Ernest Becker and the Psychology of World Views

by Eugene Webb

University of Washington

Abstract: Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczyinski offer experimental confirmation for Ernest Becker's claim that the fear of death is a powerful unconscious motive producing polarized worldviews and scapegoating. Their suggestion that their findings also prove Freud's theory of repression, with worldviews as its irrational products, is questionable, although Becker's own statements about worldviews as "illusions" seem to invite such interpretation. Their basic theory does not depend on this, and abandoning it would enable them to take better advantage of their finding that worldviews incorporating the values of rationality and tolerance tend to counteract polarization effects.

Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczyinski share Ernest Becker's belief that the task of social science is to foster cultural world views that "maximize opportunities for individual growth and development while minimizing the conflicts that historically occur as a result of collisions between different death-denying visions of reality." They also share his belief that the central problem with cultural world views is the danger of polarization—that is, their tendency to divide the world up into a "their" side and an "our" side, a side of demonic evil and a side of the angels. I am pleased to have been invited to comment on their discussion of their research in "Tales From the Crypt" because I too share their concern about the importance and possible dangerousness of world views and because I think their experimental studies of the empirical basis of Becker's analysis of human psychology make

an important contribution to understanding these matters. I also welcome the opportunity their essay offers for the clarification of some issues they bring up in their analyses of the implications of their findings. These are issues that I believe are important, and it is good that they have raised them—although in some cases I must differ regarding their interpretations.

I would like to begin with a quick overview of Becker's (and the article authors') basic ideas, then discuss what I think are some of the problematic or ambiguous aspects of these. Then, in whatever space may be left, I will try to place Becker's contribution to the psychology of world views in a larger framework that includes other approaches, particularly those of mimetic and developmental psychology.

The Thought of Ernest Becker

As the authors remind us, Becker said that human beings have evolved to be self-conscious, but this capacity has brought with it the awareness of possibility and futurity and therefore of possible death. Following such revisionist Freudians as Otto Rank and Gregory Zilboorg, Becker thought that awareness of the possibility of death would produce crippling fear if it remained constantly in the forefront of attention. As he put it in *The Denial of Death*, "...the fear of death must be present behind all our normal functioning, in order for the organism to be armed toward self-preservation. But the fear of death cannot be present constantly in one's mental functioning, else the organism could not function" (Becker 1973, 16). It therefore must be "repressed," which means (Becker quotes Zilboorg) "more than to put away and to forget that which was put away and the place where we put it. It means also to maintain a constant psychological effort to keep the lid on and inwardly never relax our watchfulness" (17).

In their analysis of Becker's thought the authors focus on cultural world views and self-esteem as the principal instruments people use to keep the terror of death at bay. In *The Denial of Death* Becker used the term "hero project" for both of these together. "Society

itself is a codified hero system," he says there, "which means that society everywhere is a living myth of the significance of human life, a defiant creation of meaning" (7). Self-esteem (success in the hero project) depends upon a heroic enterprise to carry out, which in turn means that there must be a world view that embraces heroic values and interprets the cosmos as a theater for heroic action.

Becker goes on to say there that this means "[e]very society is thus a 'religion' whether it thinks so or not..."—a point on which the authors agree, since, as they put it, there is no way unambiguously to confirm the veracity of a world view, and it must therefore be held on faith. There is an important truth in this, I think, and it is certainly a reason why Becker's thought should be of interest to readers of *Zygon*. The article authors and Becker both take a further step, however, when they equate world view with "illusion." The authors say that "culture consists of shared illusions that serve to ameliorate anxiety," and Becker himself says, "Each historical society...is a hopeful mystification or a determined lie" (Becker 1975, 124). That something cannot be verified with unambiguous proof does not, however, necessarily mean it is illusory. This is a point I will have to return to later, since it represents an important problem area in Becker's thought as well as that of the terror management theorists.

To proceed, however, with Becker's basic ideas, he goes on from the statement just quoted to say, "If each historical society is in some ways a lie or a mystification, the study of society becomes the revelation of the lie. The comparative study of society becomes the assessment of how high are the costs of this lie" (125). Here is where the problem of polarization comes in: "These costs can be tallied in roughly two ways," he says, "in terms of the tyranny practiced within the society, and in terms of the victimage practiced against aliens or 'enemies' outside it." This problem, victimization and scapegoating, became the focus of his last book, *Escape From Evil*. At the beginning of that he said his previous

works "did not take sufficient account of truly vicious human behavior" and that in this one he would "attempt to show that man's natural and inevitable urge to deny mortality and achieve a heroic self-image are the root causes of human evil" (1975, xvii). He did not cease to believe that effective cultural hero projects remain an important need, but the last book showed a greatly increased sensitivity to their possible costs and destructiveness:

> If you talk about heroics that cost mountains of human life, you have to find out why such heroics are practiced in a given social system: who is scapegoating whom, what social classes are excluded from heroism, what there is in the social structure that drives the society blindly to self-destructive heroics, etc. Not only that, but you have to actually set up some kind of liberating ideal, some kind of life-giving alternative to the thoughtless and destructive heroism; you have to begin to scheme to give to man an opportunity for heroic victory that is not a simple reflex of narcissistic scapegoating. (126)

Becker's explanation of the reason for scapegoating and the polarized vision it expresses is psychoanalytic (drawing more on Jung than on Freud): he speaks of "projection of the shadow," that is, of aspects of oneself that one does not wish to recognize (mortality, threats to self-esteem, etc.), and says, "It is precisely the split-off sense of inferiority and animality which is projected onto the scapegoat and then destroyed symbolically with him" (95).

The article authors' explanation for such polarization places the emphasis more on sociology. Referring to the thought of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), they say that "the mere existence of others who have radically different beliefs about the nature of reality poses an explicit challenge to the claims of absolute truth made on behalf of one's own point of view, thus undermining the anxiety-buffering capacity of that world view." This is a good point, and it is certainly in accord with Becker's insistence in *Denial of Death* on the importance of social support for belief in the hero system: "...man simply cannot justify his own heroism; he cannot fit himself into his own cosmic plan and make it believable" (1973, 196). He even describes neurosis as rooted in "the failure to be consoled by shared illusions"

(197).

Certainly Becker would have considered both explanations pertinent, even if he himself placed more emphasis on the psychoanalytic. Another psychoanalytic idea that he also found pertinent to the problem of polarization is transference, a concept that the terror management theorists have not yet focused on in their experimental program, but one that Becker considered absolutely central to numerous issues. Transference is a concept Freud developed to explain the behavior he observed in his patients when they alternately either deified or demonized him, treating him as though he had immense power for either good or harm toward them. These two patterns Freud termed "negative" and "positive" transference. In Becker's framework, scapegoating could be described as a sort of negative transference, while the adulation of heroic leaders in an attempt to participate in their heroic stature would be positive transference.

"Gradually," says Becker, "through the works of Adler, Rank, Fromm, Jung, and others, we have seen a shift to a more comprehensive view of transference, building on Freud. So that today we can say that transference is a reflex of the fatality of the human condition. Transference to a powerful other takes care of the overwhelmingness of the universe. Transference to a powerful other handles the fear of life and death" (1975, 127). But it does not handle it well: "In the negative transference the object becomes the focalization of terror, but now experienced as evil and constraint" (1973, 146), the scapegoat for all our fears and vulnerability. The positive transference object—the good doctor, the heroic leader— may offer us comfort, but at the cost of reducing us to infantilism and virtual bondage: "The transference object becomes the focus of the problem of one's freedom because one is compulsively dependent on it; it sums up all other natural dependencies and emotions" (Ibid.).

It is in connection with the concept of transference that the significance of religion for

Becker's thought becomes clear. This is much more than a matter of world views being religious because they involve faith. Rather, all of life involves a kind of religiousness, for good or ill, because it elicits our transferences, leading us to attribute god-like stature to figures who hold us in fascination. Transference "takes natural awe and terror and focusses them on individual beings," which allows us "to find the power and horror all in one place instead of diffused throughout a chaotic universe" (1973, 145). But in doing so it falsifies our lives and constricts us. Transference is an attempt to banish anxiety from consciousness, and "when you set up your perception-action world to eliminate what is basic to it (anxiety), then you fundamentally falsify it" (142). Moreover, to the extent that it is successful, it reduces us to automatisms: "What makes transference heroics demeaning is that the process is unconscious and reflexive, not fully in one's control" (156).

But if transference is so powerful a force in human life, what could make freedom and authenticity of existence possible? Becker's answer is religion. Religion—at least at its best and when it is not itself subjection to some charismatic figure—has the power to liberate us from finite fascinations. "Religion," says Becker, "answers directly to the problem of transference by expanding awe and terror to the cosmos where they belong" (202). This has the effect of freeing us for authentic existence: "The personality can truly begin to emerge in religion because God, as an abstraction, does not oppose the individual as others do, but instead provides the individual with all the powers necessary for independent self-justification" (Ibid.). The crucial question for psychological and spiritual growth, therefore, is, "What kind of beyond does this person try to expand in; and how much individuation does he achieve in it?" (170). Becker agrees with Rank and Kierkegaard that true fulfillment lies in reaching for "the highest beyond of religion" (174) not easy beyonds that are close to hand, such as transference objects.

The Significance of the Experimental Findings

These, then, are the main points of Becker's thought. What do the experimental studies of the terror management theorists contribute to Becker's project? It seems to me they make two important contributions. One is experimental confirmation that death-anxiety is a powerful psychological force that pervades our experience and influences our thinking and behavior even when we are not conscious of it. The authors' essay in the present issue describes some of these, but there are many others as well described in other articles by the same authors . Becker would have welcomed this confirmation and considered it important; in fact he appealed himself to experiments conducted in the 1960s using galvanic skin responses to detect repressed fear of death (1973, 21 and 288, n. 29). The other contribution is that the experiments developed by Solomon and his colleagues and reported here and in their other publications deal with many additional effects that show a variety of ways in which death fear shapes our thinking and behavior. By this they extend Becker's theory along lines that may have been implied in it but were not fully explicit.

For example, I mentioned above that Becker's own explanation of the reason for scapegoating and the polarized vision it expresses was in terms of the Jungian idea of "projection of the shadow." The article authors' explanation, on the other hand, is in terms of the sociology of knowledge as analyzed by Berger and Luckmann, and their experiments support this emphasis. Berger and Luckmann explain the power of the need for social confirmation on the ground that most of what people believe in any given society (their cultural world view) is made up not of knowledge in the strict sense (that is, knowledge based on methodical procedures of observation, interpretation, and verification) but of "knowledge" in a phenomenological sense. As Berger phrases it in *The Sacred Canopy*, this is " the cognitive and normative edifice that passes for 'knowledge' in a given society" (Berger 1967, 20). It is not *known* as true (rationally), but only *perceived* as true (phenomenologically). That is, it is taken for true, not on the basis that it can stand up to critical inquiry but only that it

somehow feels right because it is what "everyone" thinks. It is, in Berger's and Luckmann's terms, a social "objectivation" that the members of society "internalize," and belief is a function of the strength of this internalization.

It is because it must be internalized that the world view must be cultural. As Berger explains it:

> Man's world-building activity is always a collective enterprise. Man's internal appropriation of a world must also take place in a collectivity....the internalization of a world is dependent on society...because...man is incapable of conceiving of his experience in a comprehensively meaningful way unless such a conception is transmitted to him by means of social processes....The world is built up in the consciousness of the individual by conversation with significant others (such as parents, teachers, "peers"). The world is maintained as subjective reality by the same sort of conversation....If such conversation is disrupted...the world begins to totter, to lose its subjective plausibility. (1967, 16–17)

One might wonder, of course, why this is true. The terror management theorists do not *explain* it anymore than do the sociologists of knowledge; they only observe the effect and take it for granted. They are justified in doing so, I think, but the lack of an explanation suggests that there must be other basic psychological motives besides those terror management theory takes account of. This is a point I will come back to later.

Another point connected with this need for social confirmation of one's world view is the tendency of people under stress to form "in" groups and "out" groups, as the article authors demonstrated in the case of subjects who were artificially assigned to Klee- or Kandinsky-favoring groups and who, after mortality salience, showed exaggerated affection for members of their own group. That this could happen seems implied by Becker's thought, but the present research makes it explicit and further emphasizes the social side of mortality salience phenomena as compared with the more individualistic emphasis (in terms of projection) that Becker drew from psychoanalytic tradition.

That mortality salience leads to negative attitudes and even aggressiveness toward representatives of other world views would not be a surprise to Becker, but he would have welcomed the specificity on this point of some findings by the same authors reported in Greenberg, et al. (in press). Mortality salience was found to increase prejudice against foreigners generally as well as against anyone who could be perceived as advocating or even believing in a competing world view. For example, an experiment in Alabama found that mortality salience engendered anti-semitism among Christian subjects. Another study found that it increased the extent of American college students' agreement that "the Holocaust in Nazi Germany was God's punishment for the Jews." Another found that students shown graphic videos of automobile accident scenes (to sensitize them to their own mortality) and then asked to adjudicate responsibility and set damage awards in hypothetical accident cases were more severe if they thought the car was Japanese than if it was American. Still another found that German students with heightened mortality salience wanted to sit farther away from Turks.

Another, perhaps more surprising, finding was that not only did mortality salience reinforce stereotypes about people not in one's own group, but it also led subjects to prefer those who fitted the stereotype over those who violated it, even when the stereotype depicted the other as potentially dangerous and the counter-stereotypic example would have seemed less so. This clearly indicates that under conditions of mortality salience one reaches reflexively for support for one's world view; stereotypes, positive or negative, form a part of the world view, and evidently the reflexive response is to bolster that, even if a revision might actually offer greater comfort.

Something more encouraging, on the other hand, is the finding in other experiments that world views in which tolerance is a central value made derogation effects and aggression less likely—though the opposite was also true: where rigid adherence and obedience to authority

is a central value, it made them *more* likely. Since mortality salience not only makes one defensive of one's world view but also stimulates an effort to meet its standards of value, when those include tolerance and open-mindedness these are increased rather than diminished by reminders of death. Students who believed prejudice was wrong, for example, were actually rendered less prejudiced by mortality salience.

Another finding of great possible relevance to an interest in the possibility of less dangerous world views was that mortality salience effects were affected by the mode of thinking the subjects were encouraged or induced to employ. Stimulated by the distinction in cognitive experiential self theory (Epstein 1994) between rational and experiential thought as two fundamentally different modes of thinking, the terror management theorists developed experiments to see whether the mode of thinking would make a difference. Rational thinking is described by Epstein as a "deliberative, effortful, abstract system that operates primarily in the medium of language" (Epstein 1994, 715). The experiential system, on the other hand, is "a crude system that automatically, rapidly, effortlessly, and efficiently processes information" (715) and "is experienced passively and preconsciously" (711); its results are apprehended as self-evidently valid, not as inferences. The experiential is the system that tends to be dominant in most circumstances, since it is both easier and quicker. Their important experimental finding was that mortality salience effects were produced only in subjects thinking in the experiential, not in the rational mode.

In general, their findings suggest that if one is interested in developing less dangerous world views, it will help if these incorporate the values of rational thinking, open-mindedness, tolerance, respect for the rights of others, and benevolence—especially since mortality salience effects not only include attempts to defend one's cultural world view but also to live up to the values it enshrines. One might think in this connection of the Roman Catholic theologian Bernard Lonergan's formulation of what he called the "transcendental

imperatives" of his own world view: "be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, be responsible, be loving, develop and, if necessary, change" (as phrased in Tracy 1970, 4).

But these findings also suggest the dangerousness of cultural world views that discourage rationality in favor of experiential thinking, unthinking obedience to authority and tradition, and hostility toward people and groups with different views. They suggest reasons why some religious or political leaders might be tempted to encourage the latter and to manipulate their followers by playing on their fear of mortal dangers from people who think differently. For a religious or political Macchiavellian this could be very useful knowledge, and it is hardly necessary to list examples of some who seem to have intuited this and put it to effective use.

A corollary implication of these findings therefore also seems to be that the social strength of a cultural world view and its institutions cannot be a criterion of its ultimate value, since an authoritarian, illiberal, anti-rationalist world view can be expected to be more successful at stimulating fervent devotion and strong adherence than one that encourages reflectiveness and open-mindedness. Or to put it the other way around, a cultural or religious organization that wants to encourage the latter qualities may have to be willing to sacrifice organizational strength for their sake.

Another interesting finding from the experiments is that reminders of mortality are most effective at producing mortality salience effects when they are indirect and subtle, and symbolic terror management defenses, such as increased defense of the cultural world view, occur only when awareness of mortality is highly accessible but not focal. This suggests that perhaps in addition to Becker we should heed Martin Heidegger's claim that human beings tend to flee from the thought of their own death into a diminished consciousness and that to live authentically, one should face death consciously and continuously.

Problematic Issues and Ambiguities

The experimental results described above certainly seem to offer substantial confirmation

for Becker's theory that fear of death is a fundamental human motive and that repression of death anxiety can make human beings more dangerous in the way they relate to their world views and use those against each other. One might wonder, however, whether these results also confirm, as the article authors claim, Sigmund Freud's theory about an unconscious mind that houses repressed contents, transforms them, and then delivers them to the surface again in disguise as neurotic symptoms. I find this dubious but I also think terror management theory as they conceive it does not really depend on this claim.

Freud's theory of repression supposed that there is an unconscious mind which engages in prolonged and elaborate reorganization of repressed contents and that also contains, deeply buried beneath these distortions, a permanent and pristine record of all the original experiences that it hides by these devices. He assumed that the symptoms would vanish with the uncovering of this original nucleus of memory. The principal object of repression, and also the principal psychological motive, according to Freud's original theory, was Eros or sexual libido. In his later thought he also posited one additional major motive and object of repression: Thanatos or the death wish. He came eventually to see human life as a tug of war between these two major, conflicting motives: Eros and Thanatos.

The argument of the article authors that their research proves Freud's theory of repression seems ambiguous at best. For example, the authors present as Freudian the proposition that "psychological defenses can and do occur unconsciously." This is not, however, a necessarily Freudian idea; one can accept that there are unconscious mental processes, and many psychologists do, without accepting the specifically Freudian interpretation of what they involve. Moreover, the evidence the authors offer for this supposedly Freudian proposition— the effect of subliminal priming with the word *death*, which they found led to "an immediate increase in death-word accessibility and in worldview defense"— need not be interpreted in a Freudian way. In fact, other experiments using subliminal priming suggest its unconscious

effects are very simple, involving no complex unconscious mental processing of the sort Freud supposed (Greenwald, Draine, and Abrams. 1996). One of the researchers involved, Anthony G. Greenwald, stated in an interview that whereas Freud assumed the unconscious is a very smart and powerful entity, his own research suggests that unconscious cognition is simply a "dumb but fast processor that scans sensory input and directs attention" (Schwarz 1996, 2). In a further commentary published on his World Wide Web page[1] Greenwald said:

> In our research, the unconscious mind appears to work much more simply than was theorized by Sigmund Freud.... Freud saw the unconscious mind as capable of powerful and complex mental operations. He believed that the unconscious mind guided social behavior and managed complicated dream symbolism—all of this while protecting the conscious mind from discovering painful psychosexual truths. Our research reveals, instead, an unconscious mind that is limited to some very simple achievements.

Nor do the article authors' claims on behalf of Freudian theory have any real bearing on Becker. Despite his many references to Freud, Becker was not a Freudian. In fact, he explicitly rejected Freud's libido theory, saying, "Consciousness of death is the primary repression, not sexuality" (1973, 96). As for Freud's theory of a death instinct, Becker said it could be "relegated to the dust bin of history" (99). His own treatment of the death theme is actually quite the opposite of that of Freud, whose Thanatos Becker saw as an attempt to mask the anxiety of death by interpreting death as a positive motive parallel to the sex drive rather than as an object of aversion and a source of terror: "The fiction of death as an 'instinct'," he said, "allowed Freud to keep the terror of death outside his formulations..." (99).

In sum the attempt to prove Freudian theory in connection with Becker seems not only questionable but also beside the point. Becker's own theory as well as that of the terror management theorists depends only on the supposition that there is an ever present,

---

[1] http://weber.u.washington.edu/ agg.

virtually instinctive fear of death, which one unconsciously works to keep from coming too forcefully into focal awareness. This repression of the fear of death does not require anything as elaborate in the way of memory and transformation as Freud supposed.

What is genuinely interesting, however, about the effort of the article authors to link Becker with Freud is that it brings to the fore an important ambiguity in Becker's own thought—the question of what it means for him (and them) to say that world views are "illusions." Becker said himself that "life is possible only with illusions" (1973, 189), and, as I mentioned earlier, he warned against "the failure to be consoled by shared illusions" (1973, 197), by which he clearly meant cultural world views. Even if he later warned that we need to be wary of "life-enhancing illusions" (1975, 159) lest they lead to scapegoating, the idea of the need for a Nietzschean "vital lie" was central to his thought. He never, however, went into what this might mean from the point of view of epistemology and cognitional theory, and he consequently left his readers in something of a bind—in fact two binds. The first is that if you don't find an illusion to believe in, you will fall victim to terror, but if you do believe in it, there is a good chance you will fall into scapegoating. Even more of a bind is the second: that after reading Becker you have to try to believe in a "life-enhancing illusion" even though he has told you it can only be an illusion. It sounds as if only a certain degree of stupidity will save us, but unless good luck leads us into a benign stupidity we are likely to become dangerous to our neighbors.

Fortunately the authors' experimental findings point beyond the first bind, since they found that encouraging a rational mode of thinking prevents the mortality salience effects that might be dangerous. They also found that when a world view contains liberal values the reaction they call worldview defense will lead its adherents to try to be even more tolerant and less aggressive than they would be otherwise. So it sounds as if there may be hope: a world view that embraced the values of both rational thinking and also civil behavior and

tolerance would provide a first line of defense with rational thinking, and if one should fall short of that, then the irrational reaction would be to strive even harder to be civil and tolerant.

Unfortunately, however, the authors use their interpretation of Freud to make the second bind even worse than Becker left it. Referring to Freud's idea that whatever is repressed is "transformed" by the mechanisms of the unconscious mind in order to let it get past the "gatekeeper" and resurface as "the return of the repressed" in the form of a symptom, they tell us that "[t]he desire for immortality instigated by this repressed fear is 'transformed' and represented in consciousness as the cultural worldview." That is, a cultural world view is a neurotic symptom, an irrational product of an irrational process, and to believe in it would be to surrender to irrationality. An effort to think carefully and critically, on the other hand, by preventing such surrender, would presumably leave one "riddled with abject terror."

There is a bracing air of tragic heroism about all this, but unfortunately also more than a hint of muddle. Fortunately, however, the muddle is quite unnecessary, since it can be removed by clarification. Its root seems to lie in a positivistic epistemology that has long since fallen out of favor among philosophers but still lingers here and there in the social sciences. Since space is short, I will have to make the analysis brief. The fundamental premise of what seems to be Becker's and the article authors' positivism is the idea that genuine knowledge is strictly empirical. Any proposition that does not refer directly to sensory experience is only an interpretation, and interpretations are only imaginative constructions and therefore essentially fanciful. Each step one takes away from direct sensory observation is therefore a step into "illusion."

What is wrong with this? It is based on a fundamental assumption that is simply false: that genuine knowledge does not involve interpretation and that any purported knowledge that does involve it is not knowledge but illusion. It is true that interpretations are imagina-

tive constructions. And it is true that all propositions that go beyond reference to sensory observation involve interpretation. But only a strict empiricism would claim that simple sensory observation is knowledge in the proper sense. There are various other ways of thinking than this, among them idealism and critical realism. Personally I favor the critical realist position, which is that sense data are strictly speaking simply experience and serve only as the elementary building blocks of knowledge, which is built up of experiential data, interpretation, and critical reflection on the adequacy of the interpretation as a construing of the data (Webb 1988, 57–79). An interpretation can be judged adequate to the extent that it takes account of the relevant data. And it is only with this judgment that one arrives at what can properly be called knowledge.

Since these are much disputed matters, I can hardly hope to convert any positivist reader with the above paragraph, but I hope anyone can see that the positivist epistemology will inevitably lead to the kind of cognitive bind Becker and the terror management theorists seem to have fallen into. I hope also that ,whether or not one agrees with the critical realist theory of knowledge, it is clear that it does not lead to such a bind. If interpretation is an imaginative activity that tries out possible construings of experiential data, and if the adequacy of interpretation is judged in terms of how well it manages to incorporate coherently the relevant data into its constructions, then interpretation is an integral part of knowledge as such, not a deviation from it into illusion.

And if this is the case, then world views need not be simply "shared illusions." They might be this, of course, if the people who build them up do not attend carefully to their actual experience and if they never reflect critically on how careful their interpretations are and whether other ways of construing their experience might be worth considering. But in a culture that values careful thought, as many do to some degree, there is no reason why world views might not be constructed that are relatively adequate. And in the knowledge

of contingent reality, there never can be more than relative adequacy anyway, since as time moves forward there will always be new experience that will need to be taken into account, and existing interpretations will consequently need to be modified or even sometimes radically reconstructed. This in fact is the very essence of a dynamic world view and the test of its superiority over a static one that would attempt to resist the pressure of changing reality and developing experience.

Perhaps the truth in both Freudian theory and the thought of Becker and the terror management theorists is that all human beings are subject to the impetus of fundamental motives that operate below the level of consciousness and that need to be taken account of as we construct and reflect critically on our world views. Freud's basic assumption, setting aside his particular ideas about repression and symptom formation, was that biological appetites move us and shape our thought in ways we do not always consciously recognize. Becker's was that the fear of death also moves us in such ways, stimulating us to cultural hero projects and also to scapegoating. Both also assumed that our attempt to avoid recognizing these unconscious motives makes them more dangerous to ourselves and others and that bringing them to light can make them less so. They disagree, of course, as to which motive is the most fundamental or the most important, but there is no reason there could not be more than one fundamental psychological motive, and there are still other theories about fundamental motives operating below the level of consciousness which may also be pertinent to the psychology of world views.

Other Possible Fundamental Psychological Motives

Unfortunately the space remaining will prevent more than briefly mentioning some other possibilities. One that seems important is imitation. There is a growing body of evidence that the tendency to imitate others is as fundamental a motive as any other. A great deal of empirical research has been done on this, some of which I described in an earlier book (Webb

1993, 214-217). Andrew N. Meltzoff and M. Keith. Moore, for example, have done many experiments establishing that infants come into the world with a capacity for imitation that begins operating as early as within the first hour after birth (1977, 1983a). They consider this "the starting point of infant psychological development" (1983a, 708) and "an important building block for subsequent social and cognitive development" (1989, 954). Their recent research has followed this up by studying the ways infant imitation of the acts of others is integral to their forming an understanding of the world around them (Meltzoff and Moore 1992, 1994, 1995). Jean Piaget held that infants come to know things, in part, through acting on them; Meltzoff and Moore suggest that "[i]mitation is to understanding people as physical manipulation is to understanding things" (1994, 96) and that "infants see other people in terms of human acts and, in imitating them, intend to match these acts" (1995, 54).

Since this type of imitation is conscious—Meltzoff and Moore think "early imitation is a goal-directed, intentional activity" (1995, 51)—it may not seem to connect directly with the interest of Becker and the terror management theorists in unconscious motives. But if the motive to imitate is so basic that it begins to operate immediately after birth and continues to expand its scope throughout early life, this at least suggests the possibility that it might operate also below the level of consciousness.

There is another school of thought—mimetic psychology, inspired by the work of René Girard—that has formed around this idea, using the term *mimesis* to refer to a tendency to imitate unconsciously the subjective attitudes of others, and especially their desires. The most systematic effort to work out the implications of this for psychology is found in the writings of Jean-Michel Oughourlian, who refers to mimesis as the psychological equivalent of universal gravitation, describing it as a "natural force of cohesion, which alone grants access to the social, to language, to culture, and indeed to humanness itself" (1991, 2),

and leads as well to all the entanglements of rivalry and envy. The principal application of mimetic theory to anthropology and sociology is that of Girard himself, who developed a theory of the foundation of society in a primal act of scapegoating precipitated by mimesis, as the original proto-humans, imitating each other's desires and thus falling into murderous rivalry also fell into imitating hostility. According to Girard's hypothesis, the accident of two or more both fighting against a single victim would attract others, producing a "mimetic polarization of violence" which would unite the victimizers and produce peace, brotherhood and ultimately society as such (1987, 99 and 161). This clearly is pertinent to Becker's concern with scapegoating as a basic peril of social systems.

Quite apart from such speculations, however—which might be harder to test experimentally than the hypotheses of Becker—if imitation, conscious or unconscious, is a fundamental force in human psychology, then it could also be an answer to the question of why it is so difficult to believe in a world view without social support, as Berger and Luckmann remind us—or why "illusions" must be shared, as Becker put it. If mimesis is truly primitive, then it can be counted on to do its work in minds on every level of development, whereas rational thinking can only function in minds that have developed the capacity for it—and only in those when they are operating in the rational mode. For those who have not developed powers of critical reflection, mimesis will probably be the determining factor in judgment—and to the extent that this is the case, social world views may indeed be little else than shared illusions. But again, they need not be only that, and one of the values of the experimental findings of the article authors is to suggest, despite their own interpretation, that they may become more than that if they also incorporate rationality as a value.

But the ability to reason needs to be developed, and therefore a further consideration for the psychology of world views must be how development takes place. Karl Jaspers, who also shared Becker's belief that the fear of death was a fundamental force in psychology, suggested

in his pioneering *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* that development involves a gradual differentiation between the subjective pole of consciousness (our operative capacities and performances) and its objective pole (what we operate upon). A fully adequate psychology, says Jaspers, would see the subject-object relation in movement, and the best systematic ordering of world views would depict them as a developmental sequence (1960, 28).

This points toward the sort of philosophy of history that Eric Voegelin's thought exemplifies, since world views take shape historically in communities and their limits of development are largely set by the prevailing levels of psychological development among those who engage actively in intellectual and spiritual exploration. But it points equally toward the work of developmental psychologists, such as Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, and Robert Kegan. Piaget approached psychological development primarily as a matter of developing operative capacities which make it possible to work "transformations" on both mental and physical objects (1970, 14–15). More recently Robert Kegan, building on Piaget, has discussed psychological development as proceeding through an invariant sequence of differentiations in which a person who was previously "embedded" in some feature of subjectivity (such as impulses, desires, feelings, or conventions) becomes differentiated from it so that what was experienced as simply one with his or her being (that is, subjective) becomes an object for contemplation and regulation. (A child of six or seven, for example, who previously was simply governed by impulses begins to develop the ability to step back from the impulse of the moment and to think about desire as a matter of enduring needs and dispositions that may be satisfied more effectively through control of impulse.) Such differentiation will bring with it a corresponding alteration of world view.

One of the great merits of the article authors is that they not only admit the relevance of such further considerations but invite them (Greenberg, et al., in press). It is a field of study that contains rich possibilities.

REFERENCES

Becker, Ernest. 1973 *The Denial of Death.* New York: The Free Press.

———. 1975 *Escape From Evil.* New York: The Free Press.

Berger, Peter L. 1967 *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann. 1966 *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Epstein, S. 1994 "Integration of the Cognitive and the Psychodynamic Unconscious." *American Psychologist*, 49: 709–724.

Girard, René. 1987 With Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort. *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World.* Translated by Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., and Pyszczynski, T.. (In press) "Terror Management Theory of Self Esteem and Cultural World Views: Empirical Assessments and Conceptual Refinements." In M. P. Zanna, ed., *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 29.

Greenwald, Anthony G., Sean C. Draine, and Richard L. Abrams. 1996 "Three Cognitive Markers of Unconscious Semantic Activation," *Science*, 273: 1699–1702.

Jaspers, Karl. 1960 [1919, 5th edition] *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen.* Berlin: Springer Verlag.

Kegan, Robert. 1982 *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP.

———. 1994 *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP.

Kohlberg, Lawrence. 1981 *Essays on Moral Develoment*, vol. I: *The Philosophy of Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice.* San Francisco: Harper and Row.

———. 1984 *Essays on Moral Develoment*, vol. II: *The Psychology of Moral Development: The Nature and Validity of Moral Stages.* San Francisco: Harper and Row.

Meltzoff, Andrew N. and M. Keith. Moore. 1977 "Imitation of facial and Manual Gestures by Human Neonates." *Science*, 198 (7 October): 75–78.

———. 1983a "Newborn Infants Imitate Adult Facial Gestures." *Child Development*, 54: 702–709.

———. 1989 "Imitation in Newborn Infants: Exploring the Range of Gestures Imitated and the Underlying Mechanisms." *Developmental Psychology*, 25, no. 6: 954–962.

———. 1992 "Early Imitation Within a Functional Framework: The Importance of Person Identity, Movement, and Development." *Infant Behavior and Development*, 15: 470–505.

———. 1994 "Imitation, Memory, and the Representation of Persons." *Infant Behavior and Development*, 17: 83–99.

———. 1995 "Infants' Understanding of People and Things: From Body Imitation to Folk Psychology." In *The Body and the Self.* Edited by José Luis Bermúdez, Anthony Marcel, and Naomi Eilan. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, pp. 43–69.

Oughourlian, Jean-Michel. ([1982] 1991) *The Puppet of Desire: The Psychology of Possession, Hysteria and Hypnosis.* Translated with an introduction by Eugene Webb. Stanford University Press

Piaget, Jean. *Genetic Epistemology.* 1970 New York: Columbia University Press.

Schwarz, Joel. 1996 "Subliminal Doesn't Sell." *University Week* (University of Washington), Oct. 24, p. 2.

Tracy, David. 1970 *The Achievement of Bernard Lonergan.* NY: Herder and Herder.

Voegelin, Eric. *Order and History.* 5 vols. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956–1987.

Webb, Eugene. 1988 *Philosophers of Consciousness: Polanyi,Lonergan, Voegelin, Ricoeur,*

Girard, Kierkegaard. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press.

————. 1993 *The Self Between: From Freud to the New Social Psychology of France.* Seattle and London: University of Washington Press