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—Robert Jay Lifton, *The New York Times Book Review*

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Ernest Becker

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The poem on page xi is from "The Ninth Elegy," in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies,* translated by C.F. MacIntyre (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963, pp. 67 and 69), originally published by the University of California Press; reprinted by permission of The Regents of the University of California.

In memory of Otto Rank, whose thought may well prove to be the rarest gift of Freud's disciples to the world.

There is no doubt that healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it positively refuses to account for are a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best key to life's significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth.

William James[1]

If a way to the better there be, it lies in
taking a full look at the worst.
Thomas Hardy

Why, if it's possible to spend this span
of existence as laurel, a little darker than all
other greens, with little waves on every
leaf-edge (like the smile of a breeze), why, then,
must we be human and, shunning destiny,
long for it? . . .
Oh, not because happiness,
that over-hasty profit of loss impending, *exists.*
Not from curiosity, or to practise the heart,
that would also be in the laurel . . .
but because to be here is much, and the transient Here
seems to need and concern us strangely. Us, the most
transient.
Everyone *once, once* only. Just *once* and no more.
And we also *once.* Never again. But this having been
once, although only *once,* to have been of the earth,
seems irrevocable.

And so we drive ourselves and want to achieve it,
want to hold it in our simple hands,
in the surfeited gaze and in the speechless heart.
Want to become it. Give it to whom? Rather
keep all forever . . . but to the other realm,
alas, what can be taken? Not the power of seeing,
learned here so slowly, and nothing that's happened
here.
Nothing.

Rainer Maria Rilke

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Prefatory Note

Approaching death, Ernest Becker requested that the original manuscript of this, his final book, rest private and unpublished in a desk drawer, no energy remaining in him for any further barter with the gods. Believing the work to be an eloquent closure of his scientific literary career, Robert Wallace and I (with some initial anguish over the risk of irreverence) firmly decided upon publication realizing that had the time remained, the author himself would have done so for what he considered to be his *magnum opus*. Some material has been eliminated as it appears elsewhere, but beyond editing and routine work the book is Ernest's.

Marie Becker

Preface

This book is a companion volume to *The Denial of Death.* It completes the task begun there, which is to synthesize the scientific and tragic perspectives on man. In *The Denial of Death* I argued that man's innate and all-encompassing fear of death drives him to attempt to transcend death through culturally standardized hero systems and symbols. In this book I 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. This book also completes my confrontation of the work of Otto Rank and my attempt to transcribe its relevance for a general science of man. Ideally, of course, the two books should be read side by side in order to give the integrated and comprehensive picture that the author himself has (or imagines he has); but each book stands on its own and can be read without the other.

In my previous writings I tried to sketch out what might be a synthesis of the science of man. One of their major shortcomings, I now see, had to do with their fundamental organizing concept. I thought it was enough to use the unifying "principle of self-esteem maintenance." But as we will see in Chapter Five, it was too abstract, it lacked body, a universal, energetic content in the form of specific, inflexible motives. These motives I found in the work of Rank, in his insistence on the fundamental dynamic of the fear of life and death, and man's urge to transcend this fear in a culturally constituted heroism.

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.

Whether I have succeeded in leaving open the possibility for such a third alternative, while looking man full in the face for the first time in my career, is now for others to say. In the process of writing this book I compiled a pile of slips with things to say in the Preface, about the matters on which my mind has largely changed, those on which my views remain the same, etc. But this would be redundant; it would be easy for any interested student to trace—if he had the inclination to—the errors and wanderings, the inevitable record of personal growth and sobering up that characterize a so-called scientific career. Let me just say that if I have changed my views on many things, this change leaves intact, I believe, the basic premise of the Enlightenment which I feel we cannot abandon and continue to be working scientists—namely, that there is nothing in man or nature which would prevent us from taking some control of our destiny and making the world a saner place for our children. This is certainly harder, and more of a gamble, than I once thought; but maybe this should reinforce our dedication and truly tax our imaginations. Many of us have been lazy or smug, others too hopeful and naive. The realism of the world should make us better scientists. There is a distinct difference between pessimism, which does not exclude hope, and cynicism, which does. I see no need, therefore, to apologize for the relative grimness of much of the thought contained in this book; it seems to me to be starkly empirical. Since I have been fighting against admitting the dark side of human nature for a dozen years, this thought can hardly be a simple reflex of my own temperament, of what I naturally feel comfortable with. Nor is it a simple function of our uneasy epoch, since it was gathered by the best human minds of many dispositions and epochs, and so I think it can be said that it reflects objectively the universal situation of the creature we call man.

Finally, it goes without saying that this is a large project for one mind to try to put between two covers; I am painfully aware that I may not have succeeded, that I may have bitten off too much

and may have tried to put it too sparely so that it could all fit in. As in most of my other work, I have reached far beyond my competence and have probably secured for good a reputation for flamboyant gestures. But the times still crowd me and give me no rest, and I see no way to avoid ambitious synthetic attempts; either we get some kind of grip on the accumulation of thought or we continue to wallow helplessly, to starve amidst plenty. So I gamble with science and write, but the game seems to me very serious and necessary.

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Vancouver, 1972

E.B.