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Review of “Immortality Project” Concept:
Mis-interpretation in Terror Management
Theory



R. Michael Fisher

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Technical Paper No. 108

In Search of Fearlessness Research Institute

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The In Search of Fearlessness Institute is dedicated to research and publishing on fear, fearlessness and emotions and motivational forces, in general, as well as critical reviews of such works. Preference is given to works with an integral theoretical perspective.

Review of “Immortality Project” Concept: Mis-interpretation in Terror Management Theory

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Technical Paper No. 108

Abstract

The author’s long quest for a full depth and breadth study of the psychology of fear/terror is one that is not easy to attain; and thus, it will be in progress for some time to come to fruition. The work by Ernest Becker, terror management theorists and others herein, is a beginning probe into the Immortality Project (psychology) that he believes is one important pathway to a *psychology of the soul*.² The paper includes a basic review of the Im-

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² Without getting entangled in a larger (controversial) discussion on the nature of the “soul” (and, whether or not that term is even appropriate in a modern and postmodern discourse of psychology)—it is at least worth saying that I am not coming at the understanding of “soul” here from any particular theological and/or religious-based dogmatic position on the soul but am open to all forms of knowledge about “soul” and how best to understand it. For simplicity sake, when Psychology itself begins to be framed only in neuro-cognitive-behaviorist terms and emphasis (hegemonically in the discipline) as the best way to understand human actions and motivations, I believe that is exactly the point where a depth motivational psychology is required. The latter includes the deepest psycho-philosophical probing into the nature of what might be called “soul” psychology (i.e., deepest motivational dynamics often

mortality Project conception and its importance which includes the less familiar writing of Ken Wilber and his philosophical and theoretical views of Immortality Project as particularly a useful direction to go to improve upon Becker's views.

Why Should We Care About the “Immortality Project”?

Before I unravel some of the reasons various deep thinkers and academic researchers have at times given a concerted effort to the notion of “immortality project,” I will start this introduction with my own recent story of why I have come to renew my interest in the “immortality project” (IP) theory and phenomenon. Simultaneously, while writing, I wish to remind readers to consider my arcing out of my dedicated interest in a psychology not just of fear/terror (e.g., like the work of Ernest Becker and terror management theorists) but a *psychology of the soul* (*a la* Rank³) and more specifically a *psychology of immortality/mortality* dynamic as foundational to a psychology of the soul. It is this latter interest I believe is absolutely crucial to move Psychology overall these days away from only a focus on experimental, empiricist, cognitive-behaviorist, pragmatist, studies of psychology and the psychology of human behavior. We need a more depth-integral and critical psychology today, that is, a psychology of the soul (immortality) in order to understand the full-spectrum of human motivations from the highest (peaceful) to the lowest (violent).

My long quest for a full depth and breadth study of the psychology of fear/terror is one that is not easy to attain, and thus, it will be in progress for some time to come to fruition. The work by Becker, terror management theorists and others herein, is a beginning probe into the Immortality Project (psychology) that I believe is one important pathway to a *psychology of the soul*.⁴ I have included Ken Wilber's philosophical and theoretical

within a metaphysical theorizing). Immortality Project is intimately related to deep motivation, and as far as I am concerned (and Otto Rank would likely agree) this is all about a psychology of the soul.

³ E.g., Rank (1931/61), of which Ernest Becker is well-known to have been quite influenced by Rankian thought at times.

⁴ Without getting entangled in a larger (controversial) discussion on the nature of the “soul” (and, whether or not that term is even appropriate in a modern and postmodern discourse of psychology)—it is at least worth saying that I am not coming at the understanding of “soul” here from any particular theological and/or religious-based dogmatic position on the soul but am open to all forms of knowledge about “soul” and how best to understand it. For simplicity sake, when Psychology itself begins to be framed only in neuro-cognitive-behaviorist terms and emphasis (hegemonically in the discipline) as the best way to understand human

views of Immortality Project as particularly a useful direction to go to improve upon Becker's views.

My Brief Story: Finding a Controversial Hypothesis for Education

The very recent resurgence of interest grew from first, initiating an interview with Dr. Sheldon Solomon, who is one of the core members of the triad of social psychologists who created Terror Management Theory (TMT) (Fisher, 2020). TMT (e.g., Solomon, Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 2015) is inspired largely upon the work and theories of Ernest Becker (1924-74), a unique interdisciplinary cultural and philosophical thinker, who has given fear/terror a frontline emphasis in explaining the deepest motivational template of universal human behavior (i.e., fear of death)—and, in explaining evil. I have also long been interested in the study of evil (e.g., hurting and violence related to fear) and its relevance to Education overall.

Second, I was spurred to dive in with a critical lens once again to TMT because some university educators, led by Dr. Cathryn van Kessel (e.g., van Kessel & Burke, 2018) were applying TMT to education curriculum and teacher training (including dealing with the issue of *evil* in social studies and history curricula; e.g., van Kessel, 2019). I thought this was a marvelous initiative I could join in with because of my 31 years of fear management/education research. The particular article that was a real push for me to specifically re-engage with IP as a concept and theory came with van Kessel & Burke's (2018) paper "**Teaching as an Immortality Project,**" where they posit a strong universal prescriptive for all of Education as a field and teachers (as citizens) in general. Their Abstract says it all:

Teaching as a profession can be read as an immortality project, a form of compensation [defense buffer] to help resolve a certain kind of existential terror [e.g., fear of death]. Terror management theory can help us understand the ways teachers might compensate [unconsciously] for their limitedness as humans.... (p. 216)

actions and motivations, I believe that is exactly the point where a depth motivational psychology is required. The latter includes the deepest psycho-philosophical probing into the nature of what might be called "soul" psychology (i.e., deepest motivational dynamics often within a metaphysical theorizing). Immortality Project is intimately related to deep motivation, and as far as I am concerned (and Otto Rank would likely agree) this is all about a psychology of the soul.

These two educators are taking on a huge issue re: the nature and role of the “teacher” (in particular, but not limited to, school teachers)—and, making it an ethical issue about the degree of how *limited* ought to be the reach and vision of a teacher.

Wow. That’s very controversial. Now, to be fair, they do say, “This paper is a theoretical engagement aimed at illuminating the form and function of immortality projects (i.e., symbolic ways to endure after death) and related compensatory educational concerns (e.g., how teachers might gain symbolic immortality through their students), and we posit an alternative based upon our [i.e., teacher-human] limitedness...” (p. 216). Okay, “theoretical” is fine, nonetheless, the aim is to achieve their hope for a recalibration of all of Education and teacher education (attitudes) in which they are involved directly. Without going into the nuances of their arguments for bringing forth this cautionary of what too often (in their view) they see as over-exuberant “*quasi-missionary work*” (p. 216) of too many teachers and the profession of Education itself, they offer their universal corrective ethical prescription in the form of what I now call the van Kessel-Burke Hypothesis (Fisher, 2020a). They finish their Abstract with:

[W]e suggest a new orientation, namely that the profession embrace the terror of the future that it cannot know....we hope to re-orient the educational project into one with lower stakes, a shift from immortality to more ‘goodness.’ (p. 216)

The sub-text, once one reads more of van Kessel’s work, is that such a pursuit (and ethical prescription) of “weakness”⁵ and “limitedness” in the face of terror of the future will act as an anti-dote—that is, as an “educational project” as “immortality project” cooled down that will lessen the amount of its evil in schools and society overall. That’s what more ‘goodness’ means here. Their article ends with:

In moving education—and teaching as a profession—away from an immortality project, we suggest a new orientation to the terror....Part of this task involves a de-escalation of teaching as an immortality project....We posit an educational disposition [i.e., ethics] that is humbler, which, paradoxically requires more courage. (p. 226).

⁵ They posit the valuable contribution of utilizing “Weak Theology” (e.g., Caputo, 2006) for their vk-B Hypothesis.

More courage! These educators have just circulated (theoretically) a massive reframing of the relationship between *fear* and *Education* for the future. This is my specialty. Now, what makes their arguments and (theological) ethics particularly intriguing is they spin their thoughts in and around the notion and theory of the “immortality project” (IP). As an educator for over 45 years, I have to take seriously what they are asking of me. Should I ‘Be humble, be more courageous’ (this is the vK-B Hypothesis)?

I have to ask then, as would any educator who reads their paper and takes their hypothesis and prescription seriously: ***What do they mean by immortality project?*** *What theory (amongst theories) do they pick-and-favor in their understanding of IP, and at what consequence is there for the very limitation of their IP ‘best’ pick that is circulating in their hypothesis?* Oh, they are extremely focused on educators ‘getting’ their teaching that they (e.g., school teachers) are too missionary-like often, and they should cool it down, embrace weakness and the unknown, be humble, and yes, be more courageous in that choice and shift away from IP missionary-like ideas and practices that underpin so much of educational discourse (not that I disagree with this latter observation). One can notice in their paper a lack of calling themselves up on the table of limitedness—and, critical self-reflection and theoretical reflection because they do not even indicate they may have a narrowed (biased) view of the IP from the start (*via* based in Beckerian theorizing). Equally, I am amazed by their grand ethical call presumed by everything in this vK-B hypothesis—and, I wonder what be “humble” means to them?

From their reading within a particular purview of IP (perspective), one is to just “de-escalate,” they teach us (p. 226). And, such de-escalation is underpinned heavily in their paper by their conviction towards the accuracy and interpretations of Ernest Becker’s work on IP and also through the particular (experimentalist and social psychology) lens of contemporary TMT. I’ll posit here, with all due limitations for an introductory treatment only, that such views *via* Becker to TMT are of a tendency towards reductionistic, dualistic, materialistic, egoistic, existentialistic interpretations, and thus, insufficient to a good holistic-integral theory for teaching, Education and ‘goodness.’ And, beyond being ethical (related to evil vs. good), the vK-B Hypothesis is necessarily political⁶ in its circulating a prescription for how

⁶ In contradistinction to vK-B’s Hypothesis, which tends to be functionalist in sociopolitical, methodological and philosophical stance, my own stance is more from the critical (social and post-colonial) theory schools of thought—for e.g., the latter, which begins analysis of reality from the point of positing that ‘we live in an oppressive society’ (arguably, one

to be a teacher and citizen. This political aspect is largely understated in their paper, in which I will not follow suit here, suffice it to say IP is political on several dimensions as I shall argue later in the paper. So that preamble brings me to this Technical Paper No. 108 as a means to begin a more in depth analysis of the (mis-)interpretations of the IP that seem to lie within the skewed bias of TMT and the concomitant vK-B Hypothesis.

Why should we care about the IP? It is foundational, I believe, to a soul psychology for our times. And, because it is theorized (and ‘proven’⁷), by several deep thinkers, to be at the meta-motivational core of what can become our best ‘heroic’ (courageous) side and our worst ‘evil’ (cowardly) side of behaviors. The presumption of Becker, TMT, van Kessel, and myself, at least, is that if we better understand the IP and its ‘strivings’ (‘needs’ and ‘desires’)—we’ll better be able to manage it consciously instead of being unconsciously manipulated by it. To say the least, the IP is a grand universal powerful force shaping most everything humans have done historically, and are doing now. Unfortunately, most everyone is quite ignorant of what it is, which undermines our critical and management capacities to deal with it effectively and productively to advance human sanity, potential, and ecological sustainability on this planet.

My Brief History With the Immortality Project (IP)

Indeed, this technical paper is a limited introduction to assessing all IP theories. A much larger work would be needed to give due regard to the complexity and history of the notion of IP. Let me start by introducing my own history. Later, I’ll review what Becker and TMT have to say about the IP.

Back in the early 1980s is when I first encountered **IP** when reading a marvelous set of (early-phase) books⁸ by the integral **philosopher Ken Wilber**:

that is more or less ‘evil’ (i.e., unnecessarily self-destructive to Life systems) in its foundations, as self-perpetuating a *fear-based* Dominant worldview; cf. Four Arrows, 2016).

⁷ What makes IP extra-intriguing is the experimental social psychological work in lab studies by the TMT researchers, which ‘proves’ it is a real phenomenon, with real consequences.

⁸ To be clear, I am not only a Wilberian thinker but am equally critical of Wilberian thought (especially, after his writing 1997 onward, whereby he took on more the mantle of functionalism instead of the perspective of critical theory).

(a) *Spectrum of Consciousness* (1977) is Wilber's first book—it talks about a precursor kind of IP, indirectly, through another foundational concept/theory/project at the base of human meta-motivation, what he labeled “Dualism-Repression-Projection” (DRP)—a form of ontological and phenomenological psychic dynamics in all living systems; basically, the DRP is an inevitable defense⁹ of consciousness against the experiencing of the total true Real(ity) and Wholeness of existence and non-existence (i.e., nondual¹⁰) from a living organisms' perspective (*via* duality) that is capable of thinking about its wholeness and/or its separation *via* alienation and ultimately *via* material death/mortality (i.e., apparently, like no other creature, humans are hyper-sensitive in such awareness and having a sophisticated imaginary of their own dying and death in the future)

(b) *The Atman Project* (1980) is Wilber's early book on human development theory, within keeping of his *oeuvre* of creating an E-W transpersonal psychology synthesis; he offers the precursor IP form in his more well-known term the Atman Project as an ontological theory to explain the universal meta-motivational architecture of consciousness itself and its relationship with defenses like repression projection and dissociation (defense) dynamics, which deeply shape (often unconscious) human perception and behavior; Atman Project is virtually equivalent to IP, of which the latter term had not come into use by Wilber until his next book a year later

(c) *Up From Eden* (1981), surfaces the extensive thought of Wilber on “immortality project” (p. 99) and “double-edged Atman project” (p. 98)—both of which he discusses interchangeably but at the same time he draws somewhat from Otto Rank but in particular from Ernest Becker in re: to the human beings apparent insatiable “hunger for the infinite and for utter transcendence” (to phrase the meta-motivational template in Beckerian discourse) (p. 98); the number of pages in this book on IP is overwhelming and convincing of its reality in shaping much of cultural evolutionary history and consciousness evolution itself; this book had then, as it still does now, a pro-

⁹ Although this is a commonly accepted understanding of IP, as defense mechanism, I highlight that is problematic itself and it will be critiqued in this paper, especially from a Wilberian perspective.

¹⁰ Means, *nondual* consciousness, as distinct from *adual* consciousness (cf. the holarchic levels of consciousness ‘mapping’ in Wilber, 1977/82).

found impact on my own theorizing on human (soul-implied) meta-motivations—and, answering (somewhat) Becker’s burning quest: *why do people do what they do?*; substantively, Wilber (1981, p. 98) summarized his difference in interpretation of IP and, to note, Becker died before encountering Wilber’s work on IP—so, Wilber ends up both respecting Becker’s “existential position” on the IP dynamic but is quick to call it “half baked” (p. 98)¹¹ because it leaves out (typical of existentialism in general) the metaphysical, mystical, nondual, spiritual understanding of Involution and Evolution dynamics or what could be called the life-history of Spirit¹² (cf. Wilber, 1995)

The Beckerian-TMT Existential Position on the IP

To be clear, I have a very different ‘education’ in ‘evil’ than van Kessel & Burke or TMT folks in general. Becker himself, had a different education than all of us. Now, we have to sort out, what “Immortality Project” means and when using capitals on that term is best and when not to use it, for example “immortality projects” (as van Kessel often uses it¹³).

Our understanding of IP is going to be a process not an absolute, or one and only, understanding *via* some one and only definition. This very open-ended approach I am taking is very consistent with van Kessel’s (2019)

¹¹ Wilber (1981) argued, “Becker [re: conceptualizing the IP and/or Atman project] received the impetus for most of his notions from Otto Rank, and although he quotes the following from Rank, he [Becker] ought to have taken it more sincerely [i.e., accurately]...” (p. 99).

¹² Use of capital on Spirit is conscious as Wilber articulates Hinduism, Buddhism, and other spiritual traditions, looking for their core perennial wisdom in regard to “that infinite Spirit”—of which Wilber acknowledges Becker “strongly intuit[s]...[as] his true and prior Nature. He intuit[s] this infinite nature but erroneously applies that intuition to the finite realm and his finite self” (i.e., applies it, and the IP that goes with Spirit’s involution-evolution) (p. 98). A biased distortion from a Beckerian dualism perspective, rather than nondual; when only (arguably) from the latter is the appropriate discerning location which Spirit can only be truly known empirically and intuitively (i.e., contemplatively), according to the great spiritual wisdom (mystical) traditions and Wilber’s (1981) E-W psychospiritual and cultural thesis.

¹³ Overall, use of “immortality projects” – that is “projects” is equivalent to a behavioral orientation generally being emphasized on specific actions and happenings—and, much less emphasis on depth of understanding Immortality Project; the equivalent argument I make is in my own work where I ask people to contemplate and better understand the Fear Problem in human history and evolution, and development, and they ‘read’ that in skewed behavioral emphasis on “fears” as the focus—which, is exactly opposite of my focus.

project on getting a good education in ‘evil.’ I’m asking here in this technical paper how are we to best get a good education in the IP? So, with that in mind, let’s dip into some of the complexity at hand in conceptualizing the IP. And, as we do so, let’s remember that Wilber has presented a sequence of conceptual terms (theories and projects) like Dualism-Repression-Projection (DRP) and Atman Project (AP) as precursors to his then using Immortality Project (IP) *per se*. Also, remember, Becker was not aware of Wilber’s work and died before Wilber’s first book. Certainly, the DRP of Wilber is the ‘darkest’ and most defense-informed project he is pulling out of the unconscious and offering to us to reflect on—then, his Atman Project is a more expanded notion (theory) of Involution and Evolution of Spirit—by which a drive to Wholeness is the positive-seeking end of the IP; and thus, Wilber cautions us also with the negative-seeking end too where a substitute (dualism and ideology) “wholeness” is chosen and constructed in human affairs to simulate Wholeness (i.e., Spirit). This transpersonal vision and metaphysics (of soul) that Wilber utilizes to understand the IP is definitely not one familiar and/or accepted by most readers and certainly not by the hard core existentialists (Becker, TMT founding theorists). Wilber’s more implicit warning to all of Psychology is one of the danger of its reductionistic-materialistic and secularizing tendencies in the name of Science (i.e., an unacknowledged ideological scientism).

Now, with those two branches of IP interpretations in mind, even if not adequately unpacked here in this brief introductory technical paper, we can at least find some starting common ground for the very engagement with the IP notion (from Rank, to Becker, to Wilber). And, one way I prefer to frame that unifying aspect of all their interests is something like this:

Life includes Death, and with that self-awareness that this principle applies to one’s body—ego--existence, then there’s an enormous sense of anxiety produced psychically and “terror” is one way to express the affect of such a sophisticated mortality self-realization.

Thus, Rank, Becker, Wilber are theorists very interested in the IP as a means of *terror management*.¹⁴ They want to understand it as mortality (finitude) and immortality (infinitude) dialectically co-evolve. However, terror (e.g., fear of death) is not the only register in which to understand the phenomenon of the IP—but it is a pragmatic and rather obvious, extreme, and rather spectacular approach to understanding human motivation in

¹⁴ For those interested, I argue that a dialogue is immediately necessary between fear management/education theorizing (Fisher) and TMT (see Fisher, 2020b).

terms of a defense ‘project’—which, I prefer to call the ‘Fear’ Project(ion). Now, to skip around my own work on this, let’s zoom in on at least Becker’s and TMT’s versions of interpretations for illustrative and introductory purposes. Ultimately, with good observation, we can bring this initial critical thinking to assess the vK-B Hypothesis (and, any others that follow in their footsteps now or in the future). One could say, dramatically, the future of Education depends on it.

Controversy Awaiting: “Immortality Project,” as Desire or Need?

I am following all the above theorists to say categorically that some kind of psychic (soul) DEFENSE is at issue for understanding human psychology—especially, in light of the mortality/immortality ‘edge’ of confrontation as experience and as thought in the mind of the dominant prefrontal lobed species called *Homo sapiens* (or *Homo mortalis*¹⁵). That said, my discussion below is also one that includes the **need** for defense but challenges that that is all that is going on in the deepest reaches of human meta-motivation (*a la* Maslow). Let’s begin with Becker.

Becker (1961) wrote,

[T]he continual, unconscious reference of each new relationship to previous identifications [i.e., transference processes] does not tend only in the direction of growth. (p. 25)

Key concept A. here: *all relations (their dynamics) have directionality—not all relations are positive towards “the direction of growth”* or at least, it is not obvious that such is the case. I find this particularly fascinating in light of the work of Abraham Maslow (or one), the most famous of the motivational theorists and a contemporary of Becker, who concluded that indeed research shows that human universal relationships and behaviors are motivated along a spectrum from *deficit-based* to *growth-based* (need) dynamics; which, are easily interpreted equivalently as a spectrum of *fear-based* to *love-* (or freedom) *based*.¹⁶ I won’t pursue this Maslowian-Beckerian spectrum concept at this point, but it will return later in this pa-

¹⁵ TMT folks like to use *Homo mortalis* (Solomon et al., 2015).

¹⁶ For further reading see my summary of the Fear vs. Love dynamic (e.g., Fisher, 2012) and the Fear vs. Freedom dynamic (Pyszczynski, Greenberg & Arndt, 2011) and Deficit vs. Growth (Being) dynamic (Maslow, 1966, 1968).

per, as it is useful to examine further in understanding the IP and transference processes/dynamics.

Key concept B. here: *continual unconscious reference* is equivalent to *continual motivational platform* to use my own language of meta-motivation theory. Meta-motivation refers to the deepest and widest of drives as a foundational template that, more or less, determines the shape of all other more surficial and/or symptomatic motivations (and drives).

I, like Becker, am in continual search for the deepest and widest meta-motivational architecture (and its dynamics) by which we'll find the causal roots and routes of all human behavior. Of course, others have also searched for this, be they from the spiritual or secular philosophical traditions or the various sciences from premodern to postmodern times. I'll focus on this depth psychology here, but to remember, "Immortality Project" is not merely about psychological drives *per se*, at least, it is not in terms of the most common ways we think about (individualistic-ego-need-based) psychology—more accurately, and more complexly, I am referring to 'soul' drives and evolutionary *telos* (i.e., an ontological reference).¹⁷ But that's going beyond to scope of this technical paper to develop very far here.

It ought to suffice to at least acknowledge, as does Becker, that a lot of good theorizing and study has been done on the continual unconscious reference(s) of human behavior, of which *projective-identification* is one of those forces or drives (needs), while there are others that some have also classified. Returning to Becker (1961) and this continual unconscious reference of "previous identifications" (i.e., projections), he wrote that such an unconscious (universal) process and psychical-relational dynamic,

Constantly [is] bringing the past to bear upon new experience [and thus, in the present] affects the quality of the experience, and its range. In the face of the new, in other words, one is bound by his [sic] past learning [i.e., projective-identifications and transferences]; and the primitive, earliest components of transference represent the *need* to identify and fuse with another living creature [usually an authority-figuration]. (p. 25)

¹⁷ 'Soul' is not meant here in some religious or dogmatic discourse, but is beyond that, much more in the Joseph Campellian mythic sense, or Otto Rankian (cf. Rank 1931/61), or Carl Jungian depth psychological sense—with archetypal dimensions.

This “transference” is the core powerhouse concept in Becker’s *oeuvre*,¹⁸ a point I’ll defend later in the paper when I make the claim that Beckerian thought has to centralize its analysis of the IP as a form (representation) of Immortality Transference Formation (ITP).¹⁹

What Becker (1961) is pointing to is crucial, as he wrote: “transference comes afoul [i.e., in contradiction] of the well-known reality principle” (p. 25); whereby he means, more or less, that our present relationship to ‘reality’ is continually tainted, and therefore no fresh uniquely new present reality (and/or its relationship dynamics) is unfettered by the constraints and biases and need-based hooks in the circuitry of an ecology of relationality of past-present-future. Human nature, the human condition and the human potential and human relationships we are working with now, have to be examined in part, in depth, with this past-historical-psychoanalytical sensibility—that is, if we are wanting to truly understand what is going on in the present with our inevitably transference relationships and our motivational relationship to reality (if not Reality) itself. I agree fully with this set of conditional premises of depth psychology and critical philosophy. But let me take a moment to note Becker’s formation of this tradition of depth thinking, for he is not its originator but is a “post-Freudian” one.²⁰ In the above quote, he uses “need to identify and fuse with another living creature” (and he means “authoritative” figure, p. 25). Becker, also, who relied on Kierkegaard and Rank and psychoanalysis in part, had promulgated a rather common accepted notion of the fear/terror of death in the un- or sub-consciousness of humans and thus, being too raw to handle, that terror is managed by various means—which, boil down to “we need to transcend ourselves [i.e., our creatureliness],” says Kastenbaum (2009, p. 276) while summarizing Becker’s basic philosophy of human behavior. I emphasize how *need* is so accepted in this discourse, in contradistinction to *desire*.

Back to Becker’s quote: in this *need-based* pattern, Becker noted the ego (self) is always, more or less, “attempting to win them over” and thus is learning and manipulating the relationship to ‘fit’ with (or fulfill) this need.

¹⁸ A claim backed-up by Dr. Daniel Liechty, for one amongst the Beckerian scholars (cf. Liechty, in prep.).

¹⁹ It is precisely this ITP construct and theory, coined by myself recently, which I’ll argue here in this paper is the ‘best’ way to understand “Immortality Project.”

²⁰ Liechty (in prep.) wrote, “Becker was very well aware of his [own] projective identification with the humanistic tradition of Enlightenment scholarship, and wore it quite explicitly as a badge of honor. In his early work, Becker was vociferously optimistic about the prospects of post-Freudian-tinged social tinkering as the pathway to bring this humanistic Enlightenment vision to fruition” (p. 8).

That is, the need to identify and fuse (i.e., another means of transcendence). By which, many different things in that dynamic could be interpreted—as bad or good. To avoid that problematic for the moment, let me say that what is most important to my writing here is the issue of this transference being a “need” in Becker’s portrayal (and interpretation)—albeit, I realize, most depth psychology would make such a claim as well (Maslow would likely be less so inclined and Wilber even more less so). However, following a somewhat different route of philosophical and psychological meta-contextualization, I’ll argue that this core transference dynamic (e.g., Immortality Project) is not merely reducible as a “need”; but is a “desire” of living systems (*via* an instinctual pre-given apriori *telos*²¹)—that is infused as meta-motivational re: Consciousness itself in its evolutionary arc. That distinction makes a huge difference, and it certainly (at a minimum) makes a huge difference in one’s understanding and teaching about the IP. Let me move on.

Terror Management Theory: View on IP

Although, it is important to look at Ernest Becker’s early views, before Terror Management Theory (TMT) constructed its own interpretations of IP, for simplicity and as a first observation, it seems useful to see what TMT has to say, as the latest offspring of the Beckerian line of thought and theorizing on IP. When I turn to the Index of Pyszczynski, Solomon & Greenberg (2002), “Immortality” receives six pages of attention, of which it is termed as a culturally-constructed phenomenon (i.e., as “ultimately fictional”²²):

(a) citing the existential psychotherapist Irving Yalom, the TMT position is similar to Yalom’s and is thus one of seeing such immortality beliefs and/or strivings as significant to human functioning but always a biopsychic *need* to secure oneself in a real and potentially threatening, if not meaningless cold world and cosmic reality that cares not of human mortality (fear and suffering)²³; TMT cites Yalom, who cited John Maynard

²¹ See Wilber’s kosmology (1995) of Spirit in evolution.

²² This way TMT core theorists frame anything “culturally constructed” (symbolic) is related to “worldviews” as constructed (symbolic) as well—that is, as ways for “organizing my thoughts and sensations” among other things (Pyszczynski, Solomon & Greenberg, 2002, p. 17).

²³ The TMT guys quote Leeming and Leeming (1994) for part of their existential validity for their premises that there is (e.g., natural entropy and chaos, if not violent destruction, death) which is “the universal drive toward meaninglessness” (a la Leeming and Leeming) (Pyszczynski, Solomon & Greenberg, 2002, p. 19).

Keynes, “What the ‘purposeful’ man is always trying to secure is a spurious and illusive immortality”—that is, which is fictional—what TMT calls “cultural illusion” (p. 18).

(b) TMT argues, from a materialistic view, that a (symbolic) “meaningful worldview” gives the participants of culture an *escape* from meaninglessness, transience, vulnerability, insecurity and terror of one’s own intuited soon-to-come death in material reality; “In this way, cultural worldviews [universally] set up the path to immortality [and diverse immortality projects²⁴], to [enable] transcendence of one’s own death.” (p. 19); thus, immortality is made to be out to be a *need* to experience “transcendence”—and, such is for TMT a fictional (albeit, functional) “eternal symbolic reality, instead of just corporeal [existential] beings in a wholly material reality” (p. 19)

(c) TMT argues, like Rank (in part), historical and cultural evolution provides a window into the unveiling and classification of “cultural modes of immortality striving” of which the common theme being “some essence of the person continues beyond death either individually or merged within a death-transcending collective” and, this may be *via* “literal” or “symbolic” immortality projects²⁵ (p. 20)—the TMT core founders prefer only “literal” immortality as real²⁶ (p. 20)

(d) TMT cites the anthropology of religion view (e.g., Allen), that ‘universal god-making tendency’ is part of human nature—whereby, the dead, ghosts, etc. are deified, more or less, “with the desire for immortality on the part of the individual believer” (p. 21)

(e) TMT as a synthesis of several fields of inquiry, suggests strongly that immortality in the imaginary and practices of people and cultures, is “an important anxiety-reducing function” that supports development of meaning—such is a strong tendency and *need* for any living organism—even if such is (as is culture itself) not designed “to illuminate the truth but rather to obscure the horrifying [realities] possibilities that death entails [like] the permanent annihilation of the self” (“self-esteem” maintenance is hooked

²⁴ “...cultures vary greatly in the paths to immortality [e.g., stories, worldviews, rituals] they provide” (Pyszczynski, Solomon & Greenberg, 2002, p. 19).

²⁵ They quote Lifton (1979/83) on this dual distinction.

²⁶ As existentialists (self-declared atheists), predictably, the TMT core see “symbolic immortality” as more to do with religions (p. 20).

to “death transcendence” initiatives as in pursuit of immortality)—the aim of this psychic/cultural defense system seems to be for “psychological equanimity” (p. 22)

Solomon, Greenberg & Pyszczynski (2015), which is their core textbook for explaining TMT findings and implications for real applications to ‘make a better world’, I notice that “Immortality Project” (caps or not) is not even listed (same in 2002). Three terms in the Index under “**immortality**” stand out:

(a) “quest for,” (b) “immortality striving modes” (c) “symbolic immortality promises”²⁷ and, (d) “immortality longings” and overall, only 10 pages in the whole book are listed as mentioning *immortality* in general—this low quantity represents to me how little the term is engaged *per se* even though, arguably in the Beckerian tradition this concept is core to all of the “death denial” literature.

So, let’s see if IP is portrayed as *desire* in human motivation or a *need*? Clearly, the above references to immortality, as having evolved in the psychic-cultural domain of an individual and/or societal ecology, are all seen as a *need* (i.e., a psychic-cultural defense, sometimes called “buffer”—a reaction formation²⁸ in general against existential anxiety and terror built-in to human nature and the human condition). If immortality (or IP) is thus constructed (privileged) in this materialist-survivalist (only) lens of TMT, anything spiritualist (e.g., magical, mythic, symbolic) is going to be seen as a less-than derivative of a superior materialist reality²⁹; the latter, which is

²⁷ See p. 240 (in reference to Robert Jay Lifton’s work).

²⁸ I don’t dispute this finding *per se*, albeit, it is still problematic. I point here to “reaction formation” and do so because of the importance later, in discussion of bravery (twisted into bravado) as arguably, a severe problem in human behavior generally due to inflated *counterphobic reaction formation* dynamics (typically, seen symptomatically in behaviors and thoughts of grandiosity and invulnerability—typically, in pathological patriarchal cultures and purveyed in male-centric (hyper-masculinities) of hateful competition, excessive aggression and violence through a need to dominate others).

²⁹ My point of critique of TMT’s basic materialist-survivalist-dualist (Darwinian) view here is operative in consequences and overly-biases their view of IP. Theoretically, TMT thinkers may feel they are not so biased as I am making them out, and they may even quote Becker (1973) who said, “Civilized society is a hopeful protest....It doesn’t matter whether the cultural system is frankly magical, religious, and primitive, or secular, scientific, and civilized. It is [all are] still a mythical hero system” defending itself from mortality terror (cited in Pyszczynski et al., 2002, p. 196). Equally, TMT thinkers may cite respectfully Lifton’s “modes of symbolic immortality” and agree in part, that symbolic immortality

the ultimate (biased) reference for TMT (apparently). To categorize immortality as a need/striving/quest/longing is not without its merits. Rank's important work on immortality and human nature from a psychoanalytical (post-Freudian) perspective used "urge to immortality."³⁰ The adjectives and descriptors are just partial and biased.³¹ Because as one reference the TMT core thinkers cited (at a minimum) raised the question of "desire for immortality" (p. 21). *Desire* of course would have to be scrutinized carefully, but even on a first glance, intuitively I find there is a huge difference from a phenomenon that is a desire for Life, and a phenomenon that is a need to deny Death. The very classification of TMT premises, and a human nature and human condition set of assumptions within the "death denial" literature—already, pre-supposes denial (and/or dissociation or fiction-making) is the pre-requisite aim and goal (i.e., primary need) of human existence (and culture itself). There is still an entrenched Freudianism within this thinking and methodology.³² Within this denial-based positioning is a death-denial presupposition as primary (privileging) to all other positionings of human motivation—including the very category of desire—as distinct from needs.³³ Would Becker, if he was alive, approve of this rather materialistic, survivalist, reductionistic, functionalistic 'reading' of his

projects are refining and nuanced and ought not be just written off so grossly (e.g., Pyszczynski et al., 2002, p. 84). Lifton (1979) is less inclined to accept the full-force Beck-erian (and TMT) perspective however, because it is over-predeterminingly "death-centered" (opposing Freud in Becker's attempt)—and is thus too terror-centered *in extremis* because of this "monolithic causation within that dualism") as Freud was trapped as well. Lifton, like myself, prefers "a different perspective" that is "dialectic rather than dualistic" (p. 31). Lifton rightly argues, Becker thus "builds a *compensatory* [defensive-based, deficit-based, need-based, extremist-based] psychology and in so doing falls into a reductionism different from but parallel to Freud's" (p. 51-2). Wilber would agree with Lifton's critique as well.

³⁰ "Urge to immortality" is not insignificant as used by Rank (e.g., Goldwert, 1985) and points to framing the deep motivation of humans toward more desire and less need—but, this is still a speculative presumption on my part.

³¹ In fairness, the TMT core theorists have, in their pursuit of applying "social psychology...to develop broad theories of human behavior capable of explaining human activities" (p. ix) have often noted their assumptions explicitly and their "certain biases" (p. x) (Pyszczynski et al., 2002).

³² I am referring to Lifton's critique as well as my own but also to Rank's critique, which if he were alive, would be reluctant to accept the predominant *sex-denial* and/or *death-denial* (negating emphasis of motivational drive) of anyone using such a dualism framework—and, that, I surmise, is the crux of the issue I am raising even in regard to Becker's framing. And to be clear, Rank split from Freud's predominant rigid (secular-materialist) view, for one reason, because of Freud's trenchant scientific bio-reductionism (and pathologizing) of anything arational, artistic, magical, mythic, transcendent and spiritual (i.e., transpersonal) within the human experience (cf. Progoff, 1956/73).

³³ A much larger discourse and set of arguments, beyond the scope of this paper, would be needed to justify the importance of this distinction of need from desire.

work? That's far beyond my scholarly capabilities to evaluate at this time. I invite others to weigh in their views.

Although the discussion is too complex for this brief paper, I would posit that it is crucial to (at a minimum) look at the transpersonal and integral psychological and philosophical work of Ken Wilber on "Immortality" and IP. There is a very different narrative to be unraveled, and I will give some sense of it to close this paper. That aside, I'll mention only, momentarily, another direction within the humanistic psychological tradition to sort out this *desire vs. need* problem in human motivation theorizing. Abraham Maslow, both humanistic and transpersonal in orientation, offers not only a human "needs" theory of motivation (which is by far the most popularized of his work)—but, he offered later, a theory of *deficit needs (values) vs. being needs (values)* (Maslow, 1968). Arguably, the latter Being psychology is a psychology of desire primarily (and yes, dialectically), not a psychology of needs.

With Maslow's bi-centric theory of motivation in mind, with the first half of his mapping of motivation (and bulk of it in reality) as "deficit" but the second half is "Being" (growth-oriented)—as a consciousness model very consistent with Wilber's developmental and evolutionary *oeuvre*. Ontologically, Being may be an essence, but it also may be a *telos* of human potential, of an expanded consciousness, where transference dynamics themselves change entirely³⁴ from fear-based (first-tier) to love-based (second-tier), levels of consciousness and living, etc. Again, this is a spectrum view, and is speculative for the most part,³⁵ and not the place to dwell on here.

I'm curious to juxtapose not only Wilber, but also Lifton's views on IP to Becker's and TMT's views, while looking for this distinction of how IP is casted in need or desire (or both). I am fascinated with Lifton's (1979) unique (potentially useful) crafting of the notion of "immortality-hunger" (p. 284) and it raises the question for us critical thinkers as to whether this "hunger" is by some predisposition (arguably) only a "need" or is only a "desire" from a kosmocentric (Wilberian) perspective, or at least, even from a biological perspective? I could as easily argue *food* is ontologically desired (*contra*, in a Freudian-TMT need's view—as *not* feared, as in be-

³⁴ See Liechty (in prep.).

³⁵ Speculative yes, but with lots of back-up from developmental empirical studies (e.g., Robert Kegan, and see Wilber, 2000, etc.).

ing seen predominantly in potential short-supply³⁶)—not needed. This has pivotal consequences, if one is (like myself) interested in a critical theory of human/social development along the lines of a revisionist, emancipatory, liberational, Fearlessness Psychology (Fisher, 2019). But let’s move on.

Becker’s Theory: View on IP

Theoretically, TMT’s views on IP ought to be Beckerian. Fine. The question is, are Becker’s views on IP the same as TMT’s views? Again, that’s a topic I can barely scratch the surface. What I can do here is give a sense of Becker’s reading of IP as he has gathered it from (at least) Otto Rank’s view.

(a) Otto Rank (1884-1939)

Yet, Rank’s view is rarely considered these days thoroughly enough and I suspect it is rarely framed in a transpersonal depth psychological way, a frame that Ken Wilber uses (as do I myself). Progoff (1956/73) offers a good summary as well as Goldwert (1985). Rank’s view is one of taking a path of interpretation of human motivation/behavior that goes *beyond* “individual psychology”—or, as Progoff puts it, “two steps beyond psychology” (p. 251). The basic movement of that two steps came from Rank’s intense studies and concluding that (in his own words):

³⁶ And, ‘food’ as seen as if a resource potentially lacking—as in: *without it we would die* (thus, this *death-centered view* always, obsessively, constructs all things relative to their role in death and terror of death—note, Freud’s sex-centered view did this as well). Unfortunately, TMT strikes me as embracing this (fear-based) view overly so, and that is likely because it is a (W.) psychology of Capitalism *writ large*—that is, the predominant ‘norm’ deficit-based psychology, science, and economic worldview of our times and will likely be so for a long time to come. It is empirically true in the field. But that truth is not necessarily what ought to be. TMT has (apparently) no interest in a psychology of liberation/fearlessness, and would likely argue it is ‘impossible’ and it is ‘heroic’ to the point of being the problem of the worst of human behaviors for millenia—that is, the pursuit of liberation (in its worst-sides) that causes and is driven by evil—to liberate us from evil (or, they could add liberate us from *non-freedom* or oppression and such pursuits on their worst-side cause more oppression)—and, their rightful skepticism of such ‘good’ ventures (revolutions) tends to rule the scope of their theorizing and experimental designs. It’s a debate alright. One would do well to link a death-centered (world) view behind all this TMT research as interrelated to a death-phobic culture (and/or culture of death) as described by several thinkers and critics for a long time. I use “culture of fear” as the larger umbrella. The point (hypothesis still to be tested), is that TMT is measuring more a specific (if not pathological) particular cultural phenomenon (i.e., death-centric-phobic worldview) unique to these modern and post-modern times in which their research is located, rather than it is measuring a universal dominant attitude of human nature.

The “beyond” individual psychology....meant not, as I first thought, a resorting to collective ideologies as a subject of social psychology; it actually meant the irrational [*sic*- arational] basis of human nature which lies beyond any psychology, individual or collective. (p. 250)

Here we see Rank dwelling (not unlike James or Royce did as brilliant psychologists) in philosophy and theological spiritual-existential domains of human experience and the “psychology” of those domains—including, for Rank what he named “irrational” as the motivational and foundational basis of human nature—rather than only rational mind. Irrational, which is more accurately arational³⁷ for Rank is necessarily linked to the *transcendent* states of experience but also identity transformation (and transference). Rank did not reduce this transcendent and the “urge” for it to merely *need* and/or *neurosis* (i.e., defensive reaction formations). He respected it in its own right, closer to what I would call desire, and quite differently thus he framed human existence than the typical way of existentialism or psychoanalysis.

As well, Rank’s, radical, expansive and fine-tuned lens of psychological investigation touched on the pulse of something very different from the “scientific” psychologists of W. Europe in the modern period. He was onto a reality not merely reducible to “individual” or “collective” reference points. Quite original amongst the psychoanalysts,³⁸ Rank did not agree one could understand human nature/motivation/behavior through a blend—that is, “social psychology” either. Note, TMT relies heavily on social psychology³⁹ for near everything it organizes to design its experiments, interpret data, and argue a prescriptive case about human nature, the human condition, terror and terror management, and the human potential. It seems Rank’s foundational interest in “vital experience” as he called it, revolved around immortality:

Rank was able to understand at least the outline of what such a “vital experience” [i.e., of “revelation, conversion, or rebirth” = spiritual transformation⁴⁰]....[in Rank’s words] “Man [*sic*] is born beyond psychology and he dies beyond it but he can *live* beyond it only through vital experience of his own”.... It takes place at a psychic

³⁷ E.g., see this distinction made by Bickel (2020, 2020a).

³⁸ Arguably, Carl G. Jung is somewhat cut from the same rebellious post-Freudian cloth as Rank.

³⁹ Becker also had a tendency to focus his research on the social sciences, biasing his views, and having thus resorted often to anthropology and social psychology for inputs.

⁴⁰ These three terms are Rank’s, and “spiritual transformation” is Progoff’s (p. 251).

level [soul level] deeper than rationality, and its result is a sense of connection to life that extends beyond the present moment in all the directions of time [and, beyond time itself]. Immortality becomes then not merely continued individual existence [or defense against it], but a sense of more-than-personal participation [dissolving and unification] in everlasting life. In this experience, the individual find a “new soul,” not quite literally but in essence, because he now perceives his personal existence in a new light. Rank spoke of this in the traditional religious terms....[but] not to a specific theology [or doctrine]. The new outlook does not come as a result of conscious or ‘rational’ thought, but from a dark psychic source [meta-motivation] not directly accessible to the mind. It comes as of its own volition [not neurosis and pathology].... (cited in Progoff, 1956/73, pp. 250-1)

“Otto Rank, the psychoanalyst turned philosopher of history, considered the ‘urge to immortality’ to be man’s [sic] deepest drive....Rank believed that the will strives for immortality through a wide variety of paths,” argued Goldwert (1985, p. 169). The wide variety of paths is key here. Rank’s expanding notion of the creative person (soul) interwoven *via* the deep immortality urge combined, truly transcended what most of the scientific (psychological) and social science communities of thought were able to grasp. Rank saw this as a “heroic role” in the modern world but he framed it as “beyond” the labels of typical psychology of the day, and thus, beyond the “psycho-therapeutic stage” which was then (and still is, in the mainstream) the very problem that Rank saw would prevent human beings from evolving into a soul-based way, a “rebirth” and development of what Rank called “a new type of human being” in history—with a new type of personality⁴¹ (of which, I would call fearlessness-based, and Wilber would call integral-based).

Now, with some sense of Rank’s profound notion of *beyond psychology*, it ought to be somewhat evident that the IP in Rank’s worldview and based on his findings of research, show us that historically IP is highly valued in and of itself as a foundation of human nature⁴²—and an urge to the highest

⁴¹ All points here are summarized from Progoff (1956/73) and at times he is using Rank’s words (p. 251).

⁴² At this point, it is not clear to me how Rank defined (or even coined) “immortality project” —but according to Goldwert (1985) “...as Rank applied it, the term *immortality* is metaphysically neutral. According to Rank, the urge to immortality is nothing more than a psychic fact; however, he dismissed the possibility that there may be a cosmic dimension of even greater significance behind the durable recurrence of the ‘urge’” (p. 169). Here, it

human potential (not, to be reduced to a defense drive). Desire-drive is another way to frame what Rank was describing. Becker, who relied on Rank to a significant degree, now has his own take on the IP and we ought to compare the two as we study Becker on this topic.⁴³

(b) Return To Becker

My main concern, after understanding a Rankian expansionist view of the IP, is to see if Becker (like most existentialists, and TMT theorists) reduces⁴⁴ the IP conception—and, perhaps, even ‘distorts’ it to such a degree that there are more problems created than less (e.g., the van Kessel-Burke Hypothesis I mentioned at the beginning of this paper).

Becker (1973) is presumably the best, albeit limited, book to draw upon for his view of the IP. Keep in mind, Becker’s “heroism” studies and theorizing are intricately linked to both the “heroic individual” in history—yet, just as easily could be linked to the ‘immortality individual’⁴⁵ (a personality-type, creative-artistic-desire-based-outstanding type, similar to Rank’s conception). Becker had kept the Ideal with his Real, but he was trying to sort through a heroism that is beneficial and worth nurturing, yet he constructs a “knight of faith” imaginary (without fear⁴⁶) “of the most beautiful

appears Wilber (e.g., 1981, 1995) would take this cosmic (kosmocentric) perspective further than Rank and re-translate IP into transpersonal (and integral) psychology and philosophy.

⁴³ It ought to be mentioned that TMT core theorists (especially, Solomon) have some interest and respect for Rank’s views, but by no means do they try to interpret TMT *via* a Rankian (Schopenhauerian, Jamesian, Roycean, Maslowian, Liftonian or Wilberian) perspective.

⁴⁴ Simplified reductionism (i.e., *via* scientism, and symbolic-epistemic violence) is something to watch for, *contra* the Rankian notion of IP (i.e., “immortality urge”) as multidimensional, complex, and as Goldwert (1985, p. 169) expresses it, “the will strives for immortality through a wide variety of paths” (*a la* Rank; cf. my initial studies of Arthur Schopenhauer’s existential-eastern esoteric (i.e., spiritual, mystical, nondual) philosophy and psychology (e.g., Fisher, 2019a), which also greatly influenced Freud and Jung (possibly Rank), tell me that one ought to extend the critical historical overview of IP back to (at least) Schopenhauer in the 19th century to improve upon Rank’s (and Becker’s) views, or at least understand Rank’s views better.

⁴⁵ Not to put words into Becker’s mouth (he never used this term *per se*), but it seems reasonable to assert Becker would not disagree there is such a conception of an immortality individual (personality-type)—which seems more transcendent operatively than others (or the masses). Again, this is not my intention to reduce “immortality” drive/urge etc. to only individual psychology (personality)—as Rank would not prefer.

⁴⁶ Becker (1973) wrote, “As the knight of faith has no fear-of-life-and-death trip to lay onto others, he does not cause them to shrink back upon themselves, he does not coerce or [dominate] manipulate them. The knight of faith, then, represents what we might call an ideal of

and challenging ideals” (with Kierkegaard in mind, amongst others) but Becker is determined in the next breath of once reverence, he pulls up his rational mind analysis and says “If Freud can be said to have erred on the side of the visible [reality/psychology of motivation], then Kierkegaard can surely be said to have equally erred on the side of the invisible” (p. 258). Becker’s point “is that for man [sic – woman; human as animal] not everything is possible” (p. 259). Becker (echoing James) knew the danger of extremes to either side of the spectrum (the invisible emphasis can become neurotic defense due to fear of life; the visible emphasis can become neurotic defense due to fear of death) (p. 259). In this sense, to my liking, Becker is an integral thinker, always looking to integrate the oppositions and polarities that seem to predominantly construct human’s experience. Becker saw no transcendence (full immortality urge or outcome) as being useful; he’d rather we rest in the unresolvable Ideal-Real⁴⁷ complexity and do the best pragmatically we can with that condition.

But if this existentialist pragmatism is appealing, of which it is to many, we are still left with how it may itself be over-determining of Becker’s (1973) view of the IP. One senses immediately from the quotes of Becker above, he would be at once challenging and critical (if not ‘distortive’) in his engagement with the IP—as immortality itself would be too extreme for his tastes and his philosophy (and worldview). Rank did not have that problem, nor did N. O. Brown,⁴⁸ whom Becker reads and interprets. Becker thus, says that maybe there is a possibility of “giants in the history of humanity” as truly great heroes (knights of faith) but he sees they only come in the shape of “a true saint” of which they arrive so, as souls matured not by their own striving (i.e., their own needs and will)—but by “grace and not of human effort.” He was compelled to construct the choices between “religious creatureliness and scientific creatureliness” (p. 259). It seems obvious overall he settled, more or less preferably, for the latter as more trustable, empirical, humble, material, and less prone to err. It’s debateable.

mental health, the continuing openness of life out of the death throes of dread” [i.e., not death-centric-phobic in worldview] (p. 258).

⁴⁷ This Ideal-Real construct is foundational to Becker’s *oeuvre*; see explanation in Scimecca (1978).

⁴⁸ An important psychoanalytic theorist, Brown was not so prone as Becker to a death-centric materialist view, even though he based his work on the body—because Brown left room for humans individually and collectively to heal, transform, and progress beyond the “fear of death” and “fear of life” as their primary needs-driven ways of being (very similar to Maslow, 1968)—as Brown would say (in Becker’s interpretation) “men will have their apotheosis in eternity by living fully in the now of experience” (p. 261)—an experience very similar to esoteric nondual psychology and philosophy teachings E-W (and Wilberian viewpoint).

Becker's mantra, in the middle of this conversation that is implicitly about transcendence and immortality, comes down to Becker's pre-determined conviction: "*The enemy of mankind is basic repression [fear/terror], the denial [defense reaction formation] of [a] throbbing physical [visible] life and the spectre of death [as always driving the bus]*" (p. 261).

All this background in mind, now to Becker's knife that cuts history, and does not spare the blade, he goes into the darkest to assert the empirical, visible, historical reality he trusts—his visible preferred "this worldly" existence. Empirical truth, at least as he gathers it through a particular lens, reveals to him:

One Hitler can efface centuries of scientific and religious meanings; on earthquake can negate a million times the meaning of a personal life. Mankind [sic] has reacted by trying to secure human meanings from beyond. Man's best efforts seem utterly fallible.... (Becker, 1973, p. 120)

It is not total nihilistic negating pessimism, as some critics find in Becker's work, but a reasonable open-minded empirical assessment. That is, from the visible-side of reality. Becker sticks to this visible bias and then makes another critique, deeper in its cut, into the left-overs of any arrogance around the progressive Human(ist) Project (i.e., Enlightenment project or IP), whereby:

Man's best efforts seem utterly fallible [even despairing in their raw real form—empirically and historically speaking] without [a compensatory] appeal to something higher for justification, some conceptual [symbolic] support [i.e., fear management system] for the meaning of one's life from a transcendental dimension of some kind. As this belief has to absorb man's basic terror [and guilt of failure]. (p. 120)

Becker's construction of "transcendental dimension" (i.e., IP) is decidedly one that sees anything immortality (other-worldly) directed as a need to handle terror of (and failure of) human existence. IP thus, inevitably in this Beckerian view is only of worth as compensatory defense (and, as illusion or fiction, which Becker repeats in his mantra). IP (urge) cannot be seen as in itself as a desire of consciousness, of Creation, of an other-worldly purpose beyond psychology (to echo Rank). It seems Becker leaves a Rankian

IP view behind and buries it into a *psychology of terror*,⁴⁹ to put it bluntly. This psychology of terror, individual/communal, obsesses Becker (and TMT theorists) as I see it, in terms of their philosophizing about human nature and the human condition—and, results in a particularly biased death-centric-phobic worldview conception (perhaps, unconscious) that delimits the human potential imaginary and actualization potency. I am very concerned when this is a survivalist-visible-materialist worldview spreading in the academy and Educational faculties under various clever guises (e.g., poststructuralism ideology)—example, the van Kessel-Burke Hypothesis mentioned earlier in this paper.

Not surprising, Becker, once a soldier himself, talked of Hitler, and the experience of battlefield reality (p. 120) in the same breath as he is describing “immortality” project(s) and omnipotence and defenses of humans who deny their fallibility, if not their commission in evil. Becker continues his definitional theorizing of IP:

According to [Freudian] psychoanalytic theory, the child meets the terror of life and aloneness first by asserting his own omnipotence and then by using the cultural mortality as the vehicle for his [ensured] immortality. By the time we grow up, this confident, delegated immortality becomes a major defense in the service of the [supposed] equanimity of our organism in the face of danger [i.e., a fear management strategy]. (p. 120)

“Fantasy of immortality” (Freud’s phrase) bled-over into Becker’s thinking as well (more so, than did Rank’s thinking on immortality). Beyond the Hitlerian immortality project(s) of mass destruction related to war destruction in general and W. history, Becker’s gloomy-side picks further into the (mis-)placement of the immortality drive/need problem and he brings in Freud himself:

It is logical that if you are one of the few who admits the anxiety [terror] of death, then you must question the fantasy of immortality, which is exactly the experience of Freud. Zilboorg affirms that the problem troubled Freud all his life. He yearned for fame, anticipated it, hoped that through it he could create his own immortality. “Immortality means being loved by many anonymous people.” This definition is the Enlightenment view of immortality: living in the esteem of men yet unborn, for the works that you have contributed to

⁴⁹ “Psychology of terror” is the subtitle of the TMT book by Pyszczynski, Solomon & Greenberg (2002). And, for Becker (and TMT theorists) it is a focal point psychology of pragmatic realism (i.e., visibility, experimentability) without much “Ideal” remaining.

their life and betterment....[re:] Zilboorg seems to think that this oscillation between *desire* for immortality and scorn for it reflects Freud's unfortunate habit of forming polarities in his thought; but to me it seems like more magical toying with reality....(pp. 120-1) [italics for emphasis]

However we may digest this marvelous quote on Freud and immortality by Becker, it is pretty clear Becker has negatively associated the Enlightenment view of immortality in general and done so particularly with Freud's ambivalence (or "magical toying with reality")—and, bottomline, Becker comes out *contra* Freud around the concept and *contra* Rank as well. Becker still ends up Freudian more than anything, even if he was critiquing and pulling away from Freudian thought. No wonder Becker had a predominantly negative take on the IP conception he seemed focused on with Freud and arguably, seemed to thus drift away from Rank's view of IP.

In reference to my italicizing in the quote above, "desire" is the term Becker used for immortality, sounding more Ranking momentarily, but then you can hear that he sets up "scorn" as opposed to immortality and the desire for it—that is, a scorn for desire itself. I would have preferred to hypothesize about Freud's ambivalence and conflict around immortality as more a conflict about whether immortality urge is a desire or need (the latter, arguably, more worth scorning than not). But, then that would be to turn history around for a Fisherian version—a tactic, Becker himself would likely disapprove of. Fair enough.

IP Alternative(s): Ken Wilber

In closing this paper, it ought to be fairly clear (in some ways) that Becker's view of immortality albeit originally informed by Rank was overly-determined by Becker's concentration (if not attachment) to critique of Freudian psychology (even while respecting the pioneering efforts of Freud). We now have to turn "beyond psychology" as I believe Rank had it right. We have to turn to the ontological (philosophical, theological and psychology) dimensions of human nature, meta-motivation and behavior. Becker was not so keen on this project albeit, he gave Rank due acknowledgement for understanding the immortality urge as a "first motive—to merge and lose oneself in something larger" but then, Becker has to diminish that to a dynamic caused by "man's horror of isolation, of being thrust back upon his own feeble energies alone; he feels tremblingly small and impotent in the face of transcendent nature"—and, again, Becker uses "desire to be part of something bigger" with *desire* coming through, yet, he turns it immediately into a *need* of the psyche for defense against the hor-

ror of existence/death/mortality. By which he means the ‘ordinary’ (conditioned) psyche of the mainstream masses(?) sees the world this way, predominantly and obsessively in some cases. Not everyone is so enmeshed in that ‘Fear’ Project. Yes, that’s a big problem, because Becker’s pull to the visible (and science) tends to be a pull to see the reality of things from that point of view over another point of view outside of the visible and mainstream of where others are conscious within the limits of particular (often, relatively immature) stages of development.⁵⁰ Becker is generally, thus, not a developmentalist, not like Ken Wilber, who I am about to shortly introduce because of the value (potential) of a Wilberian IP perspective.

For a quick background on Wilber’s situatedness in philosophy and theory, see Wikipedia: Integral Theory. I have also done a teaching video on Wilber (Fisher, 2020c). Earlier in this paper I tracked out the other precursor terms that Wilber has adopted for IP. Those need to be studied too. But suffice it for ending this paper, that I briefly mention what he offers to the discussion of IP, from a spiritual-transpersonal-integral perspective. He offers an entirely different psychology lens. His work is based on a fearless standpoint theory (Fisher, 2008) or transpersonal psychology reference. This engages and integrates but also transcends what is “beyond psychology” (*a la* Rank) in terms of understanding the IP and human nature, motivation and behavior in general.

Early in his first writings, Wilber adopted the Beckerian position/theory that the nature of culture is a buffer for the most part, which helps in the denial of death. Thus, culture is determined in this perspective as a death reactive and death-focused proposition, at the deepest levels of motivation. Yet, that is still only a surface appearance, real as it may be, in the Wilberian framework. We can go deeper yet, into the ontological basis of motivation—that is, into the more invisible (which Becker mostly avoided⁵¹). Wilber draws heavily not only on the West for ontology but the East (the mystical, nondual schools, etc.). He offers a great synthesis, one, I believe

⁵⁰ It ought to be noted that Sam Keen (whom Becker respected) was a developmentalist, see Keen (1983). Becker’s notion of “adult” is very limited and Keen shows two more post-formal stages of development beyond adult. I heartily embrace a Keenian-Wilberian developmental perspective, for starters. And, there are problems with these theorists’ models as well. Note, the “stage” a person is at developmentally has multiple factors (limitations)—one of which is “trauma” effects/history—a large topic I have not gone into here.

⁵¹ I feel incompetent to say much about Becker’s ontological inquiries overall, but it is interesting to see him engage Rank’s ontological work somewhat in Becker (1973), pp. 152-3). Again, yet, Becker takes a different direction than Rank on “immortality” and the IP.

Becker would have quite respected, if he had lived long enough to meet Wilber's early integral writing and thinking.

Basically, Wilber offers an integral (holistic) view of the IP. His foundation is based in reality (Reality) that is Buddhistic and Hinduistic philosophically and theologically, whereby "every person's true Nature is Atman (Spirit, level 7/8)" consciousness—that is, Unity Consciousness,⁵² for lack of a better term. He also differentiates, evolutionarily and developmentally, that "unity" is pre-egoic and trans-egoic—they may on first glance look and feel the same as a primordial unity (whole) experiencing but they are very different as well and ought to be distinguished. Besides that point, he arcs out that Nature is Atman from a view that is without time/space dimensions—and without fear-based ego-centric and death-centric focuses of attention (*contra* Becker). Literally, he is talking about everyone's true Nature is Immortal. Immortality is the complex set of dynamics and qualities related to the Immortal (Atman).⁵³ Quite a different definition than Becker's W. Enlightenment definition, mentioned above.

The Immortality Project (IP) shows up in Wilber's grand narrative of involution and evolution dynamics—on this ontological but also ontogenetic framing of existence. He does talk about "symbolic substitutes" (drawn from Rank and Becker and others), whereby most of existence human life is one of having 'lost' (sort of) one's true Nature (as Atman, as Immortal)—and, that our deepest of deep meta-motivations (urges) is to reunite with that one-ness in some way—this, is for Wilber's view (not much different than Rank) a spiritual task, if you will. But it is not even a willed, or personal or communal task per se—in this Wilberian kosmology. It is just reality—ontologically speaking. The problems humans (cultures) get into however, is real and can be analyzed at the level of Atman or Immortality "projects" (i.e., defense projections or symbolic substitutes)—that's what makes up most of what we call history and development. Yet, that's only the visible part we focus on is to see these outcome projects and substitute processes—and, their utter failure at some level to satisfy the deepest desire for unity (Reality, Nature).

⁵² The larger philosophical meaning of "Unity" is way beyond the scope of this paper. He means unity-in-diversity and diversity-in-unity (as the relative *and* absolute realities interrelate in evolutionary processes—where one is no better than the other—they are dialectically related and co-evolutionary, emergent and absolute simultaneously).

⁵³ All quotes and paraphrasing here are from Wilber (1981), p. 14.

Wilber then takes time, like no other theorist I have seen, to explain in fine detail the dynamics of positive and negative IP(s)—from this transpersonal perspective, which includes individual and communal dimensions but transcends them as well—and, that is truly integral and unique. I think it is very much more complete as a ‘big picture’ of the human journey as well—because it is basically his story of the journey of Consciousness itself (as Spirit). Wilber (1981) wrote,

[T]he positive and negative sides of the Atman project [IP]—Eros and Thanatos, Life and Death, Vishnu and Shiva. And the battle of Life versus Death, Eros versus Thanatos, is the arch-battle and the basic anxiety [terror] *inherent* in all separate selves [egos]—a primal mood of fear removed only by true transcendence into Wholeness....[like it or not, the designed universe appears through the human lens of experience and growth and development to be one where] the separate self—although it pretends and aspires to immortality and cosmocentricity—necessarily fails its purpose to some degree or another. It cannot altogether pull off the [fictional] charade that it is stable, permanent, enduring [secure], and immortal. As James put it, the fearful background of death [terror] is still there to be thought of, and the skull will grin in at the banquet. Until the separate self rediscovers its ultimate Wholeness [ontologically], the foggy atmosphere of death [dramatics and tragedy] remains its constant [consuming] consort. No amount of compensations or defenses or repressions [denials] is enough.... (pp. 14-15)

On that note, it is time to close this ‘story’ of the IP and its various conceptions, which I have found very interesting to upgrade my own learning process. I feel I have just barely peaked over the blanket around my head, sat up, and taken a big breath—there’s so much more to learn about this intriguing and important concept and phenomenon.

I trust this paper in progress of an idea, of a critique, of a discussion—is able to show that Becker and TMT theorists have some problems in terms of the formation and biases in their views of the Immortality Project. Educators, or others, who rely upon TMT especially, have to take into account a more complex and nuanced historical conceptual biography of the idea—of immortality and Immortality Project. To do less, is a shirk of responsibility and a dangerous play if we are to sincerely work toward better understanding human nature, motivation, behaviors—and, better understand evil and its remediations.

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