



The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life

Sheldon Solomon , Jeff Greenberg , Tom Pyszczynski

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A transformative, fascinating theory—based on robust and groundbreaking experimental research—reveals how our unconscious fear of death powers almost everything we do, shining a light on the hidden motives that drive human behavior

More than one hundred years ago, the American philosopher William James dubbed the knowledge that we must die “the worm at the core” of the human condition. In 1974, cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker won the Pulitzer Prize for his book *The Denial of Death*, arguing that the terror of death has a pervasive effect on human affairs. Now authors Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski clarify with wide-ranging evidence the many ways the worm at the core guides our thoughts and actions, from the great art we create to the devastating wars we wage.

The Worm at the Core is the product of twenty-five years of in-depth research. Drawing from innovative experiments conducted around the globe, Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski show conclusively that the fear of death and the desire to transcend it inspire us to buy expensive cars, crave fame, put our health at risk, and disguise our animal nature. The fear of death can also prompt judges to dole out harsher punishments, make children react negatively to people different from themselves, and inflame intolerance and violence.

But the worm at the core need not consume us. Emerging from their research is a unique and compelling approach to these deeply existential issues: terror management theory. TMT proposes that human culture infuses our lives with order, stability, significance, and purpose, and these anchors enable us to function moment to moment without becoming overwhelmed by the knowledge of our ultimate fate. The authors immerse us in a new way of understanding human evolution, child development, history, religion, art, science, mental health, war, and politics in the twenty-first century. In so doing, they also reveal how we can better come to terms with death and learn to lead lives of courage, creativity, and compassion.

Written in an accessible, jargon-free style, *The Worm at the Core* offers a compelling new paradigm for understanding the choices we make in life—and a pathway toward divesting ourselves of the cultural and personal illusions that keep us from accepting the end that awaits us all.

Praise for *The Worm at the Core*

“The idea that nearly all human individual and cultural activity is a response to death sounds far-fetched. But the evidence the authors present is compelling and does a great deal to address many otherwise intractable mysteries of human behaviour. This is an important, superbly readable and potentially life-changing book.”—*The Guardian* (U.K.)

“A neat fusion of ideas borrowed from sociology, anthropology, existential philosophy and psychoanalysis.”—*The Herald* (U.K.)

“Deep, important, and beautifully written, *The Worm at the Core* describes a brilliant and utterly original program of scientific research on a force so powerful that it drives our lives.”—**Daniel Gilbert, Edgar Pierce Professor of Psychology, Harvard University, and author of *Stumbling on Happiness***

“As psychology becomes increasingly trivial, devolving into the promotion of positive-thinking platitudes, *The Worm at the Core* bucks the trend. The authors present—and provide robust evidence for—a psychological thesis with disturbing personal as well as political implications.”—**John Horgan, author of *The End of War* and director of the Center for Science Writings, Stevens Institute of Technology**

The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life Details

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From Reader Review *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* for online ebook

Kelly says

This book is a nice, accessible summary of work on Terror Management Theory (TMT) by three of the main researchers working on it. My main problem with the book is organizational, in that they don't address one of the public's main objections to this research--"but I don't think about death all the time"--until very late in the book. They address this objection fairly well, but I think it would have been much better, from an appealing-to-the-general-public perspective, to do so earlier, rather than building up their entire body of research first. I am also a bit skeptical of some of the research methodology of TMT, but the issues I have with it are (mostly) not things that could be easily addressed in a popular-audience book like this one. While I also think some of the authors' points about the impact of death thoughts to be overstated, this is also not something that can be easily addressed in a popular text. As a popular-science book, it's compelling, accessible, and understandable. The tone is a bit odd, mostly because they occasionally seem to be trying too hard to insert humor into the book. And the authors do seem to get unnecessarily partisan at times. But on the whole it's a thorough, well-written introduction to / review of TMT research that makes some interesting philosophical points.

Richard Smith says

A well written, wide ranging book that aims to give "scientific support" to Ernest Becker's assertion that avoiding the terror of death has been the main driver of human religion, culture, arts, and behaviour. The scientific bit should have included more detail and was not wholly convincing. I plan a long blog on the book and will give a link here once it's posted.

Nikki says

You might think that a book about the role of death in the way humans approach life would be morbid, and probably difficult to read. I didn't find it that way; in fact, I found that it reflected a lot of my own musings about it (said musings being helped along by the fact that for years, my biggest anxiety was about death). As someone with anxiety, this fear and knowledge about death hasn't been hidden for me, and I wasn't really surprised by the results of the authors' research showing that it is a key anxiety for many or even most people.

If you read it without that background, you may feel that it's rather overstating its conclusions. I think that might be a fair assessment if you try to apply it too literally to everyone. There are some people who've dealt with the anxiety, or don't feel it at all. But in general, I do think that knowledge and fear underlies a lot of human thought and behaviour.

Definitely a worthwhile read, and actually quite smooth and easy too. I ended up reading it all in one Eurostar trip.

Reviewed for The Bibliophibian.

Maureen says

Possibly the most optimistic book about mortality that exists! Not that I've read a ton about death, but this book is extremely accessible and fascinating. There are a few leaps in judgement (ie, that $A = B$ therefore C must be true, that didn't always jive with my personal sense of logic) but that doesn't detract from the overall usefulness of the points made in this book, which is that people are either consciously or subconsciously afraid of demise, and that informs their everyday behavior in unprecedented ways.

Not to fret though, there is terror management, which is a theory by Solomon about how we cope with knowledge of the impossibility of knowing another person, existential dread, and the impermanence of the body. What I think I appreciated most about this book is that it didn't address death as a cloud of dread, but as a matter of fact reality one simply needs to accept in order to truly enjoy life. Death is not an obstacle, because we cannot overcome it. It only exists as an obstacle to being free from fear and from truly finding meaning in the momentary. Anyway, this was a really interesting read.

Rita Ciresi says

An interesting and provocative look at how our denial of mortality leads us to act in less than intelligent ways.

Nicolas Name says

Arguably speaking, the most important theoretical work of the latter 21st century has largely been ignored by many in academia and beyond. I am talking, of course, about Ernest Becker's seminal work, *The Denial of Death*. The authors of this work, sensing academia's refusal to accept the work due to its lack of experimental research, set out to provide said research on the subject. After 30+ years and 500+ research studies on Becker's conclusions (now renamed Terror Management Theory), the authors of *The Worm at its Core* present their research in a clear, groundbreaking, lucid terms.

Overall, the book was a joy to read. The authors, following Becker's writing style, employ clear argumentation with beautiful, captivating, rhetorical flourishes to sustain the argument. One such flourish is found at the end of one of the beginning chapters, where the audience is specifically addressed. Notes about the book: I would personally not recommend this book to be read by those unfamiliar with Becker's work first-hand, as this book is best read as a modern update on Becker's theories. Second, I would not buy this book as a Christmas present for anyone outside of yourself. In my opinion, after having lived with Becker's theories for some time, is that most individuals are not necessarily ready to hear the conclusions of the book, and it will make the readers who accept the claims and premises much more pessimistic about life. It will, however, allow you to understand human motivations and the modern state of art, philosophy, psychology, and politics better than any other book available (Woody Allen, Existentialists, Irvin Yalom, and Bill Clinton, respectively).

Overall, I loved this book, the authors, as it was exactly what I was searching for. Thank you for taking the trouble to write this incredibly difficult work. I, and I'm sure many other readers as well, are incredibly

grateful for your work.

Next stop, application of proposed theoretics/the grave.

Caren says

The title of this book is based on a William James quote to the effect that the knowledge of death is the 'worm at the core' of human existence. The three authors, all university professors of psychology, spent the last twenty-five years researching ideas first presented in a Pulitzer-winning book, "The Denial of Death", written by Ernest Becker in 1973. To boil their ideas down to the simplest points, they found that people cope with the "existential terror" the realization of death provokes by building their self-esteem (to feel that their lives matter in an individual sense) and by identifying with their group culture (which inspires a sense of continuity and purpose to their lives). This second point can go awry when people resort to an "us vs. them" mentality, in which the "other" is wrong and is to be feared and conquered. For me, I began to look at world news in a different light with these thoughts as a backdrop. The book takes a look at how death was perceived in past times, in other places, and how we can personally approach our own fears about death. At the end of the book they talk about two different cultural worldviews about death: the "rock" and the "hard place". The "rock" would be a black and white view that one's own culture provides the needed answers, which fosters a sense of security, but also lacks openness to other ideas. The "hard place" acknowledges shades of gray, but thus provides for a greater feeling of anxiety. To deal with the insecurity, some may turn to drugs, alcohol, or fads. So, each view has its difficulties. The authors' answer is: "Come to terms with death. Really grasp that being mortal, while terrifying, can also make our lives sublime by infusing us with courage, compassion, and concern for future generations. Seek enduring significance through your own combination of meanings and values, social connections, spirituality, personal accomplishments, identifications with nature, and momentary experiences of transcendence. Promote cultural worldviews that provide such paths while encouraging tolerance of uncertainty and others who harbor different beliefs." (page 225)

I am very glad to have read this book. First of all, it is well-written, easily understood, engaging, and profoundly interesting. Beyond that though, I just found it helpful and marked many passages to which I plan to return.

Antonio Nunez says

I read a good review for this book in the FT and took it up without expecting the degree to which it would shake me up. It is one of the most perturbing reads I've ever made. The authors undertook to prove, over several decades, the insight of Pulitzer prize winner Ernest Becker, that people strive for meaningful and significant lives largely to manage the fear of death. So the fear of death is the worm at the core of our consciousness, the realization most of us sometimes have, consciously or unconsciously, that we exist only for a limited time and will eventually be gone from existence. Their experiments, of which they describe many, allowed the authors to prove that all of us practice "terror management" to soothe ourselves whenever the worm rears its ugly head to make our lives bearable. Consciousness, the distinguishing characteristic of humans, is both a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing because it allows us to envision alternate scenarios, to anticipate events and to cooperate to become the dominant species on earth. It is a curse because we are the only animal species that is aware that its individual members will disappear into nothingness. According to the authors many human institutions (religion, war, art, civilization itself) are adaptations to this existential

dread. Feeling vindicated by drawing faith in our cultural worldview is one way to manage terror. The authors show that judges who have been reminded of their mortality tend to be tougher on defendants than those who have not had intimations of mortality. Whenever we feel anxiety about our eventual oblivion we feel more drawn to loving our culture and hating its enemies. Another way is a feeling of personal significance or self-esteem. So, many people hate, punish or kill others because only in doing so do they feel able to bear the thought of their own intranscendence. The authors recommend better ways to manage terror by feeling a sense of belonging and personal significance, but without hurting others. They acknowledge, however, that these "soft" forms of self-validation are not as effective in deterring the fear of death as real "hard" religions. I found this book very perturbing because I had never reasoned as the authors do and resented their obvious disregard for religious faith. The book is deeply unsettling but well written and very informative.

Killer2m8o says

The basic concept of "The Worm at the Core" is that the fear of death colors everything we do in life, which the authors address with their "Terror Management Theory". Essentially, humankind developed self-awareness, resulting in an awareness of death, which the book claims to represent a potentially paralyzing fear that is overcome by self-esteem. The defense to this fear is self-esteem, which is drawn from our "scheme of things", or our confidence in our countries, tribes and social systems, and our faith in the same and in our religions. Through these "schemes of things" we hope for immortality (or at least subdue our fear of death) with ideas of an afterlife, or fame and accomplishment, but also react with harshness towards others who fall outside of, or contradict, our schemes.

The primary conclusion of the book is that 'the worm at the core' of life is an ever-present conscious or subconscious fear of death. This fear results in irrational coping mechanisms and conflict. The book relates many interesting insights into human thought and social tendency. But I think its conclusion is too simplistic in that it attributes too much influence to the fear of death.

I'd cite teenagers and animals as examples. In my admittedly limited experience, teenagers forget about death almost entirely – they do stupid stuff, take stupid risks, and often imagine themselves to be essentially invincible with middle-age seemingly eons away, let alone death. There's a remarkable absence of the fear of death in teens. The authors anticipate and address this kind of objection to their theory and explain that the reason we don't perceive our constant fear of death is because of successful defense mechanisms – active repression of uncomfortable thoughts, and subconscious mechanisms such as seeking esteem boosts or derogating outsiders.

However, many intelligent animals also exhibit a lot of similar social tendencies to humans, all without human levels of self-awareness and cognition. The book does include comment that "human hatred and violence are, in part, a residual hangover from our tribal primate heritage", but so also, I would think, are our instinctual desires for security, love, freedom and esteem. I think nature demonstrates that these driving forces are prominent independent of death thoughts. I'm not saying that death doesn't influence human behavior, just that it would seem to be more of another sister factor on the list, not THE underlying preeminent factor. In my opinion, the authors of "The Worm at the Core" had their judgment skewed by their focused interests and efforts, giving disproportionate credit to their subject, the fear of death.

I found it to be a valuable read, recommendable and thought provoking, but too narrowly focused on its own foregone conclusion to be consumed without a grain of salt.

John Kaufmann says

Excellent book. The book is a restatement, confirmation, refinement, and elaboration of Ernest Becker's 1973 classic *The Denial of Death*. The authors of "Worm" were so taken by the earlier book, they committed the next thirty years to conducting experiments and collecting evidence to confirm Becker's thesis.

The worm at the core is the awareness of death that only we humans experience. This creates an existential fear of death that other species don't suffer. Living with this fear would be an evolutionary barrier.

Terror management theory says that humans evolved two psychological mechanisms to stave off this fear. First, we have collectively developed cultures, and individually maintain faith in those cultural worldviews of which we are part. Culture imparts a sense of order, meaning, and permanence, and faith in it provides a sense that we are part of something greater than ourselves. Second is self-esteem, a feeling that we are personally significant within the culture in which we are embedded. We combat mortality by striving for significance.

We are consumed with "maintaining confidence in our cultural scheme of things and satisfying the standards of value associated with it." We live up to our roles and values, whether parent, employee, professional, believer, artist, etc. To the extent we fulfill our roles in the broader culture successfully, the better we are able to keep the terror of death at bay.

The authors describe how different cultural institutions evolved as responses to death terror. Most obviously and most significantly was religion and ritual. Religion, a sense of the supernatural, was an "adaptive and imaginative leap" to stave off the fear of death. Most religions placed humans as central to the transcendental drama, and provided a sense of control over death and a meaning to life. Religion "gave our ancestors a sense of community and shared reality, a worldview, without which coordinated and cooperative activities in large groups of humans would be difficult, if not impossible, to sustain." Other cultural institutions discussed by the authors include art, architecture, monuments, , even clothing and food.

They also discuss how failure to adequately fulfill our social roles and develop self-esteem can lead to various psychological issues. To avoid self-awareness and the coincident recognition of their finitude, people squander their lives in trivial pursuits, or are obsessed with greedily accumulating money or stuff or blindly lust for power and honor. If our defenses are insufficient, we may demean those whose values or lifestyles are different from our own. This can result in stereotyping, discrimination, and even war. Death anxiety can also lead to other psychological disorders such as schizophrenia, obsessive-compulsive disorder, sociopathy, phobias, anorexia, depression.

Two fundamental responses to our death anxiety are characterized by the authors as the "rock" and the "hard place." Rock worldviews provide clear and simple bases of meaning, self-worth, and immortality, and they afford psychological security for those who sustain faith in, and feel valued within, them. However, they can foster a tribal mentality that breeds hatred and intergroup conflict.

The "hard place," by contrast, is more complex and nuanced. There may (or may not) be an ultimate meaning or truth out there, but we can never fully grasp it because we are finite, limited beings. Meaning and values are essentially human creations. Meaning, self-worth, and immortality are never certain, so anxiety prevails. Those living in the hard place often take refuge in drugs, alcohol, hedonism, self-help books,

spiritual fads, etc.

They summarize by saying “The rock provides psychological security but takes a terrible toll on those victimized by angry and self-righteous crusades to rid the world of evil. The hard place yields perhaps a more compassionate view of the world, but is less effective at buffering death anxiety. Somehow we need to fashion worldviews that yield psychological security, like the rock, but also promote tolerance and acceptance of ambiguity, like the hard place.”

What to do? (view spoiler)

Jessica Kelley says

Rachel and I made plans to listen to the author speak at Town Hall, but neither of us could get into the book and we decided to go snowshoeing instead.

Anyone want two tickets to Sheldon Solomon next Monday? :)

Chaim says

Solomon et al. founded terror management theory (TMT), a branch of experimental psychology which has shown that fear of the big existential realities has an enormous influence on human behavior. The findings of TMT have been profound and far-reaching. Although our existential anxieties are generally unconscious, these anxieties significantly affect many areas of our lives, including our relationships, our voting patterns, our treatment of outsiders, our sexual encounters, our propensity to engage in risk-taking behavior.

The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life clearly and succinctly summarizes these findings and suggests ways we can best manage these anxieties. If there were just one book I would have other people read, this would be it, along with Ernest Becker's The Denial of Death. For only if we become aware of our inner fears and find constructive ways to deal with them will we be able to create a kind, progressive world.

YHC says

This book actually teaches me a lot on how I used to view the fear about death. I have once for all got rid of my own fear about facing my own death through reading Irvin D. Yalom's Staring at the sun (<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/2...> paragraph below also mentioned about his another book Existential Psychotherapy. (his other books are also great!)

I haven't connected sex and death with the idea that sex is more like animal behavior, we humans try to distinguish ourselves from animals because we know animals can not escape from death, specially we kill them for food. Therefore sex is directly linked to animals, then death. (This I learn now from this book)

In this book, the fear of death caused humans more violent, because we try to protect our own ideas of immortality, such as religions are the way to live forever. (I have copied paragraph below)

This book is actually better than I expected, but Irvin D. Yalom's Staring at the sun is a must read.

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Karl Hallbjörnsson says

A very lucid book with an extremely interesting thesis: the idea of death exerts a profound and often unnoticed influence over our behavior. The authors have spent a long time researching and experimenting to support their hypothesis and the book covers some very interesting results — such as judges exacting much harsher penalties for a crime than is to be expected after having thought about death.

Jt O'Neill says

Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death* was fascinating but his assertions had not been proven so the book lost some of its impact. Ten years after its publication, the three authors of *The Worm at the Core* decided to undertake research to provide evidence that our unconscious fear of death does, in fact, drive much of human behavior. The results of their research are presented in a readable and clear fashion in this book. Some of the assertions seem obvious (how religion calms fears of death, for example) but the authors do show, by culling through over 250 experiments from around the globe, that Ernest Becker was on the right track. The authors introduce terror management theory. This comes directly from Becker's work and the followup research. It says that humans are unique in the animal kingdom because they have both the desire to live and the knowledge that death is inevitable. This conflict then is how to manage the terror of death and the solution rests in cultural connections. Cultural values can give meaning to life and that meaning and those connections can help people manage the terror of death.

There's a great paragraph towards the end of the book that exhorts people to come to terms with death by following some strategies that will give meaning to your own life and will enhance the community. Very thought provoking book.
