



Escape from Evil

Ernest Becker

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From the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Denial of Death*, a penetrating and insightful perspective on the source of evil in our world.

"A profound, nourishing book...absolutely essential to the understanding of our troubled times." —*Anais Nin*

"An urgent essay that bears all the marks of a final philosophical raging against the dying of the light." —*Newsweek*

Escape from Evil Details

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From Reader Review Escape from Evil for online ebook

Trey says

Added to the to-read list for this quote from it: "Each society is a hero system which promises victory over evil and death."

Nathan Leslie says

This is right in my sweet spot--a dark, philosophical examination (exhortation) of human nature. Reminiscent of Nietzsche and E.M. Cioran in particular, Becker's text takes humanity to task. Make sure to have a fuzzy animal handy whilst reading, for this is a nightmare tale of the highest proportions. Great read during the holidays, for those sick of fakey-fake cheer and hope. Tons of great one-liners. Why am I just now discovering Becker? I want to retroactively sue my undergraduate profs for shortchanging my mind.

Robert Kramer says

Stunning. Unforgettable. A magnum opus. Even more powerful than The Denial of Death, from which it was extracted. Ernest Becker, like Otto Rank, is one of the intellectual and spiritual giants of the 20th century. What makes Becker truly great is that he recognized Rank's genius and distilled Rank's books, virtually all out of print at the time, into this lyrical masterpiece. Becker's facility with language is what Rank, sadly, lacked. Yet Becker got all of Rank almost as if he were channeling him from the Beyond. To be able to read a genius like Rank requires a genius like Becker.

Peter LaCombe says

every paragraph is vital. So well informed, lucid and readable that it seems unbelievable.

Jessica says

Ever wonder why human nature is so destructive? What is behind all those different religions? War? Greed? Capitalism versus Socialism?

This is the book to read. It is straight anthropology. Take notes while you read and review, and then read it again. I started this book in 1999, and finished in 2005. A complimentary read is The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.

jessica in chicago

M. Sarki says

<http://msarki.tumblr.com/post/7042590...>

Nearing his own end Ernest Becker expressed that he had no intention of this book ever being published. After being diagnosed with a terminal disease he decided he had nothing more to say on the subject. But his survivors decided not to honor his wishes. This happens too often to many good writers. And it is evil. It is the only issue I have with this book. His master work *The Denial of Death* did much to cement his reputation as one of the premier thinkers in modern psychology. *Escape from Evil* is still worth reading and is recommended as a way to perhaps consider another idea contrary to what you get from any religion, dictator, or state-sponsored entity. The book did give me cause to consider again my own state of affairs and to reason why it is I am the way I am these days instead of who I was in years past.

I often wonder why I am no longer given to the very hardest feelings of lust, envy, greed, and anger. It is not that I no longer have these feelings, I do, but not to the degree I used to and certainly not in the fitful state that might compel me to act on them. We humans are a living history of natural destruction and there is nothing in the cards to bet against our grave and tragic continuance of it. Everything visible in the world today indicates to me that nothing much has changed. The most specific reason that I myself no longer harbor any of these feelings enough to do damage to my neighbor, or even a loved one, has in fact nothing to do with a religious conversion or newfound knowledge and understanding regarding the error of my ways. I credit my relief to my own surrendering to, and self-examination of, all my impulses including the delicious ones as well as the maniacal disturbances threatening to manifest themselves in not so glorified ways. Because I no longer suppress these impulses I am able to examine them in light of an understanding wife, a fellow collaborator in my thinking, relevant literature and study, as well as my own fruitful imagination and exuberant gifts for fantasy. We have given ourselves permission to divulge our feelings and to realize them all by thinking entirely through them instead of acting them out as others among us have done so dangerously. Not only has the exercise made my wife and I more intimate but it also has brought relief to much of what has obsessed at least myself for many years.

Being an artist helps. By writing honestly about whatever it is that makes the most demands on me I am better able to enjoy some sort of equilibrium in the very unstable world we live in. The fact that we all want more, and what is beyond us, keeps the pressure on to continue to eliminate one-by-one the impulses that occur religiously among all of us. And those of us who safely deny these impulses are either satisfied by the promises of one's religious beliefs or numbed by some addictive behavior that can only harm us in the end. Instead, by accepting these wide-ranging impulses I, in essence, have chosen the disease instead of the cure. But the ripe fullness of each impulse in itself pleases me, and I learn just how and what it is that makes me tick.

The more I indulge myself in these exciting fantasies the more equipped I am to recognize which ones are good for me and which ones are bad. In the long run suppressing them only creates a certain pain I cannot escape from and subsequently less life due to a sort of dying. Better to live and make my share of mistakes than to remain immobile as if frozen to death on a stake. There are no fires of hell then certain to come and save me. In all matters of aggression my sword is actually my word. And though the book offers little hope to the human condition there remains an underlying urgency for continuing the pleasure for discovering new seas in which a frightened toe might take that plunge and courageously decide to really swim.

Tomi-Ann says

We are not evil because we have an "instinct" to be, as Freud said, but because we're the only animal on this planet that knows it's going to die. And so we engage in "immortality projects", including clobbering people who don't subscribe to our view of the world, all in the name of "purity" and goodness. This is a great companion piece to Becker's Pulitzer Prize winning "Denial of Death". A closer look at the specific question of why humans do such awful things.

Ben says

This book spawns a theory of social psychology. It is both a devastating critique of ideology yet beautiful argument for it. All culture is fundamentally contrived... Becker never finished this book himself, it was released posthumously by his wife after she found the manuscript hidden away in his desk- so Escape from Evil lacks a bit of the nuance of The Denial of Death- yet Becker writes more candidly in what might be considered his magnum opus. Escape From Evil is a cry for a unifying theory of society and lays its groundwork. Sure to please no one firmly embedded in an ideological camp; the science of society must go more slowly and modestly than advocated by Rousseau and Marx...

... "if we can no longer live the great symbolisms of the sacred in accordance with the original belief in them, we can, we modern men, aim at a second naivete in and through criticism." -Ricoeur
Paradigm shift.

Jafar says

This book is a continuation of *The Denial of Death*. While that book greatly impressed me, this one made me pause. Too much reflection and armchair philosophizing based on dubious psychoanalytical principles can end up giving you an odd perspective of evil. It seems that to Becker everything is about trying to transcend death and give meaning to life and make the world as perfect as the one in our imagination; it's all heroism and symbolism. I'm sure this is not what Becker wanted to say, but you get the impression that evil is almost noble because man resorts to it in his effort to overcome his mortality and insignificance.

Well, as Hannah Arendt said, evil can often be quite banal. Evolutionary psychology seems very unsophisticated compared to the highbrow ideas in this book, but it's the sort of common sense analysis that escaped Becker in his high-mindedness. It's not all heroism and symbolism and transcending death. It can be as banal as amassing resources and power to have a more comfortable life and gain access to more food and mates.

Zinnia Zhang says

The Devil's Advocate Morris West

Matt says

I love Ernest Becker. I believe he offers a perspective on social justice, and our own mortality that is intimately connected to our times. In *Escape from Evil* he examines the ways which Evil occurs in the world. He believes that evil occurs because one is attempting to be great, to be powerful, and to transcend their mortality by investing in the larger collective good, a good that requires heroes. It is a penetrating analysis, and I believe is very timely as the US begins to (hopefully) have ongoing discussion of income inequality. Personally, I do not believe that we can make lasting and significant strides towards true social justice without understanding and embracing Becker's ideas.

Jan Goericke says

Two of the most profound books I have read in remembrance. These existentialist books started to explain to me the human experience: our dualism of being an animal and a symbolic (conscious) creature, the beauty and need for idealistic belief systems (e.g., religions, state, culture, etc.), the interconnection of science (psychology, philosophy, theology, etc.), and "evil" as integral consequence of the human experience. A surprisingly fun and accessible read - highly recommended.

Chaim says

I just finished reading this and my head feels like it's ready to explode. There's just so much here. Only 170 pages but so much to digest.

Something that really surprised me: Becker's advocacy of religion. He rejects organized religion, noting all the evil it's done, especially all it's done to advocate war, but he more or less states towards the end of the book that only belief in the supernatural (which, of course, can mean many different things) can save humanity. Like psychoanalysis, he writes, (good) religion has the goal of revealing our true nature to ourselves. "Both religion and psychoanalysis have discovered the same source of illusion: the fear of death which cripples life. Also religion has the same difficult mission as Freud: to overcome the fear of self-knowledge" (163).

But unlike psychoanalysis, unlike anything else, Becker continues, religion is able to give us hope against death. Also unlike anything else, religion is able to truly make us feel that our guilt has been expiated. "Moral dependence--guilt—is a natural motive of the human condition and has to be absolve from something beyond oneself." Humans, Becker writes, will always have "a need for a 'beyond' on which to base the meaning of their lives" (162).

Why do people not talk more about Becker's very positive view of religion? In "Flight from Death," for example, we're lead to believe that all grown-ups (Becker included) recognize that there is no god and that the only reasonable thing to do is face the coming oblivion w/ courage. This might be true; there might be no god, but it needs to be emphasized that Becker personally advocated belief.

ehk2 says

"the ideology of modern commercialism has unleashed a life of invidious comparison unprecedented in history ... modern man cannot endure economic equality because he has no faith in self-transcendent, otherworldly immortality symbols; visible physical worth is the only thing he has to give him eternal life. No wonder that people segregate themselves with such consuming dedication, that specialness is so much a fight to the death ... He dies when his little symbols of specialness die." (p.85)

"But evil is not banal as Arendt claimed: evil rests on the passionate person motive to perpetuate oneself, and for each individual this is literally a life-and-death matter for which any sacrifice is not too great, provided it is the sacrifice of someone else and provided that the leader and the group approve of it"

"... It is an all-consuming activity to make the world conform to our desires ... Man is an animal who has to live in a lie in order to live at all" (p.122)

Wayne says

"The tragedy of evolution is that it created a limited animal with unlimited horizons . . . It seems that the experiment of man may well prove to be an evolutionary dead end, an impossible animal - one who, individually, needs for healthy action the very conduct that, on a general level, is destructive to him. It is maddeningly perverse,"

Humanity is caught in the greatest goof of all time.

Reading Becker is a gut-punch - but a necessary one!
