THE TANDEM PROJECT
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**UNITED NATIONS, HUMAN RIGHTS,
FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF**

*The Tandem Project is a UN NGO in Special Consultative Status with the
Economic and Social Council of the United Nations*

Separation of Religion or Belief and State

ESCAPE FROM EVIL

QUOTES FROM ERNEST BECKER

Issue: Perspectives on the Root Causes of Human Evil.

Review: Ernest Becker (1924-1974) won the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction for "*The Denial of Death*". In his book, "*Escape From Evil,*" published posthumously, Becker proposes that the natural and inevitable urge to **deny** mortality and achieve a **heroic** self-image is the root causes of human evil. Becker was a teacher of anthropology, sociology and contemporary psychological thought at Simon Fraser University, British Columbia, Canada.

The Tandem Project presents **multi-disciplinary** perspectives on the underlying causes of conflict based on religion or belief. Paragraphs selected from Becker's *Escape From Evil* are a synthesis of his thoughts, presented for reflection and dialogue. They are not meant to defame any one or any religion or belief. They are presented with high respect for the dignity and rights of followers of all religions or beliefs, by a serious scholar attempting to convey his thoughts on the depth of conflicts based on religion or belief.

Escape From Evil

EXTRACTS

"Persons have to keep from going mad by biting off small pieces of reality which they can get some command over and some satisfaction from. This means that their noblest passions are played out in the narrowest and most unreflective ways, and this is what undoes them. From this point of view the main problem for human beings has to be expressed in the following paradox; Men and women must have a fetish in order to survive and to have 'normal mental health.' But this shrinkage of vision that permits them to survive also at the same time prevents them from having the overall understanding they need to plan for and control the effects of their shrinkage of experience. A paradox this bitter sends a chill through all reflective people."

Ernest Becker, Escape from Evil -Chapter Ten – Retrospect and Conclusion: What is the Heroic Society? – Page 153.

"Self-knowledge is the hardest human task because it risks revealing to persons how their self-esteem was built; on the powers of others in order to deny their own death."

Ernest Becker, Escape from Evil -Chapter Ten – Retrospect and Conclusion: What is the Heroic Society? – Page 163

"My previous writings did not take sufficient account of truly vicious human behavior. This is a dilemma that I have been caught in, along with many others who have been trying to keep alive the Enlightenment tradition of a science of man: how to reflect the empirical data on man, the data that show what a horribly destructive creature he has been throughout his history, and yet still have a science that is not manipulative or cynical. If man is as bad as he seems, then either we have to behaviorally coerce him into the good life or else we have to abandon the hope of a science of man entirely. This is how the alternatives have appeared. Obviously it is an enormous problem: to show that man *is* truly evil-causing in much of his motivation, and yet to move beyond this to the possibilities of sane, renewing action, some kind of third alternative beyond bureaucratic science and despair**."**

Ernest Becker, Escape from Evil - Preface.

"And so religion overcomes the specific problems of fear-stricken animals, while at the same time showing them what empirical reality really is. If we were not fear-stricken animals who repressed awareness of ourselves and our world, then we would live in peace and unafraid of death, trusting to the Creator God and celebrating His creation. The ideal of religious sainthood, like that of psychoanalysis, is thus the opening up of perception: this is where religion and science meet."

Ernest Becker, Escape from Evil; Chapter Ten – Retrospect and Conclusion: What is the Heroic Society? - Page 163

"We can talk for a century about what causes human aggression; we can try to find the springs in animal instincts, or we can try to find them in bottled-up hatreds due to frustration or in some kind of miscarried experiences of early years, of poor child handling and training. All these would be true, but still trivial because men kill out of joy, in the experience of expansive transcendence over evil. This poses an immense problem for social theory, a problem that we have utterly failed to be clear about. If men kill out of heroic joy, in what direction do we program improvements in human nature? What are we going to improve if men work evil out of the impulse to righteousness and goodness ?"

Ernest Becker, Chapter Ten – Retrospect and Conclusion: What is the Heroic Society? – Escape from Evil, page 155

"Every conflict over truth is in the last analysis just the same old struggle over…immortality.
If anyone doubts this, let him try to explain in any other way the life-and-death viciousness of all ideological disputes. Each person nourishes his immortality in the ideology of self-perpetuation to which he gives his allegiance; this gives his life the only abiding significance it can have. No wonder men go into a rage over fine points of belief; if your adversary wins the argument about truth, *you die*. Your immortality system has been shown to be fallible, your life becomes fallible. History, then, can be understood as the succession of ideologies that console for death. Or, more momentously, *all* cultural forms are *in essence sacred* because they seek the perpetuation and redemption of the individual life."

Ernest Becker, Escape from Evil - Chapter Five – The New Historical Forms of Immortality Power, page 64.

"Men's fears are buried deeply by repression, which gives to everyday life its tranquil façade; only occasionally does the desperation show through, and only for some people. It is repression, then, that great discovery of psychoanalysis that explains how well men can hide their basic motivations even from themselves. But men also live in a dimension of care freeness, trust, hope, and joy which gives them buoyancy beyond that which repression alone could give. This, as we saw with Rank, is achieved by the symbolic engineering of culture, which everywhere serves men as an antidote to terror by giving them a new and durable life beyond that of the body."
Ernest Becker, Escape from Evil; Chapter Seven – The Basic Dynamic of Human Evil – Page92

"It is very important for students of man to be clear about this: culture itself is sacred, since *it* is the "religion" that assures in some way the perpetuation of its members. For a long time students of society liked to think in terms of "sacred" versus "profane" aspects of social life. But there has been continued dissatisfaction with this kind of simple dichotomy, and the reason is that there is really no basic distinction between sacred and profane in the symbolic affairs of men. As soon as you have symbols you have artificial self-transcendence via culture. Everything cultural is fabricated and given meaning by the mind, a meaning that was not given by physical nature. Culture is in this sense "supernatural," and all systematizations of culture have in the end the same goal: to raise men above nature, to assure them that in some ways their lives count in the universe more than merely physical things count."

Ernest Becker, Escape from Evil; Introduction – The Human Condition: Between Appetite and Ingenuity - Page 4.

"The Marxists have said, with Rousseau, that human nature is a blank slate, neutral, even good; evil exists because of social classes and the hate, envy, competition, degradation, and scapegoating that stem from them; change society and man's natural goodness will flower. Not so, say the conservatives, and they point for proof at those revolutionary societies which have abolished social class but which continue to express personal and social evil; evil, then must be in the heart of the creature; the best that social institutions can do is to keep it blunted; and social institutions that already effectively do this without excessive repression and within legal safeguards for individual rights – why such social institutions should not be changed. So argue the conservatives."

Ernest Becker, Escape from Evil; Chapter Nine – Social Theory: The Merger of Marx and Freud – Page133.

"This question has been the central one of the science of man, and as such the knottiest in its whole career; thus it is logical that it is the last problem to be solved. I myself have been coming back to it again and again for a dozen years now, and each time I thought there was a clear solution I later discovered that vital things had been left unsaid."

Ernest Becker, Escape from Evil; Chapter Nine – Social Theory: The Merger of Marx and Freud – Page133.

"No wonder it has taken us so long to pull all the fragmentary insights together, to join the views of both sides on the nature of man. The greatest cause of evil included all human motives in one giant paradox. Good and bad were so inextricably mixed that we couldn't make them out: bad seemed to lead to good and good motives led to bad. The paradox is that *evil comes from man's*

urge to heroic victory over evil. The evil that troubles man most is his vulnerability; he seems impotent to guarantee the absolute meaning of his life, its significance in the cosmos. He assures a plenitude of evil, then, by trying to make closure on his cosmic heroism."

Ernest Becker, Escape from Evil; Chapter Nine – Social Theory: The Merger of Marx and Freud - Page 135.

"Finally, if we know that we ourselves hate because of the same needs and urges to heroic victory over evil as those we hate, there is perhaps no better way to begin to introduce milder justice into the affairs of men. This is the great moral that Albert Camus drew from our demonic times, when he expressed the moving hope that a day would come when each person would proclaim in his own fashion the superiority of being wrong without killing others than being right in the quiet of the charnel house**.**"

Ernest Becker, Escape from Evil; Chapter Nine – Social Theory: The Merger of Marx and Freud - Page 145.

"Fortunately, no one mind can pose as an authority on the future; the manifold of events is so complex that it is fraud for the intellectual to want to be taken seriously as a prophet, either in his fantasies or in his realities. One of the last thoughts of the great William James [*Varieties of Religious Experience*] was that when all is said and done there is no advice to be given. And if a man of Freud's stature shrank back before prophecy, I surely am not going to peep any note of it at all…thinkers who have understood human nature and could take in the largest picture of history and tragedy have always shrunk back and shook their heads**.**"

Ernest Becker, Escape from Evil; Chapter Ten – Retrospect and Conclusion: What is the Heroic Society? - Page 169.

"We have no way of knowing what gain will come out of Freudian thought when it is finally assimilated in its tragic and true meanings. Perhaps it will introduce just that minute measure of reason to balance destruction."

Ernest Becker, Escape from Evil; Chapter Ten – Retrospect and Conclusion: What is the Heroic Society? – Page 170.

The Tandem Project a non-governmental organization (NGO) founded in 1986 to build understanding, tolerance, and respect for diversity of religion or belief, and to prevent discrimination in matters relating to freedom of religion or belief. The Tandem Project has sponsored multiple conferences, curricula, reference material and programs on Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights- Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion – and the 1981 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.

In 1968 the United Nations deferred work on a legally-binding treaty on religious intolerance as too complex and sensitive and passed a non-binding declaration in its place. The Tandem Project believes until a core legally-binding human rights Convention on Freedom of Religion or Belief is adopted international human rights law will be incomplete. It may be time to begin to consider

reinstating the 1968 Working Group to better organize and bring all matters relating to freedom of religion or belief under one banner, a core international human rights legally-binding treaty.