

## WHAT DRIVES PEOPLE TO BEHAVE THE WAY THEY DO?

*Life is pain...anyone who says differently is selling something.*

The Princess Bride

There is something very basic and important missing from introductory psychology textbooks -- an explanation of what it means to be human, and what it is that human beings want out of life. In my view, these are the questions with which an intro psych class should begin. The best answers I have found for these questions are provided by *Ernest Becker*, in his book, *The Birth and Death of Meaning*. I put this reading together as a summary of what Becker had to say in this book. The first few lectures will also provide an overview of these ideas. My hope is that this presentation of Becker's ideas will help you to better understand yourself and the people in your life. I am also hopeful that these ideas will provide an organizing framework that will help you understand the different subfields of psychology that we, and the textbook, will cover over the course of the semester.

The Birth and Death of Meaning was originally written in 1962 and then revised in 1971. In it, Becker addressed the questions of *what it is to be a human and why it is that people behave the way they do*. Becker felt that one could not answer these questions in the context of any one discipline and therefore tried to gather all the basic insights from the social sciences (e.g., philosophy, psychology, anthropology, biology, sociology, etc.).

Becker's analysis ultimately addresses two important sets of psychological questions:

1. Why do we need self-esteem, where do we get it, and how does it affect social behavior?
2. What psychological functions do cultures serve, why is prejudice is so pervasive, and how do cultures influence mental health?

## THE NATURE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

Becker began by noting a disparity in the way the **social sciences** (e.g., psychology, sociology) and the **natural sciences** (e.g., physics, chemistry) are viewed -- social science is seen as soft, and not "real" science, while the natural sciences are accepted as absolute truth. Becker pointed out that people view the natural sciences positively because the fruits of their investigations make us feel powerful: they enable us to take control of our environment, cure and control diseases, build better cars, better cellular phones, more potent weapons, etc, and that feels good. There are usually clear, useful, and profitable applications of knowledge gained from the natural sciences.

In contrast, by studying ourselves, the social sciences often make us feel exposed and reveal things about ourselves, our fears, our flaws and limitations that we perhaps don't want to know. In addition, because of political, moral, and practical issues, it's not always clear what we should do with the knowledge gained about ourselves. If we figure out how to bring kids up to be decent adults, it would be morally dubious to have the government tightly control child-rearing, so how would we ethically get parents to do the right things to make this happen? And who is going to foot the bill if we as a society do try to make this happen? For example, the state of Mississippi (in the U.S.) recently decided that it was going to use money from hardworking citizens—tax dollars—to fund a state wide program to teach men how to be better fathers! Many people were appalled at this decision. Yet social science evidence is pretty clear that even moderate success in such a task would substantially reduce child abuse, crime, and poverty.

Consider another example. If we figure out that violence in movies and TV contributes to violence in society, should we get rid of it? Then what would people watch? And doesn't censorship threaten freedom? And how would we stop the people who are making all that money on violence? And if we greatly reduced violent tendencies in people, who would serve in the military? And who would play center for the Edmonton Oilers?

Despite the image problems of the social sciences and complexities that often accompany applying social science knowledge, Becker argued that some of the most important insights humans have stumbled upon have come from the social sciences. The key insight Becker focused on is: *humans are largely driven by fears toward the pursuit of meaning, significance, and trying to make their mark on the world.* The way my colleagues and I have put it, people need to think of themselves as more significant than apes, lizards, and lima beans.

But are we really? Or are we just talking sausages, cold-cuts with an attitude, spam with a plan?

#### HOW ARE HUMANS SIMILAR TO AND DIFFERENT FROM OTHER ANIMALS?

Becker started his analysis by noting that any scientific study of people should begin with the observation that humans constitute a species of animals. Although this is an obvious point, people often behave as if it were untrue. As one small example, if you take a close look at the doors to most of the buildings on campus, including the Psychology or Zoology wing of the biological sciences building, you will find a warning that except for seeing-eye dogs, animals are not allowed in these buildings. Just the legitimate excuse some of you have been looking for—a legitimate excuse for not attending class! As we will see, Becker's analysis will suggest that this is not simply a semantic error, but rather a small example of how we humans try to deny our animality.

Still, the biologists insist we are in fact animals, and as such, humans share many things with other animals, including an evolutionary heritage that began with the very first life form. In fact, as a disciple of Sigmund Freud who greatly influenced Becker, Otto Rank, emphasized that all humans (including you) share a common ancestor-- a great (to the nth power) grandparent not only with all other humans, but with all living creatures as well. Rank argued that the minimal,

most basic thing that we have all inherited from that first life form is a **life-force -- a will to survive and prosper which motivates our actions**. As animals, we need certain essentials to survive, such as food, water, etc. We also probably share with many other animals a desire to have pleasurable experiences and avoid painful ones.

Of course, each species has been shaped by evolutionary processes to have unique attributes. So to understand how human beings have evolved to be the unique creatures we are, we have to take a short digression to review **Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection**.

### Brief Overview of Evolutionary Theory

The key ingredient in the recipe for evolution is **variability in behavior** because of genetic influence. There are two sources of such variability: 1) *sex*: when a new creature is produced, it does not have the exact same genetic make-up as those who produced it, but has a combination of its parents' genes; and 2) *mutation*: random mistakes in DNA replication. The idea of evolution through natural selection is that genes, which are passed along to subsequent generations through reproduction, influence each individual organism's nature and attributes. Those creatures that possess attributes facilitating their survival and reproduction most successfully pass along their genes, which in turn, leads to the widespread representation of those attributes in future generations. This is what is meant by "survival of the fittest". Attributes that facilitate survival and lead to reproductive success become prominent within a group of animals; because these attributes are well-adapted for the environment in which the species lives, they are called **adaptations**.

For example, giraffes may have started out as plant-eating mammals (herbivores) that possessed necks with varying lengths. However, at some point, vegetation in the environment in which these animals lived may have become scarce, thus conferring a survival advantage to animals with longer necks because they could get to more food. Because they could get to more food, the animals with longer necks would live longer, reproduce more, and pass along more of the "long neck" genes until the shorter necked creatures died out-- resulting in the long-necked species we know as a giraffe. Of course, what is adaptive at any moment in time is a complex issue, depending on the particular environment and all of the existing attributes of the inhabitants of that environment. Why didn't giraffe necks get even longer than they are? Presumably because after a certain length the strain on the physical design of the animal became too great so that super-long necked giraffes died out because they couldn't properly support their necks or move well enough to evade predators or be successful in the mating game.

Which brings us to another point: adaptations are not just attributes that help organisms survive but also ones that help organisms procreate, thereby perpetuating their genes into the future. In fact, sometimes an adaptation serves to enhance procreative potential while hindering chances for a long life expectancy. For example, male peacocks possess elaborate plumage that practically advertises "eat me" to predators, but this same plumage also serves to attract potential mates sufficiently to make it an effective adaptation.

### Drawbacks of Evolutionary Thinking in Psychology

Evolutionary thinking has become very popular in psychology, and you will read many evolutionary explanations of human behaviors and attributes in psychology textbooks. However, you should remain skeptical of evolutionary explanations because they always come after the fact. Evolutionary psychology has yet to come up with a truly novel prediction that has been well-supported by research, and that is a key test of the value of a theory. In addition, it is extremely easy to construct after-the-fact evolutionary explanations for however things happen to be.

For example, it is an obvious and well-supported observation that overall, men seem to be more focused on signs of health and youth in potential sexual partners than are women. Evolutionary psychologists have argued that men are more influenced by signs of health and youth in choosing a sexual partner because it has been especially advantageous for men to mate with fertile women who will be able to deliver healthy offspring.

But if the evidence had indicated that women (not men) were more focused on signs of health and youth, one could just as easily have explained that from an evolutionary perspective. One could argue that it has been more advantageous for women to be concerned with signs of health and youth in male sexual partners. Signs of health in a mate might be especially important to women because men are more promiscuous and therefore more likely to have life-threatening and fertility-threatening sexually transmitted diseases. Youth in a mate might be more important to a woman (apparently it is to Demi Moore & Madonna) because a younger mate will have more energy and will be alive longer and have the strength to protect and to help care for the offspring. The evidence indicates that these preferences are actually much stronger in men but evolutionary speculation could have accounted for a difference between the sexes either way.

Thus, evolutionary speculation can readily be offered to explain observed attributes and behaviors after the fact, but that doesn't necessarily tell us anything new because such explanations can be constructed for many different possible attributes or behaviors that humans may or may not exhibit. Good evolutionary reasoning should at least refer to *archeological or fossil records and cross-cultural evidence* to support its speculations about how things may have evolved to be the way they are.

The general message is that one should apply evolutionary ideas with caution because they are often over-applied. Popular errors in evolutionary applications include *factual errors*, *teleological thinking* (the inference of purpose to nature), and *unwarranted speculation based on the assumption that everything is the way it is because it is or was adaptive*. Indeed, the current popularity of evolutionary thinking is so out of control that paleontologist, Stephan Jay Gould, has called the tendency to explain everything as an adaptation "Darwinian fundamentalism". Gould points out that Darwin himself did not believe that natural selection was the only basis of evolution. There are at least three other factors that can determine the nature of a particular species.

First, *genetic drift* can lead certain genetic types to a certain geographic locale simply as a result of migratory patterns and historical events. These events greatly affect how groups interact and who mates with whom. For example, the importation of African people as slaves into North America and the immigration into North America of various groups from Asia and Europe over the last few centuries was not a result of natural selection but rather a historical process that has had a profound impact on the genetic composition of the human inhabitants of

North America and the environment in which we live.

Second, *correlated structures* may appear to be adaptations when, in fact, they have no adaptive value in themselves but are purely by-products of other changes that are adaptive. For example, a female hyena's clitoris is quite large and some evolutionary enthusiasts have argued that this is so because it adaptively signifies sexual maturity, thereby conferring an advantage in attracting mates. However, evidence suggests that this is not an adaptation in itself but rather a by-product of high levels of testosterone in female hyenas, which provides physical strength needed for its survival in its particular environment. In fact, the large size of the female Hyena's clitoris is sometimes non-adaptive to the extent that it can be an obstruction in the birthing process. Gould refers to these byproducts of evolutionary adaptations, which have no adaptive value of their own (and can sometimes even have non-adaptive consequences) as "spandrels".

Third, *chance events* in the way of natural and cultural occurrences may influence evolution. For example, it appears that a meteor hitting the earth some 70 million years ago caused catastrophic changes in climate which suddenly rendered thousands of species of dinosaurs such as tyrannosaurus and triceratops, who could probably kick ass in a wide variety of environments, but not cold ones, instantaneously maladaptive-- which, by the way, opened the door for the eventual evolution of organisms like warm blooded mammals that could survive in colder climates such as yourself.

So, how did evolution eventually culminate in an organism as magnificent as yourself?

Becker argued that the key difference between other mammals and the human species is the size of our brains, particularly the structure known as the **cerebral cortex**. Becker notes three factors in the historical evolution of our species that may have contributed to how our brain got to be the way it is.

First, our ancestors developed a *taste for meat* but were not particularly well-equipped to hunt game individually with their bare hands. In addition, the bigger the game, the more meat, and thus humans who could work together, plan, and fashion tools and weapons would be particularly good at taking down prehistoric mammals such as woolly mammoths. This afforded an evolutionary advantage to humans with better and better abilities to communicate, think ahead, and solve problems-- humans with bigger and bigger brains.

Second, *group living in close quarters* led to the necessity of getting along so that we wouldn't kill each other off and would face challenges from our environment as efficient groups rather than unorganized individuals. So those groups that developed the cognitive abilities to communicate and cooperate tended to prosper.

Third, the need for *sexual regulation* may have also contributed to the development of more complex brains. In contrast with other animals, which enjoy a standard breeding season in which the female is in heat, humans and other primates function on an individualized monthly cycle which, in the context of group living, means that there will always be some females in the group ovulating. Therefore, it is in human males' reproductive best interests to always be ready to take advantage of this. In this light, sexual regulations are needed to prescribe who can have sex with whom and when they can do so. So those groups whose members evolved the cognitive abilities to work within systems of rules, roles and statuses, would function most successfully.

*Becker proposed that these three pressures led to the evolution of symbolic and temporal thought - to consider the past and the future, imagine hypothetical possibilities, formulate plans, cooperate, and communicate. Furthermore, these abilities have been greatly facilitated by the uniquely human capacity for language. By providing handy symbols representing objects in the world, language helps humans think and communicate about things not present in their current environment.*

### **THREE KEY HUMAN ATTRIBUTES**

#### Freedom of Reactivity

These intellectual tools have led to three important human characteristics that are central to Becker's analysis. First, humans are able to achieve an unparalleled **freedom of reactivity**, that is, because of the human brain's complexity, *humans are exceptionally free from instinctually programmed fixed-response patterns* that govern much of the behavior of other animals; instead humans have a flexible repertoire of potential behavioral responses to choose from in most situations. At one extreme, the Amoeba has 2 responses in its behavioral repertoire; it can move toward or away from something. At the other extreme, humans can encounter a stimulus, wait, think, consider memories of the past and imagine possibilities in the future, talk things over with friends, and then act.

There are broadly 4 levels of response, from virtually no freedom of reactivity to a great deal of freedom of reactivity. First, the **reflex** consists of a fixed-response pattern. For example, when the doctor hits your knee, it moves. All animals exhibit reflexive responses. Second, **classical conditioning** shows a rudimentary capacity for learning by association. For example, when Ivan Pavlov repeatedly rang a bell each time he provided food for a dog, he eventually got dogs to salivate to the bell. A capacity for classical conditioning is found in earthworms, reptiles, birds, and mammals. Third, **insightful problem solving** is the ability to integrate different mental images to form a new thought or idea. For example, chimps can figure out to use a broom handle to retrieve bananas that are hung high at the top of their cage. Humans, apes, and perhaps a few other mammalian species have a capacity for this type of thoughtful response. Fourth, **thinking with arbitrary symbols** supplied largely by language provides the capacity for a variety of behavioral responses and enables the highest form of freedom off reactivity. This level is believed to be unique, on this planet, at least to humans. We create our own meanings and can carefully choose our reactions, not just toward environmental stimuli, but also to symbols of our own making. We can step back from momentary sensory experience, consider experience and information from the past, and consider alternative possibilities for current and future action.

#### Infantilization

The second important characteristic of humans for Becker is that they are born into a state of extreme **infantilization**. The idea here is that the more sophisticated the animal, the more immature it is at birth. Humans are the most cognitively sophisticated creatures, and are therefore also totally helpless and dependent as newborns. For example, a snake upon birth is ready to rock-n-roll -- don't mess with it! Human babies, however, cannot even turn over by themselves. The human newborn could not possibly survive on its own. In addition, the human brain develops slowly in conjunction with external stimulation and experience. Monkeys have

70% of their adult brain size at birth, whereas the human brain doesn't reach 70% of its adult size until the child is roughly 3 years old.

This early helplessness and slow development are necessary for an organism to have the freedom from reactivity that humans possess because there are two basic ways that creatures survive. They either do so because of instincts or because of learning. If an animal possesses strong instincts, then it will more quickly be capable of survival on its own, but it will not have a great capacity for learning and flexibility in response to stimuli. Relatively rigid, inborn, hardwired programming controls this type of animal. Ants and snakes have very few and very predictable reactions to particular forms of stimulation.

In contrast, a creature with a great capacity for learning must not be too heavily controlled by rigid instinctual programming. In order to learn, there must first be a relatively "blank slate" upon which the learning can then take place—upon which humans can develop their immense behavioral repertoire—software programming if you will. Thus, until the child develops and learns through experiences of perceiving and acting in the world, the only way a human is going to survive is with a tremendous amount of care.

To summarize:

1. We find in humans an increasing cognitive complexity that makes us capable of a tremendous amount of **freedom of reactivity**.
2. We see that the newborns of various species are increasingly dependent and helpless the less they are controlled by instinctual responses. This is known as **infantilization**.

Thus, Becker portrays humans as creatures that: a) facing certain pressures, evolved the capacity for language and the freedom of reactivity which language facilitated, and b) have to grapple with the development of these capacities in the context of being totally helpless and dependent at birth.

### Self-Awareness

The third important human characteristic to emerge with increasing cognitive complexity is **self-awareness** -- the sophisticated ability to reflect on the self. Thus, we can reflect on the fact that "I am and I know that I am and I know that I know that I am... and so on". In other words, we can consider the self as the object of attention in ways that seem to be unique. Of all other creatures on earth, only the chimps and other great apes seem to possess even a minimal awareness that they exist in the world.

But how do we develop self-awareness? In order to address this issue, it is necessary to consider the symbolic interactionist perspective of the sociologist George Herbert Mead. *Mead maintained that the only way that people achieve an awareness of self is by taking an external perspective developed from repeated interactions with others.* Seeing how others react to us, we form a "generalized other", or "internal audience", through which we view and evaluate ourselves. Language plays a big role in this by providing words with which we can refer to ourselves. Developmentally, the first word children tend to learn when referencing the self is "mine" and this reflects an identification of the body with outside objects. Next, the child learns the word "me" which reflects the developing conception of self as object. Finally, the child

learns the word “I” and begins to see him or herself as an actor who does things in the world, controls the world, and makes decisions.

Self-awareness is a great intellectual development. It allows us to step back from a situation and think such thoughts as: “If I engage in sex without protection, I could get HIV”. It also allows us to think about how other people are reacting to us or may react to us in the future and to adjust our behavior accordingly. In addition, it allows us to assess our own abilities and make good choices based on such assessments. Finally, self-awareness allows us to evaluate ourselves, to determine how we are doing in achieving our goals -- thus it allows us to carefully regulate ourselves, a phenomenon we call **self-regulation**. Indeed, in social psychology there is a large body of theory and research indicating that when we take the time to reflect inward on ourselves, we behave more consistently with our beliefs, values, and morals.

Despite these important benefits, Becker was quick to point out that there are negative consequences of this capacity to be aware of ourselves. The first of these is that the child is exposed to a **conflict between self and body**. When born, the infant is a body bereft of a conception of self, in that, this symbolic social construction does not emerge until about 8-12 months of age. The child is then faced with the daunting task of putting the physical reality and the social symbolic reality together. This is a struggle because, on the one hand, the body has its own innate desires (for Freud, this is referred to as the id or it), and on the other, those around us who help us form our sense of self, want other things from us. So as we develop self-awareness, we begin trying to get control over our bodily desires and actions (Freud argued that the ego or I develops to help us gain such control, and thereby fashion effective compromises between the desires of the id and the demands of external reality). Consider, for example, toilet training wherein the child is taught to get control of a natural bodily function. Although Freud overemphasized the importance of this process in formulating one’s adult personality, it is one of the more dramatic ways in which children are pressured into getting control over their body. From the perspective of a 1½ year old, this is a really tough task, and one that doesn’t make much sense -- “why should I restrict natural urges, and confine certain activities to this ceramic bowl? And you know what else, mud is lots of fun to play in so why shouldn’t I roll around in it and then go in the house and jump on the couch?” Thus the socialization process is one in which the child must learn to regulate herself or himself to conform to seemingly arbitrary rules. Becker noted that this is a tricky process. If the parents are too controlling, the child may lose their sense of bodily self and appreciation for their natural desires. If the parents are too unrestrictive, the child may not learn how to control the bodily self to function properly in the social environment.

This struggle, which we call **socialization**, entails taking an animal blob and making it into a person complete with credit cards, a social insurance number and a driver’s license. The idea is that the need for social approval from caregivers (e.g., parents) motivates the child to try to be “good little boys/girls” as defined by society’s rules. The motivation for social approval is to control the second and most unfortunate consequence of self-awareness:

### **THE HUMAN CAPACITY FOR ANXIETY**



Self-awareness combined with the ability to anticipate future events leads to an incredible **capacity for anxiety**. Existentialists would say it this way:

*Humans are conscious of their existence and thus conscious of the possibility of non-existence; ergo, they have anxiety*

John Cassevettes

Most animals experience fear only when faced with an imminent threat. However, because humans are born helpless and dependent with the ability to be self-aware and think about the future, from early childhood on, humans have a unique proneness to anxiety in the absence of an imminent threat. *Becker saw this anxiety as ultimately existential and deriving from the conflict between survival desires and the reality of being a little kid that can be crushed in an instant without the protection of adult caregivers.* Stephen Jay Gould notes that this knowledge of vulnerability and mortality may be the most important human **spandrel**, an inadvertent by-product of the evolution of the frontal lobes of the brain. This by-product creates the problem of the ever-present potential for anxiety. And anxiety often interferes with effective thought and action.

As Darwin and Freud argued, anxiety is also often adaptive because it helps to keep people alive-- it serves as a danger signal, which indicates that action is needed. But the helpless child with a capacity to anticipate all sorts of threats would be riddled with anxiety if there were not some mechanism for controlling it. The parents provide the basis for this mechanism. From the beginning, the parents provide the sustenance, warmth, and comfort that are critical for the child's survival. Thus, the love and protection of the apparently omnipotent parents provide the essential feelings of security to the child.

However, as the child grows, this love and protection becomes more and more dependent on the child meeting the parental standards of goodness. The kid must learn to be a good little girl or boy in order to sustain the parental love and affection that protect the child from the experience of anxiety. In fact, if they're not good, the security base may even turn against them—what could be more frightening to the child? Children soon learn the contingency—if I am good then I am loved and protected—and if I am bad then I may lose that protection and be subject to all sorts of threats. Thus, *the struggle of socialization is for children to learn how to restrict and control themselves in a way that meets with parental (and ultimately, as they get older, societal) approval and thereby sustain feelings of security, which allow the infant to go about the business of learning and adapting to the environment relatively unencumbered by anxiety.* (One important implication of this analysis that we will return to is that we can never feel fully secure in ourselves because from the outset we get security from external sources).

The child establishes this self-control by learning and internalizing parental standards of goodness. Because of the contingency established between goodness and security, when children believe they are meeting these standards, they can feel loved and protected; when they don't, they will feel threatened and anxious. In order to sustain the security they need, children therefore develop a conscience and standards by which to evaluate themselves (What Freud referred to as the superego). Success is achieved when children begin to punish themselves for going against the parental (and societal) values. For example, when the child feels guilt over

doing something that these external sources have taught them s/he should not do. It is as if the child is saying, “*okay Mom, Dad, you don’t have to punish me anymore, I will punish myself now*”.

Becker proposed that because of this process, socialization necessarily makes us neurotic. For Becker, **neurosis** means “*limitation of experience, the fragmentation of perception, and the dispossession of genuine internal control*”. The process of learning to live in a society unavoidably causes us to stifle our natural impulses and learn to view ourselves and the world from the perspective taught to us by our parents and other authority figures in our lives. If we have stifled and warped ourselves -- become neurotic -- in a socially acceptable way, then we are considered normal; if we have been led to stifle ourselves too much or too little or in socially disapproved of ways, mental health professionals may deem us “neurotic”.

Therefore, one important question is: “how can one minimize the damage while limiting and constricting one’s children enough for them to be safe and successful in the social world?” Part of the answer is to allow the child to explore and act in the world as freely as possible while setting and reinforcing the necessary limitations in a *consistent* manner. Without consistency, the child cannot learn what it needs to do to feel secure. Two contemporary psychologists (Ed Deci and Rich Ryan) have proposed that another part of the solution is to teach the child rules and values in a supportive non-threatening way that emphasizes the child’s autonomy and power to choose. In this way, it is hoped that children will internally feel that they really want to do the things society wants them to do. Otto Rank referred to this as the **volitional affirmation of the obligatory**. An example would be visiting a sick relative in the hospital not because of guilt or a parent’s nagging, but because you really want to do it to help the relative.

### **THE DRIVING NEED FOR SELF-ESTEEM**

To summarize, Becker proposes that anxiety results from the child’s helpless and dependent position in the face of external threats. This anxiety is then controlled by learning to internalize and conform to parental morals and values to sustain the parent’s love and protection. This analysis explains why people are driven to acquire and maintain **self-esteem**:

To be good is to be safe and secure. As Becker put it:

*“self-esteem is the natural systemic continuation of the early ego efforts to handle anxiety”*

Thus, for Becker, the psychological purpose of self-esteem is to serve as an **anxiety buffer**. In other words, self-esteem serves the psychological function of helping us function on a day-to-day basis with our anxieties under control. Because self-esteem is based on meeting internalized standards of goodness or value ultimately learned from the culture, Becker defines self-esteem as: *the culturally derived sense that one is an object of primary value in a world of meaning.*

There are a number of important points that come out of defining self-esteem in this manner. An assessment of one’s self-esteem requires *standards through which one can evaluate oneself*. If we live up to these standards of value, we have high self-esteem and feel secure; however, if we fail to do so, we experience anxiety. These standards:

- 1) delineate what is good and bad;
- 2) originally come from outside ourselves from parents and society;
- 3) change over the lifespan

For example, as a little kid, the standard of value is to please one's parents. As the child gets older, standards of value prescribe "being cool", "athletic", "smart", etc. Once we reach adulthood, the standards in our culture call for the fulfilling of culturally valued social and occupational roles, and acquiring possessions and money.

A number of factors can affect these standards and our perceptions of how well we are meeting them. Other people play a large part in this:

Our self-esteem is often affected by how we compare to others around us. This is known as **social comparison**. Usually we compare ourselves to those who are around us and similar to us. For example we are most likely to compare to same sex siblings close in age to us. If we play tennis, we are most likely to compare to others at about our level of experience and ability. When we compare favorably, we feel good about ourselves but when we suffer by comparison, our self-esteem is damaged. To protect self-esteem, we try to compare to others a little bit worse than ourselves—this is known as **downward social comparison**. One of the most potent examples of self-esteem-relevant social comparison is **sibling rivalry**. In childhood, siblings will measure to the millimeter to see who got the bigger lollipop. Each child wants to be of primary (or minimally, equal) value in the eyes of the parents.

We can also derive or lose self-esteem based on our **identifications** with different types of groups. For example, when we identify with an individual or group that achieves success (e.g., Edmonton Oilers hockey team), this increases self-esteem (often referred to as "basking in reflected glory"). We often adjust our identifications to maximize self-esteem: we increase association with successful groups (e.g., by wearing Oiler's T-shirts after a championship run) and decrease it with unsuccessful ones.

Because our sense of self-worth comes from socially derived and shared standards of value, we are always in need of **social validation** of our worth. Luckily friends, family, co-workers etc. provide most of us with continual evidence of our value. However, others can very easily threaten our self-esteem. For example, if we see someone we know on campus and the person simply walks by us without some kind of greeting to at least acknowledge our existence, the snub may bother us for days. Sociologist Erving Goffman referred to our socially exposed self-esteem as **face** and explored the elaborate ways in which we try to protect our own face but also use tact to try to protect other people's face as well.

This analysis suggests that to understand people, we need to realize that what each person wants to know is: *Where do I stand as hero?* We all want to feel heroic (not necessarily in a Bruce Willis way (thankfully), but in the sense of fulfilling culturally prescribed standards of value and the culture provides different ways to do this. When a mom plays the martyr role, what she is really doing is making her claim of heroism (minimally at least, for not strangling you after one of your childhood fits or fights with a sibling). We can seek that sense of heroism in school or in the courtroom, on playing fields or the dance floor, in an obscure laboratory or on a theatrical stage.

To stress the idea that culture provides us with these standards and roles, which we can then fulfill to feel good about ourselves, Becker refers to culture as a **codified hero system**. However, Becker points out that because of the wide variety of standards and roles people within a culture can use to feel good about themselves, we are never quite sure from where a person, even a close friend or relative, gets their self-esteem. Thus, it is quite easy to slight someone or disparage them without even knowing it—they may care about some things you think are completely trivial. To be of benefit to people, it is therefore important to try to understand where they are getting their self-esteem from; then you can help them sustain their self-worth. As Becker notes, this is also important to help people in psychotherapy:

*If you want to find out what is driving your patient, ask yourself simply how he thinks of himself as a hero, what constitutes the framework of reference for his heroic striving -- or better, for the clinical case, why he does not feel heroic in his life.*

*Ernest Becker*

Of course, maintaining and sustaining self-esteem in our culture can be a difficult task, particularly if in childhood we have internalized very high standards. In our culture, it seems like we teach kids that they can and should be good in all things, and we should strive to be the best in our main pursuits. But no one is really good at all things, and in a country approaching 30 million; very few can claim to be the best on any given dimension. According to Becker, what we try to do to sustain self-esteem is “*traffic in images of self-worth*”. So for example, I walk around thinking about the last time I played softball and hit a home run, or an exaggerated memory of a really good lecture. When we encounter negative images, this leads to anxiety, and this in turn, motivates defenses. Among these, we can make excuses for errors or failures, we can muster exaggerated thoughts about our positive qualities and accomplishments (**compensation**), or we can adjust our social comparisons and identifications -- to maximize social comparisons that make us feel superior and identifications with groups that are successful.

Unfortunately, the difficulties in sustaining self-esteem do not get any easier as one gets older. As youngsters, we all have potential, but as we get older, not only must this potential be realized in order to derive self-esteem, but the number of roles that one must fulfill increases. As Freud pointed out, the primary avenues of self-esteem are “love” (relationships) and “work” (career). As you may know, in our country the divorce rate is 50% and lots of sperm-donors don’t live up to the role of father. So relationships often fail as reliable sources of self-esteem.

An even bigger problem in a very large semi-capitalist society such as ours is that not everyone can have a prestigious job that pays a lot of money. In a small group, everyone can feel important, and resources can be distributed in a roughly equal manner. However, our system is roughly like a big pyramid, with the super rich up on top and most people down near the bottom. And it virtually has to be that way, because somebody’s got to clean the toilet stalls, and work the assembly lines, and collect the garbage, and perforate the toilet paper. This means that a lot of people are spending their lives in unchallenging, socially devalued, and low paying jobs. To the extent that money in our culture is a sign of one’s value, this means that a lot of people are being told “you are worth about \$8 per hour”. This can also undermine another role that serves self-esteem—providing food and shelter for one’s family. Thus, the person overseeing the

perforation of toilet paper for 30 years at close to minimum wage may have a tough time sustaining their self-esteem. Perhaps this helps explain why substance abuse, anxiety, and depression are such widespread problems in our culture.

If the culture does not do a good enough job of providing ways for its members to feel good about themselves, there will be social and mental health problems. In a large culture, it is no easy task to help all its members feel valuable, and some people will always be more valued by the culture as a whole than others (e.g., Wayne Gretsky vs. other hockey players; heart surgeons vs. janitors). However, better pay and more culturally communicated respect and appreciation for less valued jobs would certainly help; after all, every role in society must be fulfilled, or the whole thing falls apart—imagine a month with no garbage collection... or running out of toilet paper... yikes!

### CULTURE

Of course each culture has its own hero-system and there are many ways in which people live and feel valuable. According to the concept of **cultural relativity**, all of our ideas of the meanings of things, of “what is good”, of “what is bad” and of the nature of reality are culturally derived; therefore all of our opinions and judgments of right and wrong are relative to our own cultural perspective, not absolute. As the following quote explains, it has to be this way. So much of our view of reality is established in early childhood, that our basic tools of thinking, our concepts of things, are those of our culture.

*The great fundamental...Doctrines...are...taught so early, under such circumstances, and in such close and vital association with whatever makes or marks reality for our infant minds, that the words ever after represent sensations, feelings, vital assurances, sense of reality-rather than thoughts, or any distinct conception. Associated, I had almost said identified, with the parental Voice, Look, Touch, with the living warmth and pressure of the Mother, on whose lap the Child is first made to kneel, within whose palms its little hands are folded, and the motion of whose eyes its eyes follow and imitate--(yea, what the blue sky is to the Mother, the Mother's upraised Eyes and Brow are to the Child, the Type and Symbol of an invisible Heaven!)- from within and without, these great First Truths, these good and gracious Tidings, these holy and humanizing Spells, in the preconformity to which our very humanity may be said to consist, are so infused, that it were but a tame and inadequate expression to say, we all take them for granted.*

*Samuel Taylor Coleridge*

Although all people are thus embedded in a cultural conception of reality, these conceptions can vary widely. According to cross-cultural psychologists such as Harry Triandis, one important general distinction between cultures is the extent to which they emphasize the rights of the individual vs. the needs of the group. For example, some cultures such as those in Western Europe and the nations of North America are individualistic and emphasize individual rights and competition, whereas others, such as most Asian and Native American cultures, tend to be collectivistic and emphasize group harmony and cooperation.

As a result of these cultural differences, the behaviors that provide people with self-

esteem differ greatly between cultures. In fact, the same behavior that can provide self-esteem in one culture can undermine it in another. For example, trying to stand out from others and show one's superior ability is generally lauded in mainstream American culture, whereas the same behavior in traditional Hopi culture would lead to rejection by others. This example illustrates that self-esteem is predicated on the particular values and customs of a given culture.

Because of this, threats to the values of the culture undermine the individual's basis of self-esteem. Thus, if you tell a Canadian with a big house near the river valley and a couple of BMWs that material possessions are bullshit, you're going to be threatening that person's self-esteem and basis of security. Similarly, if you tell an Islamic person that his/her religion or customs are archaic or wrong, you will be threatening that person's self-esteem and basis of security.

**In sum, self-esteem is a fragile social construction that depends on:**

- 1) faith in a cultural worldview that imbues reality with meaning and standards of value and;**
- 2) the belief that one is meeting those culturally prescribed standards of value**

Despite the differences between cultures, they all answer the same basic questions -- questions about the nature of the universe, the purpose of life, and how to live a good, valuable life. Becker points out that *when lots of people lose faith in the answers that culture provides and therefore can't sustain self-worth, the culture breaks down*. One reason that people may lose the sense of what is meaningful is because the avenues toward value no longer apply. For example, Native Americans whose culture centered on the buffalo lost an essential avenue towards value within that culture when "white men" came over from Europe and killed virtually all the buffalo.

### **The invisible world versus the visible world**

Becker saw one big distinction in the type of worldview that a culture can have. It can be one in which there is either a strong belief in the *invisible world* (a spiritual world beyond what one can see) or one in which belief in the *visible world* (the physical and material world) dominates. Becker notes that until about the last 150 years, all cultures believed in an invisible world but with the advance of science and thinkers such as Charles Darwin, in some cultures this invisible world has been largely dismissed and replaced with a singular focus on the visible world. This in turn has some major implications.

#### The Invisible World:

Based on anthropological evidence, Becker posited that if you believe in the invisible world then that typically becomes primary and the material world becomes secondary because the former is where the power comes from. A prototypical example is traditional tribal cultures. Spirits and gods were seen as the determinants of what happens so what was important was not controlling the visible world, but staying in good graces with the spiritual forces and getting that

power to work for one's self and the group. Rituals were performed to identify and control the power of nature. Sacrifices were conducted to placate the gods or get them to use their powers favorably. Shamans in tribal cultures or saints and prophets in Judeo-Christian cultures were exalted as the link between the two worlds by possessing a special connection to the spiritual realm. In traditional Christianity, the material world is regarded as a place of suffering, which one must endure until one gets to the good stuff in the spiritual world of heaven.

This immersion in an invisible world allows for **cosmic heroism** wherein your heroism is potentially on a higher plane - it is on a larger, cosmic scale because your existence is in the service of something much greater than yourself. Becker used the analogy of people on a spaceship headed for a new galaxy. There is a clear, grand overall purpose toward which everyone contributes, and so everyone on the mission has a sense of meaning and value.

#### Visible World:

In contrast, within the visible world, people strive for material bases of self-worth and identify with more fragile things (i.e., car, job, relationships, etc.). Meaning and purpose is less shared and less grand. Because the bases of self-worth are totally material, they also have the potential to be lost or destroyed. For example, if your meaning in life is based entirely on your love for another person, that person could leave you; if your system of meaning is based on being a good computer programmer for IBM for 30 years, you could be laid off with a commemorative watch to show for your troubles; if your meaning is based on your investment portfolio, the market could crash; in each case, it would then be hard to sustain the sense that your life had any meaning. Becker argued that this heavy reliance on the material plane for meaning and self-worth is dominant in our culture.

He also noted another problem that this contributes to: It has led western cultures toward efforts to try and control nature and use it to maximize short term needs -- rather than to keep a balance with nature. For example, rather than asking nature to help you destroy your enemies, you might try and make it do so by building an atomic bomb. In a sense, our focus on the material world has led us to forget that our existence is ultimately dependent on nature, that in fact, there are powers greater than ourselves that have to be acknowledged and respected. Of course, many people in our culture have come around to this view; and others may have even shifted too far toward imbalance in the other direction.

A focus on the materialistic, visible world also leads to us to think that we know everything; that we know the causes of all things; but as Otto Rank pointed out, we really don't. For example, we think we know where babies come from. We can provide a fairly detailed answer about how the sperm fertilizes an egg, which then forms into a cell, etc. But what motivates the movement of the sperm and the dividing of the cell? What energy and design motivates and directs the transformation of a blob of cells into a complex highly differentiated organism? We are still left with the miracle of life.

More mundanely, people ride elevators everyday and assume that the little room moves up and down via a scientifically explicable process. But if you ask most people (myself included) how that works, they haven't a clue. Yet we assume that it can be explained without reference to an invisible world of power. But presumably, the scientific explanation would involve reference to electro-magnetic fields, molecules, atoms, electrons, various subatomic particles, etc. But what are these, if not invisible sources of power? If the universe began with a

single hydrogen atom, where did that come from? The point Becker makes is that we may be too quick to dismiss the invisible inexplicable forces because even if we accept a scientific worldview, our explanations always ultimately rest on an invisible world of power that we can not directly see or fully explain.

### **The fictional nature of human meanings**

You confide in images in things that can be represented  
 Which is their dimension you require them  
 You say this is real and you do not fall down and moan  
 Not seeing the irony in the air  
 Everything that does not need you is real  
 The widow [the earth] does not hear you and your cry is numberless  
 This is the waking landscape  
 Dream after dream after dream  
 Walking away through it  
 invisible invisible invisible

W.S. Merwin

Becker then proposed that regardless of whether a worldview emphasizes the visible or invisible world, they all have large fictional components. We think that our perceptions, beliefs, interests, values, and customs are inherently true, right, and meaningful when in fact, as already noted in the section on cultural relativity, they are largely creations by people for people that are meaningful only because we all agree that they are. Consider a few examples that may help to clarify this point:



*Sports* – Tiger Woods is making approximately 50 million dollars a year for being a tremendous golfer. However, when you think about it, all he is doing is hitting a little ball with a stick into a hole in the ground. This skill is valued because we as a society say that it is valued -- we elevate it to its stature of meaning and it is only significant because we agree that it is. If you like hockey and you are lucky enough to get tickets to an Edmonton Oiler's game, you'll probably cheer wildly, jump out of your seat, yell and scream as if it is the most important thing in life. But would you be doing that if you were the only one in the stands watching the game?

*Calendars and clocks* - What day and time is it today as you read this? Perhaps it is Tuesday, September 18, 2001 at 8:30 P.M. Such facts are quite comforting because we know that there was a Tuesday last week and will be another one next week. And everyday has an 8:30 P.M. It gives stability, structure, and a sense of permanence to our conception of reality. However, this is ultimately B.S., a fiction -- because today is a day unlike any other day and there will never be another one just like it. We have an ongoing stream of consciousness and then we don't. The minutes, hours, days, and years, are cultural constructs we have learned which guide our conception of reality. But they are not absolutely real.

The idea is that cultures create worldviews and pass them down from generation to generation, and much of their content is arbitrary and fictional. However, Becker argued that these worldviews are to some extent constrained by the reality that is out there independent of our constructs—we have to live within a meaning system that is not too discrepant with reality. Of course, the wide variety of different cultures that exist suggests that there is room for a multitude of fictions; but if the discrepancy is too great, a culture may be eliminated. For example, Native American groups who thought the spirits would protect them from guns had a vision that was too much out of line with reality and paid a severe price. Becker also suggested that if a society is running out of resources, the fictional elements of a culture might need to be minimized. With the increasing population of the world, Becker asks the question: *can we move toward zero fiction?* In the next section we will see why this is not likely.

### **What is normal?**

After discussing the fictional aspects of culture, Becker next asks, what then is normal? A majority of psychologists are psychotherapists whose business it is to make those who are “abnormal” “normal”. But normality is largely a culturally relative judgment. For example, many behaviors that we see in other cultures, if looked at from our cultural perspective, would be judged as abnormal. The traditional Aboriginal Australian in the outback will take a leak while casually talking with people. The same behavior in most places in Canada would land you in jail or a mental institution. Of course, here in Edmonton, to take a leak we run off to an elaborately constructed room and hope that no one will know what we are doing. Which cultural practice sounds more normal to you?

*Normality is largely culturally determined and so the person we label as abnormal is someone*

*who does not fit within the culturally accepted neurosis -- someone who does not restrict perception and behavior in the culturally accepted ways.*

This definition suggests a couple of interesting questions:

1. *Could someone we might label as psychotic be an admirable performer in a different cultural drama?*

Yes. For example, a person who hears voices may in certain tribal cultures be esteemed as a Shaman in touch with the power of the spirit world. In our culture, we would be likely to label such a person schizophrenic and put them in a mental institution.

2. *Is there a bare minimum global standard of psychosis?*

Maybe. Becker acknowledged that there are certain people who are so disturbed in thought and feeling that they would be poor social performers who undermine predictability and meaning in any cultural context. For example, people suffering from a severe form of schizophrenia may not be able to consistently play any cultural game. Therefore, they are labeled abnormal and we try to change them or at least keep them isolated so that they cannot undermine our sense that what we are doing is meaningful. Certainly, our treatment of people we label with psychological problems is motivated in part to help them, but historically, and even now, their treatment is also about preserving our sense that the game we are playing is a meaningful one. As an example, have you ever tried to convince a person with severe depression that life really is good and worth living? How did you feel when, no matter what you said to put a positive spin on life, the person turned it into something negative?

Taking this point further, Becker argued that:

*the world of human aspirations is a largely fictitious symbolic creation; therefore we must defend the utter fragility of our delicately constituted fictions.*

Since it is largely fictional and relies on social validation, our worldview can easily be threatened. Much of this social validation is achieved through the shared performance of rituals and when someone undermines the sanctity of the ritual, they can cut right through the meaning and value system, which may lead to chaos. For example, if someone at a funeral starts tap dancing on the coffin. Similarly, those with new ideas that challenge the prevailing worldview cause great anxiety and are often condemned. Many of these people have been completely squashed, but the ones we know about are those few who successfully altered aspects of the worldview, ultimately prevailing over the condemners, e.g., Copernicus, Galileo, Darwin.

*It takes so little, so infinitely little, for a person to cross the border beyond which everything loses meaning: love, convictions, faith, history. Human life -- and herein lies its secret -- takes place in the immediate proximity of that border, even in direct contact with it; it is not miles away, but a fraction of an inch.*

Milan Kundera

### **PREJUDICE AND INTERGROUP CONFLICT**

One of the important things about Becker's analysis is that it helps to explain prejudice—why we have such a difficult time getting along with other people. Recall that we need self-esteem but we can only maintain it in the context of a meaningful culture. Deviant individuals within the culture, whether psychologically troubled or highly creative, can threaten that meaning -- but it is even more likely to be threatened by those outside the culture, because they seem to be getting along just fine with a different worldview. They are implicitly or explicitly saying their worldview is correct and ours is wrong—or that ours is no more true or valid than any other. There are three main points to Becker's explanation of prejudice:

1. The existence of other worldviews suggests that our worldview may be just as fundamentally contrived as any other.
2. Thus, other cultures are always potentially threatening because they imply that our own basis of meaning, self-esteem, and security may be an arbitrary fiction.
3. We therefore have to continually reinforce our view and diffuse the threat of alternative views.

To state it another way, the existence of other people who are living by a different set of rules suggests that our way may not be the “absolutely right” way of living. To the extent that this meaning and value system is our basis for security, threats to its validity are experienced as anxiety provoking and demand a response to negate that threat. There are four ways that cultures seem to deal with the potential threat of alternative cultures:

1. Derogation: the easiest way to deal with it is to put the other group down. For example, when Europeans ran into tribal cultures on other continents they tended to view them as ignorant, brutal savages.
2. Assimilation: one of the best ways to increase your faith in your meaning system is to convert other people. For example, missionary activity with the goal of teaching native peoples to see the light.
3. Accommodation: another way is to incorporate appealing aspects of the other worldview into one's own in a way that removes the threatening elements. For example, the Hippie counter-cultural movement in the late 60's (before my time of course) gave rise to blue jeans and granola bars as a way to go against the mainstream focus on appearance and reliance on synthetic products; now we have designer blue jeans and chocolate covered granola bars. Another example is the way that some modern Christians have incorporated evolution into their belief system by saying that God created all the necessary components of life and all the basic organisms on this planet and then

let evolution happen.

4. Annihilation: the final, most efficient way to diffuse the threat of different others when all else has failed is to try to get rid of them. History is filled with examples of this solution (e.g., conflicts between the Christians and Muslims in Bosnia; the near genocide of Native Americans, the Spanish Inquisition, and of course, the Holocaust).

*History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awaken.*

James Joyce

## WHY CAN'T WE JUST ACCEPT THE FICTIONAL NATURE OF OUR OWN WORLDVIEW?

In other words, why can't we just live our life and let others live their lives and realize that our way is no better than any other?

1. Based on the analysis so far, we can't accept this because it would undermine our sense of self-worth. If we do not base our self-worth on something we believe is meaningful (e.g., how much beer we can chug, how much money we make, etc.), then we would not be certain that we have any value.

2. But taking the explanation one step further, Becker explained that we can't accept this because *if you strip away the meaning and self-esteem from life, we are just animals with the only certainty that we are doomed to decay and die* (thus the awareness of mortality assumes a prominent position in this analysis, which we previously discussed as perhaps the ultimate evolutionary "spandrel").

*...it has always seemed to me that the only painless death must be that which takes the intelligence by violent surprise and from the rear so to speak since if death be anything at all beyond a brief and peculiar emotional state of the bereaved it must be a brief and likewise peculiar state of the subject as well and if aught can be more painful to any intelligence above that of a child or an idiot than a slow and gradual confronting with that which over a long period of bewilderment and dread it has been taught to regard as an irrevocable and unplumbable finality, I do not know it.*

William Faulkner

In this light, Becker discussed the paradox that he terms individuality within finitude that consists of, on the one hand, feeling like we are unique and special; and on the other hand, knowing that we, like all other living creatures, are going to die:

*Man is a creator with a mind that soars out to speculate about atoms and infinity, who can place himself imaginatively at a point in space and contemplate bemusedly his own planet...Yet, at the same time,...his body is a fleshy casing that...aches and bleeds and will decay and die.*

Ernest Becker

So what Becker proposed is that this whole meaning and value system is protecting us from just conceiving of ourselves as aimless animals in the world struggling without purpose until death. We cling to this elaborate construction (originally the meaning system of the parents and later the culture) to help us deal with the ultimate threat that we can't dismiss -- the problem of our mortality.

**Therefore, to function with our anxieties under control, we need a meaningful worldview and a sense that we are significant contributors to it**

*Civilization originates in delayed infancy and its function is security. It is a huge network of more or less successful attempts to protect mankind against the danger of object-loss, the colossal efforts made by a baby who is afraid of being left alone in the dark.*

Geza Roheim

***Is culture just the mechanism of defense of an infant afraid of being alone in the dark?***

Becker argued that, in part, yes. Although Becker focused on this dark side of life, largely because it illuminates some of the difficulties we humans face, he did *acknowledge another side [of life] -- curiosity, creativity, pleasure, wonder, awe--* what can be called **the growth or enrichment side of motivation**. In fact, this motivation played a big role in the socialization process we already discussed—wherein the child's natural excitement, curiosity, and interest has to be controlled in order for s/he to live up to standards of value so s/he can protect him/herself from anxieties.

On the one hand, we have an unparalleled capacity for terror and for understanding the human existential dilemma, and on the other hand, we have an unparalleled capacity for awe and creativity. Becker notes, however, that they are both overwhelming if left controlled -- we can't really handle the awesomeness of reality, that is, being a living creature among billions on a big rock full of plants and animals hurtling around one of millions of stars in a galaxy etc. This is why in socializing children, we necessarily mute the child in both directions: we mute the child's terror and dread and along with that, we also mute the capacity for awe and joy.

### **JUDGING CULTURES**

Now that we understand more about the psychological functions of culture, can we assess the relative merits of a particular cultural worldview? Recall, however, that Becker's analysis suggests that *we're all neurotic; if it's within the tolerated range of culturally accepted neurosis we are normal; abnormality is thus largely a matter of cultural convention*. So given this relativistic view, can we then judge cultures?

One problem in trying to do this is that we can only evaluate cultures through the context

of our own cultural reality, which is just as arbitrary as the one we are judging. Thus, even positing that better cultures are more open, more flexible, and less false is problematic because how can we decide which is less false?

Another way to assess cultures is to ask:

*How well does a given culture serve its psychological function by providing safety, meaning, and self-worth to its members while minimizing costs to those within the culture, those outside the culture, and future generations?*

Of course, this assumes that safety, meaning and self-worth, are good things, and that assumption itself is a matter of cultural judgment; however, it's an assumption that fits our culture and we can't really get outside our own cultural framework anyway. According to Becker's analysis, when a culture is not doing well according to these criteria, we should see lots of mental health problems within the culture and/or lots of costs to subgroups within the culture or those outside the culture. Interestingly, Nazi Germany in the 1930s provided substantial meaning and value to its constituents. However, obviously it did so at tragic costs to many people within and outside the culture.

For the individual, Becker asks: *what is the ideal heroism?*

*....intensified progress seems to be bound up with intensified unfreedom. Throughout the world of industrial civilization, the domination of man by man is growing in scope and efficiency. Nor does this trend appear as an incidental, transitory regression on the road to progress. Concentration camps, mass exterminations, world wars, and atom bombs are no 'relapse into barbarism', but the unrepressed implementation of the achievements of modern science, technology, and domination. And the most effective subjugation and destruction of man by man takes place at the height of civilization, when the material and intellectual attainments of mankind seem to allow the creation of a truly free world.*

Herbert Marcuse

Becker struggles with the problem of what is the ideal meaning system, perhaps because there is no answer. Or, at least, it's not something Becker or this course should be trying to answer for you. However, Becker's musings on this are worth thinking about. Becker notes that *although religion, religious leaders, and social scientists come from very different perspectives, they converge on some basic points*. They generally acknowledge human limitations and the contradictions of human existence and recognize that we need to be humble as there are things out there beyond our control -- and basic fears we all share. In addition, social scientists and religious prophets *converge in their critiques of cultural fictions*: they realize that most people invest in false cultural fictions in order to feel meaningful and valuable and that this leads to *idol worship* (i.e., golden statues of deities, cars, etc), to prizing artificial things, and to defending

these cultural fictions to the detriment of ourselves and others.

Becker felt that these cultural fictions lead the potentially “most free” creatures on the planet into a new kind of enslavement, that out of freedom people fashion a prison. Becker calls this **symbolic reinstinctivisation**. Consider a simple summary of his analysis of the human condition: *The evolutionary development of the cerebral cortex leads to freedom from instincts and freedom of reactivity, which in turn, allows for the possibility of true freedom and creativity through intellectual development. But from birth on, without the benefit of full instinctive control, we are helpless, dependent, and capable of anticipating all kinds of threats. So, most of us become symbolically reinstinctivized by embedding ourselves in a narrow cultural worldview -- we become slaves to our trainers and social groups.*

One way to say this is that we give up the pure freedom of action to buy into a cultural worldview (or meaning system) so that we can feel secure. In fact, although we can alter the meaning system somewhat as we mature, Becker’s analysis suggests we can never truly be self-reliant. Maybe that is okay, and a small sacrifice if our meaning system provides the security we need to lead enjoyable and fulfilling lives. But Becker wanted to find a way around this dilemma and considered 4 levels of power by which we can derive meaning (that move to a grander basis of meaning):

1. Personal meaning: “the secret hero of one’s inner scenario” and refers to feeling value from one’s own traits and attributes
2. Social meaning: consists of close family relations, friends, and pets
3. Secular meaning: refers to identification with something greater than ourselves (e.g., allegiance to corporation, the party, nation, science, history, humanity)
4. Sacred meaning: the invisible and unknown sources of power, spirits and deities

However, the question of *into what hero-system (combination of the four levels) -- do I fit and express my talents and contribution so that I can feel good about myself*, is one that we rarely get to ask. Becker argued that we rarely get to ask it because when we are born our mind (at least with respect to culture) is essentially a “blank slate” and we lack the cognitive complexity to think of it, and by the time we mature, this question has already been answered for us, that is, we have already been embedded in a symbolic system of meaning. Becker then asks: What is the psychological value of the different levels of meaning? He offers these answers:

1. Personal meaning: Being truly alone is unsustainable or pathological -- one can’t sustain it in the absence of social validation.
2. Social meaning: Depending on others is too limited, fragile and fleeting.
3. Secular meaning: This third level is typically used by most -- it is broad and grand enough to serve our needs for meaning and self-esteem, and death transcendence through *symbolic immortality*, e.g., living on through children, culturally valued accomplishments such as writing a book, identifications with larger collectives such as one’s country). However, Becker claims *it is falling short of ultimate reality* and consists of *living in a world of idols* in which the bottom can drop out at any time.
4. Sacred meaning: Becker argued that the fourth level is the truest heroism—*cosmic heroism*—the most comforting and the one that can best serve the needs for security. With this, you link your own personal, invisible mystery of your depth and subjectivity to

the highest power which is also personal, invisible, and a mystery and you have the possibility of literal immortality. Because sacred meaning is abstract and eternal it is less fragile and fleeting than the other levels of meaning.

*A scheme of things is a plan for salvation....We seek the largest possible scheme of things, not in a reaching out for truth, but because the more comprehensive the scheme the greater its promise of banishing dread. If we can make our lives mean something in a cosmic scheme we will live in the certainty of immortality.*

Alan Wheelis

From Becker's perspective, sacred meaning potentially allows for freedom from control by material and cultural influences because they are not your ultimate bases of heroism and security. Thus, spirituality can enhance individuality, self-reliance, and openness. However, there are two down sides:

1. The paradox of *individuality-within-finitude* is still there and haunts us. As in the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden, once Adam bites into the apple, he tastes knowledge and gains self-consciousness and mortality.
2. Organized religion does not always lead to openness but *can be automatic, reflexive, obsessive, and authoritarian. What more compelling license to kill others than the service of a divine cause* (e.g., the Crusades; the Spanish Inquisition)?

One key question therefore is: *Can people sustain personal, spiritual faith without transforming that faith into rigid belief systems and idol worship?*

Becker argued that this is very difficult to do. People tend to fall back into idol worship and can't sustain the spiritual element. People construct statues and build churches and make distinctions (i.e., "I'm a believer and you're not"), thereby concretizing something that is really abstract. When these symbols are threatened, people respond defensively. As could be argued with regard to the freedom to burn the American flag (which the American Congress has been arguing about for thirty years), people tend to protect the symbols more than the ideals the symbols were created to represent! So for what its worth, Becker ends up recommending a personal spirituality not dependent on material trappings or social affiliations. He concluded by arguing that if we could sustain this, then maybe it could provide a basis for security that would lead to true openness and self-reliance.

Becker continued his analysis in the following two books:

Denial of Death (1973)

Escape from Evil (1975)

I highly recommend these books to you if you are interested in a further exploration of the existential dilemma of the human condition and its implications for mental health and social behavior. We will cover some of the ideas from these books later in the semester.