

GANZ NOTES - TNS 12, 1 (24 January 2023) - Ernest Becker (1925-1974)

FEAST DAY TODAY, January 24th - St. Francis de Sales, Bishop and Doctor of the Church (1567-1622)

Britannica - **Reformation**, also called **Protestant Reformation**, the religious revolution that took place in the Western church in the 16th century. Its greatest leaders undoubtedly were [Martin Luther](#) and [John Calvin](#). Having far-reaching political, economic, and social effects, the Reformation became the basis for the founding of [Protestantism](#), one of the three major branches of [Christianity](#).

Ellsberg, Robert. *All Saints.* **The Crossroad Publishing Company.** Kindle Edition.

"The Protestant Reformation [began on 31 October 1517 when Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses] evoked a variety of responses on the part of Catholic apologists. Some reacted defensively. Not content with affirming the truth, they felt the church must aggressively denounce error and cause its suppression by any means necessary. But others responded differently. **They perceived in the signs of the times a general summons to conversion and to a more intense aspiration for holiness. Among the great saints of this period was Francis de Sales.** As a bishop and spiritual director, he expounded a message of love and moderation that had enormous effect in reestablishing the vitality and credibility of the Catholic church. **The only complaint against his methods came from rigorist critics who charged that he made it appear all too easy to become a saint....** For four years [1594-1598] he trudged through the region [the Chablais region around Lake Geneva] on foot, many times barely escaping assassination. He lived in poverty, relying on alms, suffering through several harsh winters. **Rather than simply denouncing Calvinism, he chose instead to proclaim the positive message of the gospel in a way that would overcome the prevailing negative stereotypes of the Catholic faith. Not by force of arms, but by love and self-sacrifice he sought to return the hearts of the people to their ancient faith.** He met with surprising success. At least twenty-three hundred families were publicly

reconciled with the Catholic church as a result of his mission.... By this time Francis himself had achieved wide fame through the publication of his book *An Introduction to the Devout Life* [published 1609]. This manual of devotion was quickly translated into many languages and it remains one of the classics of Christian spirituality. Most such handbooks had been addressed to clerics or members of religious orders. **What was significant about Francis's book was that it was addressed to Christians in any state of life. The path to holiness, he taught, could be pursued in the world as well as in the cloister....** In 1923 Pope Pius XI named him the patron saint of writers."

DESCRIPTION OF SERIES 12 OF THE NIGHT SCHOOL

Series 12 of The Night School of the Faber Institute explores, Guest by Guest, month by month, how it happens that when evil has gotten into the fabric of a culture (e.g., American culture), the soul/a person instinctively "retracts" in revulsion (very often unnoticed by a person - this retraction). That is, evil is a toxin that corrupts things so central to the soul's essence that the soul/a person "pulls back" and finds/establishes a *defensive position in relation to that evil* (doing this most often without noticing that he or she has done this). The soul/a person seeks a "safe" spot (i.e., a way of understanding himself or herself) in which to hide, something which Becker powerfully describes as "the vital lie". When this is happening on a broad front in the people of an unhealthy culture, those people/that nation (government, church, social class) will quickly lose track of what being a human being actually is. Not knowing who we are at this fundamental level of awareness leaves us too able to be manipulated to "conform" to someone else's "safe" version - vital lie - of personhood.

Our Guest to begin Series 12 is **Ernest Becker**. He is probably best characterized as a cultural anthropologist - someone who studies the "meaning and values" of a culture as they relate to the "human project". His book, *The Denial of Death* (1973), which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1974 (after his death), was written as he was actively dying of cancer. When I first read it, probably in the early 1980s, I knew that I had read one of the ten greatest non-fiction books that I had ever read (a personal assessment). In the book, among many other things, he is

taking a long, loving look at what we *think* it means to become a (good) person. Becker explains how often that this is *not at all* what it means.

Becker with brilliant and accessible analysis, and with instructive passion, cracks open this "cheat" of personhood, so that we might begin to lay hold of what being a (good) human being actually is, and how a soul/a person gets open finally *to not knowing what a human being is* other than a relationship of profound dependence on God.

BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

Born: 1925

Died: 6 March 1974

Nationality: American

Occupation: Cultural anthropologist

Family: Born in 1925; died of cancer in 1974.

Education: Earned Ph.D. from Syracuse University.

Writer. Member of staff at U.S. Embassy in Paris, France; State University of New York, instructor, 1962-65; University of California, Berkeley, lecturer, beginning in 1965; instructor at San Francisco State University in San Francisco, CA, and at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia.

Pulitzer Prize, 1974, for *The Denial of Death*.

WORKS BY THE AUTHOR:

Zen: A Rational Critique, Norton, 1961.

The Birth and Death of Meaning: A Perspective in Psychiatry and Anthropology, Free Press of Glencoe, 1962, 2nd edition published as *The Birth and Death of Meaning: An Interdisciplinary Perspective on the Problem of Man*, Free Press, 1971.

The Revolution in Psychiatry: The New Understanding of Man, Free Press of Glencoe, 1964.

Beyond Alienation: A Philosophy of Education for the Crisis of Democracy, Braziller, 1967.

The Structure of Evil: An Essay on the Unification of the Science of Man, Braziller, 1968.

Angel in Armor: A Post-Freudian Perspective on the Nature of Man,

Braziller, 1969.

The Lost Science of Man, Braziller, 1971.

The Denial of Death, Free Press, 1973.

Escape From Evil, Free Press, 1975.

LUCIEN RICHARD, OMI from his "Death, a Theology"

Lucien Richard, OMI, "Death, a Theology" -

The pervasiveness of death leads **Ernest Becker** to affirm that the effort to repress the terror of death is the very foundation of all human culture. **Humans cannot live without limiting their perception of reality; in the face of death there is a need to build an armor to protect ourselves.** The basic fact of human reality is the realization that one has no control over death or over the meaning of one's life.

Becker's anthropology is centered on the conviction that the consciousness of one's mortality provides the key to understanding the human condition. Failure to cope with personal mortality leads to mental illness, and the denial of death is the core of most neuroses.

Contemporary approaches to death have forced Christian theology to concentrate on death not simply in the abstract, but as a concrete process, as *dying*. **Death can no longer be considered as the instant when life finally ends, but as a recurrent experience where life itself is failing, such as in illness, as in losses and separations. Every illness, every loss is a dying, so that death is going on within us at all times.**^[1]

[1] Peter E. Fink, [*The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*](#) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 327.

OUR "FACTICITY"

Kate Bowler, "The Roof Always Caves In" in *Comment Magazine* –
"What I had not learned from my shed caving in was what Simone de

Beauvoir calls our *facticity*. **All of our freedoms—our choices and our ridiculous attempts to plan our lives—are constrained by so many unchangeable details.** I was born in this particular year to those parents in this town. This medication exists and that treatment doesn't, but now it seems that all along I had these cancer cells in my colon, spreading to my liver, and scattered in my abdomen because of a genetic blueprint written long ago. **This existential state is, to borrow a term from Martin Heidegger, the *thrownness* of human life.** As we wake to the suffering of this world and our own existence, we find ourselves hurtling through time.... When North Americans look for answers to our dependence, we often turn to the easy promises of the gospel of self-help. "Try harder!" "Change your mindset." "You are your greatest hope." We bought cheap paperbacks in **a frenzy to find a cure for being human.** But soon our own limited resolve—and the relative weakness of our institutions—conjured up the atomism that Alexis de Tocqueville so feared. Our dreams turned out to be built from toothpicks, each person propped up to stand entirely alone.... The English word "**precarity**" means a state of dangerous uncertainty, but its Latin root tells us a good deal more about its Christian character.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at "**precarious**" – "Dependent on chance or circumstance; uncertain; liable to fail; exposed to risk, hazardous; insecure, unstable."

The term comes from *precarius*, or "obtained by entreaty or prayer"—a state where we cannot achieve things by ourselves. **We must rely on someone else, God or neighbour....** There is a tremendous opportunity here, now, for Christians to develop language and foster community around empathy, courage, and hope in the midst of this fear of our own vulnerability. Our neighbours are expressing an aching desire to feel less alone, needing language for the pain they've experienced, searching for meaning and someone to tell them the truth.... It is a miracle when we let ourselves, in desperation, be lowered into the unknown. When we let ourselves cry or scream or even whisper that we fear our own undoing. We will have almost nothing in our control except the knowledge of our fragility...."

LUCIEN RICHARD, OMI, "DEATH, A THEOLOGY"

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at "**death**" – "The act or fact of dying; the end of life; the permanent cessation of the vital functions of a person, animal, plant, or other organism. Also: an instance of this; (with specification) a manner of dying."

OLD TESTAMENT

In the Rabbinic tradition, death is usually seen as a normal part of created existence; Adam, created out of dust, returns to dust. Death is a natural limitation to existence.... Yet the basic concern in the Hebrew scriptures is for life.... An essential dimension of life is the right relationship to God, for life is not understood simply as bios but as life-with-God.... Death is *relationlessness*, for Sheol is a realm of God's absence.... And here lies the ambiguity of the OT concept of death. How can God be source of life, as shalom, and of death, as *relationlessness*. Since death has no power of its own and dualism plays no role in the OT, death becomes a question about God.... Relationship to God must survive death itself.

NEW TESTAMENT

Romans 14: ⁷ For none of us lives for himself and none of us dies for himself;* ⁸ while we are alive, we are living for the Lord, and when we die, we die for the Lord: and so, alive or dead, we belong to the Lord. ⁹ It was for this purpose that Christ both died and came to life again: so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.*^[1]

Finitude and mortality are essential components of the finite embodied human condition. As such they are not sinful; they become an occasion for sin when they become the ultimate concern of human existence, when life is all that is sought for. When that happens, mortality becomes "death" in the Pauline

sense. And death enters into the theological realm.... Paul says that to be in sin is to be under the domination of death. *Death in this sense is the ongoing attempt to hold on to life as one's own possession.* The terror of death is the fear of losing ourselves. The wages of sin is death, for the roots of sin is domination and possessiveness. Death becomes an enemy [when it defines itself] apart from relation to God the giver and sustainer of life.... Death is a negative reality, and this includes Jesus' death.

*New World Encyclopedia at "Ernest Becker" – "Becker also noted that the root of evil lies in **the selfishness of human beings seeking to protect their own existence in the face of their mortality**, which he regarded as an essential aspect of human nature. Recognizing such evil within human beings gave him concern about the future of human society."*

CHRISTIAN TRADITION

As we move into the Christian tradition, the theology of death becomes a theology of the afterlife, with its focus on the immortality of the soul.... *Specific church teachings on death are rare.... Death is clearly mysterious; Christianity's answer to this mystery is another mystery, the paschal mystery. Humanity is destined to pass from death to life through Christ. The mystery of Christ and the mystery of man/woman are the same mystery....*

CONTEMPORARY THOUGHTS

Theologians today approach death not primarily in terms of the afterlife, and not simply as a point at the end of life, but rather as a pervasive dimension of one's total existence.... **Martin Heidegger [1889-1976]**^[2] taught: *It is precisely death that allows human life to have meaning.* To live in a realistic anticipation of death is to accept boundaries and to live with some purpose. Meaning is to be found within human life, not by

ignoring mortality and finitude, but by taking the inevitability of death fully and frankly into account.

DEATH AS A PERSONAL ACT

According to **Karl Rahner, SJ [1904-1984]**^[3], because man/woman is a union of nature and person, death has two dimensions, a personal and a natural one.

Clearly then, one of the most important products of relationships is the emergence of structures of meaning that are essential to our existence. Meanings are learned in the context of specific relationships and circumstances.

Biologically, the human organism wears out. It weakens and collapses, or it is destroyed. In its personal aspect, though, death is something active and performed, not simply passive and suffered. Because human persons are free, they have the ability to dispose of themselves. *In its personal aspect, then, death can be the culmination of personal history of freedom.*

With the emphasis on personhood as relational, and meaningfulness as interpersonal, the death of a person is the dissolution not only of an individual but of meaningfulness and of personal environment. Death strikes directly at the human person by threatening the person with radical *relationlessness*.

Life consists in active participation in a set of relationships. *Death for its part means the destruction of what has been slowly built up and has come to form the very fabric of a personal existence.* The problem of death does not arise primarily because of our biological reality, but because of the unconditional and the uniqueness that is personhood.

The bond of personal relationship transcends distance and time and can in a similar way bridge the gap of death. There is

something about belonging at the personal level of existence that can prevail over the physical separation of death. Communion with the living and the dead is based on memory, on remembrance.

Remembering is a fundamental element of personal belonging and of the interpersonal world. Within the Christian perspective the interpersonal world extends beyond this time and space.

* 6:10–11; Lk 20:38; Ga 2:19; Ph 1:20

* Ac 10:42; 2 Co 5:15

[1] [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Ro 14:7–9.

[2] *Lexham Factbook – "Being and Time*, his best-known work, offers a detailed phenomenology of human existence, describing the "facticity" of being cast into a life not of our own making, free to pursue all kinds of options yet trapped by our own finiteness. Destiny awaits, however, and conscience calls us to an authentically human existence. In his later writings, Heidegger makes it clear that man is no Promethean, saving himself, but that the Ground of Being is revealed in the depth of his anxiety. This is not a personal God, however, nor a Being distinct from others, but rather a panentheistic kind of Being-Itself within which we find our being."

[3] "Rahner's writings are a highly significant exposition of twentieth-century Roman Catholic theology. Based in vast philosophical erudition, Rahner's work has, in fact, had broad influence on contemporary Roman Catholic doctrinal thought. The substance and methods of his work have been publicly admired by various popes. Appointed as one of its theological experts, Rahner also had an impact on Vatican Council II and its doctrinal statements. In many ways, Rahner's place in Roman Catholicism is comparable to Karl Barth's in Protestantism. In general, Rahner's thought upholds a traditional Christian supernaturalism, sometimes adjusted deeply for modern philosophy. For Rahner, as for Barth, this has meant a combining of traditional and orthodox doctrine with existentialism and its insights. Through his superb expressive skills, Rahner made his abstract teachings highly appealing to a wide

academic audience. But at the same time, his writings and lectures for the public have compelling pastoral insights and evangelistic promptings. Rahner's works have given recent Roman Catholic theology one of its ablest expositions." [K.J. Bryer, "Rahner, Karl," *Who's Who in Christian History* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1992), 579.]

THE VITAL LIE – CHARACTER

"Take stock of those around you and you will... hear them talk in precise terms about themselves and their surroundings, which would seem to point to them having ideas on the matter. But start to analyse those ideas and you will find that they hardly reflect in any way the reality to which they appear to refer, and if you go deeper, you will discover that there is not even an attempt to adjust the ideas to this reality. Quite the contrary: through these notions the individual is trying to cut off any personal vision of reality, of his own very life. For life is at the start a chaos in which one is lost. The individual suspects this, but he is frightened at finding himself face to face with this terrible reality and tries to cover it over with a curtain of fantasy, where everything is clear. It does not worry him that his "ideas" are not true, he uses them as trenches for the defense of his existence, as scarecrows to frighten away reality." —JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET¹ [Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death* (p. 47). Free Press. Kindle Edition.]

The great boon of **repression** is that it makes it possible to live decisively in an overwhelmingly miraculous and incomprehensible world, a world so full of beauty, majesty, and terror that if animals perceived it all they would be paralyzed to act. [Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death* (p. 50). Free Press. Kindle Edition.]

He can relate not only to animals in his own species, but in some ways to all other species. He can contemplate not only what is edible for him, but everything that grows. He not only lives in this moment, but expands his inner self to yesterday, his curiosity to centuries ago, his fears to five billion years from now when the sun will cool, his hopes to an eternity from now. He lives not only on a tiny territory, nor even on an entire planet, but in a galaxy, in a universe, and in dimensions beyond visible universes. It is appalling, the burden that man bears, the experiential burden. [Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death* (pp. 50-51). Free Press.

Kindle Edition.]

Job 38:

- ¹ Then the Lord^{*} answered Job out of the storm and said:
² Who is this who darkens counsel
with words of ignorance?
³ Gird up your loins^{*} now, like a man;
I will question you, and you tell me the answers!^a
⁴ Where were you when I founded the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
⁵ Who determined its size? Surely you know?
Who stretched out the measuring line for it?
⁶ Into what were its pedestals sunk,
and who laid its cornerstone,
⁷ While the morning stars sang together
and all the sons of God^{*} shouted for joy?
⁸ Who shut within doors the sea,
when it burst forth from the womb,^b
⁹ When I made the clouds its garment
and thick darkness its swaddling bands?
¹⁰ When I set limits for it
and fastened the bar of its door,
¹¹ And said: Thus far shall you come but no farther,
and here shall your proud waves stop?
¹² Have you ever in your lifetime commanded the morning
and shown the dawn its place
¹³ For taking hold of the ends of the earth,
till the wicked are shaken from it? ^[1]

And so, the core of psychodynamics, the formation of the human character, is a study in human self-limitation and in the terrifying costs of that limitation. **The hostility to psychoanalysis in the past, today, and in the future, will always be a hostility against admitting that**

man lives by lying to himself about himself and about his world, and that character, to follow Ferenczi and Brown, is a vital lie. I

particularly like the way Maslow has summed up this contribution of Freudian thought: 'Freud's greatest discovery, the one which lies at the root of psychodynamics, is that the great cause of much psychological illness is the fear of knowledge of oneself—of one's emotions, impulses, memories, capacities, potentialities, of one's destiny. We have discovered that fear of knowledge of oneself is very often isomorphic with, and parallel with, fear of the outside world'. [Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death* (pp. 51-52). Free Press. Kindle Edition.]

We don't want to admit that we are fundamentally dishonest about reality, that we do not really control our own lives. We don't want to admit that we do not stand alone, that we always rely on something that transcends us, some system of ideas and powers in which we are embedded and which support us. This power is not always obvious. [Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death* (p. 55). Free Press. Kindle Edition.]

The defenses that form a person's character support a grand illusion, and when we grasp this, we can understand the full drivenness of man. **He is driven away from himself, from self-knowledge, self-reflection. He is driven toward things that support the lie of his character, his automatic equanimity.** But he is also drawn precisely toward those things that make him anxious, as a way of skirting them masterfully, testing himself against them, controlling them by defying them. [Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death* (p. 56). Free Press. Kindle Edition.]

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- Now the Lord enters the debate and addresses two discourses (chaps. 38–39 and 40–41) to Job, speaking of divine wisdom and power. Such things are altogether beyond the capacity of Job. *Out of the storm*: frequently the background of the appearances of the Lord in the Old Testament; cf. Ps 18; 50; Na 1:3; Hb 3:2–15.

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- *Gird up your loins*: prepare for combat—figuratively, be ready to defend yourself in debate.

^a Jb 40:2.

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- *Sons of God*: see note on 1:6.

b Gn 1:9.

[1] [*New American Bible*](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Job 38:1–13.

GANZ NOTES - ON THE THEOLOGY OF DEATH

Notes and boldfaced text by Rick Ganz (December 2022 – January 2023)

Lucien J. Richard, OMI in Peter E. Fink, [*The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*](#) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 324–331.

Death seldom stands in the center of Christian theology, yet it is an ultimate in human existence. It forces upon us the most serious questions about the meaning and goal of human life, about the very existence of meaning and goal. Faced with the inevitability of death, we feel threatened by forces outside and within ourselves. Faced with the bewildering complexity of our life threatened by death, the ability to remain centered is an ever-present challenge. Every epoch has its own answer to the question of death, but the inadequacy of each answer inevitably leads every new generation to pursue the search. Whatever answer may be given to the question of death, it cannot be given in terms of ideas and concepts, or in abstract generalities.

Death is the one basic reality that makes most manifest that the human participates in the biological and the cultural. As human beings, we live at the edge of a paradox. We belong both to nature and to culture and are consistently affected by the ambivalence of such a situation. Death as an inevitable fact of human existence can be perceived only from within the interplay of biology and culture. Death is as much a social event as a biological one; it is overlaid with symbolic and ritualistic meaning. We can secure our sense of death only from images, from symbols and rituals. In symbols the truth about life and about death is disclosed to us. **Symbols light up our experience and give coherence to our existence, enabling us to be human.** Far from being un-symbolizable, the language of death is the symbol.

These symbols are not creatures of fancy; they have their roots in the polarities and binarity of human existence, in the ongoing interplay of the negative and the positive. Christianity's answer to the questions of life and death is a complex of symbols: the paschal mystery. The decisive images are of Jesus Christ, of his life, death, and resurrection. The images are those of birth, death, and rebirth: their emphasis is on life

graciously given, graciously sustained – death no longer stands as the ultimate fact, but as the penultimate.

DEATH IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

For both Hebrew and Christian scriptures, the central issue in death is a theological one: *the character of God*.

The OT, reflecting Israel's experience, has no single view of death. Life and death are not simply presented as logical opposites, for both belong to human existence as it issues from God. **In the Rabbinic tradition, death is usually seen as a normal part of created existence; Adam, created out of dust, returns to dust. Death is a natural limitation to existence.** Death is one thing when it comes to an elderly person, and another when it comes to a young person. In light of the creation story, death can be viewed as the consequences of sin.

Barth seems nearer to the truth when he writes: "The man who fears death, even though he contrives to put a somewhat better face on it, is at least nearer to the truth than the man who does not fear it, or rather pretends that there is no reason why he should do so. Since it is the sign of the divine judgement on human sin and guilt, it is very much to be feared."^{1 21}

Yet the basic concern in the Hebrew scriptures is for life. The God of Israel is the Living One (Deut 5:26; 2 Kgs 19:4; Ps 42:3). God is the source of and giver of life (Ps 36:9). Coming so fully from God, life must be considered as the highest of God's gifts; life is God's original blessing. Life is *shalom* or well-being; it is the good life in the here and now.

Since life issues from God, and from God alone, it is not an autonomous and inherent power of human existence, but it is totally dependent on God. It is God who gives life; it is God who withdraws life; God has authority over both life and death. "Good and evil, life and death, poverty and riches are from the Lord" (Sir 11:14). **An essential dimension of life is the right relationship to God, for life is not understood simply as *bios* but as *life-with-God*. Death can therefore be understood as opposed to life in all of its manifestations. Death is all the non-life experienced in the course of one's**

¹² *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, p. 598.

¹ David Atkinson, [*The Message of Genesis 1-11: The Dawn of Creation*](#), ed. J. A. Motyer and Derek Tidball, *The Bible Speaks Today* (England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), 126-127.

existence: adversity, suffering, oppression, sickness. Death itself, though, is irreversible for once one is in Sheol, there is no deliverance. “For there is hope for a tree if it be cut down, that it will sprout again and that its shoots will not cease But man dies and is laid low; man breathes his last, and where is he?” (Job 14:7–10).

The influence of divine power seems to come to an end at the threshold of Sheol. Death is an event that comes between God and the individual, for death sets the seal for separation from God. **Death is *relationlessness*, for Sheol is a realm of God’s absence.** “I am like one forsaken among the dead ... like those whom thou dost remember no more. For they are cut off from thy hand” (Ps 88:5).

In the OT there is a certain ambivalence concerning death. On the one hand, death is a limitation of human existence wanted by God, yet as a situation of unrelatedness to God, of disconnectedness, it can also be understood as a punishment on the part of God, as something unnatural, even as a curse (Gen 2:17; 3:19). *And here lies the ambiguity of the OT concept of death. How can God be source of life, as shalom, and of death, as relationlessness. Since death has no power of its own and dualism plays no role in the OT, death becomes a question about God. Israel was essentially agnostic when it came to questions concerning the afterlife.* Immortality was conceived in light of Israel’s ideas of corporate personality: *Israel as the basic unit of existence will remain.* Yet the destiny and eternal salvation of the individual was bound to arise. Such questioning begins in the post-exilic period (Dan 12:2; 2 Macc 7). The breakthrough is clearly the result of Israel’s on-going faith in God as the living God whose life-giving presence must overcome death itself. **Relationship to God must survive death itself.**

DEATH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Romans 14: ⁷ For none of us lives for himself and none of us dies for himself;* ⁸ while we are alive, we are living for the Lord, and when we die, we die for the Lord: and so, alive or dead, we belong to the Lord. ⁹ It was for this purpose that

OT Old Testament

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* 6:10–11; Lk 20:38; Ga 2:19; Ph 1:20

Christ both died and came to life again: so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.*²

For Christianity from its beginning death became **redefined** by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

In life and in death we are under the lordship of Jesus Christ. By taking death upon himself, God has set us free both to live and to die. "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die we are the Lord's" (Rom 14:8). In the NT, the question of death takes on a moral and theological dimension. "The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Cor 15:26). **Finitude and mortality are essential components of the finite embodied human condition. As such they are not sinful; they become an occasion for sin when they become the ultimate concern of human existence, when life is all that is sought for.** When that happens, mortality becomes "death" in the Pauline sense. And death enters into the theological realm.

Paul says that to be in sin is to be under the domination of death. *Death in this sense is the ongoing attempt to hold on to life as one's own possession.* The terror of death is the fear of losing ourselves. The wages of sin is death, for the roots of sin is domination and possessiveness. Death becomes an enemy [when it defines itself] apart from relation to God the giver and sustainer of life.

In the NT, **death as a question about God's character** is answered in terms of the paschal mystery. God is not only a God of the living but also a God of the dead. In Christ's death, God bears the *relationlessness* of death and in so doing reveals Godself as love.

Jesus' resurrection is a promise that, ultimately, we will not be abandoned, but not a promise that God will remove our suffering, pain and death. Jesus offers no palliatives for death in his cry from the cross. Even in the context of hope in the resurrection, death is recognized to be death. **Death is a negative reality, and this includes Jesus' death.** Jesus, through his death and resurrection, *turns death into a*

* Ac 10:42; 2 Co 5:15

² [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Ro 14:7-9.

NT New Testament

NT New Testament

sacrament, into the expression of God's effective presence in human existence; God does make good with the life originally called into existence.

DEATH IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

As we move into the Christian tradition, **the theology of death becomes a theology of the afterlife**, with its focus on the immortality of the soul.

Within that perspective, death is described as the separation of the body from the soul. The emphasis in the patristic period is on salvation from death and the attainment of eternal life. This doctrine of salvation as the overcoming of death is present in liturgies and in the patristic writings. Without such a doctrine, no substantial happiness would be possible since death itself is inevitable. **According to Justin, Christians are no longer afraid of death; indeed, they can even rejoice in death because of the promise of immortality, for salvation expresses itself in incorruption.**

Salvation from death is intrinsically connected to salvation from sin. In fact, remission of sins in baptism is related to deliverance from death: with deliverance from death came a new life and regeneration. Death as the fundamental expression of human vulnerability and corruptibility stands in the way of man/woman's divinization. Salvation is a restoration of incorruptibility, and therefore a destruction of death. **The emphasis is on death as a consequence of sin.** That death is a consequence of sin is affirmed at the Council of Trent (DS, 223).

Specific church teachings on death are rare. Several important statements have been made in our contemporary period.

Vatican II, in its pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes*, deals with the reality of death in a unique way. It does so in the context of a Christological humanism where Christ is presented as the full revelation of what it means to be human. **The text presents a coherent and existential understanding of death, reaffirming the anxiety produced by the inevitability of death. "It is in regard to death that man's [sic] condition is most shrouded in doubt" (GS, 18).** Yet there is a basic desire for eternal life. "A deep instinct leads him [sic] rightly to shrink from and to reject the utter ruin and total loss of his personality. Because he bears in himself the seed of eternity ... he rebels against death"

DS H. Denzinger and A. Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion symbolorum*

GS *Gaudium et spes*, Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World

(*ibid.*). While the human person cannot avoid death, yet his/her destiny is for eternal life.

Death is clearly mysterious; Christianity's answer to this mystery is another mystery, the paschal mystery. Humanity is destined to pass from death to life through Christ. **The mystery of Christ and the mystery of man/woman are the same mystery.** "Such is the nature and the greatness of the mystery of man [sic] as enlightened for the faithful by the Christian revelation. It is therefore through Christ, and in Christ, that light is thrown on the mystery [riddle] of suffering and death which, apart from his Gospel, overwhelms us" (22).

In 1979 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in its "Instruction on Certain Questions Concerning Eschatology" emphasized **the need to acknowledge the existence of a fundamental continuity as well as a radical discontinuity between present and future lives. To ignore this radical discontinuity would be to ignore the finality of death and the uniqueness of historical existence.** A creative tension must be maintained between the two spheres.

DEATH IN CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

Theologians today approach death not primarily in terms of the afterlife, and not simply as a point at the end of life, but rather as a pervasive dimension of one's total existence. Death is not excluded from the experience of life, and no theological anthropology is possible without asking about the significance of death. The theology of death is clearly indebted to contemporary philosophical and psychological approaches.

For **Martin Heidegger [1889-1976]³**, death does not merely represent the last moment in man/woman's life, but even casts its shadow on the totality of life. Dying is a mode of being, which concerns man/woman existentially so that human existence must be regarded as being-to-death and therefore to be defined only in light of death. *It is precisely death that allows human life to have meaning.* **To live in a realistic anticipation of death is to accept boundaries and to live with some purpose. Meaning**

³ *Lexham Factbook* – "Being and Time, his best-known work, offers a detailed phenomenology of human existence, describing the "facticity" of being cast into a life not of our own making, free to pursue all kinds of options yet trapped by our own finiteness. Destiny awaits, however, and conscience calls us to an authentically human existence. In his later writings, Heidegger makes it clear that man is no Promethean, saving himself, but that the Ground of Being is revealed in the depth of his anxiety. This is not a personal God, however, nor a Being distinct from others, but rather a panentheistic kind of Being-Itself within which we find our being."

is to be found within human life, not by ignoring mortality and finitude, but by taking the inevitability of death fully and frankly into account.

Jean-Paul Sartre [1905-1980]⁴ made Heidegger's analysis the starting point of his own approach. Like Heidegger, Sartre sees life's mortality as an essential element of human existence. Unlike Heidegger, death is not opportunity for life, but purely a brutal, fortuitous fact, beyond our understanding. As such it leads to the removal of possibilities and the fragmentation of existence; death is the reverse side of freedom. **Death deprives life of all meaning; the end of human existence in death is absolute meaninglessness – it is absurdity itself.**

The more death is seen as a boundary that robs life of much – if not all – of its meaning, the more the individual and even society is forced to choose between capitulation or affirmation, despair or trust. Contemporary approaches to death make evident why denial and repression are deeply operative in our approaches to death.

The pervasiveness of death leads **Ernest Becker [1924-1974]** to affirm that *the effort to repress the terror of death is the very foundation of all human culture*. Humans cannot live without limiting their perception of reality; in the face of death **there is a need to build an armor to protect ourselves**. The basic fact of human reality is the realization that one has no control over death or over the meaning of one's life.

Becker's anthropology is centered on the conviction that the consciousness of one's mortality provides the key to understanding the human condition. Failure to cope with personal mortality leads to mental illness, and the denial of death is the core of most neuroses.

Contemporary approaches to death have forced Christian theology to concentrate on death not simply in the abstract, but as a concrete process, as dying. **Death can no longer be considered as the instant when life finally ends, but as a recurrent experience where life itself is failing, such as in illness, as in losses and separations.** Every illness, every loss is a dying, so that death is going on within us at all times.

⁴ Baker *Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* – “**Sartre, Jean Paul. Jean Paul Sartre (1905–1980)**, a popular French atheist (see Atheism) of the mid twentieth century, approached philosophy from an existential perspective. He, along with Albert Camus, stressed the absurdity of life. Sartre was born in Paris to nominal Christians (Catholic-Protestant mix), educated in Germany, and taught philosophy in France. His first work of note was *La Nausea* (Nausea). In 1938, Sartre was captured by Germany (1940), returned to France, and taught philosophy until 1944. He attempted an abortive leftist political movement (1951), and later cooperated with French Communists, trying to reconcile Existentialism and *Marxism.”

DEATH AS A PERSONAL ACT

The most important theological development concerning death is its emphasis on the personal nature of death.

According to **Karl Rahner [1904-1984]**⁵, because man/woman is a union of nature and person, death has two dimensions, a personal and a natural one. Because men and women always appear within a spatio-temporal world, over which they have no absolute control, their death will always have a natural aspect. **Death is something which happens to them. Biologically, the human organism wears out. It weakens and collapses, or it is destroyed. In its personal aspect, though, death is something active and performed, not simply passive and suffered. Because human persons are free, they have the ability to dispose of themselves. In its personal aspect, then, death can be the culmination of personal history of freedom.** As a person, one can assume a stance at the end of one's journey, a stance of acceptance or of rejection. "The end of man [sic] as a spiritual person is an active consummation from within, **a bringing of himself to completion. A growth that preserves the issue of his life; it is total entry into possession of himself, the fullness of the being he has become by all his free acts**" (K. Rahner, H. Vorgrimler, 117).

Dying is an active personal consummation and maturation of what is already present in a person's life.

Death is the ultimate act of human freedom which gathers up and, in some way, gives meaning to all the individual events that go into making up one's life. It is in the personal nature of death that the reality of sin plays a role. **Biological death cannot be seen as a consequence of sin for death belongs to human finitude rather than to**

⁵ "Rahner's writings are a highly significant exposition of twentieth-century Roman Catholic theology. Based in vast philosophical erudition, Rahner's work has, in fact, had broad influence on contemporary Roman Catholic doctrinal thought. The substance and methods of his work have been publicly admired by various popes. Appointed as one of its theological experts, Rahner also had an impact on Vatican Council II and its doctrinal statements. In many ways, Rahner's place in Roman Catholicism is comparable to Karl Barth's in Protestantism. In general, Rahner's thought upholds a traditional Christian supernaturalism, sometimes adjusted deeply for modern philosophy. For Rahner, as for Barth, this has meant a combining of traditional and orthodox doctrine with existentialism and its insights. Through his superb expressive skills, Rahner made his abstract teachings highly appealing to a wide academic audience. But at the same time, his writings and lectures for the public have compelling pastoral insights and evangelistic promptings. Rahner's works have given recent Roman Catholic theology one of its ablest expositions." [K.J. Bryer, "Rahner, Karl," *Who's Who in Christian History* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1992), 579.]

human sin. Yet in a sinful world, death as the dissolution of human personhood assumes terrors and anxieties of its own. Death is the dissolution of the person and of the personal realm.

Contemporary insights into the nature of persons are helpful in discerning all the implications of death as personal. According to many contemporary authors, the personal is essentially interpersonal. **There is a *for-otherness* that is constitutive of the person as person. I am the person I am precisely because of my relationship to this history, this family, these friends. The personal is constituted by personal relatedness, by its relation to the other self.** As a person, I begin to exist as one pole in the complex “you and I.” The personal is constituted by personal relatedness.

From birth to death, the human environment, the human ecological context, is an interpersonal one. **Life begins as a process of attachment, of separation and of bonding, of interconnectedness, and interdependence.** The interpersonal context, the “holding environment,” provides for a variety of needs such as security and place, social integration and friendship nurturing, reassurance of worth leading to self-esteem. **Meaning never develops in a vacuum; it is always embedded in a specific context, in a web of relationships.** The interpersonal context leads to structures of meaning. These are organized structures of understanding and emotional attachments by which individuals interpret and assimilate their environment. Personal meaning includes, therefore, a sense of attachment as well as of understanding, as when we say that something means a great deal. **Clearly then, one of the most important products of relationships is the emergence of structures of meaning that are essential to our existence. Meanings are learned in the context of specific relationships and circumstances.** Meanings and purposes are learned and consolidated through a lifetime’s experience, are embodied in the relationships which sustain them.

With the emphasis on personhood as relational, and meaningfulness as interpersonal, the death of a person is the dissolution not only of an individual but of meaningfulness and of personal environment. Death strikes directly at the human person by threatening the person with radical relationlessness.

Since communication, the ability to communicate and to receive communication, is a constitutional element of the person, death manifests itself in the absence of communication. Life consists in active participation in a set of relationships. *Death for its part means the destruction of what has been slowly built up and has come to form the very fabric of a personal existence.* The problem of death does not arise primarily because of our biological reality, but because of the unconditional and the uniqueness that is personhood. **Death becomes a problem because it ends something unique and therefore is something more and other than a natural process. So human dying transcends medical and biological definition.**

Because of the interpersonal nature of personhood, every threat to human solidarity and interdependence is perceived as personal threat. But whenever communication is fostered, community nurtured, relationships encouraged, death becomes more acceptable. *This implies that there is a personal ecology to death and dying: at the core of this ecology is care.* There is a responsibility to uphold the human dignity of the other person in their process of dying, and therefore the ecological system of human family and community may not be replaced by any other institution, medical or otherwise. **In a personal world there can be no abdication of the care role to any institutions.**

The personal nature of death and dying also implies the upholding of truthfulness, **for the ultimate betrayal of personhood is to deceive another about his or her death.**

While there are many reasons to conceal the truth about death, such as the therapeutic and existential value of hope, **yet awareness of death is also a fundamental element of the truth of life. We uphold each other not by concealing the truth about death, but by bringing this truth within the reality of personal existence.**

Emphasis on human death as death of a person must also have an influence on the criteria used to certify death. The death of a human being cannot simply be conceived as the death of an organism. In determining what constitutes the death of a human being, we must consider the conditions of existence and non-existence of persons. **The bare continuation of organismic function cannot be justified, for the concept of death is not simply the concept of the cessation of life.**

The loss of temporality of embodiment, of holding environment, is a radical deprivation of essential elements of personal existence. It is death seen in its personal aspect that can also lead to a renewed understanding of immortality. **The bond of personal relationship transcends distance and time and can in a similar way bridge the gap of death. There is something about belonging at the personal level of existence that can prevail over the physical separation of death.** Communion with the living and the dead is based on memory, on remembrance. **Remembering is a fundamental element of personal belonging and of the interpersonal world.** Within the Christian perspective the interpersonal world extends beyond this time and space.

The communion of saints means that we form a society with those who have lived and died in fellowship with Christ. Since personal existence is communal and interdependent, death within the Christian framework can be perceived as a transition from one form of personal existence to another, in continuity and discontinuity with this present life. **What cannot be brought to an end with one's death is one's community.** Within the paschal mystery, God remembers the dead for God is a God of the living and the dead. "Nothing can separate us from the love of God as manifested in Christ" Solidarity with God and God's community remains; meaning is

permanently attached to a community of love that death cannot in any way destroy. Within the Christian context, the death of a person does not mean entry into another world that is alien and inaccessible to the living. Within our human and temporal/spatial context, death is a loss of the I-Thou relationship and therefore a reduction to being an "It." **Yet at another level, death itself cannot destroy a personal relation to God. The I-Thou relationship with God can be severed only by sin. Solidarity with God in Jesus means salvation from death.**

DEATH AND THE CHRISTIAN SACRAMENTS

Within the framework of the paschal mystery, the binary opposition of life and death is resolved in a positive and meaningful way without denying the negativity of death: the mystery of Christian faith is that through dying, Christ conquers death and is life-giving. **Both baptism and the eucharist are the two sacraments that ritualize most fully the paschal mystery. Baptism celebrates participation in the paschal mystery and the eucharist reenacts it.** Baptism is imaged as a participation in the death of Christ so that life in Christ might be secured. In baptism, one is immersed into water to die so that one might rise to new life in Christ as a member of his body, the church. In the eucharist this new life is nurtured, sustained and ritualized.

In its "Rite of Christian Death and Burial," the church emphasizes the interpersonal dimension of life and death. The church ritualizes the passage from life to death. Death is a liminal experience for the bereaved. The ritual of funeral and burial are rites of memory and change of status. The deceased is introduced into the realm of the dead as well as into the community of living with a new status. This new status must bring about a new relationship for the bereaved and the community of the living. After an individual's death, the focus is the family, the friends and the community of the deceased. Not only is the deceased person commended to God, but also the community and its hope. The ritual recalls the sacramental life of the deceased and identifies his/her future as being-with-Christ. The celebration of the eucharist at a funeral is an affirmation of the community that the deceased sought meaning in life and discovered such meaning in the person of Jesus Christ. In the celebration of the eucharist not only is the deceased commended to God but also the community. While the ritual identifies the future of the deceased as that of being-with-Christ, it promises this same future for the bereaving community. In celebrating the eucharist the community manifests and expresses its understanding of life and death and affirms that the deceased shared in this same meaningfulness. The worshipping community, as it proclaims the victory of

Christ over death, intensifies its faith in the paschal mystery. In the sacramental life of the church and its worship, death is personalized.

To personalize death is not to privatize it, but it is to emphasize its social context. Without the Christian community death might well be meaningless. Without a community the solitariness of life would be the final victor in death. Loneliness in life is only a faint image of the isolation incurred when death happens without community. If meaning is found by incorporation into Christ, then the meaning itself is in and through the community of the body of Christ, the church.

Emphasizing the social nature of death should lead to a greater engagement with the concerns of this world. According to Leander Keck, “the starting point for a theology of death and of resurrection is moral outrage against the world in which there appears to be no justice on which the weak can Count ...” (Keck, 97). The struggle for justice and the transformation of this world cannot be sustained when the fear of death leads to debilitating bondage. The paschal mystery is a symbol of the ultimate triumph of justice. **The power of death pervades many economic and political structures.** Moral outrage against such deaths is expressed in the sacramental life of the church. For the sacraments are anticipatory and mediating signs of ultimate justice and solidarity with God. They are symbols of protest, subversive acts, serving to unmask the injustice of an existence that perceives this time, this space, as all there is. The paschal mystery, sacramentalized in all of the Christian sacraments summons us to resistance to all personal and communal death and to liberating action in our world. The sacraments mediate, nourish, and keep alive fundamental hope in the liberating love of God. At the same time, the sacramental liturgy is the place where men and women can be made aware of the reality of their situation, of the “not yet” and pilgrim nature of their situation, of their creaturehood.

In an existence marked by conflict, the sacraments are signs of contradiction and of the possibility of an alternative vision. In their signifying role, they function prophetically in announcing universal salvation, universal peace, the overcoming of death in all of its modalities. As proclaimed in the last words of the Christian scriptures, “he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away” (Rev 21:4).

See also Burial, Christian; Funerals, preaching at

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Lucien J. Richard, o.m.i.⁶

⁶ Peter E. Fink, [*The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*](#) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 324–331.

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Ernest Becker - New World Encyclopedia

19–24 minutes

Ernest Becker (September 27, 1924 - March 6, 1974) was an [American cultural anthropologist](#) and interdisciplinary thinker and writer. Becker was not afraid to ask ultimate questions, nor was he willing to accept the limitations incurred by the [social sciences](#) in their quest for [truth](#) through the scientific method. This willingness to cross boundaries and challenge the status quo cost him his position and acceptance by the academic community in his lifetime. However, he was posthumously awarded a [Pulitzer Prize](#) for non-fiction in 1974, for his *The Denial of Death*.

The thesis of his work was that individuals live in terror of their own mortality and thus seek to find ways to deny it. He recognized that [human beings](#) differ from [animals](#) in having a spiritual aspect as well as a physical body. He also understood that the fear of [death](#) is not really about fear of the death of one's physical body, but rather about the fear that one's inner aspects, the mental and spiritual functions that seeks meaning, will cease to exist. Becker suggested that a significant function of [culture](#) is to provide successful ways to engage in death denial.

Becker also noted that the root of [evil](#) lies in the selfishness of human beings seeking to protect their own existence in the face of

their mortality, which he regarded as an essential aspect of human nature. Recognizing such evil within human beings gave him concern about the future of human society. Although Becker was willing to include [religion](#) in his quest for understanding human nature and believed the true meaning of human life was connected to divine purpose, he did not accept the teaching of many faiths that the human spirit is eternal. When a person realizes that although their body will grow old and die their spirit lives forever in the [afterlife](#), fear of death is lessened and denial of death is unnecessary. For Becker, raised in the [Jewish](#) faith and influenced by [Freudian psychoanalysis](#), the concept of eternal spiritual life was not "truth," but merely another denial of death.

Life

Ernest Becker was born on September 27, 1924, in Springfield, [Massachusetts](#), into a [Jewish](#) family. As a young adult he served in the infantry in [World War II](#). There, he was involved in the liberation of a Nazi [concentration camp](#). After the war, Becker attended Syracuse University in [New York](#) state. Upon his graduation, he joined the U.S. Embassy in [Paris](#) as an [intelligence](#) officer.

Although Becker enjoyed living in Paris, he did not wish to spend his life in the diplomatic field. He returned to Syracuse University in his early 30s to pursue graduate studies in [cultural anthropology](#), choosing [anthropology](#) as his course of study "naively because the term literally means 'the study of man'" (Leifer 1979). He completed his Ph. D. in 1960, writing a dissertation that examined the mechanisms of transference in Western psychotherapy and [Japanese Zen](#). The published version of this work, *Zen: A Rational*

Critique (1961) was dedicated to his adviser, Douglas Haring, a Japanese specialist, who had greatly influenced Becker during his studies (Liechty n.d.).

Becker's first teaching position was at the Upstate Medical Center in Syracuse, where he taught [anthropology](#) in the [psychiatry](#) department. At that time, the views of Thomas Szasz, who had just published *The Myth of Mental Illness* (1961), criticizing the medical model of psychiatry had begun to be known. Szasz became Becker's strongest intellectual influence, creating opportunities for him to become knowledgeable about psychiatric theory and practice. During this time, Becker published his first two books *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (1962) and *The Revolution in Psychiatry* (1964), which directly contradicted the medical model; they were not widely appreciated in psychiatry.

Becker joined Szasz' circle, regularly participating in his discussion group. Although not always in agreement, Becker supported him when Szasz was censored and removed from teaching. This lost Becker his position in the psychiatry department, and he spent a year in [Rome, Italy](#), before returning to Syracuse to teach [education](#) and [sociology](#) in 1964. Becker continued to be outspoken, in favor of the [Civil Rights Movement](#), and opposed to military and business research grants as he felt they undermined [academic freedom](#) (Liechty n.d.). Becker's contract was not renewed.

In 1965, Becker moved to the University of California at Berkeley under a one-year contract. Although his classes proved popular, his methods and critical view of the prevailing empirical approach to [social science](#) research made him unpopular with the administration, who did not renew his contract despite student

protest. Rather than continue to teach only non-credit courses, Becker took a position at San Francisco State University, where he hoped his interdisciplinary approach would be more acceptable.

In 1969, he resigned his position at San Francisco State University when student revolts erupted and the National Guard were called in to maintain order. Becker found it inappropriate to have armed police at the door of his lecture on freedom (Liechty n.d.). Instead, he took a position at Simon Fraser University in [Vancouver](#), British Columbia, [Canada](#). The interdisciplinary department there suited Becker well, and he revised *The Birth and Death of Meaning* as well as writing his prize-winning *The Denial of Death* and *Escape from Evil* in his time there. However, he remained concerned about the problems of the world, feeling repressed and [exiled](#) from his own country (Leifer 1997).

Unfortunately, Becker's life and work was cut short when he was diagnosed with colon [cancer](#) in 1972; he died on March 6, 1974, in Vancouver, at the age of 49.

Work

Ernest Becker was an astute observer of human behavior and society during the turbulent era of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. He was driven to answer the question, "What makes people act the way they do?" Finding the [social sciences](#) fragmented, he worked toward an interdisciplinary view of human beings, one that invoked [truth](#) from every related discipline, including [religion](#). Through his efforts, "he outlined a perspective on human motivation that is perhaps the most broadly interdisciplinary to date" (Liechty 2005).

Becker came to the recognition that psychological inquiry inevitably comes to a dead end beyond which belief systems must be invoked to satisfy the human psyche. The reach of such a perspective consequently encompasses science and [religion](#), even to the creation of a "science of evil." Because of his breadth of vision and avoidance of social science pigeonholes, Becker was an academic outcast. It was only with the award of the [Pulitzer Prize](#) in 1974 for his 1973 book, *The Denial of Death* (two months after his own death from cancer at the age of 49) that his contributions began to be recognized.

Science of man

Becker's *The Birth and Death of Meaning*, written in 1962 and revised in 1971, was Becker's first attempt to understand the human condition. Its title derives from the concept of humankind's move away from the simple-minded [ape](#) into a world of symbols and [illusions](#), and then deconstructing those illusions as human intellect developed. Becker argued that it is language that sets human beings apart from other animals, and that it was through language that self-awareness and freedom from [instinctive](#) behavior became possible.

In this volume, Becker was attempting to reconcile the fundamental human contradiction between [mind and body](#). He described the human being as a creature of meaning, who "unlike any other natural creature, lives in two worlds: The natural and the supernatural, the world of matter and the world of meanings, suspended halfway between the animal and the divine" (Leifer 1997).

When we understand that man is the only animal who must create

meaning, who must open a wedge into neutral nature, we already understand the essence of love. Love is the problem of an animal who must find life, create a dialogue with nature in order to experience his own being (Becker 1968).

In the revised version of *The Birth and Death of Meaning* published in 1971, he included his understanding of human fear of mortality. He argued that human beings have a physical body that is born and dies, thus all living creatures face [death](#). The fear of death that humans experience, though, lies not so much in the death of the body but in the death of meaning, for it is meaning that defines the human self and [society](#).

Becker believed that the [social sciences](#) were mistaken in their efforts to model themselves after the natural sciences. He regarded the use of the scientific method as self defeating, since its goal of controlling the experimental situation removed the human elements that should be the concern of the social sciences. Becker saw human behavior as essentially unmeasurable, not due to lack of sophisticated tools but in its very nature there was lack of precision and predictability. He also argued that there was no universal individual for whom a "science of man" could be constructed; every [personality](#) is formed within a particular [culture](#) and the symbols of that culture are incorporated within each person's identity. Thus, a true understanding of human behavior requires a "science of man within society," in other words, it must include the social and cultural environment within which people live. For Becker, any source that aided in answering the question "What makes people act the way they do" was legitimate and of interest in developing such a "science of man" (Liechty n.d.).

The *Denial of Death* emerged out of Becker's attempt to create this

"science of man." Influenced by [Otto Rank](#)'s view that the fear of life and death is a fundamental human [motivation](#), Becker pursued his quest to understand human motivation in the context of mortality. *Escape from Evil* (1975) developed the social and cultural implications of the concepts explored in the earlier book and functions as an equally important second volume.

The Denial of Death

Becker's *The Denial of Death* was published in 1973. He was awarded the [Pulitzer prize](#) for general non-fiction posthumously in 1974, two months after his death.

The basic premise of *The Denial of Death* is that human [civilization](#) is ultimately an elaborate, symbolic [defense mechanism](#) against the knowledge of mortality, which in turn acts as the emotional and intellectual response to a basic survival mechanism. Becker argued that a basic duality in human life exists between the physical world of objects and a symbolic world of human meaning. Thus, since human beings have a dualistic nature consisting of a physical self and a symbolic self, they are able to transcend the dilemma of mortality through heroism, a concept involving the symbolic half. By embarking on what Becker refers to as an "immortality project" (or *causa sui*), in which an individual creates or becomes part of something which he or she feels will outlast their time on earth, a person feels he or she has "become" heroic and, henceforth, part of something eternal; something that will never die, compared to the physical body that will die one day. This, in turn, gives human beings the feeling that their life has meaning, a purpose, a significance in the grand scheme of things. From this premise, mental illness is most insightfully extrapolated

as a difficulty in one's hero system(s). When someone is experiencing [depression](#), their *causa sui* (or heroism project) is failing, and they are being consistently reminded of their mortality and insignificance as a result. Schizophrenia is a step further than depression in which one's *causa sui* is falling apart, making it impossible to engender sufficient defense mechanisms against their mortality; henceforth, the schizophrenic has to create their own reality or "world" in which they are better heroes. Becker argued that the conflict between immortality projects which contradict each other (particularly in [religion](#)) is the wellspring for the destruction and misery in the world, caused by [wars](#), [genocide](#), [racism](#), nationalism, and so forth, since an immortality project which contradicts others indirectly suggests that the others are wrong.

Becker also made the point that humankind's traditional "hero-systems," such as [religion](#), are no longer convincing in the [age of reason](#); science is attempting to solve the human problem, something that Becker felt it can never do. Becker declared that people need new convincing "illusions" that enable them to feel heroic in the grand scheme of things, in other words immortal. However, Becker provided no definitive answer, mainly because he believed that no perfect solution exists. Instead, he hoped that gradual realization of innate human [motivations](#) can help to bring about a better world.

Still, for Becker, the ultimate source of meaning is transcendent, cosmic energy, divine purpose:

But I don't think one can be a hero in any really elevating sense without some transcendental referent like being a hero for God, or for the creative powers of the universe. The most exalted type of

heroism involves feeling that one has lived to some purpose that transcends oneself. This is why religion gives him the validation that nothing else gives him. ... When you finally break through your character armor and discover your vulnerability, it becomes impossible to live without massive anxiety unless you find a new power source. And this is where the idea of God comes in (Keen 1974).

Science of evil

In his final works Becker doubted that human nature was good. If the root cause of human behavior is the attempt to deny through heroism something that cannot be denied, namely [death](#), there is no cure for the human condition. Alienation is a social problem that can be overcome through improved human interactions. Mortality, on the other hand, is an ontological fact of human existence, and therefore cannot be overcome. Becker recognized that human beings struggle to transcend death and non-existence through the pursuit of eternal meaning. This implies that the source of [evil](#) and the cause of human [suffering](#) is selfishness:

For man, maximum excitement is the confrontation of death and the skillful defiance of it by watching others fed to it as he survives transfixed with rapture (Becker 1975).

Becker was committed to the improvement of human life, but his studies forced him to conclude that the path of human progress was not inevitably one of betterment. Yet, he still hoped that the aspect of human nature that is the cause of human problems and the source of evil, the desire to transcend the inevitable death of the physical body, can help us triumph in the end:

It is the disguise of panic that makes [us] live in ugliness, and not the natural animal wallowing ... this means that evil itself is now amenable to critical analysis and, conceivably, to the sway of reason. (Becker 1975)

He recognized, however, that the solution to the human struggle was not to be found in a narrow approach to the social sciences, but required a spiritual and theological component (Liechty n.d.).

Legacy

Becker's work was considered brilliant, and he was awarded a [Pulitzer Prize](#) for his *Denial of Death*. However, his work was not widely accepted within the academic community. His interdisciplinary methodology and critical views ran counter to the mainstream of the [social sciences](#).

However, after his death, following a period in which his work remained ignored, scholars in many fields began to study, teach, research, and write about the works of Becker. In 2002, a collection of essays by 28 scholars in some 26 disciplines, all influenced by Becker, was published as *Death and Denial: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Legacy of Ernest Becker*.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, as [terrorism](#) threatened many around the world, a trio of experimental [social psychologists](#) amassed a large body of empirical evidence substantiating the universal motive of death denial as advanced by Becker, published as *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* (2002). The Ernest Becker Foundation is devoted to multidisciplinary inquiries into human behavior, with a particular focus on violence, to support research and application at the

interfaces of science, the humanities, social action, and [religion](#).

Becker believed that the most worthwhile intellectual questions are the fundamental questions of human nature, human destiny, and the meaning of life. He rejected the narrowing of questions to conform to the scientific method that was the the standard methodology for social scientists. He asked ultimate questions, and was not afraid to discover tough answers. His legacy is his encouragement to others to ask such questions. Through such questioning he hoped that humankind would succeed in reaching a higher level, overcoming evil and establishing a world of peace.

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- [The Ernest Becker Foundation](#)
- [1974 Winners](#) Pulitzer Prizes website

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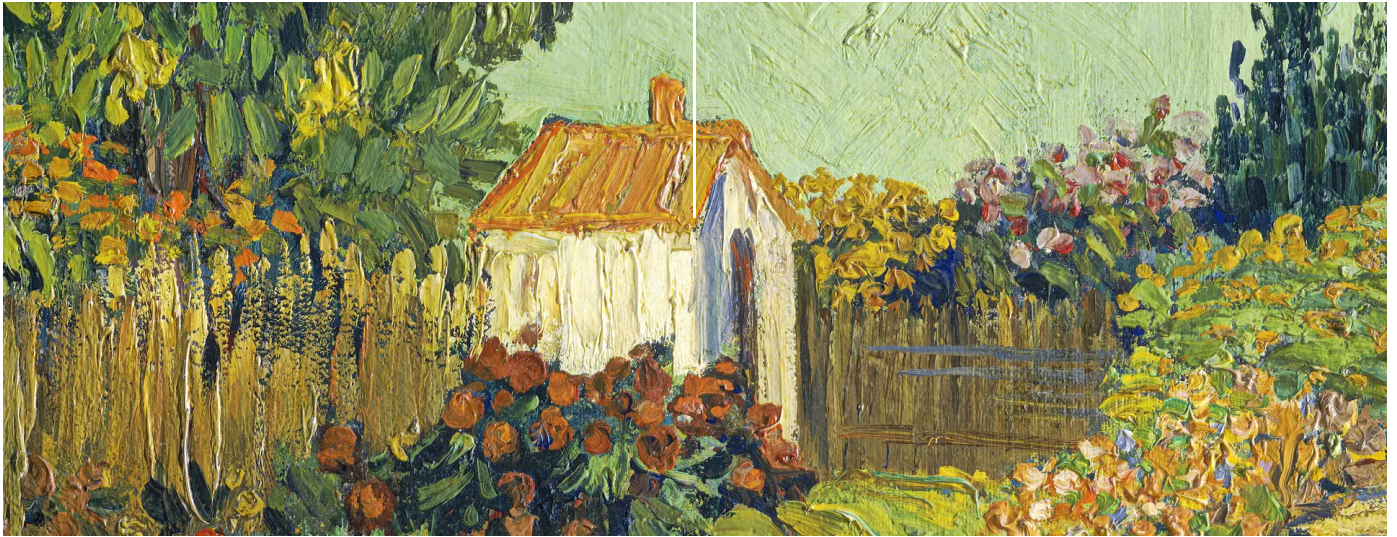
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Kate Bowler

The Roof Always Caves In

Why there is nothing wrong with being doomed.



Landscape by an unknown imitator of Vincent van Gogh, 1925-1928.

[View Full Image](#)

I

It was in the cowboy days of subprime mortgage lending and a bank was dumb enough to give me money to purchase a bungalow in Durham, North Carolina. I was a twenty-five-year-old graduate student in religion, and my husband and I had recently moved from Canada, where our credit scores were purely hypothetical and the meagre stipend that I received for teaching, researching, and correctly pronouncing Kierkegaard's name to my classmates (no, look, it's more like Kierkegore) had really only furnished us with friend-making stories about the time we got vitamin deficiencies and all the skin on my husband's hands inexplicably peeled off. But we had a house we couldn't afford, which was still a treat, and the previous owner had left not only a bright green mini-golf carpet in the living room but an entire Elvis Presley tribute in what later would become our guest room.

There was a shed in the backyard with all kinds of promise—a simple peaked structure that was two floors high and lined with thick white oak. It had been a

carpenter's workshop for the owner who had built the main house and even bothered to line the edges of the property with elegant masonry quarried from the same blueish gray stone that makes Duke University look like Duke University. But the problem with the shed was the crater, where the roof had sunk so low that termites and wet wood were threatening to pull the whole thing down. We tried to prop it up as best we could—beams here, brackets there—but the only real solution would be a religious one.

I have always believed that one of the great arguments for being part of a collectivist Christian tradition—three cheers for Mennonites, Hutterites, Amish, and Anabaptists of all kinds—is their willingness to do voluntary, gruelling manual labour and call it love. And we would need a lot of love. So our Mennonite family drove the thirty-seven hours from their prairie homes and took residence in the King of Rock and Roll's Memorial Room and used reciprocating saws for most of the day until their biceps burned and not much of the original building was left. Then they measured new wood and we bought a nail gun, and sometimes, at night, I would wake up to find my husband flicking me in his sleep because his hand, the nail gun, had a lot of work left to do.

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collectivist Christian tradition is their willingness to do voluntary, gruelling manual labour and call it love.



That year the star of the Christmas letter was the shed, with a few addenda to make clear that it should last another twenty-five years before it caved in again on account of the limited warranty on the shingles. I thought about this often when I would sit in the yard, watching the same people show up to build me a fence because I had recently received a sudden Stage IV cancer diagnosis and there was nothing else to do. I wondered about the shed, which would almost certainly outlive me now, and how all my plans (oh, my beautiful plans) had been stripped down to the studs.

Human lives seem like very sensible projects when you initially add them up. A golden anniversary is fifty years and possibly two kids and three furnaces. A retirement home for your parents is at least another monthly mortgage payment for a decade, but you can probably budget correctly if you imagine finally paying off your student loans. And then taking out another. We add and subtract for radiators and replacement cars, and when the dishwasher vomits all the soapy, dirty water onto the hardwood (only ever when we are on vacation), we don't feel

lucky, but we are.

What I had not learned from my shed caving in was what Simone de Beauvoir calls our “facticity.” All of our freedoms—our choices and our ridiculous attempts to plan our lives—are constrained by so many unchangeable details. I was born in this particular year to those parents in this town. This medication exists and that treatment doesn’t, but now it seems that all along I had these cancer cells in my colon, spreading to my liver, and scattered in my abdomen because of a genetic blueprint written long ago. This existential state is, to borrow a term from Martin Heidegger, the thrownness of human life. As we wake to the suffering of this world and our own existence, we find ourselves hurtling through time.

Even at my most durable, it took so many people to build my life, prop it up, and maintain it. But once I was sick, I came to realize that the most basic aspect of our shared humanity is our fragility. We all need shelter because we are soft and mushy and irritable in the elements—and we will need so much more than a bank loan because, sooner or later, we are left exposed. Time and chance, sayeth Ecclesiastes, happeneth to us all.

Frankly, none of us can afford the lives we already have. We set out to build our own dreams, slay our own dragons, and pay our own taxes and find that we trip

over our health and our marriages and the way our inboxes suck us into the void. We were promised that American individualism and a multi-billion-dollar self-help industry would set us on our feet. When North Americans look for answers to our dependence, we often turn to the easy promises of the gospel of self-help. “Try harder!” “Change your mindset.” “You are your greatest hope.” We bought cheap paperbacks in a frenzy to find a cure for being human. But soon our own limited resolve—and the relative weakness of our institutions—conjured up the atomism that Alexis de Tocqueville so feared. Our dreams turned out to be built from toothpicks, each person propped up to stand entirely alone.

As we wake to the suffering of this world and our own existence, we find ourselves hurtling through time.



We understand instinctively that we cannot win this game of solitaire. Our churches and book clubs, Bible studies and farmers’ markets, carpools and sports teams offer little reminders that we should need each other, borrow and lend money, babysit and run an errand, argue and debate. “Absolute independence is a

false ideal,” argued the sociologist Robert Bellah, whose trenchant understanding of the modern self rarely missed the mark. “It delivers not the autonomy it promises but loneliness and vulnerability instead.” But we usually only see this when we have sunk to the very bottom. Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber describes how she understood the truth of interdependence most fully when she began practicing the uncomfortable honesty demanded by Alcoholics Anonymous. “Recovery is hard to do on your own. You have to do it with a group of other people who are messed up in the same way but have found some light in their darkness. Sitting in those rooms in 12-step meetings, there’s a particular kind of hope that only comes from being in the midst of people who have really suffered—suffered at their own hand—who can be completely and totally honest about that.” They nicknamed this sort of community “The Rowing Club.” They would have to take turns pulling on the oar. At times, each would have to be willing to be carried.

The English word “precarity” means a state of dangerous uncertainty, but its Latin root tells us a good deal more about its Christian character. The term comes from *precarius*, or “obtained by entreaty or prayer”—a state where we cannot achieve things by ourselves. We must rely on someone else, God or neighbour. But a letter to Dorothy Day from a priest in Martinique was quite pointed about what it would mean for people wanting stable roofs: “Here we

want precarity in everything except the church. These last days our refectory was nearly collapsing,” he wrote. “We have put several supplemental poles and thus it will last, maybe two or three years more. Someday it will fall on our heads and that will be funny.” But he couldn’t bring himself to stop feeding people in the breadlines in order to be another kind of church, the kind that was “always building, and enlarging, and embellishing.” We have no right to, he concluded. No right, I suppose he meant, to demand security afforded to no one else. As Christians we must nod our heads and shrug our shoulders when we’re told, in no uncertain terms, that there are no lifetime warranties.



There is a tremendous opportunity here, now, for Christians to develop language and foster community around empathy, courage, and hope in the midst of this fear of our own vulnerability.



There is a tremendous opportunity here, now, for Christians to develop language and foster community around empathy, courage, and hope in the midst of this fear of our own vulnerability. Our neighbours are expressing an aching desire to

feel less alone, needing language for the pain they've experienced, searching for meaning and someone to tell them the truth. They are hungry for honesty in the age of shellacked social media influencers. They are desperate for a thicker kind of hope that can withstand their circumstances and embolden them to preach the truth of our resurrected Lord whose future kingdom will have no tears and no pain and no Instagram at all.

We have a few good clues that we are allowed to hope for this kind of interreliance here, now. There's a strange story in the Gospel of Luke about friends who bring one of their own to see Jesus. Their Rowing Club was a man down, so they carried him to where Jesus was preaching in hopes he could be healed from his paralysis. But the crowds were thick and they couldn't get through the door, so they had a dangerous idea and climbed onto the roof and began to dismantle it. Then they lowered their friend through the tiles on a stretcher into the middle of the bewildered throng. And then, and then, and then, a miracle happened.

It is a miracle when we let ourselves, in desperation, be lowered into the unknown. When we let ourselves cry or scream or even whisper that we fear our own undoing. We will have almost nothing in our control except the knowledge of our fragility, and we watch someone else wear themselves out running to the

pharmacist or cleaning the bathrooms and sanding a plank of wood for yet another Anabaptist form of love.

It is a miracle when we see the precarity of others and we decide to carry the weight of their stretchers instead of worrying about the groceries. God bless all the people who bothered with my complaints and worried about my heartbreak. The saints are those who press pause on louder concerns because they have decided to remember what they would rather forget: our independence is a sham.

And it would be the greatest miracle of all to be the paralyzed man who gets off the stretcher. Who hears Jesus's voice returning us to ourselves. We are healed. We are whole. We came through the roof, but we walked out the door. Hallelujah.

If I am very lucky, the shingles will last and the chemotherapy will hold and love will continue to do most of the work. I will go back to being someone who tallies up the inconvenient expiry dates of large appliances and count on birthdays and New Year's to set the clock of my mortality. I will be like the homeowner an hour after Jesus and the crowd have left, my floor littered with broken tiles and crumbled plaster. And I will look up, through the gaping hole to the blue, blue sky right from where I stand, no longer surprised by the fundamental Christian

truth that the roof always, always, caves in.

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THEME: THE RESTORATION OF THE HUMAN

TOPICS: COMMUNITY, CULTURAL RENEWAL, DEATH

Kate Bowler

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