete with examples of this urge to purify, idealized goodness, holiness, or utopia, whether secular or otherworldly. All of these constitute modes of flight from the tragic finitude of our natural condition. They are grounded in a completely mistaken understanding of the nature and function of our imaginative capacity to project ideals. Instead of the imaginative projection of current tendencies that can energize and give direction to present action, these methodological fantasies undermine our capacity for intelligent thought and constructive practical action. They invite messianic visions, divine campaigns, and imperial actions that seek to impose "revealed" solutions upon "recalcitrant," if not evil, others by "divinely" authorized and inspired force if necessary. . . . There is no utopia and never was a golden age. There is no providential process, no "hidden hand" guiding human history to an idyllic conclusion. . . . We need to recognize and sympathize with the fundamental human anxieties that have generated these fantasies, while recognizing them for the often quite destructive illusions they are. . . . We need to reappropriate legitimate religious attitudes from the transcendent illusions that have sought to give them comfort and assurance, and to provide secular institutions and naturalized ideals consistent with scientific intelligence that can minister to human needs and energize human action, thus contributing to the progressive amelioration of human living. This is not a counsel of despair, but an invitation to assume our collective responsibility for stewardship of the Earth consistent with natural humanity's ideal possibilities. We must finally replace those mythologized "heavens" with relativized utopias, continually revised practical ideas that can provide constructive direction for present action thus celebrating our common life on this Earth in which, in the words of Camus, "all (our) gods have feet of clay." (Sprintzen, 2009, p. 214)

I have used Sprintzen's (2009, Sprintzen & Rosenberg, 1973) work to indicate briefly the possible contours of a constructive and productive critical analysis of Becker's psychology and philosophical anthropology of the person striving within the human condition. However, the purposes of my essay are neither primarily critical nor historical. If they were, much more could, and should, be said concerning matters, such as the embeddedness of Becker's thought within the zeitgeist of the America of the 1950s and 1960s, and the

relationship of Becker's psychology to his somewhat idiosyncratic and non-conventional theism. It also is possible that the integrative interpretation attempted herein may underestimate the extent to which, in his later and darker thought, Becker might be understood as moving away from some of the earlier planks in his Enlightenment project and facing more directly the limits of both reason and science.[12] Becker himself seems to have considered this possibility, and rejected it. In the preface to his final book, *Escape From Evil*, he states,

> Obviously it is an enormous problem: to show that man *is* truly evil-causing in much of his motivation, and yet to move beyond this to the possibilities of sane, renewing action . . . Let me just say that if I have changed my views on many things, this change leaves intact, I believe, the basic premise of the Enlightenment which I feel we cannot abandon and continue to be working scientists—namely, that 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. (p. xviii)

At any rate, my central purpose has been to explicate Becker's thought as it is revealed in his published works, and to do so in a way that hopefully is readily accessible to most psychologists. What remains is to indicate why I think Becker's ideas should be revisited and pursued critically at this point in the evolution of psychology (perhaps especially in humanistic psychology).

In their introduction to a recent special issue of *New Ideas in Psychology*, Martin and Bickhard (2012) describe what they regard as a reemergence[13] of interest in the psychology of personhood among a number of contemporary philosophically, theoretically, humanistically, and developmentally inclined psychologists. Contemporary motivations and contexts for such a reemergence are not difficult to discern. Throughout the second half of the 20th century into the 21st century, humanistic and critical psychologists consistently have drawn attention to the perils inherent in the reductionism, instrumentalism, individualism, objectification, and imperialism of much mainstream work in the history of psychology. To the extent that psychology is a history of ways in which human beings have attempted to understand themselves and their conduct and experience, these various "isms" cannot fail to raise concerns about the extent to which so much contemporary scientific psychology has narrowed its focus in a manner that turns away from the activities of persons interactively engaged with each other within increasingly alarming political, economic, and moral contexts and challenges. With this overall context in mind, it seems entirely reasonable to suggest the

possibly salubrious insertion of Becker's psychological and philosophical theory of human striving into a renewed effort to articulate a nonreductionistic, nonscientistic psychology of personhood, especially one that (perhaps as extended by the critical scholarship of David Sprintzen and others) might be made to speak powerfully and convincingly about those features of human existence and experience that cannot, and will not, be made to go away.

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Notes

1. At the time of his death at the Vancouver General Hospital in Vancouver, British Columbia, Becker was a professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology (previously the Department of Political Science, Sociology and Anthropology, when he initially joined it) at Simon Fraser University.
2. One exception is the incorporation of Becker's thought into the work of some contemporary existential–humanistic psychologists (e.g., Schneider, 1999, 2004).
3. The website of the Ernest Becker Foundation (http://www.earnestbecker.org/) describes Becker's intellectual career "as a quest to come to terms with what is enduring in the philosophical anthropology of Freud and Marx." Although overly simplified, this description itself is enough to send most psychologists in search of cover.
4. In 2005, Dan Liechty, assisted by the Ernest Becker Foundation, compiled and edited a superb collection of Becker's writings (*The Ernest Becker Reader*).
5. Some readers will be aware of recent work on Becker that has been published in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (e.g., Bartlett, 2008; Hoffman, Stewart, Warren, & Meek, 2008; Kramer, 2007; Mendelowitz, 2006).

6. Becker was very interested in, and knowledgeable about, the history of ideas concerning the social theorizing of human existence and the human condition. His 1968 book, *The Structure of Evil: An Essay on the Unification of the Science of Man*, is a marvelously lucid and extensive repository of such material and provides a rich mapping of the sources of his thought.

7. The phrase "science of man" can and should be read as "science of the person."

8. Becker was a peripatetic academic who received his PhD in cultural anthropology from the University of Syracuse in the Spring of 1960, and he was then hired to teach anthropology in the Department of Psychiatry at the Upstate Medical Center in Syracuse. Later, following a year in Rome, Becker returned to Syracuse to spend the 1964 academic year in the Education and Sociology Departments of Syracuse University, before moving on to the Sociology Department at the University of California at Berkeley in 1965, then to San Francisco State University to teach social psychology in 1967, and (in his final move) to Simon Fraser University in 1969.

9. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for helping clarify the close relation of Becker's and Rank's thought with respect to relations between the artist and artistic and larger communities.

10. "Approaching death, Ernest Becker requested that the original manuscript of this, his final book, rest private and unpublished in a desk drawer, no energy remaining in him for any further barter with the gods. Believing the work to be an eloquent closure of his scientific literary career, Robert Wallace [Becker's editor at *The Free Press* in New York City] and I (with some initial anguish over the risk of irreverence) firmly decided upon publication realizing that had the time remained, the author himself would have done so for what he considered to be his magnum opus. Some material has been eliminated as it appears elsewhere, but beyond editing and routine work the book is Ernest's" (Marie Becker, as cited in Becker, 1975, p. xv).

11. Both Becker's final books—*The Denial of Death* (1973) and *Escape From Evil* (1975)—initially were prepared as a single manuscript, titled "Marxism and Psychoanalysis," as described in Becker's letter of March 17, 1972 to Edwin Seaver, Editor-in Chief, George Braziller, Inc., who subsequently decided not to publish it. Shortly, thereafter, on June 27, 1972, Becker submitted his work to Robert Wallace at The Free Press. (Originals of both these letters are available in the Ernest Becker Collection in the Rare Book and Manuscript Collection in Columbia University's Butler Library.)

12. As one anonymous reviewer of this article put it, "In what direction was Becker headed when he died?" Would he have become even more alienated and radical, severing ties not only with more conventional approaches to education and science, but with the very possibility of rational reconstruction and progress? These are fascinating questions that call for careful, critical, and close analysis of Becker's notes and letters—a project different from that attempted here.

13. Martin and Bickhard (2012) use the term *reemergence* because they recognize an earlier period in the history of psychology during the late 1800s and early 1900s in which many leading psychologists (e.g., William James, Wilhelm Wundt, James Mark Baldwin, John Dewey, William Stern, Mary Whiton Calkins, and Pierre Janet) "focused considerable attention and effort on the psychological development of persons as emergent through their activity within their biophysical and sociocultural surrounds" and were "committed to the study of persons interacting holistically within the world" (p. 86).

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Bio

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