Mourning My Future Death:
Finitude, Love, and Self-Deception

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ABSTRACT: My aim in this paper is to offer some critical remarks about the possibility of honestly confronting finitude through the experience of the value of the other. I suggest that there is reason to think that an honest confrontation with finitude cannot be so accomplished, and that, moreover, there can be no ‘compensation’ for the fact of finitude. Finally, I suggest that the rhetoric of ‘authenticity’ might not be the most fruitful way of talking about confronting our death.

Everything that man does in his symbolic world is an attempt to deny and overcome his grotesque fate...

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 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. He doesn’t have to have fears when his feet are solidly mired and his life mapped-out in a ready-made maze.

—Ernest Becker, The Denial of Death (27, 23)

In what follows, I would like to raise the specter of skepticism, not about the problem of finitude, but about the idea that there is in fact an answer to this problem. I want to raise some doubts about what I take to be some of Ralph D. Ellis’ central claims in his recent paper “Love, Religion, and the Psychology of Inspiration,” as well as in Love and the Abyss: An Essay on Finitude and Value. In particular, I want to present doubts on three fronts. I doubt 1) that love involves an honest recognition of human finitude rather than a denial of it; 2) that it is possible to be ‘compensated’ in any adequate way for the problem of finitude; and 3) that the
rhetoric of authenticity is of much use in discussing such problems. As everyone knows, it is much easier to criticize a position than to construct it. Whatever the problems with Ellis’ view regarding love and finitude, it is nevertheless an important contribution to our philosophical reflections about the human condition and the way this condition can inform our relations with other human beings. I thus offer the following criticisms as a means of continuing this conversation rather than ending it. Before formulating these criticisms more fully, however, I want to briefly reconstruct some of the issues which here concern us.

It is a precarious position we are in: lords of the earth yet slaves to our bodies. It is this rather humiliating feature of human existence that has led thinkers like Ernst Becker to characterize us as ‘gods that shit’—our existential dilemma is captured in the fact that we are half animal and half symbolic. We want to be fully symbolic; it is our finitude that we most wish to deny. Our bodily functions are perhaps the most offensive to us—so offensive that we separate them from the rest of our lives, place them in small, secluded rooms, and are embarrassed when the sounds of our bodies eliminating waste are heard by others. As Becker provocatively puts it: “Excreting is the curse that threatens madness because it shows man his abject finitude, his physicalness, the likely unreality of his hopes and dreams” (Becker, 1963, 33).

Our repression of finitude is buttressed by an organic narcissism. We feel—intensely and innately so—that our bodies are in some sense permanent fixtures of the world. We reach a kind of peace in the pre-fabricated world of culture. Its scripts tell us what to do and who to be, and this relieves us from the great burden of confronting the terror of the world. We participate in and construct social identities as a way of securing ourselves against death anxiety. The inevitable result of this is that we are not ourselves. We are fundamentally inauthentic. Everything that we typically identify as being “the self” is merely the baggage of a collective consciousness incapable of examining death in any sustained and meaningful way. Dread lurks at the heart of the human condition.

It is in this nest of issues that we call the human condition that we can understand Ralph Ellis’ recent paper, “Love, Religion, and the Psychology of Inspiration,” as well as his background research in this area (most notably Love and the Abyss). Ellis examines what is required for human action, and then reveals the way this requirement (inspiration) is often had at the expense of our own authenticity: we come to be inspired by metaphysical systems that systematically obscure the fact of human finitude. Among the major culprits in this arena is Fundamentalism:

Fundamentalism means literal interpretation, including literal interpretation of statements about the existential concern of finitude: that death is not real, that God will rectify all injustices, and that God supplies whatever love and fellow-feeling cannot be gotten through concrete personal and social relations with other finite beings. In short, for the fundamentalist type of religion, the problems of finitude do not exist (18).
The contrast to this manner of dealing with finitude (viz, denying it) is to be found in the experience of love of the Other—an experience which, admittedly, can be captured by what Ellis dubs the ‘experiential’ approach to religion.

Rather than denying the existence of the problems of finitude, the purpose is to provide an awe-inspiring emotional experience of the value of being, so that it is possible to bear up under the inevitable hardships and injustices of life without self-deception and inauthenticity. ‘Eternal life’ is not taken to mean literally that people do not really die when they die (as people often comfort themselves by saying at funerals), but something more metaphorical—for example, that life is infinitely valuable and thus worth as much as an infinitely long life, or that the depth of a life’s meaning outweighs its shortness in length...the purpose is to inspire the faithful to ‘have faith’—i.e., to feel inspired with a sense that the negativity of the existential conditions of finitude are more than compensated for by the positive value of being, which the religious experience attempts to facilitate (18).

It is this that is also to be found in the experience of love, Ellis argues, where “we intensely experience the intrinsic value of being as instantiated in the other” (19). This experience can be ‘universalized’ to other conscious beings, and through this, Ellis contends, we can come to live richer, better lives. Failure to do this—either by embracing fundamentalist forms of religion or by becoming so disturbingly narcissistic that one can no longer experience the autonomous value of the other—is to engage in a form of self-deception where we deny “the ultimate reality of finitude” (24). To recognize our finitude, by contrast, is to attain a kind of authenticity, and it is in this authenticity, Ellis contends, that we have answered the problem of finitude.

When we have such a pronounced positive value experience as is facilitated by love, the arts, or non-fundamentalistic religious experience, we feel that, if only the inspirational experience could be sustained, we would be much more than compensated for in even the worst of all possible metaphysical scenarios—i.e., the scenario in which our brief and humble existence on this inconsequential ball of dust is all there is...since we have given up our own sense of self-importance in favor of reveling awe-strickenly in the other’s form of being, it now makes much less difference to us whether the ego-subject with which we previously identified ourselves will survive forever or not...we esteem the other all the more concretely because she is finite.

In short, once we have experienced such extreme positive value, we are compensated for the ontological predicament rather than needing to deceive ourselves that the predicament does not exist (25).

This passage captures what I take to be the core of Ellis’ position. It also presents many of the themes that raise the ire of skepticism in me: that love can save us from the problem of finitude; that one can be saved from (or ‘compensated’ for)
finitude; and that such experience enables one to attain 'authenticity.' In what follows, I want to spell out my concerns in more detail.

I will begin by expressing some general skepticism about the very idea of 'authenticity,' here understood as a form of life that is utterly honest about the reality of finitude. The jargon of authenticity, here as elsewhere, admits of what looks like a kind of elitist self-deception: those of us who manage to get beyond the struggle against finitude achieve a cognizance of our own condition that enables us to be what we are in some honest way. As a goal, I suppose this is laudable enough—but I have serious doubts about the capacity of anyone to acknowledge our condition in a sustained way—in a way that makes peace possible, and which will actually prevent us from exerting our will on the world in ultimately destructive ways. Here, too, the empirical literature has something to teach us. The empirical elaboration and vindication of 'terror management theory,' as it is called, aims to establish the pervasiveness and sub-conscious operation of death-denial in normal human beings. As experiments by Sheldon Solomon, Tom Pyszczynski, Jeff Greenberg and others have shown, mere reminders of finitude are good predictors for aggressive behaviors toward others, and these predictors function well regardless of the religious beliefs of those participating in such experiments. These experiments suggest that death denial is not simply the product of fundamentalist approaches to religion or of deep-seated narcissism: its existence may well be present in everyone, regardless of their capacities for love.

The denial of finitude is deep. It is probably deeper than we are capable of recognizing. Given this, it is doubtful that we can simply voluntarily decide to acknowledge our finitude. Belief is almost universally recognized as involuntary, and rightly so: our beliefs about the world are likely never the product of conscious choice. So, while I am sure that Ellis is correct that much religious belief is a response to the problem of finitude, I am not sure what pointing this out (again) actually accomplishes. Moreover, much of the seminal literature on death-denial suggests that most beliefs are likely the result of death-denial (Brown 1959; Becker 1973; Yalom 1980; Piven 2004). Thus, unless it can be demonstrated that there are certain beliefs that enable us to cope with finitude honestly, inauthenticity might well be the natural (and inevitable) condition of humanity.

Ellis thinks that the experience of love—as well as its attendant beliefs—can answer the problem of finitude by honestly confronting it. I have serious reservations about this view, which I will discuss below. Before doing this, however, it is worth considering, albeit very briefly, Ellis’ claim that acknowledging our finitude (I assume by forming the correct kinds of attitudes and beliefs about it, things which are purportedly made possible by the experience of intrinsic value of the other) will change the manner in which we relate to one another. This is an old view that has become rather popular again in recent years—but it is one that relies on common sensical ideas about the relation between beliefs and actions rather than on the available empirical data.

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1 See, for example, Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Lyon, Pyszczynski, and Solomon, 1989; Amôa, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon, 1997; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Solomon, 1999.
There is a wide (and ever-growing) literature that should lead us to be skeptical about the abilities of our beliefs to have much effect at all on our everyday actions. Much of what we believe seems, in certain respects, irrelevant to what we in fact do. There is a massive body of experimental literature that suggests that our actions are much more the product of minuscule situational stimuli than they are of our beliefs and desires at the conscious level. This suggests that things like engaging in helping behavior can be better predicted by examining the music playing in the background, or whether a person found change on the ground, than by whether or not said person has a literalist reading of the unreality of death.

A few specific experiments are worth mentioning. Everyone is familiar with the experiments of Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo. Both sets of experiments speak to the power of varying situational stimuli to alter predicted courses of action among participants in psychological studies. In Milgram's famous experiments, it seems that the presence of an authority figure was a good indicator of whether or not a subject would engage in harming behavior. In Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment, the random assignment of roles (as guard or prisoner) was sufficient to predict the kind of behavior the participant would engage in.

But these are not isolated experiments. It turns out that seminarians speaking on the Good Samaritan will stop to help a person in distress in more cases if they are told they are ahead of schedule (Darley and Batson 1973). It turns out that a person is much more likely to engage in helping behavior if they have just found a dime in a phone booth (Isen and Levin 1972). Likewise, the presence of pleasant or unpleasant sounds turns out to be good predictors for engaging in helping behavior—far better predictors than any information we have on various personality characteristics or belief sets. (Matthews and Cannon 1975; Fried and Berkowitz 1979).

As always in psychology, the range of empirical data cannot definitively prove that our occurrent beliefs are irrelevant to action (a claim that would be too strong at any rate). But it does suggest that, historically, we have placed far too much emphasis on the importance of beliefs in guiding our actions—and that, in perhaps much of what we do, belief is an afterthought. (For an interesting account of how the data in neuroscience supports this view, see Wegner 2002). Thus, changing our beliefs about religion and finitude might well have no effect on the way we conduct ourselves. This painful possibility stands in stark contrast to what might be the quixotic hope that the truth will set us free.

Let me grant Ellis' point that inspiration is a necessary emotion for human agents—that it is perhaps the most basic of all. Let me further acknowledge the importance of Ellis' work in spelling out the significant limitations of drive-reductive psychology. Finally, let me embrace the significant connections (again) that Ellis has drawn between fear of finitude (death denial) and religious intolerance and fundamentalism. But with all this granted, I am not sure there is anything to be done. I'm not sure it gets any better, or even can get any better. We are the sorts of

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1 Here is a representative sample of some of the literature: Asch, 1955; Milgram, 1963; Latane and Darley, 1968, 1970; Isen and Levin, 1972; Darley and Batson, 1973; Zimbardo, Banks and Haney, 1973; Matthews and Cannon, 1975; Batson et al., 1978; Fried and Berkowitz, 1979; for impressive overviews of the relevant literature, see Doris, 2002; as well as Zimbardo, 2007.
creatures, as both Sartre and Heidegger have emphasized, that deny their own essential nature: that ignore facticity for transcendence, that attempt to make themselves only gods and never creatures.

So, it might well be the case that there are modes of death-denial that are more politically acceptable than other modes of death denial. This I grant. I for one much prefer attributing supreme value to other agents in the world as a means of struggling against my inevitable shuffle off of this mortal coil. But we should not mistake enthusiasm for authenticity. To love is, at least in certain respects, to deceive oneself about the nature of what one loves. To love is to ignore defecation, rotting flesh, and the nastiness of our creaturely existence. While we need not ignore finitude in its totality, as Ellis points out, this hardly entails that we actually acknowledge our condition for what it is. In love, we might well acknowledge the ephemeral nature of what we are experiencing—and this can indeed heighten our appreciation of what we see, as Ellis correctly argues—but this is hardly a moment of the acknowledgment of finitude in its completeness. Rather, we are carving out an area of perceptual significance so that we can ignore all of the unpleasantness of our creaturely existence: we ignore the blood and the bile, the sweat and the semen, the unpleasant defecation that, as Becker claims, threatens madness. To love is to see what is best in a thing, and this is not equivalent to seeing what a thing is. I thus must object to the claim that love involves the absence of self-deception. It does no such thing. It reveals value, to be sure, but it does this in a way that systematically ignores the humiliating side of our decaying existence.

The same process occurs when we attempt to appreciate any particular moment by aestheticizing it: we transform a particular thing or event into an ephemeral art object. This enables us to enjoy the thing we experience, but our enjoyment is far from entirely honest. When we take in a painting, for instance, we can be overwhelmed by its beauty—to appreciate the experience of the painting we must be cognizant that our experience of the painting is not one that will last. We will leave the museum and return to the workaday world, to the fatty foods and smog, to the ever-mediocre qualities of the familiar. In appreciating the painting as something experienced immediately, and hence not as something that will last, we are forced to ignore some of the most obvious features of it: that it is made of decaying materials, painted by a now-dead-hand, organized in a way that certainly conceals certain features of the world.

To behold the painting, of course, is to see the world in a particular way—and I do not want to deny that art, as well as love, can be revelatory. I am enough of a phenomenologist for that. What I want to deny is that what the painting reveals about the world is somehow more ‘authentic’ than what is revealed when we experience the mundane or the worthless. Both revelations are selective, and to the extent that they are selective and regarded as definitive, we are engaging in an act of self-deception in fully engaging in the experience.

The same thing, I contend, holds of our experiences of love. The love object is met as an object of intense value that beats back the dread of death. But the experience of such worth is hardly honesty incarnate: the love object is seen, not for what it is in its entirety—decaying, defecating flesh—but in a way that accents certain features over others. Even when seen as ephemeral, there is no guarantee of
anything like authenticity. As I have been arguing, it is perhaps essential to love that we can successfully ignore some of the creatureliness of those we love. The implication of this, I think, is clear: love is not the key to authenticity about finitude. There is no key. In fact, my hunch is that we are in a room without doors. Death-denial is as basic to our condition as is perception.

So I do not think it is fruitful to talk in terms of honesty and self-deception, authenticity and inauthenticity, when thinking through the commitments of fundamentalists and other run-of-the-mill death-deniers. To couch the issue in these terms is, in one sense, to make too great a virtue of honesty. The reason to reject the fundamentalist is not that they aren’t honest about finitude. None of us are honest enough about that. The reason to reject the fundamentalist is that their views have the net effect—as do so many others—of diminishing the ability of persons to live lives without fear and shame, even if those lives are as full of self-deceptive practices as any life has ever been. The adage ‘to each his own’ has the wisdom of death about it: we are all struggling against our finitude, coping with our predicament as best we can. All we can ask of one another is that we be able to mourn our future deaths in peace.

And perhaps the most honest thing we can say about the problem of finitude is that there can be no compensation. Like Dostoevsky’s worry about what kind of future goods could justify the killing of an innocent child, I am left with worries about what possible truly honest experience could ever justify our collective condition. My own death is one thing; the future death of my child is another. No amount of love seems sufficient to compensate for her inevitable fate—or for the inevitable fate of any of us. Everyone I have ever known or will know will be lost to death, and then will be buried and forgotten. I see no answer to this problem. Love is wondrous, but it is a wonder set against the void. All death is tragic, as is our condition. Allow me to end on a pessimistic and poetic note, but hopefully also an honest one:

Early or late, come when it will
At midnight or at noon,
Promise of good, or Threat of ill,
Death always comes too soon.

—R.H. Stoddard, 1902, from “Threnody”

Bibliography


