

denial of death by ernest becker

Denial of death is a central theme in the work of Ernest Becker, a cultural anthropologist and interdisciplinary thinker whose ideas have profoundly influenced psychology, philosophy, and existential thought. In his seminal work, "The Denial of Death," Becker explores the ways in which human beings grapple with the reality of mortality and how this fundamental anxiety shapes our behavior, culture, and psyche. The book, published in 1973, won the Pulitzer Prize and has since become a cornerstone of existential psychology. Through Becker's lens, we can gain insight into the mechanisms of denial that shield us from the fear of death and the implications they have on our lives.

The Premise of Becker's Argument

At the heart of Becker's thesis is the idea that the awareness of our own mortality creates profound anxiety. This anxiety is not simply an individual concern; rather, it is a universal human condition that influences our actions, beliefs, and societal structures. Becker posits that to cope with the fear of death, individuals engage in various forms of denial, leading to the construction of cultural systems and personal identities that serve to provide meaning and permanence in an impermanent world.

The Role of Culture in Denial

Becker argues that culture serves as a defense mechanism against the anxiety brought about by the inevitability of death. Cultures develop systems of beliefs, values, and practices that help individuals transcend their mortality. Some key aspects include:

1. **Myth and Religion:** Many cultures create myths and religious doctrines that offer explanations for existence, the afterlife, and the significance of life itself. These narratives provide comfort and a sense of continuity beyond death.
2. **Heroism and Legacy:** Individuals often seek to achieve a sense of significance through heroic actions or contributions to society. By creating a legacy, people strive to become part of something greater than themselves, thus extending their existence beyond their physical life.
3. **Social Constructs:** Becker emphasizes the importance of social roles, norms, and institutions that help individuals navigate their lives. These constructs provide a framework for understanding one's place in the world and can alleviate the anxiety associated with mortality.