THE BIRTH AND DEATH OF MEANING

An Essay on the Nature of Humanness and the Problem of Humankind

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Introduction & Bibliography Revised 1975 & 2014
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110. Since in truth bondage and freedom are relative, these words are only for those terrified with the universe. This universe is a reflection of minds. As you see many suns in water from one sun, so see bondage and liberation.

110. Each thing is perceived through knowing. The self shines in space through knowing. Perceive one being as knower and known.

112. Beloved, at this moment let mind, knowing, breath, and form, be included.

Ernest Becker was an Anthropologist. He was also my Professor, and sage-like friend. He died of cancer on the 6\textsuperscript{th} of March, 1974. Some two and a half years earlier, in late 1971, Becker had published his second interdisciplinary perspective on what he termed “…the problem of man”. It was also the second time he had used the title The Birth and Death of Meaning. And, while it is certainly only one amongst Becker’s many extraordinary, deeply thought provoking and oft times disturbing works, it is especially in relation to this second edition that I was inspired to provide a response. This was because The Birth and Death of Meaning, for me at least, not only touches upon but largely covers “the field”, that is, in so very many ways, it embraces the combined essence and facets of most, if not all his other works.

When I told Becker that I really wanted to do this, not just for academic reasons, but for more far-reaching, personal explorative reasons, he said, “Good! Do it.”. So, during the course of 1972, with his invaluable support, I wrote The Response that follows this introduction. The original introduction required revision in 1975 so to acknowledge Becker’s passing - his “popping back into the eternal time stream”, to use one of his favourite ways of describing death, and to make clearer the new stimuli that had taken me beyond Becker’s view of things.
When Becker read my response to his second edition of The Birth and Death of Meaning, his principle reaction was that it set one upon a course of thought, which took one to the very edge of certainty about the human condition, in its multi-various manifestations, and about its worth in providing the basis for individuals and whole societies to behave in ways that are at once responsible, acceptable and sane, rather than the opposite, as has been too often the case.

Becker was, as always, forthright and generous in his comments but, it seemed to me at the time, that his thoughts about what I had written were tinged with mild melancholy and regret. He may just have been feeling kindly towards his young friend, who was about to leave Vancouver and the University to build a new life in the Antipodes. Nevertheless, he did tell me that what I had written had made him wistful, because he found the course I had taken-and clearly would continue to take in my thinking - was at once intellectually exciting, embracing and intimidating. Moreover, it was clear to him that it provided naturally challenging directions, the rigorous pursuit of which, he suggested wryly, could “reap handsome rewards in the worlds of anthropology, sociology, psychiatry, philosophy, and even theosophy”, that is, if only I were prepared to stay and produce a fully fleshed out, scholarly dissertation under his and the University’s aegis. But such was not to be.

This accepted, my search for a suitable lens through which to review the question of Meaning was founded initially in the desire to explore what might best be described as the Utopian Inclination in humankind. Particularly, I was intrigued by the possibility that individual and social narcissism might lie at the very centre of this inclination. And further, that humanism, being seemingly born of a reaction to narcissism, might be the generator of the positive thread in utopian thought, while narcissism, which, “…from the standpoint of values …conflicts with reason and with love” (Fromm 1964), might generate what I like to call “the necessary negative”.

In researching this possibility, I found myself suddenly, and to my surprise, beyond my chosen analytical position, which, with Becker’s solid and long-time encouragement, was based mostly on Freud’s view of the human psyche, civilization, and how it is all supposed to work. There were two reasons for this shift in my theoretical position. First, the results of my enquiry showed me to be on the right track. Second, it became increasingly apparent through
my research that, while this utopian inclination in humankind might be explained psychologically, the question “Why at all?” did not appear to have been given proper consideration by any major authority in the field of Social Theory. This, at least, was the case, insofar as I was able to discover at the time,

It was at this point certainly, that most Freudian-based literature, along with Freud’s social theory, had to be put aside. For me, it had become inadequate to a proper explanation of the whole picture. And the picture only became much clearer when, at last, I explored in depth the liberating thinking of Carl Gustav Jung, and the pivotal role that the notion of Meaning had played in his theoretical and empirical work.

Initially however, just prior my gentle release from Becker’s Freudian thrall, and my subsequent realization of the embracing worth of Jung’s approach over the seeming narrowness of Freud’s, I appeared largely on my own. I had felt like the climber who, having run out of rope on a rock-face, can find nowhere safe for a stance, can in no way reverse the route, and who, in consequence, is obliged to untie him or herself in order to finish the climb.

Now, this last is not intended to imply any sense of melodrama or pretension in the position I adopt in the response that follows. Rather, it is a simple metaphor, which served to illuminate the tentative nature of my reply to Becker, and to indicate the direction in which my own philosophical position and, more particularly, my spiritual position, was and is still evolving.

After I had untied the rope and started upon what I thought of as my solo climb, little knowing that others had been obliged to do the same, only earlier, most notably Jung himself, the description of the route I took then appears to me now to be no less valid and clear in the world of the twenty first century. If anything, it is much, much more so, for now it has assumed a greater solidity that continues to grow with each passing day, and which, indeed, is only as it should be given that my concluding thoughts remain unchanged about what I have called the Growing of the Known and our inevitable on-going confrontation with the Absurd.

The feeling of being liberated from the tight intellectual harness of Freud’s theories, and of the conventional scholarly thought of the day, remains with me, and I find this freedom just as
exciting, daunting, frightening, and, best of all, challenging, as it was at the beginning. But still, many of my academic colleagues and nearly all other readers of this essay over the years, have continued to find it, for the most part at least, difficult to comprehend, not to say disturbing for those have actually understood its thrust. Becker predicted this would be the case, and warned me of impending rejections and hostility by those who would almost certainly find my chosen theoretical position threatening, if not preposterous and wrongly premised.

I say this last primarily as an alert to the next prospective reader. But I say it also to excite and arouse their curiosity, because for me, and for those others who I now know to have journeyed the same or a very similar route, this is still the major, if not the quintessential pivotal area of all social and psychological thought and theory. The reader will almost certainly feel exposed and experience also that sense of being left on the very edge of certainty about the nature of the human condition, with all that this means in terms of retaining one’s own sense of self-worth, one’s meaning, one’s own sanity.

Strangely though, or, perhaps, not so strangely for me at least, the theoretical has long since given way to the empirical, which, in turn, has led me to an increasingly intuitive, creative and spiritual sense of balance in what might be described as The Scheme of Things: how humankind attempts to deal with the absurdity of its position on this tiny planet of ours, situated in a universe that is unimaginably old and incomprehensively huge, and which is still expanding close to the speed of light.

I have dealt with what I call the Improbability Enigma elsewhere, but what I have said about the improbable mysteries of a livable universe and, most particularly, about the nature of human consciousness, bears upon and reflects what you are now about to read: The Response to Ernest Becker’s The Birth And Death Of Meaning.
1.

THE RESPONSE

From the very extensive literature that exists on the subject of Utopia and Utopian Thought, it appears that there is little which sets out to examine the fundamentals of this remarkable inclination in humankind.

Usually, the reasons behind the construction of specific utopias in the minds of particular individuals or social groups may be extracted from their various social designs. But what I am interested in here is the factor, or perhaps factors, which seem inherent in all utopian thought. I refer not to the general underlying purpose of utopian writing, namely social criticism, but rather to our seemingly innate tendency to always be in search of a state of perfection and, by implication, to our tendency to deny Change, or, at the very least, to be in complete control of change, and, thereby, in complete control of our destiny.

From proto-hominids onwards and, indeed, in all forms of organic evolution, it may be argued that there is a tendency for the organism, be it a plant, an animal, a person, or even a society, to seek, by whatever means, to control what happens to itself. This may be seen as a fundamental element in determining survival. The quality and degree of information available to and interpretable by us, or any living thing for that matter, about alternative futures, instantaneous and longer term, might be said to be of the utmost importance in at least avoiding danger, as well as in gaining the necessary requisites for life.

Concerning the tendency to perfection, this may also be viewed first within the framework of organic evolution, where the form and nature of things is fashioned in part through the facilities of adaptation and adaptability: adaptability being the degree of flexibility in the capacity of an organism to adapt, which at any one instant in time provides perfection in shape and state, even though perhaps in the very next micro-second all may be changed to another state of perfection. Perfection born continually from the destruction of the perfect might be one way of viewing the essence of selective evolution. Indeed, it might be applied ontologically to the entire miracle of what we loosely call Existence.
However, while this tendency to perfect and attain a stable state appears to be a natural or innate residual in humankind, with the emergence of reflexive thought, that is our ability to think about ourselves thinking, together with language and culture as the evolutionizers of our humanness, we have been struggling ever since with what we perceive to be our imperfections. More precisely, it might be suggested that, underlying the evolution of any culture and society, is this very tendency to perfect our humanness. In short, the state to which we have given the name Human may, in fact, be an ideal, a goal, towards which we attempt to move. One of the principal means by which we have done this in the past, and continue to do so now, is by improving our systems of communication: how we receive, deal with and react to the input of available, obtainable information.

In every age the imperfections in our humanness have been perceived differently. The specific lens prevalent at any one time, through which the individual, group, or society, perceives their humanness has been manifest in what is known (reality, truth), in the way the known is known (preference, inclination), and what can be imagined from the known as it known (evaluation, extrapolation).

Within this schema can be seen the phenomenon of the need in humankind to transcend itself. There is the forever unacknowledged but always sensed non-human, i.e., animal, in us that appears to force us sometimes gently, sometimes with great energy to attempt to make ourselves God-like. In this context God becomes Human. Therefore, to be God, or as God-like as God, or as powerful as God, is to be human, is to have reached a state of Perfection.

If we extend this suggestion further, it could be said that the solidifying of a particular societal or cultural form at any one period in time is in effect a confirmation, an acknowledgment, through the tacit act of belonging, or beginning to belong, of the attainment of a degree of humanness seemingly never before realised. Being a member of a society meant, and means still, that one’s supposed humanness has the support of others who are embalmed in the same social suppositions. Overall, suppositions of humanness, of course, are founded upon value systems, or, more precisely, value systems may be described as a manifestation of a society’s attempt to interpret correctly, that is, in life supporting ways, what is known and what can be
imagined from the known as it is known. This means that social values may be seen as the
determinates of humanness by delineating the way in which the known is known, and, in turn,
defining as precisely as possible the correctness of what is known.

The fact that different societies can evolve and exist simultaneously all over the planet
appears to support my suggestion. For each, but now with increasing overlap, there is a set of
values that differ from those of other societies. And it is from its value system that a society
and its individual members derive their humanness, their sense of meaning.

Where a value system becomes moribund and eventually collapses, and with it the society
whose humanness it determined and whose behaviours it controlled, I would suggest that one
reason for the collapse could be that the known, and what can be imagined from the known as
it is known, for either, internal or external reasons, is rendered insufficiently adaptive. I mean
by this that, where confrontation with new information is sufficiently at odds with the truths
or accepted tenets of that society, the extent to which it is possible to be human under the
original or traditional supposition is placed partially or completely in the negative.

The effect of this would seem to be that the individual members of a culture or society
perceive themselves as losing the frames of reference which permitted them their humanness,
and the outcome of this effect is inevitably the emergence of another societal form with a
new, or, more usually, a somewhat different set of values.

Excluding prolonged extreme acts of institutionalised terror, amongst which the Inquisition,
the Jewish Holocaust, and Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge regime stand out, and excluding also the
more general factor of war and conquest, which, in many, if not most instances, has as its
central ingredients the attempted acquisition of territory and the imposition of one way of
being human (value system) upon another, I think it possible to suggest that the major
societies, and their subsequent dissolvings and metamorphoses throughout history, are really
only bulges in the evolutionary fabric of our striving towards humanness, towards perfection.

In other words, rather than one set of values being replaced completely by another, the form is
one of a continuum where certain values from a particular social system will prove more
adaptive in confrontations with truths from other social systems; perhaps because they were originally adopted from another system or systems. Other values will simply appear to dissolve in the face of a different, more relevant set of truths. Still others will seem to remain unchanged in any confrontation. And, while this is occurring in one society, it is, of course, occurring in all which co-exist and are in contact with each other over time.

The rigidity, flexibility, and reducibility of each truth will inevitably and simultaneously affect, be affected by, and again re-affect the other truths within its own value system and in the value systems being confronted. The result is, and has always been, a continual blending and blurring of realities. I suggest that the speed at which this process occurs is, in part, a function of the sophistication and availability of information that exists at any one time, as well as the ability or capacity of those cultures in contact with each other to incorporate new information into their corpus of knowledge, as well as their means of knowing, and to recognise that, by doing so, their means of knowing alter as does everything they have known, however insignificant might be the change. In short, how a culture or a society supports its particular ideal of humanness alters and consequently so does the meaning of this ideal.

It is important at this point to look more closely at the individuals who make up a society because they are the internal, albeit mainly unconscious or quiet forces, which at any one time provide simultaneously the stability of and challenge to the ideal of humanness in their society.

While societies interact with each other at a gross level, the individual appears to exist in a duality of truths, which, to varying degrees, appear to be in conflict with each other, while at the same time both are related to being human. The dilemma for the individual lies in sensing the humanness of the society in which he or she exists to be in some ways different from his or her own condition of striving for perfection, i.e., an ideal personal state, even though he or she is dependent upon the former to lend support to this condition.

While this dilemma in Western Society has become more conspicuous and more consciously pronounced since the Enlightenment, and particularly since the mid 19th century, it can be said I think, that, in every age and in every social group ever since hominids developed the
facility of reflexive thought and language, there have always been skeptics, thinkers, inventors, men and women with ideas about how the social condition might be made better, more human, more perfect. These, of course, are the deviants whose genius, actions and thinking throughout history are inextricably bound up in the very essence of evolving humanity, that is, Social Change. And interestingly, it is precisely in this area of the social DNA that the particular chemistry of utopian thought may be located.

I say this because there appears to be a fascinating but elusive paradox subsumed within the mechanics of social change. It seems manifest in the fact that, on the one hand, ideas, inventions, and the skepticism of certain individuals about accepted truths or tenets have overtly contributed to the evolution of our social condition by questioning the correctness of what is known and its interpretation in terms of delineating the human in us. On the other hand the inspiration for these ideas, inventions and skepticism springs from the need in these people to eradicate and correct the imperfections perceivable in both their individual and social conditions, as well as eradicating the disparities that they perceive to exist between the two. Implicit in this idea then appears the ideal of working towards the direction and the rational control of what might best be described as habits.

Taken to its logical conclusion, this would, in effect, permit the management of change, which would mean all of our social and individual traits, tendencies, and propensities that have evolved over time could be slowed down or speeded up as required. Moreover, as is demonstrated in most utopian writing, the very heart of the matter would soon become apparent in the tendency or desire to halt change altogether. This last, would ensure the continued humanness of all those who belonged. It would ensure, in fact, their perfection in what would appear to them, or be accepted by them, as an ideal state. Spontaneity and the struggle to perfect would be erased and social quietism would prevail. People would be at last a part of the final result, and the notion of progress would be rendered obsolete, both as a concept and in the practical sense. In short, and most important of all then is the fact that inherent in the essence of social change appears our intense desire to halt it.
The reason for this must stand still further delineation because we are involved here, most precisely, with the notion of “Meaning”, which is born out of our confrontation with what Camus (1951) has called the Absurd: the fact that we can, indeed must it seems, fashion images of ourselves sufficiently powerful to deny our nothingness. We are aware that such constructions cannot be achieved outside the social realm, which, of course, necessarily embraces all political systems, religious beliefs and spiritual traditions. The social realm is, per force, the only medium available to us as individuals from which to derive our meaning, our sense of self-worth.

In fact, as I have already suggested, the social realm itself might be conceived as being fabricated from or by the interactions of individuals seeking to gain, establish, and enjoy a common humanness, a common perfection of meaning.

Given this, the central point I am suggesting can now be made clearer: that our intense desire to control, direct, and, if possible, halt change altogether, appears founded in the even stronger desire to avoid any confrontation with the absurd, that is, with the essential meaninglessness of constructed meaning; of our lack of meaning outside of the society. Articulated differently, the more rapid the rate of social change, the closer we appear to be to a confrontation with the absurd, the more we are driven or drive ourselves to find techniques to avoid such a confrontation, the greater the inclination to change.

This last, which is also of course the first, can be explained as a function of the growth of knownness. That is, as what is known, and what can be imagined from the known as it is known, increases through us developing techniques, political, economic, technological, etc., to control and make perfect our situation, there is a concomitant increase in our sense of meaning, in our humanness, in our perfection.

And while there have been, indeed seemingly must always be, both negative and positive ramifications from our efforts to achieve perfection in order for change toward humanness to occur at all, it is important to emphasise that, since scientific enquiry rather than religion became our primary means of discovering ways to direct ourselves towards perfection, we have departed from the cyclic and have entered upon a spiral, an upward, outward-tending
vortex. That is, we have largely forsaken, or are in the process of forsaking, our attachment to heavenly utopias of various kinds, which, until the establishment of the Scientific World View, were the only real basis for people to evade the absurd.

We have forsaken these heavenly utopias for the realisation that such an ideal is increasingly possible on the planet itself. In short, at a level that is mostly below the conscious, evasion of the absurd may now be said to be occurring scientifically and technologically; and this at an ever-increasing rate.

In examining the implications of this suggestion even further, it is essential not to lose sight of the growth in meaning, in humanness, being born out of the growth of knownness, for it is here that we finally arrive at a perspective of the future from the past which appears at once exceedingly complex and yet eminently simple. In fact, its complexity lies in trying to express the ramifications of its simplicity.

This said, I think it may be explained best in this way: Because the techniques being used by peoples around the planet to perfect their humanness are now, by and large, ones which suggest, propagate, and develop others at a seemingly ever increasing rate, we are faced with a most intriguing situation. As the rate of change in our condition rises through the development of ways to control and perfect it, so we appear to draw ever closer to a confrontation with the absurd. The faster the change in social parameters delineating our humanness, the less sure we can be about the correctness of our condition. Yet, the closer we approach our sense of meaninglessness, the greater becomes our meaning, our perfection, our humanness.

In my mind at least there can be no apex to this suggestion and its implications, only an ever-expanding awareness that meaninglessness and meaning are one in the growing of the known. They have always been as one, only today it is somewhat clearer than yesterday. So now The Birth And Death Of Meaning may be recognised for what they really are: functions of the growing of the known. Both are always one and the same, and, in this, we may now perhaps transcend our optimism and pessimism, and walk on in the face of the absurd.
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