

The Denial of Death in Technological Culturalism: The Drive To Be A Modern Hero

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Abstract: This paper looks into the works of anthropologist Ernest Becker, sociologist Jacques Ellul, and the field of terror management theory to understand how technological culture has developed from man's fear of death. It should be seen that the fear of death along with the obsession with technological efficiency leads to a world wherein most of people's drives are geared toward reaching an immortal state of being, either symbolically or materially. From this understanding we can then see how problems may arise in a technology world, of which I propose four.

Keywords: technology; death denial; culture; evil

Introduction

This paper seeks to find attitudes in technology that are in essence religious attitudes that function to deny mortality. From Becker, Solomon, et. al., and Ellul we know that religious attitudes play a fundamental role in historical progression. These religious attitudes, it seems, have transferred into the technological age, wherein, there is a technical structure that no human is not affected by.

This structure has leaders and followers, all of whom might differ in opinion, but agree on technology as a vital part of human progress.

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Drawing on Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death*, Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski's *The Worm at the Core*, and the detailed analysis of technology by Jacques Ellul, this paper seeks to reconcile certain features of religious attitude, death denial, and technology.

In the end, we should see that there are some major technological developments that pose issues to 'the good life' in general. These issues are both the nascent of individuals who yield immense power in access to material resources and fiat finances, as well as mass groups of people who follow and accept this formation of technological history.

Part I. - *The Work of Ernest Becker*

First, I would like to begin with Ernest Becker, famous for his Pulitzer Prize winning book *The Denial of Death* and *Escape from Evil*, the latter being a 'conclusion' of the former. In the first book, *The Denial of Death* Becker proposes that the basic drive in human life is to find a way to become immortal, either symbolically or materially, and with these desires coming from a way to uphold one's self-esteem and/or one's culture. The simple way of putting this is to become a 'hero' in one's own culture. Becker quotes William James: "mankind's common instinct for reality... has always held the world to be essentially a theatre for heroism." (Becker 1973, 1). To become a symbolically immortal hero is to become a cultural figure whose ideas remain locked into a cultural worldview that further perpetuates itself, obviously the larger the worldview the better, in this type of system, which includes many features in politics, technology, and economics. The second and lesser immortality is a material immortality, wherein the material gained through a lifetime can be passed on from generation to generation, thus solidifying that whoever has access to this material has power.

The typical way for a person to gain either type of immortality is based on their ability to become a hero in their cultural group — which is typically done by doing good for the group through creating new technologies, allocating material and land, or defeating enemies (who either risk the group identity through intellect or physical means).

In archaic and ancient times we can perhaps think of persons who were adept at hunting, building, and protecting the tribe — by my own

understanding this time would have almost a mixture of both symbolic and material immortality, that is, because symbols were often tied to material, the heroes of this time would not have earned their place through sheer intellectual means, but on upholding pseudo-scientific beliefs.

These beliefs, as Becker points out, are best understood in the concepts of 'microcosmization' and 'macrocosmization'. Microcosmization is the act of humanizing the "cosmos by projecting all imaginable earthly things onto heaven" (Becker 1973, 18), thus "intertwining his own destiny with the immortal stars". An example of this is in the constellations, that is projecting animals or shapes into the skies and the ideas of the zodiacs were built. Macrocosmization is the idea that "man simply takes himself or parts of himself and bows them up to cosmic importance". As Becker details: "the popular ancient pastime of entrail reading or liver reading: it was thought that the fate of the individual, or a whole army or a country, could be discerned in the liver, which was converted as a small-scale universe." (Becker 1973, 18).

After the agricultural revolution, larger and better established settlements that humans were living in allowed for more time to intellectualize and form culture and promote lasting rituals, both the way to deny death and the hero transformed. During this time we see some of the beginnings of the contemporary ways in which heroes could be formed through symbolic value. This is tied directly to the more sophisticated economic system that came with the agricultural revolution and the cities and civilizations that followed suit. Because class systems were starting to rise, there was not only more ability for the higher classes, those being mainly religious and nobility, to have material wealth to expand for their material immortality, but also material to build and create symbolic immortality, being in the forms of statues, mosaics, temples, coins, etc. However, the way to become a hero and deny death had not changed much, it was still based on the ability to uphold one's culture, which largely continues to this day. For Becker, what separates the modern world from the ancient world is what seems obvious: the rise of technology. This rise is largely placed in the renaissance and enlightenment period and is distinguished from the ancient period because of the revolution of the scientific method. As Becker says:

"In both periods men wanted to control life and death, but in the first period they had to rely on a non-machine technology to do it: ritual is

actually a preindustrial *technique of manufacture*; it doesn't create new things..." (Becker 1973, 8). "The second period began with the efflorescence of the modern machine age and the domination of the scientific method and world view." (Becker 1973, 8).

The difference between these two periods is that with machinery becoming an object (analogue technology), which has been over time accessible to all, or modern technology we have almost called it until the late 20th century; digital technology came about after World War two, and information technology came in the 2000s. I do not think there are better technologies to discuss other than the first and the third. Meaning analogue is null. But then we have the question: How can analogue for humans now?

While at this point my summary might seem like a basic introduction to how material and symbols through history merely contribute to human action, what is important to acknowledge at this point are that the two ways in one reaches immortality, either material or symbolic, which are again, from either a point of *self-esteem* or from reaffirming one's culture.

The problem we see from Becker is that regardless of these desires being malicious or well intentioned, the outcome is usually the same. For, as we can imagine, many of the heroes throughout history are heroes in their own cultural group, but an anti-hero to others and vice-versa. It is the desire to escape death that leads to an actual increase in the death of others — either malicious or well-intentioned. The consequences are the same — only leaving the immortal hero. A strange irony is that in an effort to escape death, while the individual hero might feel accomplished, for the forgotten peoples it is a very different story; and this is last sentence "while the hero might feel accomplished, for the forgotten peoples it is a different story" means also: the hero will never be satisfied, the forgotten people somehow are.

Part II. - *Terror Management Theory*

After Becker finished his works a group of young psychology students: Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski found his works and decided to dedicate major parts of their future to putting what Becker had proposed into experiments. What they found upholds much of

what Becker had understood in his more classical academic approach. This set the foundations for Terror Management Theory.

Terror Management Theory states that:

“Firstly, we need to sustain faith in our cultural worldview, which imbues our sense of reality with order, meaning, and permanence... Since we are constantly on the brink of realizing that existence is precarious, we cling to our culture’s governmental, educational, and religious institutions and rituals... The paths to literal and symbolic immortality laid out by our worldviews require us to feel that we are valuable members of our cultures. Hence, the second vital resource for managing terror is a feeling of personal significance, commonly, known as *self-esteem*.” (Soloman, e.a. 2010). Over the course of roughly more than two-hundred plus studies, and especially from the book *The Worm at the Core*, the overriding conclusion supports Becker’s thought. That is: when confronted with death, people will hold on tighter to their world views, which helps with their self-esteem, and be more readily available to condemn the other.

What is interesting to think about at this point is that in the technological world, we might be seeing a similar ‘in-grouping’ and ‘out-grouping’ of people who are either pro-technology against those who are either anti-, skeptical, and/or critical of technology.

Part III. - *Technique and Jacques Ellul*

The primary concept of Jacque Ellul’s we should be concerned with is that of *technique*, which is: “the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity.” (Ellul, 1964). For Ellul, this was one of the overriding phenomenon’s of history after the Enlightenment, wherein analogue technology became current, but exasperated after WW two, with the rise of digital technologies. He did not live to see the fruition of informational and social technologies as we know them today.

In his primary books on technology, *The Technological System*, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes*, and *The Political Illusion*, Ellul posits that the modern world is a milieu of technological practices affecting everyone, but carried out by technicians, or similarly the new working class/petite bourgeois, that help to carry out the functions of a technological society. Because their work is new compared to a generation

before, it seems advanced, and progressive, a better money earner. However, because there is propaganda, those who work in the field of technology without an understanding of its processes, or history, lack the ability to decipher when technology is working for them as a working class or against them. These two notions are further expounded upon in the third installment of his 1960s trilogy in which he recognized, long before most, that the dilemma between communist and capitalist was never a moral one, but one of who could access technology and the *technique* of technology before their cultural antithesis could — to put it into terms we went over with Becker.

Part IV. - *The Synthesis*

If we take the three previous sections and connect them to create a mode of analysis, it would look something like this:

‘The totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity is the overriding drive in which a human seeks to deny the immanence of death. Because of this people seek to become heroes in their respective economic-technological place.’

While this last phrase might not seem worrisome, nor undifferentiated from one person to the next, and even absurd to some populations, we have to think of the people who do have their hands in the technological process in the world, of which there are few, we can have enough cause to be concerned.

For the problems I am going to further discuss demonstrate a connection between this synthesis I have proposed to a post-World War two history style of death denial in the form of political and economic development from western ‘technological’ countries to ‘underdeveloped’ countries; space exploration; technological development and war; social media and psychological well being; and trans-humanism, to name a few.

Part V. - *Heroes in Technology*

In this part of the presentation I will take the liberty to discuss some contemporary issues based in technology and demonstrating Ellulian *technique* and problems from heroism.

- 1) The first is “Political and economic development from western ‘technological’ countries to ‘underdeveloped’ countries”. We can see from the studies of post-development that an overriding factor in colonization, expansion, and bureaucratic work was either the well-intentioned or malicious one. These three concepts typically work chronologically: first there is colonization, followed by political or cultural implementation in the regions where colonization is a success — leading to expansion, followed by work after implementation which is bureaucratic work. Of course all three can go with an ebb and flow of cultures that intersect region upon region and culture upon culture, but when we see the European idea of science and machine as being the core ideas to development and its course through history it is easy to see that there is a very narrow view being implemented.
- 2) Technological development and war. As Becker and many others remarked, it was once something that people of nobility did. The people who most highly participated in the actual warfare itself were people of a class higher than peasantry and subaltern. With the modern interweaving of neo-liberal economics and religious fundamentalism, wherein a technologically advanced class is able to convince a lower class of its own culture to fight in wars against others of their same economic class is truly absurd. This can best be understood by the work done by J U Nef in his book *Conquest of the Material World* in which he demonstrates that “Technical progress favors wars... because (a) the new weapons have rendered more difficult the distinction between offense and defense; and (b) have they have enormously reduced the pain and anguish implied in the act of killing.” (Ellul, 1964).
- 3) Private space exploration with interest in tourism, colonization, information technologies, growing organs, to mention a few — who actually knows how many different plans there are, for example:
 - a. When it comes to private companies growing organs, I imagine one major issue and that is the rise of illegal organ harvesting. Imagine that a private company grows organs, that would mean they set the price on the market for buying an organ when needed. However, what happens to people who cannot afford or access this new market. An illegal one will arise.

b. When it comes to tourism, I find it to be a rather absurd idea and a complete waste of resources. It is a very egoistic venture in my opinion due to its access to only a select few. Millions, billions, of dollars will be spent for what will virtually be an amusement park for the 0.01%.

c. When it comes to colonization, either on the moon, Mars, or in open space, there does not seem to be a real clear understanding of what will happen or how these plans will happen logistically. However, a majority of US citizens believe that space exploration does “it is essential that the U.S. continue to be a world leader in space exploration.” (72%).

4) Trans-humanism, which I think of as the scientific fetish that has existed since time-immemorial. What happened with secularists that rejected religion was that they rejected the idea of god, but never the problems that came with religion in regard to wanting to transcend and defeat the material world, effectively staying within a religious mindset. For instead of rejecting religion and living a life or morals and presence in the world devoid of desiring immortality, all the pro trans-humanists seek is the same outcome of life that a devout religious person would.

Ray Kurzweil is a good example here, he believes that around 2045 humans and machines will mesh together at such a point that the two will be indistinguishable from one another. While this does sound like a strange prediction, the idea that so many people like it, believe in it, or have some similar yet different desire for a machine immortality to happen in their lifetime is astounding. This is religious behavior that gets the benefit of seeming secular and scientific. And while it does use modern science as its foundations, it also acts as if the outcomes from these scientific foundations should serve an ancient religious goal.

Conclusion

Of these four issues presented here: western technological development abroad, war, space exploration, and trans-humanism. We see a small problem wherein a small group of people command a large part of power, influence, and discourse to which all others are affected. I imagine this group of people much like a new priest and priestess class parallel to the ancient ones. Shamans of tech, so to speak. However, one benefit we do have in the modern world is that of information, which shows us how truly human these people are: for example, Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos don't have

empires from their tech genius that is wholly superior to others. They do not pay taxes and get to use all that money to fund their own projects that promote them to a tech culture hero. And I imagine that they really believe they are doing good for the world, despite all the material needed to go into their projects which is built on the backs of the subaltern and proletariat, and lumpenproletariat. In fact, it is truly tragic, because what we can see in tech is what we have seen through history in matters of human exploitation, by a hero mindset that wishes to transcend death and become immortal. If this is the case, we can still turn to our authors for help to escape this existential dilemma of technological religiosity, which is simple to do, and does not require us to equally become ingrained in a hero death denial system.

All sources, Becker, Ellul, and the research in terror management theory roughly say the same things to do in face of terror, existential dread, and matters of depression and anxiety that arise from the technological system. They are spending time with the arts, spending time with children, being in nature, working on something of real purpose, learning new skills, and have a close community. This does seem ideal, perhaps hippy, perhaps Epicurean, but it also seems to be some things that are majorly lacking in a technological era. So it would make sense that what we lack is what we need.

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