



## Course Syllabus

**Course Title:** EHTP 2048: The Visionary Psychology of Ernest Becker

**Term and Year:** Fall 2015

**Section:** 1

**Units:** 3

**Instructor:**

Ed Mendelowitz, Ph.D.

617-328-6785

Hours by arrangement

[emendelowitz@saybrook.edu](mailto:emendelowitz@saybrook.edu)

**Catalog Course Description:**

The cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker was an astonishingly brilliant thinker and writer who was interdisciplinary in the truest sense. With a surpassing fund of knowledge and a uniquely passionate and penetrating mind, Becker roamed freely through seeming libraries of works in sociology, anthropology, political science, ethology, psychoanalysis, psychology, religion, and the broader humanities so as to articulate stunning cultural, existential-humanistic, and spiritual truths. Becker understood, like William James and Otto Rank before him, that the fundamental problems in life are existential rather than instinctive. Human beings are conflicted not so much because of sexual or aggressive drives but because we know too much. We have evolved into creatures who think, a simultaneously mortifying and exhilarating occurrence when we consider the implications of what it means to be briefly alive on a planet that spins on the periphery of a single galaxy within the Infinite. We are, in a sense, effete animals who strive interminably to limit overexposure. Although the risks are self-evident, the untold possibilities are ultimately uppermost in Becker's searching and visionary mind. In reading Becker's seminal works, we will consider the universal mind and pervasive humanism of one of the most original and ethically-attuned native psychologists of our time.

**Degree Program Affiliation:** Psychology

**Specialization Affiliation:**  CS  JS  EHTP  CSHI  TSC  N/A

**Grading:** (See Appendix A for rubric)

Credit or No Credit

Letter Grade (students need to pre-arrange for this option with the Registrar)

**Prerequisites and Co-Requisites:** None

**Program Requirement(s) Met Completing This Course:**

This course may fulfill an elective requirement for the EHTP Specialization at the M.A. or Ph.D. level as well as the Certificate Program in Death, Loss, & Meaning.

**Course Delivery Modes:**

Canvas site       Residential component       Audio/Video conferencing

**Textbooks and Readings****Required Texts:**

- Becker, E. (1971). *The birth and death of meaning: An interdisciplinary perspective on the problem of man* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York, NY: Free Press. (\$17)
- Becker, E. (1973). *The denial of death*. New York, NY: Free Press. (\$11)
- Becker, E. (1975). *Escape from evil*. New York, NY: Free Press. (\$15.75)
- Liechty, D. (1995). *Transference and transcendence: Ernest Becker's contribution to psychotherapy*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson. (\$12.50 used copy)
- Liechty, D. (2005). *The Ernest Becker reader*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. (\$27)

**Required Articles:**

- Kramer, R. (2007). The journals of Ernest Becker, 1964-1969. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 47, 430-473.
- Martin, J. (2014). Ernest Becker at Simon Fraser University (1969-1974). *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 54, 66-112.

**Optional Readings:**

- Mendelowitz, E. (2005). Intimations of genius: Review of *The Ernest Becker Reader*. *AHP Perspective*, 27-28. (Article to be made available through the course shell)
- Mendelowitz, E. (2006). Meditations on Oedipus: Becker's Kafka, Nietzsche's Metamorphoses. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 46, 385-431. (Article to be made available through the course shell)

**Learning Objectives:**

1. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the mature thought and work of Ernest Becker.
2. To understand the central place of the interpenetrating awareness of both the horror of death and exhilaration before Arrival/Creation in both individual and cultural psychology.
3. To gain an appreciation of Becker's conceptions of self-esteem maintenance (a recurring theme in his work) and the relationship of these to generative death anxiety.
4. To gain an appreciation of Ernest Becker as interdisciplinary thinker/writer *par excellence* and, by extension, the manner in which existential/humanistic/transpersonal psychology may be rendered more richly, passionately, and compellingly by consideration and integration of Becker's example and work.
5. To ascertain a general understanding of the existential depth, humanistic largesse and cosmic—ultimately visionary—reach of Ernest Becker's extraordinary corpus and mind.

**Course Activities to Meet Learning Objectives:**

1. Students will take up the selected readings as outlined in the course requirements and syllabus.
2. Students will engage in online discussions on a variety of themes suggested by the readings under consideration.
3. Students will engage in online discussions on themes initiated by the instructor.
  - Assignment 1 will be used to demonstrate students' initial thoughts and reflections relating to these three aforementioned spheres concerning the themes and scope of Ernest

Becker's work.

4. Students will engage in critical thinking, broadly, about the visionary psychology of Ernest Becker and the commingling of conflicts and possibilities that inhere in what Becker had called "the lived truth of creation."
5. Students will engage in both inward and shared personal dialogues relating to the critical place of Ernest Becker's oeuvre in approaching an awareness of our shared human predicament and the prospects therein for nobler lives and a better world.
  - Assignment 2 will provide students with an opportunity to explore the work of Ernest Becker as it relates to death, anxiety and evil no less than self-esteem, creativity and cultural heroics—complexity and possibility that, arguably, the interdisciplinary mind approaches and apprehends best of all.

**Course Assignments:**

1. "Existential/Humanistic/Transpersonal Psychology and Ernest Becker: Early Thoughts." Students will complete a paper of approximately 12-15 pages in length relating their initial impressions, understandings, and insights concerning the unique work and purview of Ernest Becker and integral place of these within the literature of the third force.
2. "The Visionary Psychology of Ernest Becker: Transience and Possibility." Students will complete a paper of approximately 12-15 pages in length in which they interact, substantively and earnestly, with Becker's writings resonant with "cultural heroics" and "higher virtue" in the face of radical discord—themes that auger, ultimately, for personal integrity, even valor, and the prospects for a better world.

**Course Schedule:**

	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Assigned Reading</b>	<b>Date Assigned Work Due</b>
Week 1	Ernest Becker: An Introduction to Man and Work	The Ernest Becker Reader: Preface, Introduction	
Week 2	The Birth and Death of Meaning	The Birth and Death of Meaning	
Week 3			
Week 4			
Week 5	The Encompassing Backdrop	Transference and Transcendence	
Week 6			
Week 7	The Journals	The Journals of Ernest Becker, 1964-1969	
Week 8	Ernest Becker at Simon Fraser	Ernest Becker at Simon Fraser	Assignment #1

	University	University, 1969-1974	
Week 9			
Week 10	Magnum Opus	The Denial of Death	
Week 11			
Week 12			
Week 13	Escape from Evil	Escape from Evil	
Week 14			
Week 15	The Visionary Psychology of Ernest Becker	The Ernest Becker Reader: A Conversation with Ernest Becker; The Spectrum of Loneliness	Assignment #2
Week 16			

**Expectations for Writing Style:** Follow APA/Saybrook Style Handbook guidelines except for front matter of paper (i.e., you do not need to include a separate title page, abstract, table of contents, etc. but should include proper citations and references).

**Relationship of the Course to the Saybrook Mission and Tradition:** Ernest Becker’s visionary psychology is both thoroughly interdisciplinary and profoundly humanistic. In American psychology, perhaps only William James and Rollo May are comparable. It is interesting that May, the great psychotherapist and philosopher, wrote with a certain reassuring remove from his subject matter: like Virgil in Dante’s company, he would lead us gently by the hand. Becker writes, in Nietzsche’s words, “with blood” such that the timid may feel sometimes tugged down paths they are reluctant to traverse. There is an almost desperate yearning for truth that culminates in a staggering contribution to EHTP psychology and planetary humanism. For students of existential-humanistic psychology (including its inexorable transpersonal dimensions)—indeed, of human nature generally—Becker is all but indispensable. With admirable modesty, Becker once described his life’s work as a kind of “intellectual house-cleaning” meant to make room for “the higher virtues.” The “higher virtues”—precisely what Saybrook’s legacy and mission are ultimately all about.

**Faculty to Student Contact Expectations:**

- Faculty will make contact with students enrolled in their course within the first week of the new semester.

- Faculty will respond to emails or phone calls and acknowledge received assignments within two business days.
- Faculty will be in contact with students at least once a week for online cohort courses to provide a substantive contribution and respond to student posts.
- For individually mentored courses, faculty will schedule with each student regular online and off-line communication.
- Faculty will return papers with feedback for assignments submitted through Canvas within one week for minor (less than 5 pages) assignments and two weeks for major (more than 5 pages) assignments.
- For turnaround expectations for essays and dissertations, see *2015-2016 Psychology Degree Program Student Handbook*.
- Students should contact the faculty member if these minimum standards are not met, and persistent problems with faculty responsiveness should be brought to the attention of the Specialization director or the Psychology degree program director.

**Student to Faculty Contact Expectations:**

- **In order for a course registration to be activated, students must post something within the first week of the new semester.** Students are expected to keep up with scheduled posting as posts are intended to generate discussion and demonstrate on-going learning.
- In individually mentored courses, students need to follow the schedule posted and agreed upon with the instructor.
- Students are expected to complete course evaluation upon completion of course.

**Multiculturalism and Diversity:** Saybrook University is committed to embracing multiculturalism and diversity throughout the curriculum. All courses in the College of Social Sciences seek to integrate considerations of multiculturalism and diversity in the course content and discussions. Faculty and students are expected to demonstrate respect for diversity in all course-related communication, including race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ability, and age.

**Academic Integrity:** Honesty in use of sources and original writing by the student is expected. The graduate units to be earned in the course and their application to earning the program degree depend on this integrity in completion of all assigned work for the course. A high standard of individual work in scholarly writing is to be demonstrated. Acts of misconduct, such as plagiarizing sources, submitting work written by others, submitting written work already presented in another paper, and incorrect attribution of material are unacceptable and will be subject to the Code of Conduct as described in the *Student Handbook*. All work of the student for the course may be subject to review through TurnItIn.com in order to determine originality of material.

Many times written work completed during completion of the two literature review essays (RES 9020 and RES 9030) will be relevant to the future dissertation. This is understood, and it is expected that some of that written work will be integrated into the dissertation. However, duplication may not occur within course papers submitted prior to the dissertation stage of the doctoral program. That is, do not include materials you have already written for one course in a paper for another course or a subsequent paper in the same course.

**Disability:** In compliance with Section 504 of the Americans with Disabilities Act, Saybrook

University seeks to support students with documented special needs that qualify under federal law. Any student with 504/ADA issues should have necessary paperwork on file with the office of the Office of the Dean of Enrollment Management and Student Services so that recommended accommodations can be arranged in a timely manner. Students should submit documentation from their health care providers with recommended academic accommodations prior to the beginning of the term; accommodations are not extended retroactively, but the staff and faculty will seek to work with students proactively to facilitate a level field of learning opportunities. Authorization and release forms for students and their healthcare providers are available on the University website: <https://www.saybrook.edu/mysaybrook/registrar/forms>.

**Technical Requirements and Support:** Both students and faculty are expected to have sufficient skills to carry out their learning activities with the technologies needed to enable the student to fulfill the learning objectives. Computer and navigation skills for word processing, email, the online learning platform, and Internet usage are essential. All drafts of written work will be shared in electronic mode.

### Appendix A: Rubric for Grading or Evaluation

**Letter Grade Key:**

- A** Exceptional work and acquisition of learning objectives
- A -** Very good work and acquisition of learning objectives
- B +** Good work and acquisition of learning objectives
- B** Passing work and acquisition of learning objectives
- B -** Weak work and acquisition of learning objectives (Failing Grade)
- C** Very weak work and acquisition of learning objectives (Unacceptable)

### Cohort Participation Grading/Evaluation Rubric

<b>Rubric for Course/Cohort Participation grading/evaluation is as follows:</b>				
	<b>Participation at the A level</b>	<b>Participation at the B level</b>	<b>Participation at the C level</b>	<b>Participation at the D level</b>
<b>Ideas</b>	Participation and interaction about the course reflects well-developed ideas relevant to the course content. The ideas make a contribution to the course as well as demonstrating critical thinking and complexity of thought.	Most of the participation or interaction about the course reflects well-developed ideas, with occasional lapses. The ideas generally contribute to the course as well as demonstrating critical thinking and complexity of thought.	Adequate development of ideas, but common lapses and/or often not relevant to the course. Ideas inconsistently contribute to the course. Ideas commonly do not demonstrate critical thinking or complexity of thought.	Ideas generally unclear or inadequately developed. Communication is often not relevant to the course and often do not contribute to the course. Ideas often do not demonstrate critical thinking or complexity of thought.

<p><b>Demonstrates Comprehension of Course Materials</b></p>	<p>Consistently demonstrates that the course materials has been read and comprehended. Contributions draw upon a variety of sources from the course material. Reflects critical thinking about the content.</p>	<p>Demonstrations that most of the course material has been read and comprehended. Draws upon a variety of sources from the class material, with occasional lapses. In most discussions of the material demonstrates critical thinking.</p>	<p>Inconsistently demonstrates that course material was read and comprehended. Draws upon a limited number of sources from the class materials. Inconsistent demonstration of critical thinking about the course material.</p>	<p>Only occasionally demonstrates that the course material was read and understood. Draws upon only a few sources from the class material. Limited demonstration of critical thinking about course material.</p>
<p><b>Respectful of Different Perspectives</b></p>	<p>Participation is openly respectful of different perspectives. Does not push views on others. Demonstrates an ability to understand and learn from different viewpoints. Disagrees assertively, but respectfully.</p>	<p>Participation generally respectful of different views. At time, may push one's viewpoints over others. Shows an ability to learn from some other perspectives. Disagrees assertively, but respectfully in most interactions.</p>	<p>Respectful of most other viewpoints, with some lapses. Repeatedly pushed one's perspective on others. At times demeaning of other perspectives. Only occasionally demonstrates ability to learn from other viewpoints. At time disagrees in a disrespectful manner.</p>	<p>Inconsistently respectful of other viewpoints. Often will push one's perspectives on others, or will be demeaning toward other perspectives. Often does not demonstrate an ability to learn from different viewpoints. Often disagrees in a manner not respectful of the other person or their ideas.</p>
<p><b>Advances Conversations</b></p>	<p>Most interactions advance the conversations with new ideas, creative examples, comparing to other ideas/sources, or other ways of making unique contributions. Uses multiple ways of advancing the conversation.</p>	<p>The majority of interactions advance conversations with new ideas, creative examples, comparing to other ideas/sources, or other ways of making unique contributions. Uses different ways of advancing the conversation. Occasionally may summarize ideas or contribute in</p>	<p>Often interacts in a way that advances conversations with new ideas, creative examples, comparing to other ideas/sources, or other ways of making unique contributions. Uses a limited number of ways in advancing conversations. Often just summarizes ideas from others or the</p>	<p>Rarely advances the conversation. Uses a restricted way of contributing new ideas to the conversation. Primarily relies or summarizing other people ideas or offers an appraisal of the quality of other people's contributions.</p>

		ways that are not substantive.	course materials. Often relies or merely offering an appraisal of others people's contributions.	
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### Paper/Essay Grading/Evaluation Rubric

<b>Rubric for Paper/Essay Grading/Evaluation is as follows:</b>				
<b>Ideas</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>A- / B+</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>B- or lower</b>
	Excels in responding to assignment. Interesting, demonstrates sophistication of thought. Central idea/thesis is clearly communicated, worth developing; limited enough to be manageable. Paper recognizes some complexity of its thesis: may acknowledge its contradictions, qualifications, or limits and follow out their logical implications. Understands and critically evaluates its sources, appropriately limits and defines terms.	A solid paper, responding appropriately to assignment. Clearly states a thesis/central idea, but may have minor lapses in development. Begins to acknowledge the complexity of central idea and the possibility of other points of view. Shows careful reading of sources, but may not evaluate them critically. Attempts to define terms, not always successfully.	Adequate but weaker and less effective, possibly responding less well to assignment. Presents central idea in general terms, often depending on platitudes or clichés. Usually does not acknowledge other views. Shows basic comprehension of sources, perhaps with lapses in understanding. If it defines terms, often depends on dictionary definitions. May list ideas or arrange them randomly rather than using any evident logical structure.	Does not have a clear central idea or does not respond appropriately to the assignment. Thesis may be too vague or obvious to be developed effectively. Paper may misunderstand sources.
<b>Organization and Coherence</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>A- / B+</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>B- or lower</b>
	Uses a logical structure appropriate to paper's subject,	Shows a logical progression of ideas and uses fairly	May use transitions, but they are likely to be sequential (first, second, third)	May have random organization, lacking internal paragraph coherence and using



	purpose, audience, thesis, and disciplinary field. Sophisticated transitional sentences often develop one idea from the previous one or identify their logical relations. It guides the reader through the chain of reasoning or progression of ideas.	sophisticated transitional devices; e.g., may move from least to more important idea. Some logical links may be faulty, but each paragraph clearly relates to paper's central idea.	rather than logic-based. While each paragraph may relate to central idea, logic is not always clear. Paragraphs have topic sentences but may be overly general, and arrangement of sentences within paragraphs may lack coherence.	few or inappropriate transitions. Paragraphs may lack topic sentences or main ideas, or may be too general or too specific to be effective. Paragraphs may not all relate to paper's thesis.
<b>Support and Style</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>A- / B+</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>B- or lower</b>
	Uses evidence appropriately and effectively, providing sufficient evidence and explanation to convince.	Begins to offer reasons to support its points, perhaps using varied kinds of evidence. Begins to interpret the evidence and explain connections between evidence and main ideas. Its examples bear some relevance.	Often uses generalizations to support its points. May use examples, but they may be obvious or not relevant. Often depends on unsupported opinion or personal experience, or assumes that evidence speaks for itself and needs no application to the point being discussed. Often have lapses in logic.	Depends on clichés or overgeneralizations for support, or offers little evidence of any kind. May be personal narrative rather than essay, or summary rather than analysis.
	<i>Style</i>	<i>Style</i>	<i>Style</i>	<i>Style</i>
	Chooses words for their precise meaning and uses an appropriate level of specificity. Sentence style fits paper's audience and purpose. Sentences are varied, yet clearly structured and carefully focused, not long and	Generally uses words accurately and effectively, but may sometimes be too general. Sentences generally clear, well structured, and focused, though some may be awkward or ineffective.	Uses relatively vague and general words, some inappropriate language. Sentence structure generally correct; sentences may be wordy, unfocused, repetitive, or confusing.	May be too vague and abstract, or very personal and specific. Usually contains several awkward or ungrammatical sentences; sentence structure is simple or monotonous.

	rambling.			
<b>Mechanics</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>A- / B+</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>B- or lower</b>
	Almost entirely free of spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors.	May contain a few errors, which may annoy the reader but not impede understanding.	Usually contains several mechanical errors, which may temporarily confuse the reader but not impede the overall understanding.	Usually contains either many mechanical errors or a few important errors that block the reader's understanding and ability to see connections between thoughts.