Ernest Becker, while not primarily known for his educational writings, developed a theory of education which stressed the liberation of the individual. Becker's total work provides an ideal-real social science, and an ethical imperative for understanding human behavior. Based upon the principles of "immortality-striving" and "self-esteem maintenance," Becker offers an alternative system of education where one's own life, one's own freedom, becomes the basis of one's education.

Joseph A. Scimecca*

The Educational Theory of Ernest Becker**

It was only immediately before his premature death in 1974 (at the age of fifty) that Ernest Becker began to receive the recognition he so justly deserved from the academic community. Ironically the bulk of this recognition was accorded to Becker, for his thesis of the primacy of the repression of the thought of death, only when it became known that the social critic himself was dying. Lost in the rush to pay homage to the dying or dead was the fact that Becker had completed *The Denial of Death* (1973) a full year before he knew of the cancer in his body. This Pulitzer Prize winning work[1] was the outgrowth of themes he had explored and developed in a half dozen of his previous books. One of these neglected themes, Becker's view on the role of self-esteem maintenance in education, is of particular importance to educational theorists; indeed it forms the basis of his educational theory. Since the principle of self-esteem maintenance, along with the denial of thoughts of death or what Becker, borrowing the term from Otto Rank, calls the principle of "immortality-striving" are intrical parts of his total social theory, we must understand what Becker refers to as his "ideal-real" social science before we can begin to analyze his educational theory.

Ernest Becker's Social Theory — The "Ideal-Real" Social Science

Ernest Becker's social theory can best be characterized as social phenomenology. He sees man as "the animal in nature who par excellance imposes symbolic categories of thought on raw experience." Society is a fiction created by human beings, a fiction which enables them to impose meaning upon their lives. Social theory, according to Becker, has a dual task: to understand the fictions individuals create, and to point the way toward the transcending of these fictions in order to insure freedom. This is what is meant by Becker when he labels his own theory an "ideal-real" social science. There simply could not be a "theory about man without a belief in what is proper for man."[2]

What is proper for man is freedom, freedom from the constricting nature of the very social fictions he creates. The only questions worth asking are how man got to be as he is and how can he use this knowledge to attain freedom. The only viable analytical framework must be one that can explain the varying degrees of human freedom in society and history.[3] This framework, which forms the real or categorical part of Becker's social science, starts from the premise that society is a game, a

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play-form. This is the insight that Johan Huizinga points to in *Homo Ludens* (1955); it is an integral part of the social theory of Georg Simmel, who describes man as playing at society. Society is a monumental game and "this game is the living principle of all civilization."[4] In "playing" at society man creates a fictional world, a "symbolic universe" as it were, that brings meaning to his life. Social theory if it is to carry out the promise of the Enlightenment, the hope for a free and autonomous human being, must lead us to an understanding of the importance of our fictional creation, and more importantly of the utter seriousness with which we try to sustain and re-inforce this fiction.

> The world of human aspiration is largely fictitious and if we do not understand this we understand nothing about man. It is a largely symbolic creation by an ego-controlled animal that permits action in a psychological world, a symbolic-behavioral world removed from the boundness of the present moment, from the immediate stimuli which enslave all lower organisms. Man's freedom is a fabricated freedom, and he pays a price for it. He must at all times defend the utter fragility of his delicately constituted fiction, deny its artificiality.[5]

It must rank as a truly remarkable intellectual achievement that man has been able to discover the fictional nature of the social world.

While Becker's views are quite similar to such other social phenomenologists as Alfred Schutz and his most famous student, Peter Berger, there are two major differences between their respective positions. First, Becker integrates his phenomenological framework within a neo-Freudian psycho-analytical base instead of within the social-psychology of George Herbert Mead. Secondly, Becker's social theory has a definite radical potential, whereas the Schutz-Berger position is inherently conservative.[6] Instead of opting for the preservation of the fictional world (i.e. society) in the face of perceived chaos as, for example, Peter Berger does,[7] Becker is willing to accept the consequences that exposing the fictional nature of reality might unleash, hoping that exposure might bring freedom. In taking this radical stance Becker is well aware that the risks are great, for once the fictional nature of human existence is revealed the individual can be deprived of heroic meaning. Culture as currently constituted provides the only way man can see himself as a hero within the symbolic fiction. Without his fictions man is reduced to his basic animal existence. This is the fundamental anxiety of human existence: unlike other animals man has an awareness of himself as a unique individual but is the only animal who knows that he will die.[8] Man must constantly live with this burden. he must create meaning for himself, yet he knows that any meaning he creates will die with him. The problem of meaninglessness, the heart of the phenomenologist position, revolves around what Becker describes as "cultural hero systems" — those channels culture affords the individual for making a secure contribution to the world despite the realization that this contribution must be a finite one. Once the social fiction is discredited, the old way of triumphing over despair is lost. Man creates a tenuous, fragile fiction, but it is the only defense he can muster against the despair that is inherent in the human condition.[9] Discrediting the social fiction may be a terrible price to pay, but it must be paid if man is to be free.

The role of the social science Becker envisions is clear then. Its task is to assess the humanly defeating fictions of the socially created hero-systems. Because it is by definition a utopian social science, it must provide directions for establishing meaning and freedom. Social theory should address the fundamental problem of what hero-system is best for the individual. Perhaps, because we are so enmeshed in the fictional reality we create we can never ask in any ultimate sense: What is real? But we *can* ask what is false. Or as Becker puts it, we can ask:

> What is illusionary, what prevents the health, the coping with new problems, the life and survival of a given society. What are its real possibilities within the web of fictions in which it is suspended? In any given historical period the task of the social sciences is to see broader and better than the members of a given society what is killng that society from within its own institutions.[10]

What Becker seeks, then, is no less than an historical understanding of how certain types of social structures shape certain types of individuals through generations.[11] In order to fully understand this process we must look at Becker's theory of human motivation — the roles that self-esteem maintenance and immortality-striving play in shaping human behavior.

Human Motivation: Self-Esteem and Immortality Striving

Drawing heavily upon the works of Alfred Adler and Otto Rank, Becker reformulates many of the basic Freudian concepts: the early training of children, for example is best understood not through the Freudian staple of the Oedipus complex, but through the principle of self-esteem maintenance. The child, according to Becker, seeks to maintain his self-esteem by becoming the type of person who need not fear disapprobation or the loss of his succoring objects (usually the mother). In this manner the child learns to devise his self-esteem from symbolic performances pleasing to adults rather than from a continued physiological or psychological dependence.[12] In short, individuals simply like to feel good about themselves, especially in their relations with other people.

Becker's social theory provides a built-in ethical imperative by presenting a normative structure to aim for, one that enables us to discuss the ways in which any existing society provides (or fails to provide) for the self-esteem needs of its members. An "ideal-real" social science should focus specifically on how societies confine individuals to shallow, routine and unrewarding behavior by limiting role flexibility. Such a social science enables us to understand how the self develops, both internally and in relation to external conditions. Put simply, we can begin to understand how the individual constantly seeks to avoid anxiety and to maintain self-esteem in a socially constructed world.

In his early works Becker held that the principle of self-esteem maintenance was *the* single principle which could explain human motivation.[13] Later, particularly in his last two books, *The Denial of Death* (1973) and *Escape from Evil* (1975) he came to see the principle of immortality-striving as more encompassing and he combined the two. Briefly stated, the immortality-striving principle holds that, given the primacy of the fear of death, every individual seeks immortality and identifies with an ideology of self-expression which he believes gives him this immortality.[14] Man, in his attempt to escape his mortality, to deny the tenuous nature of his existance, creates norms, rituals, and ultimately bureacracies which order his life. The individual blindly follows the ritualized activities of his daily existence, desperately seeking satisfaction in order to maintain his self-esteem. This is Becker's explanation of why man adapts without struggle to the bureaucratic "iron cage" that Weber so prophetically described; why individuals give their unquestioning allegiance to nation states that arbitrarily send them to their deaths.

The basic motivating principle of human behavior is the fear of death; self-esteem must be maintained in the face of this fear. In order to alleviate his fear of death man attributes a supernatural nature to culture. Culture comes to provide the mechanisms of perpetuation and redemption. Thus Becker's ideal-real social science seeks to show how and why man is unduly constrained by the very culture he creates as well as how he can overcome these constraints. Since education has traditionally been a mechanism for transfering culture from one generation to the

next we can readily see its importance in Becker's total framework. Indeed, according to Becker, the educational institution can provide the necessary basis for insuring the freedom and meaning he so eloquently calls for. In order to judge this claim we can begin with an analysis of his views of what an ideal curriculum for human freedom would look like.

An Ideal Curriculum — An Anthropodicy of Alienation

What is a liberal education? This is a question that has concerned educators for centuries. To Becker a curriculum for a "liberal education" entails a

> general theory of alienation, an anthropodicy. It features a body of knowledge that teaches man how his human fredom and responsible choice is constricted. It teaches him the "good" by showing him the causes of evil. And what can good and evil mean for man except in terms of the liberation of responsible human powers?[15]

The focus of education must be upon human liberation, self-reliance, on the self-creation of meaning. General education would be a study of alienation, of how human powers are and have historically been constricted in the search for meaning. The reasons for alienation from self and society form the core of Becker's ideal curriculum. Alienation implies powerlessness; it implies failure, and is therefore undesirable. A curriculum must be introduced that overcomes alienation by promoting human freedom and the fullest possible development of human talent.[16] Human freedom is to be valued within the framework of the democratic ideal. Education needs a moral philosophy, an agreed on ethical ideology and, echoing John Dewey, Becker chooses democracy translated into a specific curriculum. One's own life, one's own freedom becomes the basis for one's education. Not truth for truth's sake as the traditional ivory tower position calls for, but truth for mankind's sake. Knowledge is not to be an end in itself, but is a means to develop the critical faculties of human beings. Becker's ideal curriculum would show

> how man is basically an animal, and how he developed from the other animals; we would study the growth of perception and language; the development of the self-those things, in sum, which are now roughly included under courses on "Human Development," "Developmental Psychology," "Personality," "Social Psychology," "Culture and Personality." They would show how every human being is born into his cultural world, and is molded by it into a social actor. They would show how man forfeits his place in the animal kingdom, in order to become a self-conscious human being whose life is directed by values and meanings. They would show that there is nothing absolute about these values or meanings, that they are relative to the society in which one grows up — what the anthropologists call "cultural relativity."[17]

Students would be encouraged to learn on their own, tailoring the curriculum to their own needs. Once they had digested and understood the core knowledge of alienation they would move on. It must be noted at this point that Becker's ideal curriculum is a university curriculum, and therefore does not deal with the problems (either learning or social) of students at the lower levels of our educational system. This failure to consider the processes of learning and much more importantly the socio-political context within which this process takes place is a major weakness in Becker's theory and, as we shall see in the next section, it is a weakness that Becker shares with other utopian educational theorists. For the time being, however, suffice it to say that the important claim of Becker's curriculum of alienation is its provision of a vantage point from which individuals can examine their lives, their society, their world.[18] Human nature is to be seen as basically neutral; man is not motivated by drives of hate or agression, but simply seeks to "feel maximally good" about himself.[19] Alienation results when individuals do feel good about themselves: it is the ultimate form of self-destruction. Man is alie-

nated and anxiety ridden in a culture that does not allow him to be heroic. He fears death, yes, but more than that he fears a meaningless death. Individuals strive to create meaning, to make and leave their mark on the world. But our culture allows this for only a few individuals. We live in a society which lacks for heroes not because men are cowardly by nature but because they are not allowed to have power over their own lives. In order to create unalienated individuals, people with enough self-esteem to face death with dignity, our culture must provide the opportunity for living a meaningful life, for establishing one's *individuality-within-finaltude.*[20] Becker's anthropodicy of alienation point out where and how men are being robbed of meaning, how their potential for growth is being crippled by social illusions. Because Becker's educational theory is an "ideal-real" one, it has built into it certain implications for change — it seeks to alter those conditions which limit mans opportunity to conquer despair.

The Implications of Becker's Educational Theory for Radical Social Change

If Ernest Becker's educational theory is to have any real impact it must be entwined with a theory of social change. Joel Spring has delineated two basic theoretical perspectives inherent in theories of social change. The first has a technological and rationalist orientation and seeks social improvement through a process of orderly social planning and increased efficiency. Here the student is treated as an object to be worked upon, molded, generally shaped for the good of society.[21] For the most part this is the paradigm example of the liberal theory of change. The other theory starts from an entirely different perspective. According to Spring:

> Here the concern is not with order and efficiency but with increasing individual autonomy. The goal of social change is increased individual participation and control of the social system. This model rests on the conviction that a great deal of the power of moderrn social institutions depends on the willingness of the people to accept the authority and legitimacy of these institutions. In this context the question becomes, not how to fit the individuals into the social machine, but *why* people are willing to accept work without personal satisfaction and social authority which limits freedom. This condition of acceptance. . .is primarily the result of the ideals, beliefs and ideologies in the mind of the child.[22]

Becker's educational theory clearly falls under this second view. Indeed, as I've shown, Becker even offers an answer as to why mankind so readily accepts authority. Individuals, trying to deny the tenuous nature of their existence, create norms, rituals and, ultimately bureaucracies which order their lives. The individual blindly follows the ritualized activities of daily existence, seeking desperately to get satisfaction and maintain his self-esteem. Only by pointing out the manner in which the very fictions we create come to constrain us can we begin to change society. Only by focusing upon alienation (and the principle which underlies and unites a full-field theory of alienation: the principle of self-esteem maintenance) can we begin to have a truly radical theory of education. The correlates of human unhappiness can be plotted using self-esteem as a focal point.[23] Self-esteem is the ethical imperative for a radical theory of education. By teaching individuals to have self-esteem, we offer them the means to be free. Education is at the service of the individual. Man is taught to develop to his fullest potential; this is what education is all about. In a society where people possess a high degree of self-esteem, or self-worth, they would be less likely to take out their frustrations on others. To be human is to need to be an object of primary value, to be an heroic contributor to life.[24] The educational institution should therefore be turned around to insure that the individual learns that he is "an object of primary value" in the socially created fiction in which he lives his life. Our children must be taught that they are worthwhile human beings, "cultural-heroes" to use Becker's term. The

educational system as it exists today damages our youth by repressing their spontaneity by limiting their natural appetites. It is time to awaken the joy in self-discovery, in the unfolding world. We must no longer impose restricting standards upon students. We must teach them self-esteem, to value themselves, so that they may value others. This is what Becker's educational theory offer us, a view of an individual who has enough self-esteem to act without anxiety even in the face of his knowledge of his own mortality. In a long passage, Becker presents a picture of what a person educated to have self-esteem would look like. Such a person would:

> perceive the world with a minimum of bottled-up frustration, distortion, dependency and fear. The formula is the easiest of all theoretically, although it is hard enough to practice. Let the child learn by doing, by the development of his own strengths, perceptions, capacities; let him experiment on his own, learn the confidence that comes with repeated triumph over frustrations and problems. This makes him flexible about the external world, not easily put off by it, willing to grab it this way and that. He will tend to see things as they present themselves on their terms and not as he wishes them to be or fears that they might be. This is crucial for the problem of democracy because only self-reliant people see their leaders as they are, and not as projections of their own found hopes or foolish fears; they need others less for support and so do not automatically see gray temples as fatherly wisdom and are not likely to be taken in by the magical power of a deep and rumbling voice. Instead, they would tend to judge the leader on his acts and his judgement; and if they do this they will find that gray temples are a sign of senility and a deep voice is merely a lifelong study in public relations, that hides a squeaky mind and shallow self. The self-reliant person would be suspicious of easy promises and wild expectations because he himself has learned that reality is not generous but has to be approached correctly and patiently; and so he would also mistrust those who scorn reality by trying to push it, force it into fantasy, or who fear it and try to over-control it. A citizenry composed of large numbers of such people would be something to reckon with....[25]

This is a utopian ideal worth striving for. But if it is to be more than a utopian ideal we must consider the political context that forms the educational system. It is just not enough to state as Becker does that "Education need no longer be beholden to the powers that be."[26] Here he makes a mistake that is common to phenomenologists. Because he accepts the idealist doctrine that the social world is essentially a product of the ideas individuals hold of it Becker, therefore, believes that mere understanding of the nature of social reality, of its fictional status, is sufficient to change this reality. He assumes that if society is the product of men's minds then the course to follow, if changing the world is the goal, is to change men's heads. Because what man creates is transitory, man can transform his creation. But the process of changing reality is much more difficult. Society is an objective reality too, a re-ified entity, and social definitions are produced within a political context and are upheld by interests with an immense stake in their preservation.[27] Unless an educational theory provides for a concrete assessment of the objective status of society, unless it takes into consideration the fact that social constraints are not arbitrary figments of our minds which can be changed by willing them to be changed and a practical plan based on these considerations is formulated, the educational system will continue to remain as it is — a primary agency for the legitimation of the rule of those in power.

Yet, because Becker's educational theory did not go far enough we must be careful not to lose sight of the distance he did take us. Ernest Becker has provided us with an ideal-real social science, an ethnicla imperative for understanding human behaviour. His educational theory is one that stresses the development and maintenance of self-esteem in the face of one's finaltude. It is a veiw that offers individuals the prospect of emerging as distinct persons rather than burying themselves in a culture that tyranically channels their lives. While the fear of death is a real fear, we cannot allow it to constrain human freedom and self-direction. We must fashion an educational system that stresses self-esteem maintenance because

individuals with a sense of self-worth will not take out their anxieties on others. The problem of human liberation is reducible to the problem of how to best permit the self-creation of meaning.[28] Ernest Becker left us a possible answer to this question in the form of an educational theory based on a volitional view of human motivation. It is now up to those of us who believe that the liberation of man should be the primary goal of education to graft a political notion of how society functions, of how educational concerns are ultimately political concerns, onto Becker's view of the importance of meaning and self-esteem in human behavior. In this way we can begin to fashion a truly radical theory of education a theory, whose goal is the only relevant goal — human freedom.

Notes

**I would like to thank James McClellan for his careful reading and helpful suggestions on a previous draft of this work.

Although I am a firm believer in the equality of the sexes I have, for the purposes of clarity and consistency only, used masculine pronouns throughout.

[1] Ernest Becker was posthumously awarded the 1974 Pulitzer Prize for General Non-fiction for *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973).

[2] Ernest Becker, *Beyond Alienation* (New York: George Braziller, 1967), p. 126.

[3] Ernest Becker, *The Lost Science of Man* The Lost Science of Man (New York: George Braziller, 1971), p. 121.

[4] Becker, *Beyond Alienation,* p. 142

[5] Ernest Becker, *The Birth and Death of Meaning* 2nd edition (New York: The Free Press, 1971), p. 139.

[6] For an elaboration of this position see Scott G. McNall and James C. M. Johnson, "The New Conservatives: Ethnomethodologists, Phenomenologists, and Symbolic Interactionists," *The Insurgent Sociologist* 5 (Summer 1975): 49-65.

[7] See in particular, Peter Berger and John Neuhaus, *Movement and Revolution* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1970).

[8] Becker, *The Lost Science of Man,* p. 141.

[9] Becker, *The Birth and Death of Meaning,* p. 142.

[10] *The Birth and Death of Meaning,* p. 159.

[11] This position is quite similar to the views of C. Wright Mills and Erich Fromm, two social scientists Becker greatly admired. See especially Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *Character and Social Structure* (New York: Harvest Books, 1953), C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself* (New York: Rinehart and Co., 1947) and *The Heart of Man: It's Genius for Good and Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964).

[12] Ernest Becker, *The Structure of Evil* (New York: George Braziller, 1968).

[13] See in particular, *The Structure of Evil* and *Beyond Alienation.*

[14] See Otto Rank, *Will Therapy and Truth and Reality* (New York: Knopf, 1945); *Beyond Psychology* (New York: Dover Books, 1958); and *Psychology and the Soul* (New York: Perpetua Books, 1961).

[15] Becker, *Beyond Alienation,* p. 229.

[16] *Beyond Alienation,* pp. 107-112.

[17] *Beyond Alienation,* p. 258.

[18] *Beyond Alienation,* p. 289.

[19] *Beyond Alienation,* p. 255.

[20] Becker, *The Birth and Death of Meaning,* p. 145.

[21] Joel Spring, *A Primer of Libertarian Education* (New York: Free Life Editions, 1975), p. 130.

[22] Spring, pp. 130-131.

[23] Becker, *The Structure of Evil,* p. 337.

[24] Becker, *The Birth and Death of Meaning,* p. 76.

[25] *The Birth and Death of Meaning,* pp. 176-177.

[26] Becker, *Beyond Alienation,* p. 243.

[27] For an interesting criticism of the phenomenological position see, Albert Szymanski, "Marxism and Science," *The Insurgent Sociologist* 3 (Spring 1973): 25-38; and for phenomenologists who avoid this criticism by concentrating upon the role of re-ification in the process of subjective reality formation see, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966).

[28] Becker, *Beyond Alienation,* p. 229.