

ABSTRACT

Christianity and Creatureliness: Becker, Percy, and John Paul II on a Right Understanding of Death and Suffering

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The denial of death and the desire to abolish suffering both empty a person of humanity; Christianity reconciles these issues while keeping creatureliness intact. For Ernest Becker, the denial of death results from the paradoxical condition in which man possesses the gift of mind and the constraint of body. Though haunted with the prospect of death, man has in Christianity the hope in choosing a life of truth rather than denial. Walker Percy demonstrates that the search to abolish suffering involves purging man of his consciousness of death and it is this very notion that has led to the “century of death.” Pope John Paul II argues that in the absence of a religious outlook, there is no positive understanding of the mystery of suffering. Without such an outlook, death awareness and suffering serve no purpose.

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CHRISTIANITY AND CREATURELINESS: BECKER, PERCY, AND JOHN PAUL II
ON A RIGHT UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH AND SUFFERING

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

As we progressed through those typically carefree and innocent childhood years we somehow were subjected to the reality that life truly doesn't last forever. That initial moment of awakening may have occurred through observing a death scene in a movie. Perhaps we learned from a carefully prepared talk from our parents, or from the emotion and, tragedy of watching someone close to us pass away. It is inescapable: we all become aware of death. And this awareness instigates fear and anxiety, which ultimately leads to a state of denial. It is this awareness that makes us uniquely human, but we can't dwell upon this forever. Consciously or not, we have a natural inclination to block out the subject of death and finitude as far back as possible in our mind. It is too frightening for us to deal with death in its totality. This holds true for suffering as well. Pain holds just as much anxiety and denial as death. Blocking out death and suffering is a natural human survival mechanism. If it were not, we could scarcely function for fear of all the dangers around us. According to Ernest Becker, we spend much of our lives grappling with this struggle, and the result is -- life. It is when death and suffering are not acknowledged as necessary aspects of our existence that humanity is lost.

What, then, are distinctively human characteristics? The answer can be extracted from the works of Ernest Becker's *Denial of Death*, Walker Percy's *The Thanatos Syndrome*, and John Paul II's *Evangelium Vitae*. Although these distinguished writers approach the subject from varying perspectives, together they provide us a common

thread: that our *awareness* distinguishes us from the rest of the animal kingdom. This awareness has made possible our unique abilities of language as well as our ability to love, to reason, to know and seek truth, and to have a relationship with God. And it is through our relationship and our understanding of God that meaning is given to suffering and death.

It wasn't until the early 1900s that psychology emerged as a major school of study, roughly around the same time that Kierkegaard and the existentialists were grappling with the meaning of human society. Sigmund Freud was one of the first scientists to look inward for the answers: into the human sub-conscious, composed of the id, the ego, and the super-ego. Freud's basic thesis was that the sex drive was the definitive drive in human nature, and therefore the cornerstone of man's anxiety.¹ Freud is largely credited for popularizing psychology, and he remains one of the towering figures in 20th Century thought. But like anyone else, he has many detractors. Legions of psychologists and scientists have sought to refine and correct his theories. One such individual was Ernest Becker, who succeeded in the challenge. According to Becker's seminal work *The Denial of Death*, Freud may have gotten the theme right, but he got the motivation wrong. Human beings are driven by sub-conscious urges, but not primarily by the sex drive. They are driven instead by the death drive, or, more accurately, the all-consuming fear of death, that great unknown and constant threat of terminus to all things known. We poor humans live and die like all other earthly animals, but the difference is that we are self-aware in the meantime. Humanity is exactly this: the awareness of one's ability to create, just as one is created. Being human is characterized by a unique

¹"Man" is generically used in the entirety of this paper to signify human beings. This term takes up the sense of universal human subject as understood by the authors addressed in this discussion.

conflicting nature of mind and body. We are cursed with the ability to wish that it were otherwise. We are aware of the constant threats all around us, of our fragility and our small place in this huge cosmos. To suppress such awareness is to empty man of his humanity. We spend much of our lives attempting to define ourselves against this reality, and it is this very drive that leads us to do almost everything that we do. Becker calls it our drive to “heroics” — to build a family, to create art, to find success within society, to leave a legacy larger than we were—in essence, to live a human life as our culture in the United States of America knows it. The foundation necessary for heroics is laid by what Ernest Becker titles the “vital lie,” that lifestyle that convinces one that he “controls his life and his death.” This is to deny one’s “creatureliness,” however (Becker 57). Becker states:

The prison of one’s character is painstakingly built to deny one thing and one thing alone: one’s creatureliness. The creatureliness is the terror. Once admit that you are a defecating creature and you invite the primeval ocean of creature anxiety to flood over you. But it is more than creature anxiety, it is also man’s anxiety, the anxiety that results from the human paradox that man is an animal who is conscious of his animal limitation. (Becker 87)

By devoting energy to maintain the vital lie, to creating a fortress of character and denying one’s creatureliness, one fails to grasp a life of truth and substance.

The punch line for Becker is that the basic motivation for human behavior is the need to control our basic anxiety, to deny the terror of death. The denial of death results from man’s paradoxical condition in which he possesses the gift of mind and the constraint of body (Becker 26). He has body and mind, and it is his body that ultimately limits him. Though aware of his bodily limitations and the concept of death, he is quick to envelop his very own death in layers of denial. This is not a solution for Becker, but

rather the problem. A state of half-awareness of one's condition, or general awareness without personal acceptance, keeps one from knowing truth. Truth is the elevated good for Becker. However, he recognizes that the process in reaching truth is terrifying without a bigger context, and it is Kierkegaard that he looks to for providing this context.

Becker dedicates a large portion of *The Denial of Death* to the ideas of Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard was an exquisite figure for Becker because he was able to merge religious and psychiatric categories with much clarity. Kierkegaard showed that psychological and religious perspectives on reality were intimately related and reinforced each other. Becker turns to Kierkegaard to give context to why this process of reaching awareness of one's condition, though daunting, is necessary. Kierkegaard's solution is faith. Living with the voluntary consciousness of death, the heroic individual can choose to despair or to make a Kierkegaardian "leap of faith" and trust in God (Becker 90). Only when man chooses to realize his condition and acknowledges his creatureliness—the fact that he is insignificant and weak without a creator—is he able to turn to the ultimate transcending power, which is God. This leap of faith, in which one genuinely accepts that there is a higher power, is the necessary transition to give meaning to one's existence. Faith delivers us from the hands of terror and misery. With Christianity there is hope in choosing a life of raw truth rather than blinding denial in the prospect of death.

In his novel *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Walker Percy creatively shows what happens when blinding denial overtakes truth. With a scientific project that successfully "cures" society of suffering by mixing the right mixture of drugs, Percy is able to demonstrate that the search to abolish suffering entails purging man of his consciousness

of death and it is this very notion that has led to what Percy calls the “age of thanatos” (Percy 86). Just as Becker argues, awareness is the cause of our misery and suffering. Man’s awareness of his “condition,” the fact that he has both mind and body, makes him an anxious creature. Therefore, the human self-consciousness is the disease to be cured as Percy points out. However, awareness is exactly what distinguishes human beings from the rest of creation. To expunge suffering from man’s existence entails altering self-consciousness, which results in a loss of humanity. These scientists’ experiments allow for a death free of fear and anxiety, and because of this human beings are no longer touched by it: hence, the “culture of death.” For Percy, an existence that can come without fear or anxiety is not a human one. Serenity is not better than suffering because it abstracts from the goodness of the human capacity to desire and to know the truth—or as Becker would say, the truth of our condition. The idea behind Percy’s novel is that no technology, regardless of how advanced it is, can aid in the search of what is integral to the human condition. Human beings have selves or souls, something beyond the values found in utilitarianism, which allows them to discover the human compensations for suffering. The overzealous desire to “improve” the quality of life as seen in these particular scientists of Percy’s novel comes ironically at the prize of dehumanization. Percy is criticizing the utilitarian, efficiency-driven world view. The problem with these scientists and their project is that the value is misplaced. Value for human life in its entirety is distorted by a higher value put on efficiency. Success of the human race for these particular scientists is something that can be quantified and evidenced through statistics. For them, the fact that the incidence of AIDS contraction and teen pregnancies were decreasing meant that they were successful. Their experiment defies the mystery at

the core of human existence in that it opposes the fundamental truth of human experience that is one of human limitation. Humanity is *not* perfection. As Pope John Paul explains, humanity cannot equal perfection because innocence was lost in the Fall. Without the concept of human limitation, humans are blinded to their creatureliness and therefore unable to have an understanding of their role as creatures and God's role as creator. Instead they become their own gods. They are deprived of faith, sin, and guilt or what gives context to and understanding for suffering and death. The compensations for humans, or the value to be found in death and suffering, can be illuminated through the teachings of Christianity. Without God, it would appear that human suffering as well as awareness of death itself is pitifully pointless.

John Paul II relies heavily on scripture to discuss the meaning of suffering and death. God's intentions were not for man to be sinful, but because Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden tree, sin was introduced into the world. Because of the Fall, innocence was lost and suffering and death followed. The Son of God, Jesus Christ, died on the cross for our sins and only through his shed blood was man redeemed. As is stated in the Bible, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (*New International Version*, Romans 6.23). Though death comes to us as the result of man's first sin, man's hope for healing from sickness, as well as the prospect of eternal life, are restored through Christ's suffering. To truly follow the footsteps of Christ requires man to undergo suffering just as Christ did for us. However, Pope John Paul II argues our encounter with suffering and death are not to be perceived in a negative light. Suffering is a restorative process in that it allows us to become Christ-like. Suffering provides reality to the teachings in scripture as it helps Christians

to understand what Jesus himself underwent. It teaches us endurance, strength, faith, and righteousness. Though suffering is inevitable on this earth, it is not comparable to the gloriousness that will be revealed to the followers of Christ. For Christians, death is not the end-all. Rather, it is the beginning of eternal life, unity, and happiness with God. Pope John Paul II emphasizes that without the Christian perspective, awareness of death and suffering serve no purpose. To deviate from God's intentions results in a loss of humanity. Man is a creature of God, but without the acknowledgement of a creator, man cannot fully understand what it means to be human.

CHAPTER TWO

Ernest Becker and *The Denial of Death* (1973)

The basic premise of Ernest Becker's work *The Denial of Death* is that human civilization embraces an elaborate, symbolic defense mechanism against man's acceptance or acknowledgment of mortality. Becker states: "The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man" (Becker xvii). Whereas the popular Freudian school of thought explained the motivations and neuroses of human nature as a product of unconscious instinctual drives, Becker sees man's problems deriving from the basic split between man's limited body and his limitless mind. The result, Becker then explains, is man's paradoxical condition: "He was given a consciousness of his individuality and his part-divinity in creation, the beauty and uniqueness of his face and his name. At the same time he was given the consciousness of the terror of the world and of his own death and decay" (Becker 69).

For Becker, the core anxiety is not rooted in sexuality or aggression, but in the terror produced in an animal that has attained self-awareness and knows that it will die. As Becker describes, "Man's very insides—his self—are foreign to him. He doesn't know who he is, why he was born, what he is doing on the planet, what he is supposed to do, or what he can expect. His own existence is incomprehensible to him, a miracle just like the rest of creation, closer to him, right near his pounding heart, but for that reason

all the more strange” (Becker 51). This lack of understanding produces fearful anxiety, which leads to what Becker calls the “vital lie”—man’s refusal to acknowledge his own mortality (Becker 47). In attempts to control and to deny the terror of death, man embarks on what Becker refers to as a “causi sui”, or immortality project, in which he creates or becomes part of something that he believes will last forever. Man feels he has become heroic and part of something that will never die, compared to his physical body that will die one day (Becker 46). This, in turn, gives man the feeling that his life has significance in the grand scheme of events. Becker's synthesis points toward a transcendent source as the only realm from which real answers to the human quandary might come. However, in an age of reason, religion is no longer as convincing; rather science is attempting to overcome the problem of man, something that Becker feels it can never do. Instead, it is the “real” man, or “self-realized” soul, that transcends himself by embracing anxiety and realizing the truth of his condition and therefore his “creatureliness” (Becker 87). Like the theologian Søren Kierkegaard, Becker agrees that self-transcendence requires facing anxiety, embracing finitude, destroying the “vital lie”—only then can one “relate itself to powers beyond itself... to infinitude, to absolute transcendence, to the Ultimate Power of Creation, which made finite creatures” (Becker, 89). One goes through it all to arrive at faith, the faith that one’s very creatureliness has some meaning to a Creator—that despite one’s insignificance, weakness, and death, one’s existence has meaning in some ultimate sense because it exists within an eternal and infinite scheme of things brought about and maintained in some kind of design by some creative force. As Becker states, “Possibility leads nowhere if it does not lead to faith” (Becker 90).

Becker provides the psychological commentary to the workings of our “culture of death” as John Paul II coined it (John Paul II 39). With careful analysis, he slowly breaks down how we respond to death—or, better stated, how we fail to respond. In *Denial of Death*, he calls to the forefront man’s refusal to acknowledge his own mortality, as identified before—the vital lie. His goal in addressing the vital lie is to cultivate the awareness of, and preparation for, death; his guidance gives way to the possibility of man’s enlightenment. It is no new development to suggest that man is in denial of death, but Becker sheds light on why and how we are able to maintain this veil and live seemingly unaffected by death’s inevitability. In addition, it is not novel to propose that humanity has a strange, paradoxical relationship with death. As ironic as it appears, man denies death even as he is infatuated by it. This infatuation of death has permeated every facet of media and entertainment. Though this revelation appears initially contradictory, Becker ultimately shows both behaviors—denial and infatuation—to be one and the same.

Man’s Condition of Awareness

Man is very much aware of the concept of death; however, it is his own death that he fervently envelops in layers of denial. Even though people see death all around them and grasp as an objective fact that everyone dies, few people truly understand, subjectively and inwardly, that they will die someday. The awareness of death is incomplete at the core of every man’s heart. His half-awareness makes it possible for him to fear his own death while remaining infatuated with it. His psyche appears to remain relatively intact, because he never contemplates the horror of his own inevitable death. As Becker explains it, “the fear of death must be present behind all our normal

functioning, in order for the organism to be armed toward self-preservation. But the fear of death cannot be present constantly in one's mental functioning, else the organism could not function" (Becker 16). The paradoxical nature of man's half-awareness can be understood as "the ever-present fear of death in the normal biological functioning of our instinct of self-preservation, as well as our utter obliviousness to this fear in our conscious life" (Becker 17). In order for man to survive he must be protected with fear-responses, but in normal times without immediate danger present man can move about without ever believing in his own death. Man exists as if death is around him but not part of him.

To understand the mechanisms by which man construes death, it is essential to look first at what Becker labels man's "condition" (Becker 58). Man faces the difficult role of balancing the gift of intellectual thinking and reflection with the constraint of bodily needs. As Becker states, we have the curse of "consciousness of death." Man is a self-conscious animal, a creature that never overcomes anxiety, and that makes him so different from the rest of the animal kingdom. Our "condition" makes sense of our seemingly contradictory relationship with death. As Becker explains, "anxiety is the result of the perception of the truth of one's condition" (Becker 87). Society gives us comfort away from these anxieties because we are able to blend in with the masses and live in denial. Of course death would be feared if we acknowledged it, especially when viewed as the end-all, the total submergence and negation. The perspective determines the defense mechanism and the perspective tends to be rooted in complete and utter denial that stifles the motivation for action.

Our own individual reflections on death are without doubt colored by the influence of current attitudes in our culture. These attitudes are sometimes conflicting and contradictory, and in a strange way somehow coalesce to shield us from the reality of death. Society has created the crass optimism of simply ignoring death altogether. Death is commonly exploited in a materialistic manner that allows it to be objectified even as it is defied. As Josef Pieper puts it, we act “as if the dying of human beings were some sort of ‘painful episode’ that occasionally ‘still’ happens, something it is best not to talk about, at least not in public” (Pieper 14). Sigmund Freud shed much light on this phenomenon when he stated that “At bottom no one believes in his own death” (qtd. in Pieper 58). Though death surrounds us, it remains incomprehensible. Acknowledging death in general does not bring us to the conclusion that death is necessary and possible in relation to ourselves. As Karl Rahner articulates perfectly in his essay *On the Theology of Death*, “Death is the most universal thing, and every man declares it is natural and matter of course that one dies. And yet there is alive in every man a secret protest...” (qtd. in Pieper 59). This unrelenting behavior towards death stems from man’s unusual condition of possessing the gift of mind and the constraint of body.

The puzzling relationship that man has with death seems to be a combination of denial and infatuation. At first glance, these appear to be very different mechanisms of reception; however, further analysis reveals infatuation as denial wrapped in desensitization. Manifested in our society is an almost matter-of-fact approach to death. In motion pictures, television shows, and news media, death is overwhelmingly exploited. Hollywood is the ultimate purveyor of death as both heroic and horrific through such movies as *Fight Club*, *300*, *The Hunger Games*, and *The Sixth Sense*. These

dramatic and violent portrayals of death serve as entertainment and render death as a common parlance. Infatuation and familiarity with death in this manner represses its reality in an attitude less paradoxical than it is casual. Death is thought about casually in the third person. Those deaths on the screen show the annihilation of impersonal names and faces and therefore pose no real threat to the observer, after all. This attitude of ambivalence results in a kind of pornographic objectification of death. A parallel is evident: just as the pornography of sex detaches the sexual act from the accompanying emotion of love, so too the pornography of death abstracts the death of a human being from the natural emotions of grief, fear, and irreplaceable loss. Fascinated by the deaths of others as entertainment, one avoids any acknowledgment of death as personally pertinent.

A few comments on this perplexity are in order here. Man's condition is unlike that of any other creature due to his "awareness." Man is strange in that he displays elements of both matter and the metaphysical. Man's existential dilemma, as Becker characterizes it, stems from being half animal and half symbolic: "Man is literally split in two: he has an awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever" (Becker 26). Man expresses individuality, but is confined to inescapable finitude. It is man's symbolic identity that brings him out of nature. Becker argues that a basic duality in human life exists between the physical world of objects and a symbolic world of human meaning. Thus, since man has a dualistic nature consisting of a physical self and a symbolic self, man is able to transcend the dilemma of mortality through heroism, a concept involving his symbolic half. He is a

symbolic self by virtue of his name, a personality, and life history. He is given a mind that transcends that of nature and reaches heights of contemplation and self-consciousness. Nevertheless, “man is a worm and food for worms” (Becker 26). Man rises above nature while remaining hopelessly tied to it. Though his mind may soar in the skies, his body ties him to the finitude of life as it inexorably decays. Man has a troubling dualistic nature; aware of the splendor that enthrones him above all other creatures, he is nevertheless destined for a bodily deterioration. This unique awareness explains the semiconscious attitude that attempts to bury the anxieties surrounding the topic of death. Ignorance provides safety from the hard truth of his perishable existence.

Though a semiconscious attitude towards death is no new phenomenon, it tends to increase in a technologically advanced era. A more panoramic view provided through advancements in modern day technology in a sense brings the overall characterization of humanity to the stage; therefore, our mentalities on such things on death are much more publicized and transparent. Increased access to media has allowed for man’s fixation to be satiated; it has allowed an infatuation with, and desensitization toward the raw drama of death.

Modern culture in the United States reflects a deep-seated denial of death. This relationship with death does not seem unreasonable from the perspective of death as the “ultimate crisis” (Pieper 19): that is, departure from this life and all we know. It is the distinction between what we know here and the unknown that is beyond. Death is the ultimate “culture shock” in that we travel to a strange after-life in the process of our own dying. Though we all encounter death throughout our lives, our experiences are indirect until our own death comes into question; hence, our concept of death is limited here on

earth. The idea that we can never truly experience death while alive allows for this prevalent subconscious mindset. As Thomas Mann in *The Magic Mountain* states, “Death is an affair of the others” or as Edward Young in *Night Thoughts* puts it “All men think all men mortal, but themselves.” (qtd. in Pieper 11) Death, then, is often construed in the third person; it doesn’t apply to “me”, or “you”, but it applies to “them”—the others.

Our humanity unites us in our fear of death in one way or another. To be human means to be aware, to have the ability to seek and know the truth, and it is these unique abilities that inspire fear. As Becker states, “The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man” (Becker xvii). We fear the unknown, and death is certainly an unknown. We fear things we can't understand, and death is something we can't fully grasp. Becker accepts the reactions of awe, fear, and ontological anxiety with respect to death as natural; he does not intend to denounce these responses, but to call attention to the nature of humanity. We tend to turn first to our controlling nature, and when this proves to be ineffective, we resign ourselves to other tactics such as transference. The psychoanalytic concept of transference, as identification with an external object, corresponds to a motive of merging with the cosmos. This is a dynamic in which human beings seek to draw power for living from external objects. Becker posits that people have this kind of relationship to God as well. While life expansion forces coexist with the fear of death, it is the latter that imbues them with urgency. Transference, for example, reflects both fear of death and possibility for "creative transcendence." In both cases,

transference involves distortion and illusion. The problem of an ideal life becomes the problem of the "best illusion," the one that allows maximum "freedom, dignity, and hope" (Becker 202). As will be discussed later, only religion, with God as an object of transference, can satisfy these criteria. However, this is a religion that emphasizes an awareness of limits, introspection, and a confrontation with apparent meaninglessness.

The Vital Lie

The basic motivation, regardless of the underlying mechanism used, is man's biological need to control. Regardless of the strategy, subconscious or conscious, the tactics used strive to escape the complicated problem of death present in the human psyche. The true paradox stems from the condition of man itself, not the strategies used as coping mechanisms. Mortality inhibits the extent of our control, and because man is a creature that must control, this leads to denial as the resultant coping mechanism. If one cannot control the ultimate event of death, then one can rely on the safeguard of denial to mask the anxiety. As mentioned already, this is what Becker labels the "vital lie" of character. It is deemed vital by Becker because "it is a *necessary* and basic dishonesty about oneself and one's whole situation" (Becker 55).

Since the terror of death is so overwhelming, we conspire to keep the terror unconscious. The vital lie of character is the first line of defense that protects us from the painful awareness of our helplessness. According to Becker, this vital lie is first planted during childhood. Becker states that "one of the first things a child has to do is to learn to 'abandon ecstasy,' to do without awe, to leave fear and trembling behind. Only then can he act with a certain oblivious self-confidence, when he has naturalized his world. We say 'naturalized' but we mean unnaturalized, falsified, with the truth obscured, the

despair of the human condition hidden” (Becker 55). A child, as Becker describes it, borrows power from adults and creates a personality by interjecting the qualities of the godlike being. This shared power provides a character armor to make it feel safe and to maintain the pretense that the world is manageable. However, the price for such a pretense is the trade of integrity for immortality. If one chases the fantasy of immortality, one loses the concept of humanity itself. To be man is to be finite.

Heroics and Narcissism

Society plays the second line of defense against our natural impotence by creating a hero system that allows us to believe that we transcend death by participating in something of lasting worth (Becker 5). Since, according to this view, the main task of human life is to become heroic and transcend death, every culture must provide its members with an intricate symbolic system that is covertly religious. Christianity provides a solution to the terrifying world and the horror of death. Christianity provides the immortality that man seeks. It is important to note the key component of narcissism when discussing the hero system. Narcissism brings to the surface our hopeless absorption in ourselves. We may care for others, but it is ourselves that we predominantly care about. It is the underlying belief that everyone is expendable but ourselves that breeds a narcissistic society, and it is thanks to this narcissism that we grasp the concept of death, without ever genuinely applying it to ourselves. Narcissism is a natural part of man’s condition, as Becker shows: “If you took a blind and dumb organism and gave it self-consciousness and a name, if you made it stand out of nature and know consciously that it was unique, then you would have narcissism” (Becker 3). Narcissism is what causes man to aim for limitless self-extension, to strain to feel as an

object of primary value, and to stand out from the rest; this behavior powers the machinery of the hero system, for narcissism pushes man to become the hero. The hero system manifests itself in a myriad of ways, but it primarily ensues from the belief that man creates objects of lasting worth and meaning that outlive death and decay. For example, it may entail sacrificing ourselves to conquer an empire, to build an institution, to write a novel, to establish a family, or to accumulate a fortune. If man and his products count, then immortality is attainable on this premise. As Becker states, “heroism is first and foremost a reflex of the terror of death” (Becker 11). Integrated into the roots of denial, heroism provides comfort to man’s ego and quenches the “overreacher’s” desire to surpass the limits of human potential.

Though elevated above all other living creatures, the human person’s lifetime is haunted with the prospect of death. When put in this light, it is understandable that a society such as the United States would sustain itself with protective systems of denial. Yet Becker argues that this denial is our very hindrance; fear, the cause of denial, is what holds us back from our full potential. This is not only a fear of death, but a fear of life and vulnerability. Becker states, “The human animal is characterized by two great fears that the other animals are protected from: the fear of life and the fear of death” (Becker 53). This is because life entails too much thought and perception, which ultimately results in a synchronizing repression of death, since both life and death are entangled naturally; to take in this information, to figure out one’s life while death is always approaching, would be crushing. This is why man is reluctant to move out of simple-mindedness into the overwhelming surrounding world and the dangers it imposes when fully encompassed. He shrinks from life to preserve his own as he knows it. He had to invent and create out

of himself the limitations of perception, the character armor, to live on this planet. On this matter, Becker says, “The great boon of repression is that it makes possible to live decisively in an overwhelmingly miraculous and incomprehensible world, a world so full of beauty, majesty, and terror that if animals perceived it all they would be paralyzed to act (Becker 50). Therefore, man’s weakness and repressive behavior makes it impossible for the power he draws from to be his own. He is only able to naturalize his world and keep up the pretense of control by borrowing powers from those around him. As Becker explains:

We don’t want to admit that we are fundamentally dishonest about reality, that we do not really control our own lives. We don’t want to admit that we do not stand alone, that we always rely on something that transcends us, some system of ideas and powers in which we are embedded and which support us. (Becker 55)

This power isn’t always overt; rather than a god, or a person of status, it may be something as seemingly innocent as an all-absorbing activity or hobby. A myriad of systems provides support for the pretense that he rests on his own center. This naturalization is more appropriately considered a falsification, because it hides the reality of man’s condition and obscures the truth by allowing man to feel in control of his life and death when frankly the truth is quite the opposite. On this matter, Becker states:

What we will see is that man cuts out for himself a manageable world: he throws himself into action uncritically, unthinkingly. He accepts the cultural programming that turns his nose where he is supposed to look; he doesn’t bite the world off in one piece as a giant would, but in small manageable pieces as a beaver does ... he learns to expose himself, not to stand out; he learns to embed himself in other-power, both of concrete persons and of things and cultural commands; the result is that he comes to exist in the imagined infallibility of the world around him. (Becker 23)

Man is devoid of humanity without consciousness of his fate, but if this consciousness is able to take over, there remains another concern—what happens if one’s falsified powers crumble like sand? How do we transcend death and still maintain hope? According to Becker’s reflection on Kierkegaard, all hope is not lost if man chooses to live with the voluntary consciousness of death, because there is hope in choosing a life of truth rather than denial.

The Kierkegaardian Leap

Kierkegaard’s philosophy, as Becker understands it, provides a solution to the overwhelming despair following the voluntary consciousness of death—a solution that requires a leap of faith. The “Kierkegaardian” leap requires an individual to put trust in the unknown god of life whose mysterious purpose is expressed in the overwhelming drama of creation.

From the foregoing, it is evident that psychiatric and religious perspectives on reality are very much intimately related; for Kierkegaard this is particularly true. This causes Becker to speculate on the belief system of this well-known philosopher. For Kierkegaard, man’s anxiety is a function of his ambiguity of existence coupled with his powerlessness to overcome this very ambiguity—or, as Kierkegaard would put it, for man to become straightforwardly an animal or angel. According to Kierkegaard, man’s condition is a result of the Fall, in which Adam and Eve were ejected from the Garden of Eden due to their disobedience. This casting out is the cause of the union of man’s opposites of self-consciousness and physical body. For Kierkegaard, evil is marked by repression, closed as it is to truth and revelation, while good is the ability to unveil oneself and face anxiety and its accompanying freedom. However, man chooses to live a

trivial life because it is easier than facing the danger of the full realm of experience. The important lesson to take from this is that balance cannot be found if man does not grasp both spectrums of his existence, because there must be a balance of necessity and possibility, of body and spirit. This means an acknowledgment of reality and limits, with respect to mind and limbs. The “vital lie” and the armor that is built during childhood are exactly what holds a person prisoner, according to Kierkegaard, for the person is not the self-realized soul, the “real” man who has transcended himself.

Kierkegaard sees the anxiety resulting from the perception of the truth of one’s condition not as an ending for man, but as a final maturity. It does not bog down humanity even lower than before, when he was in denial; rather, he transcends into a realm of enlightenment with the process of self-realization. The resulting truth, the destruction of the vital lie, opens a new possibility for man to see beyond into infinitude and absolute transcendence—to the Ultimate Power of Creation that is responsible for the creation of mankind. One goes through this process of self-realization to finally arrive at faith. One must admit one’s creatureliness to give meaning to a creator, for there is no “creature” without a “creator.” However, Kierkegaard does not say that the preliminaries to making the leap of faith are not terrifying or difficult. As Fredrick Perls puts it, “To suffer one’s death and to be reborn is not easy” (qtd. in Becker 57). This process of shedding the comforts of one’s character armor is not easy precisely because so much of one has to die. Though faith certainly never banishes anxiety, it uses this anxiety to provide an eternal fountain for growth into new dimensions of thought and trust. For Kierkegaard, faith in God is the solution to mankind’s paradoxical nature: it provides meaning to life despite man’s true insignificance, weakness, and death.

Without faith in God, the acknowledgment of one's mortality conjures futile misery and discomfort. As Becker says, "If character is a neurotic defense against despair and you shed that defense, you admit the full flood of despair, the full realization of the true human condition, what men are really afraid of, what they struggle against, and are driven toward and away from" (Becker, 55). It takes faith to give context to the suffering and anxiety that naturally accompanies the humbling truth of mortality. Just as Kierkegaard explains, the process of discarding character defenses can only be delivered from the dread of possibility that holds him prey by the hands of faith and "in no other place does he find repose" (Becker 91). As Becker beautifully summarizes the teachings of Kierkegaard:

Man breaks through the bounds of merely cultural heroism; he destroys the character lie that had him perform as a hero in the everyday social scheme of things; and by doing so he opens himself up to infinity, to the possibility of cosmic heroism, to the very service of God. His life thereby acquires ultimate value in place of merely social and cultural, historical value. He links his secret inner self, his authentic talent, his deepest feelings of uniqueness, his inner yearning for absolute significance, to the very ground of creation. Out of the ruins of the broken cultural self there remains the mystery of the private, invisible, inner self which yearned for ultimate significance, for cosmic heroism. This invisible mystery at the heart of every creature now attains cosmic significance by affirming its connection with the invisible mystery at the heart of creation. This is the meaning of faith. (Becker 91)

The truly open person, the individual who has shed his character armor, the vital lie of his cultural conditioning, is beyond the help of any science. Science cannot bring meaning to man's condition, but can only aim to conceal it. Thus science is not the solution for Becker or Kierkegaard, but in fact is the very problem. As Kierkegaard clearly argues, tearing down the walls of denial and making the leap of faith is necessary to give

meaning to the inevitable anxiety that results from revealing the truth of one's creatureliness. Piety, in the prospect of death, provides hope and significance in choosing a life of truth over denial. Kierkegaard's leap of faith, or more particularly Christianity, not only gives reason to break down one's layers of denial, but it provides meaning to suffering and death, as will be further explained with respect to Walker Percy's novel *The Thanatos Syndrome*.

CHAPTER THREE

Walker Percy and *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987)

Walker Percy's novel *The Thanatos Syndrome* sheds a satirical light on society's attitude toward suffering and death. Though rambunctious and outrageous at times, his prophetic novel provides an interesting commentary on the modern predicament, the direction it is going, and ultimately, its consequences. His clever presentation of such a predicament stems from the concept that suffering and death are no longer viewed as essential; in fact his book exploits our futile attempts to avoid both at all costs—ultimately, the cost is our humanity as a whole. What exactly is humanity? The concept known as trichotomy tells us that humanity is composed of three distinct parts: body, soul and spirit. In Genesis 1:26-27, God says, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness...So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them," thus making explicit the analogy of the Trinity (comparing the three *natures* of man with the three *persons* of God). In contrast to trichotomy, the view accepted by most scholars is that man is dichotomous, or consists of a material aspect and a non-material aspect. The non-material part is called by many different names: soul, spirit, mind, life force, or any of a dozen or more equivalent Scriptural words. Percy addresses man's focus on the body or material aspect that man fervently embraces while either ignoring or denying the soul or non-material aspect of humanity.

From here forward, we will group death and suffering as one category of suffering, for they are closely intertwined. Though at first glance it seems intuitive and virtuous to avoid the suffering of others, Percy provides his readers an interesting perspective on why this is not so. As he explains, energy comes from both the positive and the negative; it takes all of it to produce the truly rich, fully human experience that God intended for mankind. Energy is not always positive and without peril. Because suffering is a fundamental part of being human, to do away with the vulnerability or presence of suffering would lead to an even bigger problem — a society stripped of humanity

In this novel, a sequel to Percy's novel *Love in the Ruins*, the main character Dr. Tom More returns to his psychiatric work after spending two years in prison for selling prescription drugs to truck drivers. Very soon after his return he notices that his former patients are acting strangely: "In each there has occurred a sloughing away of the old terrors, worries, rages, a shedding of guilt like last year's snakeskin, and in its place is a mild fond vacancy, a species of unfocused animal good spirits" (Percy 21). Dr. More and his cousin Dr. Lucy Lipscomb collaborate in a search for the cause of these peculiar phenomena. They soon discover that John Van Dorn, head of the computer division of a nearby nuclear power plant, and Dr. Bob Comeaux, director of the Quality of Life Division of the Federal Complex overseeing euthanasia programs, are both involved in releasing heavy sodium into the water supply to "improve" social welfare. Improving the social welfare for those involved in this scheme implies ridding society of suffering by altering brain chemistry. This is done by quietly suppressing troublesome functions of the cortex, and the result of this tampering is a dramatic reduction in crime, violence,

suicide, and even AIDS percentages, as well as a complete relief of anxiety in the unwitting sodium drinkers. As Dr. More describes it, “Actually it would be the abatement of symptoms—of such peculiarly human symptoms as anxiety, depression, stress, insomnia, suicidal tendencies, chemical dependence. Think of it as a regression from a stressful human existence to a peaceable animal existence” (Percy 180).

Though the effects of these chemicals are undoubtedly positive, the fact is that they artificially change the victim’s consciousness while allowing a select few to function as all-powerful puppet masters. One of More’s interlocutors argues that this use of heavy sodium is no different than putting fluoride in the water to control tooth decay. However, More is unmoved by this argument. Though both inarguably function for the sake of social welfare, something altering the very nature of people’s behavior does not sit well with Dr. More. The advocates claim that their cause is a good one, but Dr. More notes that there is something very wrong with it, not only on the legal level of civil rights, but on a larger philosophical scale. Their project for social betterment meddles with free will, the right of the individual self to pursue its own heights—or depths. Just as Becker suggests, Percy’s character too believes that we need our anxieties to discover who we are. In addition, as we will see from Pope John Paul II, suffering plays an integral role in our existence. Man’s condition is not intended to be subdued, but to be faced.

If the human goal were in fact safety or peace, then the chemotherapists of Percy’s novel might very well deserve our consent and praise, for they clearly secure for human beings what humans are incapable of securing on their own: freedom from anxiety about death. As a result of the sodium treatment, the people actually feel secure and peaceful. However, for Dr. More, personal sovereignty is not accomplished through

one's attempt to defeat death. Instead it comes from one's ability to live well with the present fear and anxiety of one's inevitable death and genuine acknowledgement of self-conscious mortality. A reasonable question might be: "Why is self-conscious acknowledgment of mortality necessary?" The answer is simple: because truth is necessary. As in his essay "Sex, Drugs, Politics, Love and Death: The Political Teaching of Walker Percy's *Thanatos Syndrome*," Peter Lawler states, "one cannot experience curiosity, wonder, or love without experiencing anxiety and dislocation in view of one's contingency and mortality" (Lawler 175). Yes, awareness makes these unique human characteristics possible. Without it, man is not capable of curiosity, wonder, or love. For that reason, any relationship with God or a life of ultimate truth is impossible. If the human goal were to obtain safety and peace, then we could no longer remain human, since truth would be forfeited.

The Problem with Cartesianism

Mankind is distinguished by its unique awareness. Yet, contemporary America is a product of scientific thought that aims to defeat suffering and death. For Percy, our persistent attempts to escape self-conscious mortality can never succeed completely. His novel postulates that even if a "cure" for man's troubling condition were discovered, an ever-present issue of power distribution would be inevitable. As Lawler has argued, both Comeaux and Van Dorn are driven by a Cartesian mindset that human beings should dismiss as misery-producing illusions any experience that makes them glum in the midst of good fortune. Man's awareness is the problem that needs to be cured; it is the cause of uncomfortable and unproductive moods. Dr. Bob Comeaux and Dr. John Van Dorn, the experts, are on a mission to resolve this "condition." The problem is that a wholly

Cartesian mindset is impossible to set forth into action with one's innate consciousness. The experts may promote their cause with arguments that appear to be sound, but they themselves do not partake in the "cure." Dr. More's biggest conflict with the experiment initially seems to be that the scientists are put in complete overseer positions. If *everyone*, including the scientists themselves, were under the influence of heavy sodium, then the issue of tyranny would be absent. Dr. More discovers that the underlying problem is not the science, but more so the scientists themselves who exempt themselves from their own treatments. The experiment, rather than being objective science, is a projection of the scientists' troubled and unexamined selves. Their destruction of restraints and their role in freeing others carries with it the intention to free themselves from their own personal fears, anger, and misery. However, their dominative scheme does not have intentions to reign over thoughtless automatons. For Dr. Comeaux, the aim is perfect human innocence, and for Dr. Van Dorn the aim is unprecedented human excellence. The intention is to keep humanity intact and to reign over perfected human beings. Their role as overseers introduces corruption and serves as the downfall to the plan of human perfection. In the end, it is Dr. Comeaux's racist anger and Dr. Van Dorn's sexual perversion that distorts the integrity of the project. They are deluded by an imagination that their "social welfare" experiment made them divine.

To believe Lawler, many Americans today, like Comeaux and Van Dorn, are guilty of a Cartesian way of life in exempting their own minds and actions, explicitly or implicitly, from their science (Lawler 155). Lawler refers to this movement evident in American society as "pop" Cartesianism, or the modern day ideals reflective of Descartes' teachings. As Lawler explains:

They [Cartesians] believe, or are told to believe by the various sorts of enlightened, scientific experts who shape public opinion, that everything has a scientific, materialistic explanation, or ‘can be reduced to the causes and effects of electron, neuron, and so forth.’ They are told to believe that human beings, like all other animals, will be content in good environments, and miserable in bad or materially impoverished ones. (Lawler 156)

Therefore, humans should dismiss as misery-producing illusions any experience that brings them misery in the midst of good fortune. However, to hold the Cartesian mindset that anxiety is a treatable symptom of a disease to be cured in the name of an orderly, stress-free, reasonable life, one has to surrender personal sovereignty by denying what one really knows about oneself. Therefore, the experiences of self or soul that point one in the direction of the truth are traded for ignorant blissfulness or a “peaceable” animal existence.

Despite their intentions to suppress the otherwise instinctive, self-conscious thoughts of mortality and suffering, the project was doomed from the beginning. This comes as no surprise. As Peter Lawler states in his essay, “Wherever one finds human beings, one finds disorder and trouble” (Lawler 177). History certainly supports his proposition, as it is clearly evident that a perfect society, one free of any disorder, would require changing man's consciousness and therefore, his nature. To err is to be human; therefore, anyone who seeks to obtain perfect humanity is destined for failure. Percy's surmises that to change this fact, to make human innocence a possibility, would entail not only altering the nature of man himself, but also ultimately changing God's creative intentions. The desire to perfect humanity is disparaging to the very notion of what it means to be human. Despite the artificial means to modify “social welfare” through chemically altered water, Christianity maintains that there is a unique and fatal flaw in

Homo sapiens, one independent of Western civilization. This is not to say that Western civilization does not nurture these traits, but it does imply that the flaw is inherent in our nature. Dr. Comeaux realizes this phenomenon, but believes that scientific knowledge provides opportunity for creation of human innocence. The key word is alteration—or more particularly, an alteration of man’s distinctive nature. An innocent, untroubled, and docile being is not a fully human one. In his essay, Lawler parallels the concept of pornography to what is wrong with the scientists’ approach in perfecting humanity. He quotes Flannery O’Connor: “Pornography . . . is essentially sentimental, for it leaves out the connection of sex with its hard purposes, and so far disconnects it from its meaning in life as to make it simply an experience for its own sake” (Lawler 184). In other words, pornography extracts self-conscious mortality as well as the responsibilities of human life from the act and replaces the whole with mere sexual satisfaction. The sentimentality found in pornography is also present in the urge to restore innocence by one’s own means, as Dr. Comeaux clearly attempts to do.

However, I would argue that the innocence that was lost in the Fall can only be regained through a redemption we cannot attain on our own. The objective of self-acquired redemption would entail a destruction of human nature, as well as a disregard for the truth of human deformity resulting from the Fall. The problem is that redemption—the return of human beings to innocence and the freedom of sin—is only acquired through the works of God, not man himself.

The Scientists and the Project for Social Betterment

Man is deprived of some way of explaining why he experiences himself as more than an animal adjusting well or poorly to his environment. No explanation can be

offered for why human beings alone among the animals can know and desire the truth. Comeaux and Van Dorn provide no answers nor do they care to; instead, as utilitarians, they turn to statistics as the only topic of importance. Due to the ingestion of heavy sodium in the populace, these statistics track such data as the decrease in the occurrence of violence, suicide, AIDS, teen pregnancy, as well as the increase in test scores. Though there are no psychological signs of suffering for the unwitting sodium drinkers, as More admittedly observes, those affected are also emptied of passion, guilt, anger, and curiosity—a flatness of the soul that is a result of the treated individuals no longer being touched or moved by death. Without *thanatos*, there is no *eros*, and without *eros* there is no attachment to one's own: there is no passion, guilt, anger, or hatred. In addition, sex has become mechanical and language has been diminished to a type of computer-like binary language. Sex, crime, and poverty are not the cause of terror; rather, the cause of terror is the quandary of not knowing who we are and where we come from. The fact is, the experts solved nothing, they just blanketed it for the time being and traded the idea of self for social reform.

Van Dorn and Comeaux, though both instrumental in their singular cause of “social betterment,” have very different personal reasoning in reaching their justification. This stems from the differing core ideals of liberty apparent in them both, with respect to the handlings of sex, a major focus of the project's scope. As Lawler says, “Comeaux, the moralist, creates a world, not of sexual liberation [in opposition to Van Dorn], but of liberation from sex” (Lawler 178). Though both Van Dorn and Comeaux understand sexual freedom to be at the core of human freedom, their understanding of liberty as well as their individual justification for the project is very different. Comeaux extols their

chemical treatments replacing the menstrual cycle with estrus. The result is no more “useless” sex; sex is only actuated for means of reproduction. This utilitarianist approach serves as a “natural” form of population control. There is no more sexual deviancy because there is no more sexual freedom. Under Comeaux’s scheme, sexual freedom, being at the core of human freedom, would have to disappear from the world for the world to become well-ordered, the problem being that this moralistic use of science would create a world with no need for personal restraint—and, therefore, morality.

Van Dorn, on the other hand, has a different stance toward the matter, rooted as his views are in a desire for human excellence paired with sexual liberation. His more finely tuned goal is to exterminate only some of the self, in turn liberating the creative energy of eros from repressive moralism or guilt. Van Dorn, “the Renaissance Man” (Percy 200), is fittingly the founder of a private school for young children dedicated to Greek ideals of virtue. The Greeks defined virtue as excellence, but for Van Dorn this has absolutely nothing to do with moderation or self-restraint. His theory of the nature of man supports that the “highest achievements ... derive from sexual energy” (Percy 219). More and Percy both reject Van Dorn’s perspective of the soul or self as a reflection of the body and its needs; for them, this depiction is just an extension of Cartesian self-denial. It is his distorted Greek ideal of virtue as excellence that reduces itself to the easygoing promiscuity of a chimp colony. Van Dorn’s warped perception that sexual liberty allows for human excellence blinds him to the fact that the curiosity needed to impel oneself into intellectual and artistic greatness has been all too eagerly part of the bargain. For either individual, the importance of language and communication that Percy feels is essential in reaching a solution is tossed away as irrelevant; their project has

amounted to controlling nature. For Comeaux, this controlling and subduing of nature allows for the restraint of Christian morality to be inherent in society and therefore to be followed obliviously. For Van Dorn, the restraint ironically liberates bodies and minds from the tradition of repression. In both cases, morality is abandoned because it no longer actively functions.

It is only in a colony of selfless chimps that one could find the simple and honest openness, or the “sexual revolution” upon which Van Dorn aims to found the society around him. This Cartesian-like moral revolution involves the liberation from the repressive teachings of Christianity. The Christian teachings, from the Cartesian standpoint, are the cause of distortion in Western civilization. The ideology of Van Dorn appears to run parallel with the ideas of pantheistic oneness, or the oneness with nature and yourself. For Percy, pantheism is just a form of Cartesian self-denial, because this system of thinking denies the experiences that separate the self from the rest of nature and the cosmos. It follows that Percy finds this a disillusioned regression from the teachings of Christianity. Experience shows that man is not one with nature, but in some mysterious way transcends it. This is why Dr. More initially has a derisive reception to the scientists’ experimental scheme. After further analyzing the sodium effects, he has to acknowledge that perhaps the distinction between the realities of humans and chimps has actually disappeared. In other words, he has to reconsider the possibility that science could make pantheism true. However, he realizes that pantheism could never be true, for if it were, there would be no selves with the need or capacity to be religious. To level out the differences between man and chimp would imply an unrealistic extraction of self from mankind.

Humanity, for Percy, means the ability to choose, feel, and act on one's accord; to detract these qualities is to strip oneself of God's intentions for his creation. The impending end for humanity is not limited to environmental collapse, in Percy's view, but instead involves a more radical change taking place in man's consciousness. Percy makes it clear that this devastating change is due to our abandonment of God. Percy's novel brings to the surface our movement away from the gospels' teachings, our displaced sense of morality, and the inevitable descent it has paved for a society wrought with spiritual disease. Percy gives such a spiritual disease terrifying expression by having this team of well-meaning humanists enact their own deceptively decent form of "demonry." Ironically, the seemingly harmless aim for social betterment is the cause of this descent. Though Percy presents the longing for excellence and innocence as an inescapable part of human nature, Van Dorn's and Comeaux's combination of scientific knowledge and idealistic imagination was clearly personally tapered and resulted in incoherent projects for human perfection. Rather than achieving human perfection, they only succeeded in depriving those affected by the sodium of their distinctively human qualities —*eros* and *thanatos*, or the capacity to be moved either by death or love.

Science, Technology, and the Age of Thanatos

The involvement of science and medicine in instrumenting this scheme that attempts to abolish suffering by altering man's consciousness are important to note. In an age where technology has developed at an exponential rate, there seems to be much room for dehumanization. During his Laetare Medal Speech in 1989, Percy commented on *The Thanatos Syndrome*: "I tried to show how, while truth should prevail, it is a disaster when only one kind of truth prevails at the expense of another. If only one kind of truth

prevails—the abstract and technical truth of science—then nothing stands in the way of a demeaning of and a destruction of human life for what appear to be reasonable short-term goals." Dr. More, though initially confused and disoriented in a world bordering on catastrophe, comes to discover the values of commitment, relationships, ordinary life, and faith while seeking the answers to the surrounding bizarre phenomenon. Percy satirizes both the “do-gooders” and grand social solutions of our age; he reminds his readers that moral good actually emerges in the space between two people struggling and talking together. Dr. More, like Percy, “renders the unspeakable speakable” (Percy 17), and in so doing, offers the reader an opportunity for reflection upon such themes of healing, moral good, and hope in the “age of thanatos” (Percy, 86)—or, as John Paul II refers to it, “the culture of death” (John Paul II 39). Regardless whether it is the “age of thanatos” or the “culture of death,” both concepts demonstrate just how great evil can be committed out of a sincere desire to do good. The changes in consciousness causing such labels to be designated to this era have resulted from the abandonment of God and the concept of the soul for the new religions of science. Percy pokes fun at the consequences of such an era by having his characters use heavy sodium to resolve suffering, ultimately leading to a strange reversion to chimp-like behavior. Percy states that the message to be taken from this unexpected turn of events is that “It is better to be a dislocated human than a happy chimp” (*More Conversations* 202). Percy is also trying to drill home the importance of language and communication that has been lost and replaced with ramped-up ambitions for science and technology. For Percy, exploration and realization through communication is key, because it illuminates the inescapable questions of life. His point

is not that it can turn anxiety into pleasure, but that there is a compensatory pleasure and appreciation in self-understanding. For Percy, loss of language means loss of creature.

However, for the scientists in Percy's novel, the results outshine the process; scientific inquiry has shown itself to replace the great controversies and intellectual quarrels of human history with numbers. Both Comeaux and Van Dorn point to statistics to vindicate their project. They demonstrate that society as a whole has limited itself to the scope of only one truth at the expense of other necessary truths by singularly focusing the progression of humanity as one that can be appropriately assessed by the means of science alone. For them, reliance on mathematics serves as the means to that end, because it is the only legitimate example of success. The problem for Percy's character Dr. More is the abandonment of communication as the means for progression. Science may have provided a blissful existence for those ingesting the heavy sodium, but it wholly disregards the communicative process of reaching a meaningful and thoughtful existence. The triumph of science over human language is not a success in the eyes of Dr. More, for when efficiency becomes the only factor worth considering, it invites disaster.

A Utilitarian Regard for Life

Percy demonstrates in his novel that the post-modern predicament is very much a result of the advancements in science. An emphasis on science detracts from the experience of being human; as seen in Dr. More and the scientists involved in the conspiracy, these characters are enclosed in a lifeless, self-constructed world of scientific abstractions that numbs them to the realities of the real world and flesh-and-blood people in it. In this case, the guinea pigs *and* the experimenters themselves are casualties of the age of thanatos. It is not just the victims of the chemical additive in the drinking water

who are being "impoverished," but also the scientists who victimize and study them. Both are victims of dehumanization, the only difference being that the majority of the community is unaware of this phenomenon. Percy likens this particular prophetic depiction of life in America to the era of National Socialism. He finds harrowing parallels between our own behaviorists and the German scientists who practiced eugenics. Our culture shares with theirs, Percy suggests, a mere utilitarian regard for human life. The logical conclusion of that view is that those who are "useless" to themselves or the world, such as unwanted infants, nursing home hospice residents, or hopeless mentally ill patients, ought to be "compassionately" eliminated. In the absence of a "life with dignity," reasons one of Percy's humanist technicians, those who make no "contribution" to society should all be accorded their right to a "death with dignity."

More's obvious disdain to these moral and medical "improvements" brings about contempt from his fellow physicians. Not exactly the ideal model of a Christian, More nevertheless knows that it is nothing less than satanic to seek the elimination of spiritual suffering. He knows that any attempt to devise a medical cure for the human plight would empty mankind of humanity. It is this freedom made possible by the human self-consciousness that conjures wars, insanities, and perversions. At the risk of such misery, More comes to realize our self-awareness confesses both sin and faith, and enables us to live a meaningful relationship to God and fellow man.

"Do you know why this century has seen such terrible events happen?" More's friend Father Smith asks him. "The Turks killing two million Armenians, the Holocaust, Hitler killing most of the Jews in Europe, Stalin killing fifteen million Ukrainians, nuclear destruction unleashed, the final war apparently inevitable? It is because God agreed to let the Great Prince Satan have his way with men for a hundred years - this one hundred years, the twentieth century. And he has. How did he do it? No great evil

scenes, no demons - he's too smart for that. All he had to do was leave us alone. We did it. Reason warred with faith. Science triumphed. The upshot? One hundred million dead.” (Percy 365)

Human Suffering: An Illness to be Cured

The problem that Percy finds at the core of modern science and scientists is an underlying aim to eradicate man of his self-consciousness. As Father Smith explains to Dr. More, a silent war has been taking place between reason and faith and science has triumphed. Science as the recruited replacement has not only triumphed in regards to faith, but has accelerated the eradication of self-consciousness. An eradication of self-consciousness provides an escape from the awareness of human suffering and mortality that distinguishes man from the rest of creation. The contemporary society of North America is particularly of interest because it is the product of philosophical and scientific thought. Today's society, dominated by scientific thought, has allowed for a dismissive attitude towards discomfort and misery to flourish. This is problematic for Percy, because it has taken the power of theology and spirituality and handed it over to impersonal and deterministic sciences. Science has won over domination of public opinion, and it is in this defeat that people no longer have to think for themselves. Public opinion is ruled by no one in particular; therefore, making the leap into personal sovereignty is no longer necessary. Yet, it seems that complete immersion in the sciences cannot provide sufficient answers to life's bigger questions and consequently complete self-denial is to an extent impossible. Science cannot explain why man is the only animal capable of self-awareness, why he seeks and desires the truth, or why he remains anxious even with good fortune. Though man can act as a function of the bigger society, he cannot function as simply a body in motion. He might turn over his personal sovereignty

to the scientific experts for the sake of comfort, but he cannot escape his own personal experiences.

Using science as a solution to man's condition is problematic for Percy and the protagonist of his novel *The Thanatos Syndrome*. As the character Dr. More says himself, "I seldom give anxious people drugs. If you do, they may feel better for a while, but they'll never find out what the terror is trying to tell them" (Percy 6). Though scientific application in his story provides a plethora of fantastic solutions for sex, crime, and poverty, the message is that it cannot provide answers to the most crucial questions in every man's heart. Human terror is rooted in an innate inclination to understand who we are and where we came from. Heavy sodium may address crime rates and teen pregnancies, but by misplacing emphasis on ridding society of undesirable statistics it only serves to strip man of his awareness, and therefore his identity.

The prevalent pop Cartesian mindset present in contemporary America keeps people in the dark by mistaking the good as a life free of anxiety and suffering, which inadvertently turns its followers away from self-truth. Lawler states:

People in ages of faith accept as given the realities of human suffering and death, believing that they are beyond human control. They have the reasonable faith that human life is nonetheless good, and they unsentimentally accept the responsibility, given by God, to live well. By feeling less, they see more. Even if we say there is no Christ, we have to say that they lived more in light of truth than those governed by tenderness wrapped in theory. (Lawler 199)

However, in the absence of God, anxiety is seen as a symptom to be treated, while suffering is seen as a syndrome to be cured. Modern science's rational conquest of sickness and death is not life-constructive. It obliterates the truths that provide an appreciation of life's fragility and mysteriousness. The ideals of the scientists in Percy's

novel are shaped by the goal to perfect human beings by freeing them from their flaws, but it is our flaws that shape us. Our major “flaw” is that we are anxious creatures; however, as Kierkegaard expresses it, it is this very anxiety that one must acknowledge and harness to transcend to the realm of God and ultimate truth. To rid life of the bad simultaneously empties humans of their unique perception of truth. Once again, just as Percy says it is better to be a dislocated human than a happy chimp. In the final analysis, we are naturally different, and to smooth over these differences is anything but natural. It follows that it is an aberration if we try to alter God’s intentions, or more particularly to abolish the very qualities that distinguish us from the rest of creation. For Percy it has become a political project to reduce a stressful human existence of inevitable suffering to a “peaceable” animal existence. Percy wryly exaggerates this observed phenomenon by having characters of his novel revert to infant-like behavior and have to learn from chimpanzees the basic skills of language and communication. He feels strongly about the power of language that humans have abandoned in favor of drugs and chemicals to suppress depression and anxiety.

The search for peace of mind in the contemporary world implies purging man of his consciousness of death, and Percy explains that this had led to a “century of death” analogous to Pope John Paul II’s description as the “culture of death.” These observations realize the apparently benign and compassionate efforts of science as ones that are poisonous at their very core. In the process of these attempts, man is being stripped of his capacity to be moved either by *eros* or *thanatos*, love or death. Percy reiterates this phenomenon by drawing out horrifying yet legitimate parallels between today’s scientists seeking to “improve” the quality of life to those of the Nazi era

scientists who ultimately assisted in killing the Jews. We can see a fine line being drawn in Percy's novel as it takes aim for social betterment: a notion for one's aspiration to attain blissfulness and aims to perfect, and the possibility of a complete dismantling of what it means to be human. If anxiety is portrayed as an illness that must be cured, then the core of humanity is consequently portrayed as a syndrome that must be purged. As Lawler puts it, "When the person of Christ, Who recognizes all human beings as persons or beings with souls or selves, is replaced by impersonal or abstract theory, we can no longer recognize the good in the face of a particular, brave, strange, deformed, dying girl" (Lawler 202). What it comes down to is a thoughtful evaluation of Comeaux's resounding thought that "good is better than bad, serenity is better than suffering" (Percy 351). This idea is troubling because it abstracts from or denies the goodness of the human capacity to desire and know the truth. For Percy the fact is that the self-surrender required for the abolition of suffering is impossible. Indeed, no technology, however advanced, can aid one in the search that is integral to the human condition.

CHAPTER FOUR

Pope John Paul II and the Christian View on Living, Death, and Afterlife

Man, in his own ignorance, often challenges the existence of God. Why would God allow suffering, in particular the suffering of the innocent? The Old Testament gives us a detailed understanding that suffering and death (the ultimate suffering) entered the world by the original sin of man. So how exactly does Christianity affect a person's perspective on suffering and dying? In order to gain a better understanding of Christianity's perspective on death, we must examine the significance religion places on human life. After all, how one lives life and respects the value of life lays the foundation for how one perceives suffering and death.

This chapter argues three distinct points from a religious perspective about the need for suffering and death. My first argument is that there is a moral change taking place about suffering and death that is taking its cues from outside of the church. Here I identify typical life situations, how people are often left alone to deal with their problems, and how society has been quietly assimilating the view of taking humanity out of being human. Next, I argue against a system that attempts to replace revelation with reason, called utilitarianism, and how this approach has led to a "culture of death" mentality. The utilitarian approach justifies the use of logic in which the ends justify the means, thereby creating a warped perception in which an acceptance of suffering is absent. Finally, I explore the concept of creatureliness in the context of Pope John Paul II's remark that without the Creator the creature would certainly disappear (John Paul II 40).

The problem he addresses is that of the creature that loses touch with God and begins to view life as a measurement of time, believing that life is for its own control, and that it is permissible to project one's own values onto others. This is precisely how man loses his "creatureliness." Drawing from Becker and Percy, this chapter incorporates Christian teaching, including those of Pope John Paul II, to validate the need for suffering and death.

The Bible teaches that Jesus Christ appointed Peter and his successors to look after his faithful followers and care for them. Jesus said to Peter, "Feed my lambs." (John 21:15-17; this and all subsequent references from the *New International Version*). From the time of that decree placed upon Peter to spread Jesus' message that God is Love, the successor has been the Pope. Peter is considered to be the first Pope. The Roman Catholic Church designates the Pope as its Supreme Pastor. It is the Pope who conceives the college of bishops and has primacy over the Church and its faithful. The Pope represents Christ's love and concern for the world. He is the prime witness to faith who teaches and explains Christ's message to contemporary audiences. Over the ages the Pope has tirelessly shepherded the flock according to the teachings of Christ.

The words he speaks and the views he espouses have tremendous impact upon that flock of millions. When the Pope addresses his congregation, whether the masses gathered in Vatican Square or the people he sees from a makeshift pulpit in a third world country, he is delivering God's message to his flock near and far. The message he delivers to Christian followers promises them an eternal and splendid afterlife free of suffering. The source of the Pope's knowledge on living and dying comes directly from Holy Scripture. As is the case with the Pope, so with us: we too gain full comprehension

of how Christianity emboldens its believers with the blessing of living, caring for the weak, accepting death, and receiving the gift of eternal life. Christianity allows for a positive understanding of the mystery of suffering and death, despite the moral change in the culture that believes otherwise.

Moral Change

There is a subtle rejection of suffering and death that few orthodox Christians would be tempted to endorse. After all, Christianity uses numerous reminders of mortality. For example, the liturgy of Ash Wednesday marks the foreheads of believers with the shape of the cross to remind them that they are in a physical vessel on a journey toward death. The clergy speaks the words, “For dust you are and to dust you will return.” (Gen. 3:19) These are the words God spoke to Adam and Eve when they ate the forbidden fruit. The ashes remind the faithful of mortality and the need for penitence, and the shape of the cross reminds the faithful of the good news that through the crucifixion of Christ all of our sins are forgiven.

Such a reminder of mortality is lost on a “death-denying” American culture, however, as theologian Marcus Borg explains in his article “Death as the Teacher of Wisdom.” Borg believes that denial of death has come about because the aging and the dying are not among us as we rise in the morning; instead, the sick, aging, or dying are now insulated and kept apart from the general population. Furthermore, families with widely dispersed members may come together only to attend a burial. American society is transforming traditional living arrangements by encouraging its older citizens to take advantage of retirement communities and nursing homes. This is an attractive option for those families that have not witnessed the act of dying. Dying is now placed outside the

home for the convenience of family members who now forego the painful witnessing of a family member's demise.

Christianity states openly and repetitively that there is life after death (e.g. Rom. 6:23, Prov. 12:28, Matt. 25:46), and that eternal life is granted only to those who are righteous and faithful believers, whereas nonbelievers are condemned to eternal punishment. Even so, American society prefers to remain silent on the topic of afterlife. As Borg notes: "Our language is filled with euphemisms about death: somebody passed away, or "we lost Uncle Ned." If a married couple discusses life insurance, one typically hears, "If something should happen to me..." and not "When I die..." (Borg 3). Borg captures our society's ability to refer to death with palatable words, contrasting it with the church's reminders that death can never be ignored: "Earnestness means making the connection between death and me, to know that I will die. It is much more than the intellectual knowledge that we will all die. All of us know that To realize that this consciousness will one day cease, to see myself dead, to see the coffin closed upon me—that is earnestness" (Borg 10). Furthermore, Borg remarks that death "can free us from an identity based on distinctions and comparisons ... the equality of death arouses compassion in us, for it teaches us about our essential equality before God and about the artificiality of the comparisons by which we typically assess people" (Borg 13). Borg does not advocate for doom and despair, but quotes the wisdom from Ecclesiastes that death can teach us how to live. "Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do" (Eccles. 9:7). Borg encourages his readers to be cognizant of death and to look to the church for clarity on facing death.

Borg's argues that a society fixated on the living loses its ability to appreciate how our certain death can actually teach us to live better lives. His idea that death frees us of distinctions and comparisons as it equalizes humanity before God goes hand in hand with the teachings of John Paul II. The Pope teaches that each individual's life is to be valued as truly distinct and without compare, no one greater and no one lesser. To gain a better insight into the biblical writings concerning death, one may turn to Pope John Paul II's moving account of the value and inviolability of human life in his Encyclical Letter, *Evangelium Vitae*. He argues that the Church must defend and protect individuals and peoples against the threats to human life that are so apparent today. Whatever is opposed to life, especially abortion or euthanasia is a supreme dishonor to our Creator, argues John Paul II. God's love for human life is infinite: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Life is more than just the physical beat of the human heart, and the Bible provides countless examples of the dignity of the person. The Pope paraphrases Romans 2.14-15: "Every person sincerely open to truth and goodness can, by the light of reason and the hidden action of grace, come to recognize the natural law written in the heart the sacred value of human life from its very beginning until its end, and can affirm the right of every human being to have this primary good respected to the highest degree. Upon the recognition of this right, every human community and the political community itself are founded" (John Paul II 12-13).

Indeed, suffering is an integral part of humanity, yet it is clear that to a large extent the essential nature of suffering has been forgotten and deemed unnecessary. As John Paul II, Becker, and Percy have shown convincingly, denying death and avoiding

suffering empty a person of humanity. Societies of privilege in particular seem to focus more upon individual needs, casting aside the value of a human life as it becomes measured through cost and benefit—the goal being to excise inconvenience and burden. This trajectory, as expressed in Percy’s novel *The Thanatos Syndrome*, comes at the price of dehumanization. The mere thought of experiencing suffering would obviously alarm any rational person. But to become Christ-like entails suffering, since redemption came through His suffering on our behalf. There is no sharing in Christ’s glory unless there is sharing in His suffering. It is a restorative process because through it man gains endurance to strengthen his character. It is clear that God uses suffering to chasten and discipline us to become good soldiers of the cross, to make us stronger.

Nevertheless, suffering is commonly viewed in mainstream media and government actions as an unnecessary evil, something that must be abolished from existence by the sciences rather than being viewed in a restorative and healing fashion. As Pope John Paul II notes, suffering has been placed on an arbitrary scale based on convenience factors often predetermined by Godless government entities or maverick doctors. John Paul II provides insight that the position as Pope entails wrestling with the issues Christians face in a world that continually poses new threats, that allows acts that poison society, and passes legislation that forces compliance even if it violates religious principles. It is difficult for a Christian to witness today’s societal agendas that violate the very morals of Christian teaching—agendas geared toward self-indulgence with little regard for the preciousness of life in itself. This mindset revolving around pleasure shows an aversion for any type of personal suffering. I must argue that Christianity brings to the surface that suffering is straightforward and essential. It provides reason in a

cultural climate that fails to perceive any meaning or value in suffering; rather than considering suffering the epitome of evil to be eliminated at all costs, it helps provide positive understanding of the mystery of suffering. Suffering is intricately involved with what it means to be a follower of Christ, for Christ suffered and endured the ultimate sacrifice for his people. Consequently, life on earth would not be possible without his dying for our sins. Death was not God's original plan for man. In fact, death is the very contradiction. However, as discussed in previous chapters, the Fall allowed for death to enter into the world.

In the absence of a religious outlook, one finds no positive understanding of the mystery of suffering. As John Paul II argues, the intrinsic value of life has been disregarded and replaced with utilitarianism. In addition, suffering is not recognized as an innate human quality. However, the introduction of sin into the world made suffering an innate human quality. Suffering is the result of sin. As a result, it has become more acceptable and convenient to legalize abortion, "pull the plug" on the elderly, and quicken the demise of the handicapped and terminally ill.

Utilitarianism: The Culture of Death Mentality

As was seen in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, the absence of piety leads to a utilitarian regard for life. Regard for life is based solely on measurements of efficiency. The intrinsic value of the human being is ignored. This way of thinking is outrageous. By ignoring religious values, people think that they can control life and death by taking the decisions about them into their own hands. What really happens in this case is that the individual is overcome and crushed by a death deprived of any prospect of meaning or hope. We see a tragic expression of this in the medical field: for instance, the practice of

physician-assisted suicide. Either due to pity at the sight of the patient's suffering or due to financial considerations, the family or spouse may be persuaded or convinced that euthanasia is the right action. As mentioned, death is proposed for malformed babies, the severely handicapped, the disabled, the elderly, especially when they are not self-sufficient, and of course the terminally ill. Such a view of the meaning of life is warped because it confuses value with efficiency and has led to a veritable "culture of death" that contradicts Christian beliefs. As Percy argues convincingly, if one looks back to the era of National Socialism and acts of genocide, a subtle parallel can be drawn between that era and the utilitarian mentality of the current era that formulates a system of value on a basis of usefulness and efficiency.

Whereas Christian ethics are ultimately based on love, utilitarianism is based on results. Utilitarianism avoids the need to appeal to divine revelation by replacing revelation with rationalism. It is rationalism, rather than an adherence to biblical principles, that guides the ethical decision-making of a utilitarian. There are a number of problems with utilitarianism. One problem with utilitarianism is that it leads to an "end justifies the means" mentality. If any worthwhile end can justify the means to attain it, a true ethical foundation is lost. But it is surely the case that the end does *not* justify the means. If that were so, then Hitler could justify the Holocaust, because the end was to purify the human race. Stalin could justify his slaughter of millions because he was trying to achieve a communist utopia. The end never justifies the means. The means must justify themselves. Another shortcoming of utilitarianism is that it attempts to calculate and assign value to human life. Since in the utilitarian perspective suffering is in opposition to pleasure, it carries no value. This directly opposes the Christian perspective

on suffering, which posits that suffering is a means for bringing us closer to God. God created man for a full and perfect life, with its joys and pains.

In my view, abortion, denial of care, and euthanasia are threats to human life that arise both from individual choice and from governmental decisions. In spite of what appears to be a righteous advocacy for life in government as well as in the media, we can easily find contradictions. In this era of massive human rights movements, good intentions may become skewed, and the left hand may not see that the right hand is controlling the living. This “culture of death” has gained ground. It is a direct threat to human rights when we allow any erosion to the basic respect for the human existence—healthy or ailing. Pope John Paul II states that every individual is entrusted to the maternal care of the Church, so any threat made to human dignity and life must necessarily be felt in the Church’s very own heart. Society presents suffering as an option we should avoid, urging acceptance and convenience of contraception, sterilization, abortion and euthanasia. The Pope presents the position he passionately rejects: “There is no place in the world for anyone who, like the unborn or the dying, is a weak element in the social structure, or for anyone who appears completely at the mercy of others and radically dependent on them, and can only communicate through the silent language of a profound sharing of affection” (John Paul II 36). Any act against the living cannot be justified by a society’s view of cost and value; rather, as the Pope argues, there is intrinsic value in life itself beyond the scope of efficiency. Suffering, in the view of a nonbeliever, is avoidable. Expanding upon this even more, suffering, tragedy, and loss are meaningless and pointless if there is no higher meaning or purpose for it. The nonbeliever quickly concludes that anyone suffering without the foreseeable chance of

obtaining a better quality of life should then be afforded death, as it outweighs the agony of suffering. How does the religious view of death affect a person's perspective and fear of death? It is in the face of death that the riddle of human existence becomes most acute; this is a pivotal transition period in which it is crucial for man to practice acceptance rather than rebel against death. As the Pope beautifully states, "The certainty of future immortality and hope in the promised resurrection cast new light on the mystery of suffering and death, and fill the believer with an extraordinary capacity to trust fully in the plan of God" (John Paul II 110-111). He goes on to say that we live and we die to the Lord. It is through our undergoing our very own death that we are obedient to the Lord. We must therefore face our certain death courageously and consciously.

The Loss of Creatureliness

More and more each day, the mainstream media are removing the presence, if not the thought, of a divine power from our daily lives, by mentioning God less and less. For example, the celebration of the birth of our Christ is now commonly referred to as the "winter holiday" so as to be more palatable for the masses. Any connection or reference to God is not to be connected to any public institution or function. Prayer, for example, is banned in public schools. The Pope quotes from the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: "Without the Creator the creature would disappear...but when God is forgotten the creature itself grows unintelligible" (John Paul II 40). Without God we cannot understand what it is to be human. It is creatureliness, as Kierkegaard called it, which is necessary for a proper moral vision and practice. Our society wants to see itself as nothing more than humans with a preset lifespan. Religion is an inconvenience that fails to see man as a creature of God, but only as an entity that should be free to exist

unbound by rules, customs or laws that prohibit his free will. He views himself simply as a higher form of life situated on an arbitrary, hospitable planet. Without a religious outlook, man sees himself only as a higher-level life form. He lives and dies like any other animal. Man no longer considers life as a splendid gift of God, something “sacred,” but rather life itself becomes a mere measure of time. As such, man then claims life as his private matter, where he controls his fate, his destiny. Christians believe that birth and death are primary experiences that must be lived. In the same sense, as references to God are removed, it is not surprising that the meaning of everything else becomes distorted. Simply stated, nature itself goes from being “mother” nature to being “matter” nature. Christians must certainly grapple with an ever-growing rejection of creation. Society cannot ignore God’s plan and must respect all human life. If man doesn’t believe in God or that man’s very existence derived from being created, then man truly must be no different from any other living organism.

In this chapter, then, three distinct thoughts on suffering and dying were discussed. I provided my opinion from a religious perspective. My first argument considered the moral changes taking place on suffering and death that take their cues from outside of the church. Here I identified typical life situations: how people are often left alone to deal with their problems and how society has been quietly taking humanity out of being human. Next, I argued against the utilitarian view that attempts to replace revelation with reason. This absurd approach justifies the use of a logic wherein the ends justify the means, subsequently creating the warped perception found in the “culture of death.” Lastly, the concept of creatureliness was discussed and the meaning behind Pope John Paul II’s claim that without the Creator the creature would certainly disappear. The

creature would eventually lose touch with God and begin to view life as a measurement of time, believing that life is for its own control, and the creature would project its own values onto others. Those words describe how man loses his “creatureliness.” These discussions aimed to demonstrate that the Christian perspective provides a positive understanding of the mystery of suffering and dying.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Any reader employing some degree of critical analysis of Ernest Becker's *Denial of Death*, Walker Percy's *The Thanatos Syndrome*, and John Paul II's *Evangelium Vitae* will likely discover a striking correlation among the works: namely, that consciousness provides a sense of purpose to suffering and mortality. From a Christian perspective, both suffering and death have value. To be human means to be a creature of God, and any deviation shows a reckless disregard for what it means to be human. Obviously there can be no creature without a creator. It is through our unique awareness of creatureliness that we are able to experience love, to invoke wonder, to seek truth, and to know God. Though the truth of our condition entails suffering and acceptance of our mortality, not all hope is lost. Securing hope is possible with the Kierkegaardian leap of faith, for with faith God promises forgiveness, grace, and eternal life. "Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life" (John 5:24).

It is from a primarily psychological perspective that Becker provides commentary on man's unique condition. What makes man different than the rest of creation is the fact that he has awareness. As Becker puts it, "man is a worm and food for worms" (Becker 26); in other words, man rises above nature while remaining hopelessly tied to it. Man's paradoxical condition arises from the fact that he possesses the gift of mind and the constraint of body. He has body and mind, and it is his body that ultimately limits him.

With man knowing his bodily limitations and eventual death, he is quick to suppress this reality under layers of conscious denial. The punch line for Becker is that the basic motivation for human behavior is the need to control our basic anxiety, to deny the terror of death. The terror of death causes man to shield himself with character armor, or as Becker titles it, the “vital lie.” The vital lie enables one to believe that he controls his life and his death. Becker’s analysis of the vital lie sheds light on how we are able to maintain this coping while we go about each day unaffected by death’s inevitability.

If man were to chase the fantasy of immortality, he would lose the concept of humanity in itself. Yet Becker realizes that the process of shedding one’s character armor is terrifying. He turns to Kierkegaard for answers and finds that the solution is faith. To arrive at that faith, an individual must recognize one’s creatureliness—the fact that like every other creature one lives and dies. However, faith brings with it the realization that one’s very creatureliness truly has meaning to a Creator. It is a faith that despite one’s true insignificance, weakness, or death, man’s existence has meaning in some ultimate sense. Such faith must exist within an eternal and infinite scheme of things that is brought about and maintained by some kind of design by some creative force. The light at the end of the tunnel, as Kierkegaard proposes, is that in ridding oneself of the vital lie one allows for infinitude, absolute transcendence, and access to the Ultimate Power of Creation (Becker 89). Becker supposes: “Possibility leads nowhere if it does not lead to faith” (Becker 90).

Percy demonstrates that the search to abolish suffering implies purging man of his consciousness of death, a notion that has led to the “century of death.” Peter Lawler, commenting on Percy’s novel, reveals that the ultimately futile but life-destructive

project of modern science, especially “medical science,” is “the rational conquest of sickness and death,” or the obliteration of human mystery, which includes the mysterious human perception of the truth (Lawler 58). Humanity is no longer animated by its distinctive awareness of mortality. Rather, the aim has become to rid society not only of suffering, but self-conscious mortality. In the absence of Christianity, man’s anxiety about his condition is viewed as an illness to be treated. Percy’s rebuttal to the scientists’ “cure” is this: “Better to be a dislocated human than a happy chimp” (*More Conversations* 202). The scientists’ project addresses social decay and succeeds in accomplishing their “social welfare” vision. However, what this project really accomplishes is an eradication of whatever one could not understand. Their utilitarian approach put the emphasis on efficiency. Therefore, the eradication of self, the destruction of man’s condition, was enacted all for the sake of statistics that appear to boast success for the human race. Even if given the option to “cure” the disease of self-conscious mortality and therefore anxiety and depression, man needs these experiences of self to point him in the direction of truth. Percy emphasizes the importance of dialectical investigation—exploration through communication—to transcend our anxieties and to directly address the matters that cause us suffering. Though it cannot turn anxiety into pleasure, there is compensatory pleasure in self-understanding. It solidifies the fact that we are naturally different from the rest of the animal kingdom; therefore, to smooth over those differences would be unnatural. If given the choice between the stressful, troubled, and sometimes cruel human existence or the well-ordered and content animal existence, Percy points us to choose the former.

For his part, John Paul II notes that suffering resulted from the fault of man. . Suffering is the consequence of sin on every level, and of original sin committed in the Garden of Eden first of all. Yet, there is a positive understanding to be had of suffering. Suffering provides the opportunity to become more Christ-like, to empathize with the sacrifices that Jesus made for man. Whatever the immediate cause of his suffering, the ultimate reason is that of directing his attention to the person of Jesus Christ. Suffering has a tendency to slow people down, to reduce their arrogance, to reduce their self-righteousness, their self-satisfaction, their self-reliance. Pope John Paul II argues that without the religious perspective, or more particularly the Christian faith, there is no positive understanding of the mystery of suffering. The overzealous desire in society to improve quality of life has ironically come at the prize of dehumanization. Christians face an ever-growing society whose actions reject the very idea that there is a truth of creation which must be acknowledged, or a plan of God for life which must be respected. Without God, we are doomed to a “culture of death”: a culture that lacks reverence for life and can only measure success by assigning efficiency.

Christianity is a religion that emphasizes an awareness of limitation, introspection, and confrontation with apparent meaninglessness. It requires individuals to be aware of their condition, their confines, their creatureliness, and therefore the truth. With awareness, one is equipped to make the Kierkegaardian leap of faith: a leap that promises self-understanding, truth, and eternal life. With the Christian perspective, there is purpose to be found in death awareness and suffering. The individual is able to undergo the process of which Becker speaks, in which one rids oneself of character armor and therefore of the vital lie. Though a terrifying process to undergo, as Becker

acknowledges, facing the unique condition of man is made possible by faith. With acknowledgement of one's condition, it is then faith in God, as Percy and John Paul II demonstrate, that allows for hopeful understanding to be found in death and suffering. Rather than value being based on efficiency, this hopeful understanding finds value to be an intrinsic property of life in and of itself. In addition, faith in God allows suffering to serve as a redeeming and restorative power, as it reminds us of the sacrifices that Christ made for his people. Past the concept of suffering and death being resultant of the Fall, hope remains intact in that God promises his people life after death. As Becker, Percy, and John Paul II argue, there is hope to be found even after one faces one's creatureliness and disavails oneself of the vital lie, and that hope is present among God's faithful followers.

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