

The Grim Educator

The Grim Educator

CATHRYN VAN KESSEL

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA LIBRARIES



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Image credit: Andy Scott

Our conscious and unconscious thoughts about death and evil shape how we interact with others and shape our world.

By engaging with the ideas of **Ernest Becker** and theorists such as Hannah Arendt, as well as borrowing from **Terror Management Theory** in social psychology, we hope to provoke thinking about how our conscious and unconscious approaches to evil and death impact education (and our lives).

Using the contents tab to the left, discover descriptions, resources, and lessons for classroom use and beyond!

We hope to update this resource regularly with new ideas and lessons, so keep checking back!

This research has been supported by:

- The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada
- The Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta
- The Department of Secondary Education at the University of Alberta
- The University of Alberta Libraries

PART I

INTRODUCTION TO

TERROR MANAGEMENT

THEORY

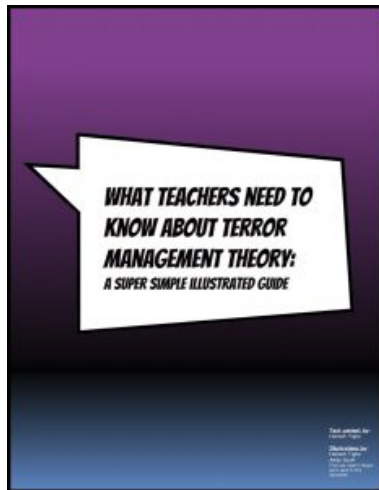
In this section, you will find helpful resources to learn about terror management theory.

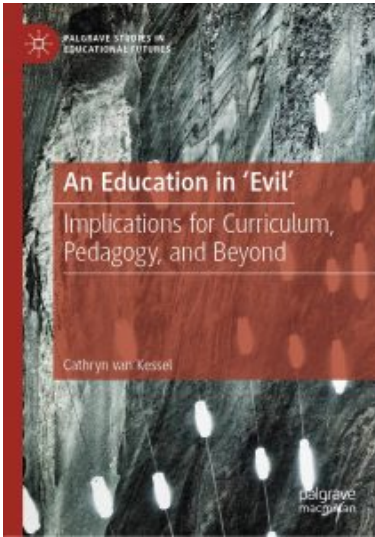
Resources

A user-friendly resource to introduce teachers to terror management theory.

- Written by Hannah Tighe
- Illustrated by Hannah Tighe and Andy Scott

Link to PDF: [TeacherGuide](#)





Chapter 7 of this book focuses on Ernest Becker and TMT in the context of education. For those at universities with a subscription to Springer, the downloadable eBook is likely available through the library system.

[Publisher link](#)



A YouTube element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online [here](#):

[https://openeducationalberta.ca/
grimeducator/?p=280](https://openeducationalberta.ca/grimeducator/?p=280)

The Surprising Ways Death Shapes Our Lives

Braincraft (via PBS) outlines some of the foundational ideas of Ernest Becker and experiments by TMT theorists in a lighthearted, accessible way (4:06)



A YouTube element has been excluded from this

version of the text. You can view it online here:

[https://openeducationalberta.ca/
grimeducator/?p=280](https://openeducationalberta.ca/grimeducator/?p=280)

Flight from Death Trailer

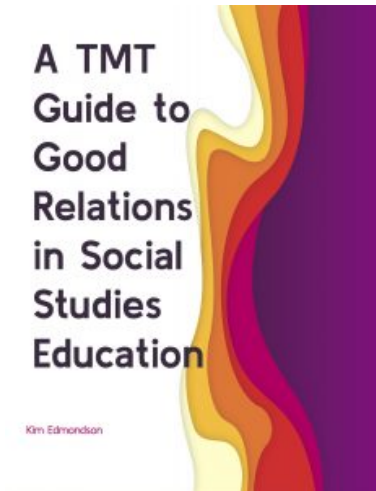
This movie, Flight from Death, outlines key ideas and experiments from terror management theory (3:57)

I. A TMT Guide to Good Relations

KIM EDMONDSON

In this brief, but powerful guide, Kimberly Edmondson walks us through how TMT, in conversation with other concepts, can help us live in relation to others in good ways.

Click here: [A TMT Guide to Living in Good Relations](#)



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PART II

VILLAINIFICATION

Definition

Villainification refers to the often unintentional process of focusing on one person, the villain, as wholly representative of a larger evil (van Kessel & Crowley, 2017). A common example would be Hitler as the embodiment of the horrors of the Second World War. Although these villains are responsible for horrific events, they are not solely responsible. Focusing the blame on an individual has the unintended effect of letting everyone else off the hook.

How do otherwise normal people inflict harm upon others?

For Hannah Arendt (1963/2006), evil can be a form of thoughtlessness—the banality of evil. As Arendt (1977) stated over a decade after her initial exploration of mundane evil: “The sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people who never made up their minds to be or to do either evil or good” (p. 180). In some contexts, this situation is interpreted as our socialization to follow orders in the sense of Stanley Milgram’s (in)famous experiments on destructive obedience. In other contexts (and not necessarily mutually exclusively) thoughtlessness can be interpreted as a lack

of critical thought about how ordinary individuals can affect others (den Heyer & van Kessel, 2015). The historical record indicates that “demonic despots are never exclusively responsible for hatred and violence” and it is largely “normal” people who are perhaps thoughtlessly following orders or passionately doing “God’s work” to “stoke the gas chambers at Auschwitz, sow the killing fields in Cambodia, or hone the horrors of Abu Ghraib” (Solomon, 2012, p. 1).

While Arendt revealed how we can perpetuate evil without intending it, Becker explained why sometimes ordinary people can indeed purposely do evil deeds. The [fetishization of evil](#) leads us to localize all of our fears and anxiety into a single, manageable source. We take all that threatens to overwhelm us, confine it to a particular group of people, cause, ideology, or, in some cases a specific person, which is then labelled as evil. Our heroic quest, then, is to annihilate it. One’s own group is “pure and good” and others “are the real animals, are spoiling everything for you, contaminating your purity and bringing disease and weakness into your vitality” (Becker, 1975, p. 93). We have seen this in the Nazis conceptualizing Jews as infectious vermin before and during the Shoah, and some Hutus labelling the Tutsis as cockroaches before and during the Rwandan genocide.

From Arendt and Becker, we have come to understand how people like ourselves can perpetuate extraordinary death and destruction, both intentionally and unintentionally. The task of anti-villainification, then, is to highlight how there are a nexus of factors that contribute to the evils of the world. Instead of focusing only on one villain, we need to examine how ordinary, average people also contribute to great harm.

Suggested Readings for further study

Arendt, H. (1977). *The life of the mind: Thinking* (vol. 1). New York, NY: Harcourt Brace.

Arendt, H. (2006). *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil*. New York, NY: Penguin. (Original work published in 1963)

Becker, E. (1975). *Escape from evil*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Browning, C. R. (1993). *Ordinary men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.

den Heyer, K., & van Kessel, C. (2015). [Evil, agency, and citizenship education](#). *McGill Journal of Education*, 50(1), 1-18.

Journell, W. (2019). *Vice, On the Basis of Sex, and the liberal imagination: Villainification and heroification in popular political film*. *Educational Studies*. Advanced online publication. [doi:10.1080/00131946.2019.1692021](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2019.1692021)

Krutka, D. G. & Milton, M. K. (Producers). (2018, January 27). [Episode 75: Evil and Villainification in the Social Studies with Cathryn van Kessel and Ryan Crowley](#). Visions of Education. [Audio podcast].

Minnich, E. (2014). The evil of banality: Arendt revisited. *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education*, 13, 158-179. [doi:10.1177/1474022213513543](https://doi.org/10.1177/1474022213513543)

Solomon, S. (2012). Terror management theory: Why war?" In D. J. Christie (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of peace psychology*. Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell.

van Kessel, C. (2018). [Banal and fetishized evil:](#)

[Implicating ordinary folk in genocide education.](#) *Journal of International Social Studies*, 8(2), 160-171.

van Kessel, C., & Crowley, R. M. (2017). Villainification and evil in social studies education. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 95(4), 427-455. [doi:10.1080/00933104.2017.1285734](#)

2. Introductory Lesson Ideas for Villainification

AARON THACKER

Option 1: The Self as a Villain

History’s “villains” and “heroes” are, essentially, ordinary folk like you or me. In what way would the story of your own life (so far) be depicted differently if it were written by someone who sees you as a villain (or as a hero)?

Potential Assignment

Write the story of your life—or of a portion of your life—from the perspective of a nemesis, like a teacher, parent, or peer with whom you disagreed substantively.

Option 2: Villains in Personal History

Each person has his or her own history, one which tends to be self-narrated. Who are the “heroes” and “villains” in that narrative?

Potential Assignment

Write an exaggerated version of the story of your life that transforms the mundane or quotidian individuals in your life into heroic or villainous characters.

Option 3: the ‘Other’

Considering the us/them binary and the presentation of the villain as “Other,” it is somewhat strange that we take pleasure in prominent presentation of villains. Why is the representation and inevitable downfall of individualized villains so affectively satisfying?

Potential Assignment

The media is overwhelmed by coverage of “people we love to hate”: depending on your position, that person might be a Kardashian (or all of them), or Justin Bieber, or Alex Jones, or Kanye West, or Lena Dunham, or Anne Hathaway (for whatever reason). Choose a “person we/you love to hate” along with an angry blog/vlog post about this

person, and compare that post to the depiction of a villain in your textbook.

Option 4: Zeitgeist vs. Poltergeist

Instead of imprinting the *zeitgeist* (spirit of an era) of a particular historical milieu onto a singular historical figure, would it be more helpful to characterize the systemic and subconscious tendencies of a historical moment as a *poltergeist* (spirit of influence/disturbance/noise)?

Potential Assignment

What would the “personality” of the twenty-first-century Canadian poltergeist be? In what way would this poltergeist influence Canadian citizens?

Option 5: Textbook Narratives

If textbooks do indeed provide narratives—in the sense that they are *constructed*—then we are denied the initial third of the

narrative arch (antecedence, exposition, and incitation). Would history’s “villains” have more nuance if this aspect of their narratives were to be “fleshed out?”

Potential Assignment

Choose a “villainous” historical figure and investigate his or her childhood, family, and the zeitgeist in which he or she came of age. Potential creative assignment: dramatize that childhood as a theatrical “prequel” to the information provided in your textbook.

Option 6: Googling Villains

Nothing quite captures the contemporary zeitgeist like Google Image’s search algorithms. Enter a word, and all of the imagery that is prominently associated with that word—at that moment in time, coloured subtly by the individual’s search history—will appear. When the word “villain” is searched, what patterns among the images can be recognized, and what do those patterns say regarding contemporary assumptions about villainhood?

Potential Assignment

Create a composite of the characteristics of the villains that appear in your search, and compare that composite to the characterization of a historical “villain” (past or present).

Option 7: Writing Villains

“How to Write a Memorable/Convincing/Engaging Villain”—the title of countless blog contributions and writers’ guides such as [this one](#). How could textbooks be written differently if the writers attended to the suggestions of these blogs?

Potential Assignment

Amend the depiction of a historical “villain” of your choosing in your textbook based on the suggestions of a few of these blogs while also trying to remain historically accurate.

Option 8: Shifting Perspective

“Every villain is the hero of his or her own story.” A variation of this adage has been attributed to nearly every author of the twentieth and twenty-first century (most recently, George R.R. Martin of *Game of Thrones* fame). How would the story of an historical “villain’s” life be written differently from the perspective of the “villains” themselves?

Potential Assignment

Rewrite a subsection of your textbook in first-person, from the point of view of the “villain,” rather than third-person.

(Created by Aaron Thacker, 2018)

3. Social Studies Heroes and Villains Lesson Plan

ESTHER STEEVES

Intended Audience

Grade: Jr. High (various grades)

Lesson: Social Studies Heroes and Villains

Class length: 45 min

Note to reader:

This lesson plan was designed as a “flex block” for junior high students. Students from any grade could sign up for this class. There are no prerequisites. This lesson could easily be retooled for high school

Before Class:

- Cue videos
- Test audio

Learning Objectives

Objectives:

- Students explore why it is important to humanize heroes and villains in social studies
- Students do Internet research to uncover the “human side” of social studies heroes and villains
- Students consider strategies they could use in the future when they encounter heroes and villains in social studies



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://openeducationalberta.ca/grimeducator/?p=69#h5p-1>

Download this Lesson Plan

[Social Studies Heroes and Villains Lesson Plan](#)

(Created by E. Steeves, 2018)

4. Textbook Analysis Lesson Ideas

AARON THACKER

Option 1: Efficiency versus Effectiveness

What is the most *efficient* way to tell the story of an historical moment, and why may that not be the most *effective* way to tell that story?

Potential Assignment

choose a subsection of your textbook about a historical “villain,” and identify (an) area(s) that seem to be “shortcuts” around a more complex, nuanced discussion; compose a replacement for the shortcut(s) that explores the system factors surround the individual actor who is emphasized.

Option 2: Unpacking Binaries

Human beings tend to—and have always tended to—organize and simplify the complexities of the world around them into binaries

(good/evil, right wrong, us/them, black/white, patriot/traitor, occident/orient, etc.). How does the representation of historical narratives in textbooks as a conflict between “heroes” and “villains” reflect this tendency?

Potential Assignment

Try to find a major historical moment in your textbook that is at no point reduced to a pair of mutually co-existent concepts (axis/ally (WWII), capitalism/communism (Cold War), Christian/Muslim (post-9/11), Indigenous/settler (colonization of Canada), men/women (women’s suffrage), black/white (civil rights movement), etc.). Hint: you may not find any.

Option 3: The Victors

“History is written by the victors”—an axiomatic statement that is often attributed to Winston Churchill. Implicit in this widely accepted idea is the notion that history is composed exclusively of winners and losers, heroes and villains. What does this implication say about how textbooks are written (i.e., written by heroes)?

Potential Assignment

Find a primary source pertaining to D.C. Scott (perhaps one of his poems, such as “The Onondaga Madonna”), and try to write a textbook bio on him from his own perspective (an auto-bio).

Option 4: Mimesis versus Delineation

To what extent are history textbooks more mimesis (or verisimilitude) than delineation? If textbooks are indeed more mimetic than “accurate,” then should one engage with textbooks from an aesthetic perspective? In other words, are historical narratives more “narrative” than “history?”

Potential Assignment

Compare a section of Chester Brown’s “Louis Riel: A Comic-strip Biography” with the section on Louis Riel in your textbook. Write a response to the following question: which do you find more holistically informative, and why do you feel that way?

Option 5: Abstract and Individualized Villains

In fiction, antagonism can be individualized (e.g., human vs. human) or abstract (e.g., human vs. nature). How different would a Social Studies textbook look if it were written with abstract “villains” (i.e., systemic tendencies) rather than individualized ones (e.g., Hitler)?

Potential Assignment

Rewrite a subsection of your textbook (about a “villain”) in a manner that abstracts the characterization of evil.

Option 6: Clash of Titans

There is a tendency to construct history as a “clash of titans” (e.g., Hitler v. Churchill), but it is the average citizens of the times that enact the policies—or are enacted upon by the policies—of those in positions of power (e.g., Joe Axis v. Joe Ally or Joe SS v. Joe Jewish). These historical characters—the “every-people”—are as captivating as the power-players, as the our ongoing fascination with Anne Frank’s diaries testifies. Why do our textbooks value the object narratives of historical overview rather than the subjective perspectives of individuals who experienced these historical milieus?

Potential Assignment

Choose a subsection of your textbook, and find a collection of primary source, subjective documents from the era that could potentially replace the textbook materials. Potential creative assignment: create a composite from these perspectives—a collective subjectivity as opposed to the historical objectivity of the textbook.

Option 7: Function of Propaganda

What is the function of propaganda, and in what way does that function parallel the historical narratives in a textbook?

Potential Assignment

Find a piece of primary-source propaganda from each of two competing nations during a substantial historical event—e.g., USA and Germany in WWII, USA and Russia in the Cold War, even Israel and Palestine or North and South

Korea if you're feeling *risqué*—and compare/contrast these depictions to the description of the conflict in your textbook. Is the textbook more like one than the other? Are there any formal similarities?

(created by Aaron Thacker, 2018)

5. Lesson Ideas for Canadian History

AARON THACKER

Option 1: Reexamining Idols

Canadian history is riddled with historical actors who were once idolized and have since been re-examined (in particular, the first Prime Minister of Canada, Sir John A. Macdonald). The tendency to focus on these individuals has seeped into prominent public discourses about how we memorialize these figures. How can we nuance the narratives that surround these historical figures without simply redacting the aspects of that narrative that are inconsistent with contemporary values? When considering efficiency v. effectiveness, is the tearing down of statues and the changing of the names of schools an effective solution or merely an efficient one?

Potential Assignment

Choose Canadian historical figure who has a monument in his or her name somewhere in Canada, and write a 250-word plaque that nuances the figure's participation in her or his historical milieu.

Option 2: Nuancing Redemption

Canadian history also has its fair share of historical figures who were once demonized and have since been redeemed. The leader of the Red River Rebellion, Louis Riel, is a prime example, but whether the rebellion is seen more positively today or more negatively by its contemporaries, “one [person] does not [a rebellion] make.” Consider the question above (once more) in this context: how can we nuance the narratives that surround these historical figures without simply redacting the aspects of that narrative that are inconsistent with contemporary values? How can the consideration of actors beyond the protagonist/antagonist contribute to this nuance?

Potential Assignment

Research one of the minor players in the Red River Rebellion—on either “side”—and write a letter to your MLA arguing for the creation/preservation of a monument for this individual.

(Created by Aaron Thacker, 2018)

6. Hitler the Villain Lesson Plan

CATHRYN VAN KESSEL

Exercise

How might seeing Hitler as an exceptionally evil monster prevent us from addressing the horrors of our own times?

Learning Objectives

The goal is to make a villain like Hitler seem less like an otherworldly monster, and more like a person we might encounter in our daily lives. This task is toward a greater goal of preventing atrocities and disasters in our time and context. By seeing Hitler as a person instead of a monster reveals an uncomfortable truth that many of us are capable of contributing to (or even instigating) horrendous actions.



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://openeducationalberta.ca/grimeducator/?p=71#h5p-2>

Download this Lesson Plan

[Hitler the Villain](#)

(Created by C. van Kessel, 2018)

7. Comic-Related Lesson Ideas

AARON THACKER

Option 1: Comics and Textbooks

What is the relationship between the narrative of a typical comic book and the historical narrative of a textbook? What about the pseudo-historical narrative of a meta-comic book like *The Watchmen*?

Potential Assignment

Choose a “superhero” comic book from the library, and compare the depiction of the villain in that narrative to a “villain” in your textbook.

Option 2: Fiction-informed History

Evil is often portrayed in fiction narratives in a manner that parallels evil in historical narratives—e.g., “HYDRA” in the Marvel

universe (esp. Captain America) is a Nazi organization with a Hitler-esque leader, “Red Skull”—so are there examples of the opposite process occurring (historical narratives mimicking fiction)?

Potential Assignment

Consider the characteristics of the villain in your favourite *Marvel* film, and compare those characteristics to a negative depiction—in an article, blog, series of tweets, vlog, etc.—of a prominent, contemporary figure (e.g., Trump, Trudeau, Notley, etc.). Identify the similarities between these two constructions of “villains.”

(Created by Aaron Thacker, 2018)

8. Current Event Lesson Ideas

AARON THACKER

Option 1: The Distracting Villain

In what ways are contemporary “villains” emphasized and individualized in the media as means of distracting the U.S./Canadian public from broader, systemic factors at play?

Potential Assignment

Have students research this issue related to a current event. As an example, Osama bin Laden was among the most discussed individuals (if not *the* most discussed individual) during the decade between the attack on the World Trade Center towers on September 11, 2001 and his death on May 2, 2011. Map out what important news events during that time—particularly those regarding U.S. contributions to conflict in the Middle East—were overshadowed by the manhunt for bin Laden?

Option 2: Firearm Rhetoric

“Guns don’t kill people; people kill people.” Or “the only thing that can stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.” These are the go-to slogans of firearms-rights folk all over the world (particularly, though, in the United States, where the Second Amendment protects the right to bear arms. As a result, these people tend to individualize gun violence when it rhetorically suits them (“mentally deranged” or “a bad apple”) or overgeneralize this same violence when that suits their agenda (“Muslim terrorists” or “Antifa radicals”). How could we challenge these narratives through an avoidance of villainification and an explorations of broader, systemic factors?

Potential Assignment

Research a contemporary act of extraordinary gun violence (e.g., the Dunforth shooting) and compare an article by an unaffiliated media source (e.g., BBC) with an article or blog/vlog post by a highly affiliated source (e.g., Alex Jones). Write a response about the elements of the story that are contained in one source but not in the other, and purpose a few contributing, systemic factors that neither source explore.

(Created by Aaron Thacker, 2018)

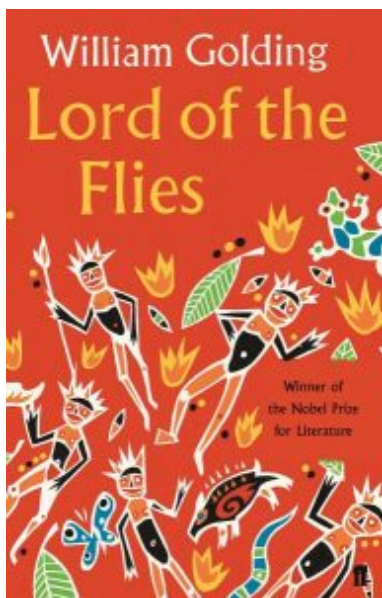
9. Lord of the Flies Lesson Plans

Check out these lessons created by **Kelly Drury Laffin** (2019) to engage students in philosophies of evil and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* with connections to historical and current events!

The Beast Within: [Link to Google Slide Presentation](#)

Students will learn about Hannah Arendt's banality of evil as well as Alain Badiou's understanding of evil. The grade level assumed is Grades 9-12.

[The Beast Within Downloadable PDF](#)



PART III

FETISHIZING EVIL

Definition

The **fetishization of evil** is the localization of evil within a single, recognizable and concrete source that can then be targeted for destruction.

When the **fetishization of evil** occurs, we take all that threatens our physical and symbolic selves and confine it to a person, group of people, or an ideology and label that entity or group as evil and then seek to **annihilate** it. We convince ourselves that if we could only eliminate that one thing, we would then be freed of all suffering and evil. The process of **scapegoating** entails blaming a person/group, while fetishizing evil takes this idea further. Not only is a single person or group blamed for a perceived (and simplified)



Photo credit: [Peter Forster](#)

problem, but also there is a call for the elimination of that person or group. For example, blaming immigrants for a struggling economy is scapegoating, while calling for deporting (or worse) immigrants is fetishizing evil.

Fetishizing evil requires a reliance on stereotypes and related processes. A stereotype is an oversimplified generalization about an entire group of people without regard for individual differences. Prejudice is pre-judging, making a decision about a person or group of people without sufficient knowledge. Prejudicial thinking is based on stereotypes. Prejudice is an attitude. Discrimination is the behaviour that can follow prejudicial thinking. Discrimination is the denial of justice and fair treatment in many arenas, including employment, housing and political rights.

One's own group is "pure and good" and others "are the real animals, are spoiling everything for you, contaminating your purity and bringing disease and weakness into your vitality" (Becker, 1975, p. 93). We have seen this in the Nazis conceptualizing Jews as infectious vermin, and the Hutus labelling the Tutsis as cockroaches. A disturbing TMT study found that a worldview threat is buffered if worldview violators have been killed (Hayes, Schimel, & Williams, 2008).

Why do people fetishize evil? It is ultimately a way of dealing with our own sense of vulnerability and death. Fetishizing evil is a way of confining our fear to a specific, manageable object. It is a way of making our fear concrete and controllable. Then, by coming against the evil, lashing out against it, and in some cases eradicating it, we assert our own purity, specialness, and our own status as heroes. Thus, from Becker's perspective, many forms of aggression aimed at annihilating others with a "lust for killing" is a result of the fetishization of evil

Check out this fetishizing evil PSA by Rebeka Plots (2020):

<https://biteable.com/watch/embed/fetishizing-evil-psa-rplots-2654529>

Suggested Readings for Further Study

Becker, E. (1975). *Escape from evil*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Castano, E., & Giner-Sorolla, R. (2006). Not quite human: Infra-humanization in response to collective responsibility for inter-group killing. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90(5), 804-818. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.90.5.804>

Hayes, J., Schimel, J., & Williams, T. J. (2008). Fighting death with death: The buffering effects of learning that worldview violators have died. *Psychological Science*, 19, 501-507. [doi:10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02115.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02115.x)

Schimel, J., Hayes, J., Williams, T. & Jahrig, J. (2007). Is death really the worm at the core? Converging evidence that worldview threat increases death-thought accessibility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92, 789-803. [doi:10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02115.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02115.x)

Solomon, S., Greenberg, J., & Pyszczynski, T. (2015). [*The worm at the core: On the role of death in life*](#). New York, NY: Random House.

van Kessel, C. (2018). [*Banal and fetishized evil: Implicating ordinary folk in genocide education*](#). *Journal of International Social Studies*, 8(2), 160-171.

(Created by C. van Kessel, 2018)

10. Teaching Genocide

CATHRYN VAN KESSEL

By combining the ideas of Arendt and Becker, educators can focus on how we all are capable of not only thoughtlessly contributing to atrocities but also even killing others out of heroic joy.

Hannah Arendt has given us much insight into a process of evil. Specifically, evil intent is not required to do an evil deed. What, then, begins the process of evil? For Arendt (1963/2006), this evil is a form of thoughtlessness—the banality of evil. As Arendt (1977) stated over a decade after her initial exploration of mundane evil: “The sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people who never made up their minds to be or to do either evil or good” (p. 180). From Arendt we know that ordinary people can contribute to great harm simply by going about their business and failing to consider how they are part of harmful system. She illustrated this idea with Adolf Eichmann, who we now know was not the best choice for her theory (Stangneth, 2015); however, there are countless others who could serve as exemplars of banal evil, such as Christopher Browning’s (1993) work on reserve police battalions.

While Arendt revealed how we can perpetuate evil without intending it, **Ernest Becker** explained why sometimes ordinary people can indeed purposely do evil deeds. Those who threaten our worldview are evils that must be eradicated. Becker talks about fetishizing fear by localizing all of one’s fear and anxiety into a single, manageable source. We often **scapegoat** marginalized groups, but we can **fetishize** any group as the embodiment of evil. We take all that threatens to overwhelm us, confine it to a particular group of people, cause, ideology, or, in some cases a specific person, which is then labelled as evil. Our heroic quest, then, is to annihilate it. One’s own group is “pure and good” and others “are the real animals, are spoiling everything for you, contaminating your purity and bringing disease and weakness into your vitality” (Becker, 1975, p. 93). We

have seen this in the Nazis conceptualizing Jews as infectious vermin, and the Hutus labelling the Tutsis as cockroaches.

We need to arrange our curriculum in ways that encourage the study of ordinary people like ourselves. Students, particularly high school students, are more than capable of understanding the theories of Arendt and Becker. We can ask students to attend to the complexities of how genocides have happened, and continue to happen. There are some who perpetuate genocide in very banal ways, others who feel compelled to be obedient and deflect responsibility to the authority figure, and then there are those who fetishize evil and participate in the killing with glee. For some, more than one of these dispositions might be operating in the same person more or less over time. As Hatzfield (2006) found in his interviews with those who perpetuated the Rwandan genocide, there were all sorts of factors that led someone to participate in genocide.

Suggested Readings for Further Study

Arendt, H. (1977). *The life of the mind: Thinking* (vol. 1). New York, NY: Harcourt Brace.

Arendt, H. (2006). *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil*. New York, NY: Penguin. (Original work published in 1963)

Becker, E. (1975). *Escape from evil*. New York NY: Free Press.

Browning, C. R. (1993). *Ordinary men: Reserve Police*

Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.

Hatzfeld, J. (2006). *Machete season: The killers in Rwanda speak* (L. Coverdale, Trans.). New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. (Original work published in 2003)

Minnich, E. (2014). The evil of banality: Arendt revisited. *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education*, 13, 158-179. [doi:10.1177/1474022213513543](https://doi.org/10.1177/1474022213513543)

Stangneth, B. (2015). *Eichmann before Jerusalem: The unexamined life of a mass murderer*. New York, NY: Penguin Random House.

van Kessel, C., & Crowley, R. M. (2017). Villainification and evil in social studies education. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 95(4), 427-455. [doi:10.1080/00933104.2017.1285734](https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2017.1285734)

van Kessel, C. (2018). [Banal and fetishized evil: Implicating ordinary folk in genocide education](#). *Journal of International Social Studies*, 8(2), 160-171.

(Created by C. van Kessel, 2018)

II. Fetishizing Evil and the Holocaust

CATHRYN VAN KESSEL, FRANCESCA CATENA, AND KIM EDMONDSON

How might students understand how otherwise normal people can take part in a genocide like the Holocaust?

Note to Reader:

This lesson assumes that students already have a general sense of the events of the Second World War, including the Holocaust.

Learning Objectives

- Provide students with an overview of key ideas from Arendt and Becker
- Examine patterns of thought and behaviour that contribute to genocide and other violent actions



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://openeducationalberta.ca/grimeducator/?p=87#h5p-3>

Download this Lesson Plan

[Fetishizing evil](#)

(Created by C. van Kessel, F. Catena, & K. Edmondson, 2018)

PART IV

WORLDVIEW THREAT



A Vimeo element has been excluded from this version of the text.
You can view it online here: <https://openeducationalberta.ca/grimeducator/?p=89>

Our existential situation shapes how we interact with those deemed different from ourselves.

Our worldview protects us from our existential fear literally and symbolically. It is probably obvious how many religions comfort us in a literal sense: They explain how we live on after death (e.g., Hades, Heaven, Sheol, reincarnation, etc.). Secular worldviews can also alleviate death anxiety (e.g., such as taking comfort in our recycling of the atoms in our body according to the Law of Conservation of Matter and Energy). It is important to note



Photo credit: [Ken Treloar](#) on Unsplash

TMT does not say that any one of these worldviews is correct—either a secular view or a particular religion. Rather, TMT points out how these beliefs function to provide us with a sense of immortality. Worldviews also provide us with symbolic immortality. When we are part of a culture, we are part of something larger than ourselves, something immortal—our community, our nation. In this sense, our worldview explains where we have come from, and what will endure after us, as well as what our place is in the world. We derive a lot of our self-esteem from being part of a like-minded group, whether that be a large-scale religious community or a small scale niche community (e.g., goths, hipsters).

Because all worldviews are to some extent arbitrary, fictional assemblages about the nature of reality, they require continual validation from others in order remain believable. Exposure to cultures of people with alternate worldviews, especially those that are diametrically opposed to one's own, therefore, potentially undermines one's faith in the dominant worldview and the psychological protection it provides. Thus, contact with others who define reality in different ways undermines an assumed consensus

can be mocked or insulted.

- **Assimilation:** Involves attempts towards converting worldview-opposing others to our own system of belief. Of course, the prototypical example of assimilation is missionary work, and in education this process can take the form of teachers (or fellow students) attempting to convert students to their perspective on historical or contemporary events, as we see with the idea of teaching as an immortality project.
- **Accommodation:** Modifying one's own worldview to incorporate some aspects of the threatening worldview. More specifically, through accommodation one accepts some of the peripheral components of the threatening worldview into one's own, which renders the alternate worldview less threatening and at the same time allows one's core beliefs to remain intact. In teaching, for example, teachers might have students make dream catchers, but fail to address the thought and beliefs behind this Indigenous practice.
- **Annihilation:** The most extreme example of a defense against worldview threat, annihilation involves aggressive action aimed at killing or injuring members of the threatening worldview. If groups of people with opposing beliefs can be injured or killed, the implication is that their beliefs are truly inferior to our own. Further to this point, by eliminating large numbers of people with a different version of reality, the threatening worldview may cease to exist, and thus no longer pose a threat. Some of the most horrific human behaviors throughout history, namely war and genocide, are examples of annihilation as a form of worldview defense, and in the classroom students may express support for annihilation of certain groups.



Blasones (1) de S. Martin. — 2. de S. Martin. — 3. de S. Martin. — 4. de S. Martin. — 5. de S. Martin. — 6. de S. Martin. — 7. de S. Martin. — 8. de S. Martin. — 9. de S. Martin. — 10. de S. Martin. — 11. de S. Martin. — 12. de S. Martin. — 13. de S. Martin. — 14. de S. Martin. — 15. de S. Martin.

“As a teacher, I imagine everyone entering a classroom as carrying an invisible shield (worldview) with them. As with worldviews, each shield would be different, tailored to the individual holding it. As well, depending on the shield an individual holds, they may be more vulnerable to certain attacks (topics/opinions) than someone with a different shield. Early on, the type and style of shield may be heavily influenced by familial ties, maybe it has a family crest or other signifier. And like a worldview, a shield is not permanent. A different shield could be

adapted as the holder evaluates the effectiveness, or lack of effectiveness, of their current shield. Some shields may be more robust than others, being able to put up with more before they yield. And perhaps most obviously, shields are typically meant for protection when they are deployed, similar to worldviews according to TMT.” (B. Bjornsson, 2019)

Suggested Readings for further study:

Becker, E. (1973). *The denial of death*. Free Press.

Becker, E. (1975). *Escape from evil*. Free Press.

Burke, K., & van Kessel, C. (2021). Thinking educational controversies through evil and prophetic indictment: Conversation versus conversion. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 53(1), 90–100.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1767072>

Hayes, J., Schimel, J., Williams, T. J., Howard, A. L., Webber, D., & Faucher, E. H. (2015). Modifying committed beliefs provides defense against worldview threat. *Self and Identity*, 14(5), 521–548.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2015.1036919>

Jacobs, N., van Kessel, C., & Varga, B. A. (2021). Existential considerations to disrupt rigid thinking in social studies classrooms. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 20(1), 51–65.
<https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/taboo/vol20/iss1/4/>

Schimel, J., Hayes, J., Williams, T. & Jahrig, J. (2007). Is death really the worm at the core? Converging evidence that worldview threat increases death-thought accessibility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92, 789–803. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.92.5.789>

Solomon, S., Greenberg, J., & Pyszczynski, T. (2015). [*The worm at the core: On the role of death in life*](#). Random House.

van Kessel, C. (2020). Teaching the climate crisis: Existential

considerations. *Journal of Curriculum Studies Research*, 2(1), 129–145. <https://doi.org/10.46303/jcsr.02.01.8>

van Kessel, C., den Heyer, K., & Schimel, J. (2020). Terror management theory and the educational situation. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 52(3), 428–442. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2019.1659416>

van Kessel, C., & Saleh, M. (2020). Fighting the plague: “Difficult” knowledge as sirens’ song in teacher education. *Journal of Curriculum Studies Research*, 2(2), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.46303/jcsr.2020.7>

(Created by C. van Kessel, 2018–2021)

12. In the Classroom

CATHRYN VAN KESSEL

The Big Idea

Once you are aware of **worldview threat** and its accompanying defensive compensatory actions, you then are faced with what you can do in your classroom.

Option 1: Prevention of Harmful Defensive Actions

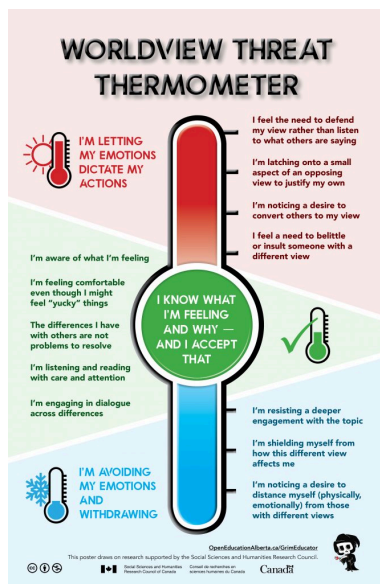
Potential Assignment

- teach your students about **worldview threat** and **worldview defense**. Talk about potential [defensive reactions](#)!
- set up a classroom that attends to the emotionality of learning and worldview threat and defence
- use [strategies](#) to mitigate worldview threat

Recommended read (open-access): van Kessel, C., & Saleh, M. (2020). Fighting the plague: “Difficult” knowledge as sirens’ song in teacher education. *Journal of Curriculum Studies Research*, 2(2), 1–20. <https://curriculumstudies.org/index.php/CS/article/view/59/25>

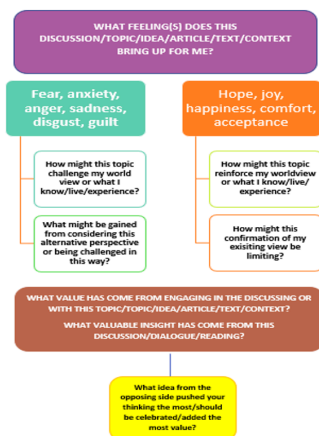
Option 2: Worldview Threat Thermometer

Use the following poster in your classroom (available in [large, printable poster quality PDF version here](#) and [printable PDF here](#)) as a reference guide when learning about worldview threat.



Option 3: Reflective Guiding Questions for Difficult Conversations and Reflections

Use the following guide as a starting point for worldview threat reflection.



by Melanie Glaves, 24 July 2020

Option 4: Understanding Why Humans Group Themselves Together in the First Place

According to Becker and TMT, our self-esteem relies on being a meaningful, contributing member to the group that shares our worldview. By living up to the cultural values held by this group, we

earn a sense of self-esteem. When we belong, our anxieties about our own finite life are reduced.

Potential Assignment

Sticker Inclusion Exclusion Activity

Materials: stickers of different colours and shapes/sizes (I use stars of a variety of colours in two different sizes). Ideally, you want (at least close to) the same colours if there are different sizes.

Inform the students that the class is going to do an activity where a sticker is placed on their forehead. Allow students to abstain from participating, but inform them that they cannot influence what the others are doing.

Have the students close their eyes. Place a sticker on their forehead. For a class of 20, try to have at least 2 or 3 people with the exact same sticker, and at least 4 people with the same colour of sticker.

Once all the stickers have been placed. Tell the students to open their eyes, but to remain silent. Without using their voices (or looking in a mirror to see their own sticker), have the students place themselves in groups (they can use gestures, though).

Likely, the students will organize themselves by those

with the exact same sticker (but however they organize themselves is fine).

Tell the students to “try again”, organizing themselves in a different way. Again, note what organization they choose, and tell them to try again. Repeat as often as you like.

Different organizations include: same colour/shape/size, same colour (but different shape/size), same shape/size (but different colour), everyone together as one, everyone on their own, etc. etc.

Students will get frustrated, perhaps even shoving students out of ‘their’ group in order to get the ‘right’ answer. This is obviously an entryway to an interesting discussion on a variety of points.

Eventually, stop the activity and debrief the students:

- How did you feel when you knew what group you you part of?
- Did you feel lost when you didn’t know where you belonged?
- To what extent did you rely on other people to tell you where you belong?



when you
forget about TMT
and become reactionary
to the new
information we
are learning in class

when we
remember TMT, and know
that the yucky
feelings are valid
**BUT IT DOESN'T
MAKE US BAD PEOPLE**

C. MacCuish, 2019



A YouTube element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://openeducationalberta.ca/grimeducator/?p=91>

Considerations Regarding Emotional Correctness

As a teacher I think it is important for us to understand and employ emotional correctness in our classrooms. We are in an environment where we are dealing with young people who have yet to fully develop opinions of their own. Much of what students bring to class will be from the media, their parents/guardians, social groups and social media. Should a student make a remark that is insensitive or out of ignorance, it is my job as an educator to attempt

and provide them with either the correct information or a means to gather it. Even during my first teaching practicum, I was already confronted with this situation.

Should a student make a remark that can be dangerous or hateful it would be my responsibility to call attention to it in a manner that respects all parties involved and ensure that the student or students understands that it is not ok and why. As a teacher we must employ a different persona in the classroom, we will be dealing with vulnerable citizens that will often require guidance and understanding. Terror management theory has been helpful as now I have a theory I can apply when contentious issues are discussed, and an individual's worldview or perspectives can potentially be threatened. I have come to understand that discussing and attempting to teach contentious topics is a process. As teachers we will often have to ease students into learning, especially when the subject matter is controversial. We cannot drop a heavy topic in students' laps expecting them to either adopt a different perspective or share their ideas and opinions instantly. We must first get them into a mindset where they are willing to receive the knowledge, later allowing them to expand their own personal views and understanding of the world around them.

In my personal life, however, I don't believe I would employ emotional correctness to the same degree that I would as a teacher. I have been in situations where I am often required to educate strangers on how to properly behave in a civil manner and I am unfortunately tired of doing so. I do not believe it is my responsibility to consistently correct ignorance when met with it, especially

when we live in an age where information is so readily available and the proper ways to behave have become simple common sense.

I consistently hear how so many people are not happy with how politically correct the world has gotten, but I am honestly ok with it. I have no problem with people having to monitor what they say, do or type. I think that it provides those who have been unfairly confronted with hate in the past with a small degree of protection. I also believe that when social issues do arise there will always be a group of overly sensitive people who are able to garner a large amount of attention. And with the help of social media, their concerns or disdain can often become magnified to seem as though a majority of the world agrees with them, creating the cancel culture we see today. I believe this is just a phase in which our society must go through to evolve and improve. With the introduction of social media paired with the ever-changing social landscape we operate within, we, as a people, are just attempting to navigate and manage our experiences in this unfamiliar terrain. While society is going through some growing pains at the moment, I do not believe this is where it will stay. I see this in my classrooms. Today's students are far better at understanding the world that exists around them and are better adept at handling the nuances that we all must operate within.

By D'Javon Brown, 7 December 2019

Teaching Students about the Process of Working Through their Defenses

- [The Oatmeal](#) does a step-by-step guide (in comic form!) to dealing with information that has an emotional impact (“the

backfire effect”). It’s in a U.S. context, but should be relatable in other places, like Canada.

(Created by C. van Kessel, 2018-2021)

13. Worldview Threat Across Subject Areas

CATHRYN VAN KESSEL, FRANCESCA CATENA, KIM EDMONDSON,
NICK JACOBS, AND KARA BOUCHER

Mathematics

Worldview threat from mathematical principles that violate our day-to-day sense of reality

e.g., probability: even if you flip a coin 25 times and every one is “tails”, the odds are still 50/50 that you will gets “heads” next time (aka “[the Gambler’s Fallacy](#)“)

ESL/ELL

In English as a Second Language (or English Language Learning) classrooms, you might encounter:

- worldview differences in vocabulary
- binary structures in language (e.g., feminine/masculine)
- plus, a very high chance of cultural diversity in those classes

Physical Education and Wellness

Worldview threat can help explain politics in sport, such as the backlash to NFL players like [Colin Kaepernick](#) kneeling during the anthem, or [Tommie Smith and John Carlos](#)‘ Black Power salute during their Olympic medal ceremony on October 16, 1968)

TMT also helps us understand [sports fandom](#)! Why is it that we rally behind “our” team and dislike the opposing one? Check out this article on how [Sports Hooliganism Comes Down to a Fear of Death](#).

Worldview threat partially explains why we have trouble evaluating claims to knowledge about nutrition and health. Our [reading comprehension is reduced](#) when we worldview disconfirming information (and increases when we read what affirms our worldview)!

Furthermore, terror management theory as a whole explains some approaches to physical education and wellness, as we strive to overcome our physical limitations and make our bodies resistant to decay and death. We might take unnecessary and dangerous [risks](#), but there can be positive effects as well (e.g., increased [performance in sports](#)).

Science, Art, and Music

Worldview threat can help us understand the difficulty of changing paradigms (see: [Thomas Kuhn](#))—why there is so much resistance to new approaches and understandings:

- Sciences: the excommunication of Galileo; resistance to the idea of continental drift/plate tectonics; climate change denial

- Music: resistance to the invention of classical music from the paradigm of Baroque
- Art: Renaissance art was a shifting paradigm (What's art for for? Who can make art?)

History or Social Studies: Canadian Internment Camps Lesson

[Internment camps lesson](#)

How might students identify injustices and build empathy regarding internment in *Canadian history*?

The aim of this lesson is to build an understanding from two basic perspectives:

- *Members of the Canadian government and broader society*: Why they were afraid of so-called enemy aliens (e.g., fetishizing evil, worldview threat)
- *Those who had been interned*: Engaging with their stories to foster empathy

(FYI: At the time of writing, this was part of the Grade 11 social studies curriculum in Alberta)

14. Educating (and Being a Human) During a Pandemic

CATHRYN VAN KESSEL

The Big Idea

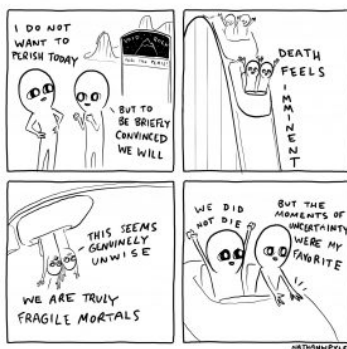
Because our conscious and unconscious fears of death (i.e., **mortality salience**) affect our behavior, being in a situation where we are constantly reminded of our bodies' vulnerability to disease and death takes a toll (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic).

Beware Reckless Behaviour

Many folks were shocked and dismayed that [some people held a COVID-19 party in Kentucky](#) (among other irresponsible activities). Unfortunately, though, these situations are actually predictable. Although it may be tempting to call these folks idiots (and, in a way, true, because “idiot” comes from Ancient Greek & means a “private person” who isn't thinking of the public good), it's more helpful to call them terrified. They are too scared to see that their bodies are mortal.

Research shows that when reminded of death, some (but not all) folks will behave more recklessly—to assert that death is for others

and doesn't apply to them ([Taubman et al, 2010](#)). And we can see this in our own daily lives with some of our preferred (and overall not-as-harmful) activities:



<https://twitter.com/nathanwpyle/status/1121448747966304256>

It's "ok" to find ways to manage our terror of death—in fact we need those to live happy lives. But, it's vital that we find ways that don't hurt others. Our immortality projects shouldn't endanger others.

Beware Exacerbated Intolerance for Difference

We tend to hunker down in our worldviews and be less tolerant of those who have diverging views from our own when reminded of death. This situation occurs because worldviews and worldview groups give us a sense of permanence (i.e., security in an insecure world).

Perhaps someone makes a comment in class that fuels racism, or we notice that students are being extra defensive about their

worldviews. *What might we do?* The question becomes how we might get that student, the other students, and ourselves to stay with our uncomfortable emotions for longer, and in thoughtful ways. We can't ignore a hateful comment (then we, too, are perpetuating hatefulness). But, also we need to try not to go ballistic on the student (although justified in many ways, will this be helpful? Probably not).

So What Do We Do?!

We need to recognize that there are conscious and unconscious forces at play. Right now with the COVID-19 crisis we are reminded of death every day, and so the weird ways we react to things are more heightened than they would be under more normal circumstances. For example, we know that reminders of our mortality can tank our [reading comprehension](#) of things that threaten our worldview. Think of how that effects how we engage with media coverage of political figures! We also know that reminders of death makes us prone to insult those who are different from us, or seek to pathologically convert them to 'our' way of seeing things, among other effects.

I'm wondering how the effects of relative social isolation during the pandemic exacerbates our tendencies to derogate others for their differences. I see this as a bit of a positive feedback loop, that the further we are into the pandemic, the more we are reminded of death, but also the more we are required (now by law, at least in Alberta and Canada) to engage in social distancing and even isolation. The longer we isolate, the more we gravitate towards our own worldviews

or strongly held beliefs as that source of comfort. Some may look for comfort in dangerous (online) social groups (e.g., incel groups on Reddit, or online eating disorder groups, etc.).

– Kim Edmondson, MEd, secondary school teacher

We need to monitor our own emotional responses and help students with theirs. Try to become aware of what you are feeling & why (e.g., anxiety & fear from the news. Consider narrating your own cascading emotions to help your students wrestle with their own ([Garrett, 2017](#)).

Name the problem and give context. Move the discussion away from them as a person and toward the action and its context and effects. Make the student feel heard, but not excused from the behaviour—try not to assume the worst—but teach them about the effects of what they have said. Maybe, if we're lucky, we can shift people away from harmful views and reactions?!

Remind yourself and others about the value of tolerance and generosity as it relates to your worldview/culture (e.g., communities coming together, religious-related views like Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, famous philanthropists within your culture, etc.)

Consider carefully using humour in some situations. Don't belittle someone or use harmful stereotypes, but find ways to laugh. Laughter diffuses anxiety really well (which is why nervous laughter is a thing)



[Meme](#) by Tom Morello

Be careful not to overgeneralize a group. Following the wisdom of Kent den Heyer ([2018, p. 14](#)), I try to avoid “the” and replace with “some-but-not-all” (e.g., some-but-not-all people in Edmonton are hoarding toilet paper, some-but-not-all Italians are singing on balconies, etc.)

And last (but not least), **let’s take this opportunity to remind ourselves that we fear death because we love life.** So, let’s be good to each other and make every day count in our communities!

Suggestions for reading/viewing about COVID-19 from a TMT perspective:

- Greenberg, J. & Solomon, S. (2020, May 21). Coronavirus reminds you of death – and amplifies your core values, both bad and good. [The Conversation](#).
- Solomon, S., Harvell-Bowman, L., & Vail, K. (2020, June 5). [This mortal life: Covid-19, terror management theory \(TMT\), and existential concerns](#) [YouTube video].

(van Kessel, 2020)

15. Strategies to Mitigate Worldview Threat

CATHRYN VAN KESSEL

The Big Idea

Identifying the problem of worldview threat is important, but equally important is thinking about how we might mitigate at least the worst of it. Below are some strategies (and as the mobilization of this research continues, strategies may be added, so check back periodically!)

Strategy 1: Conceptualizing Worldview Threat

Conceptualize [worldview threat](#) (and associated self-esteem threat) when initially building classroom community, and remind each other during threatening situations. This strategy is the hope of anticipating a threatening situation as well as being metacognitive during.

Strategy 2: Remember Shared Values

Immediate before an anticipated threatening situation, prime

students with helpful shared values from the worldviews present in the classroom (e.g., kindness and grace). Importantly, though, this action requires tapping into helpful aspects that not only students might have [but also those of whomever you might be talking about.](#)

Potential Strategies

- Mention quotations from the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12) about gentleness and mercy, as well as sympathy for those who have been persecuted. Teachers could also engage with a Hadith from the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), such as “kindness is a mark of faith, and whoever is not kind has no faith” (Sahih Muslim).
- Prime students with what might boost their self-esteem (e.g., having students privately list things that they have done that they are proud of). [Self-esteem helps buffer our existential anxiety.](#)

Strategy 3: Start from a Distance

Start threatening conversations at a distance from the problem (e.g., the same issue somewhere else, or here but in the past) and then work your way toward talking about the problem today, here, with us.

Strategy 4: Use Humour

Use humour (carefully). Laughter can help us relieve all sorts of anxieties, but be careful not to derogate others or cause further worldview threat. [Sigmund Freud \(1905\)](#) argued that humour is a defence mechanism: “(Humour) scorns to withdraw the ideational content bearing the distressing affect from conscious attention as repression does, and thus surmounts the automatism of defence” (p. 169). [Neil Elgee \(2003\)](#) has written on humour as a defence against death, allowing us to release tension.

Suggested Readings for Further Study

van Kessel, C. (2020, December 5). *Considering the emotionality of antiracist education* [Webinar]. Alberta Teachers' Association Diversity, Equity & Human Rights Speaker Series, Edmonton, AB, Canada. <https://sched.co/fQaN>

van Kessel, C. (2020, October 7). [*Consider this: How terror management theory helps us understand the pandemic*](#). The Quad.

van Kessel, C., & Saleh, M. (2020). Fighting the plague: “Difficult” knowledge as sirens’ song in teacher education. *Journal of Curriculum Studies Research*, 2(2), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.46303/jcsr.2020.7>

(Created by C. van Kessel, 2021)

16. Worldview Threat and the Climate Crisis

Worldview Threat and the Climate Crisis

CATHRYN VAN KESSEL

It is urgent that educators in social studies and science (among other disciplines) consider the ethical imperative of teaching the climate crisis—the future is at stake. From the perspective of **terror management theory** (TMT), a barrier to teaching this contentious topic effectively is **existential threat**.

Through the lens of TMT it becomes clear that climate catastrophe is an understandably fraught topic as it can serve as a reminder of death in two ways:

1. such discussions can elicit not only **mortality salience** from considering the necrocene produced by climate catastrophe
2. such discussions produce existential anxiety arising from [worldview threat](#). This threat can occur when Western assumptions are called into question as well as when there is disagreement between those with any worldviews that differ.

For a summary of relevant aspects of TMT in the context of teaching of the climate crisis, as well as specific strategies to help manage this situation (providing conceptual tools, narrating cascading emotions, carefully using humor to diffuse anxiety, employing language and phrasing that does not overgeneralize divergent groups, and priming ideas of tolerance and even nurturance of difference), see this open-access article:

van Kessel, C. (2020). Teaching the climate crisis: Existential considerations. *Journal of Curriculum Studies Research*, 2(1), 129–145. <https://doi.org/10.46303/jcsr.02.01.8>

For an in-depth look at climate anxiety, check out Panu Pikhala's report for [Mental Health Finland](#),

as well as Pikhala's [Hope and Action Project](#) with teachers, including this [list of emotional tasks for classroom use](#)! (Please note that Google translate does a decent job of the website if you don't read Finnish)

PART V

TEACHING AS IMMORTALITY

The Big Idea

Teaching as a profession can be an immortality project, a form of compensation to help resolve a certain kind of **existential terror**.



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You can view it online here: <https://openeducationalberta.ca/grimeducator/?p=96>



Image credit: [anaterate](#)

Ultimately, self-esteem and maintaining faith in a cultural worldview serve to alleviate the fear of inevitable death by providing people with a sense of life-continuity, or immortality, which can be literal or symbolic. The **TMT** sense of self-esteem (not to be confused with a more commonplace understanding) does not have the endgame of simply feeling good about yourself; rather, it is specifically the feelings of having a meaningful, significant existence. This self-esteem is linked to our literal and symbolic immortality. Literal immortality refers to the story

a culture tells the group about what happens after death, which for most of the world's religions involves some form of existence in the afterlife. There are non-religious understandings as well, such as taking comfort in the recycling of the atoms and energy that make up our bodies per the First Law of Thermodynamics. Symbolic immortality refers to symbolic extensions of the self through lifelong achievements (e.g., books, works of art, children) that will live on in the culture after physical death.

The pursuit of **self-esteem** through teaching is a symbolic immortality project when the terror of individual death is alleviated by the teacher's ability to pass along particular values and attitudes to their students; i.e., teachers can reproduce certain versions of themselves through schooling (van Kessel & Burke, 2018). Along this line, teachers can see their students similar to how they might see their children. Teachers-as-quasi-parents can



Image credit: Andy Scott

bequeath their ideas and commitments as part of their legacy to the next generation. The profession has long been fundamentally about creating legacies, illustrated by the common practice of teachers referring to their students as their own: “my kids” or “our kids.”



Photo credit: [Ken Treloar](#)

It is vital for us to question the goal of recreating the self in education. This framing is not to downplay that teachers can make a difference in the students' lives; rather, the call is to be thoughtful about our motivations and the potential harmful (albeit unintended) consequences. With teaching as an immortality project, both students' and teachers' lives are on the line. Because teaching is at least partly about delaying the terror of individual death, there is a danger of overly investing in molding

students in a very particular way, thus foreclosing educational opportunities.

The danger lies in failing to listen to our students and their particular needs and desires. Within teaching is a semblance of a saviour-complex (Burke & Segall, 2015) which can mean that we impose our will upon our students. To be clear, people (including teachers) should do whatever they can to work toward their preferred future for society, but it is folly to place expectations on an individual teacher to change the world singlehandedly. Teachers need to consider what their theory of change is—the mechanisms by which societies have changed, and will continue to—and then operate within that framework. Furthermore, there is a danger to psychological well-being when teachers' professional **self-esteem** is contingent upon students mimicking teachers' beliefs and actions. If teachers do not receive the attention from their students and colleagues as expected, their self-esteem is threatened due to **mortality salience**. Creating teacher legacies helps teachers deal with death, even if they do not know that death is a motivating force, but the cost is that we create a situation with cosmic stakes. Although teachers can begin their careers brimming with a moral purpose that is construed as socially meaningful, they can burn out and sink into despair as they feel inconsequential. We need to challenge the teacher-as-saviour model, which involves interrogating the existential elements that underlie it.

Suggested Readings for further study

Burke, K. J., & Segall, A. (2015). Teaching as Jesus making: The hidden curriculum of Christ in schooling, *Teachers College Record*, 117(3), 1–27.

van Kessel, C., & Burke, K. (2018). Teaching as immortality project: Positing weakness in response to terror. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 52(2), 216-229. doi:10.1111/1467-9752.12301

(Created by C. van Kessel, 2018)

PART VI

ADDITIONAL BECKER AND TMT RESOURCES

Other Resources

[The Ernest Becker Foundation](#) has a lot of excellent information about Ernest Becker as well as Terror Management Theory.

[The Order of the Good Death](#) has a list of picture books for young children about death.

Podcasts where Cathryn van Kessel talks about evil and TMT

Ng-A-Fook, N. (2020, April 28). Episode 6: Cathryn van Kessel. *Fooknconversation: Talking About “Academicky” Stuff* [Podcast]. <https://www.fooknconversation.com/podcast/episode-06-cathryn-van-kessel/>

CTL Podcast. (2020, March 27). Episode 14: Addressing racism in the classroom. *Teaching Plus* [Podcast]. https://www.podomatic.com/podcasts/teachingplus/episodes/2020-03-27T15_08_51-07_00

Couillard, J. (2020, February). 017: Interview with Dr. Cathryn van Kessel (aka Dr Evil). *Powerful* [Podcast].
<https://www.jeffcouillard.com/2020/02/06/017-dr-evil-cathryn-van-kessel/>

Shane. (2019, May 23). Conversation 96: That strange dance. Ed: *Conversations about the Teaching Life* [Podcast].
<https://theedpodcast.podbean.com/e/conversation-96-cathryn-van-kessel-that-strange-dance/>

17. Glossary of Key Becker & TMT Terms

ANDY SCOTT

Anxiety buffering hypothesis: Self-esteem helps people handle anxiety. Most importantly for terror management theory, it buffers us against the anxiety that arises from the knowledge that we will one day die.

Causa sui project: The purpose that a person assigns to him or herself that allows them to make sense of their existence and mortality. Serves as a vessel for our personalized immortalization by creating something of ourselves that we believe will last beyond our life on earth. Put simply, it is our immortality project. For educators, teaching can be an immortality project in both helpful and harmful ways.

Cultural worldview: A set of beliefs that we use to explain the nature of our reality. These beliefs endow our lives with meaning, give guidelines by which to live a valuable life, and promise some form death transcendence (i.e., immortality). People can hold several interconnected worldviews simultaneously (e.g., one can be a Christian, a Canadian, and an educator all at once).

Character (armor/defense): Refers to the identity we develop throughout our lives that is made up of one or more interconnected *cultural worldviews* to which we prescribe. Our character armor is constructed by piecing together various protective beliefs which serve to shield us from the anxiety that comes with knowing that we are destined to die.

- Example: A person's character shield could consist of various overlapping identity components. One could identify as

Canadian, Buddhist, Asian, an Academic, and many other things that would combine to provide personal meaning and a feeling of immortality.

Death thought accessibility (DTA) hypothesis: Individuals keep thoughts of death out of awareness by adopting and adhering to self-esteem and immortality yielding cultural worldviews. When these worldviews are threatened, they are unable to prevent death related thoughts from creeping back toward consciousness.

Dehumanization: The process of viewing a person or group of people as less than fully human. People often justify harmful actions directed toward others by dehumanizing them because it diminishes the guilt that comes with hurting a fellow human.

- Example: Jews were often referred to by the Nazi Party as cockroaches and rats which helped to make killing more palatable to those carrying it out. Likewise, Nazi soldiers were often portrayed as half-man and half-demon by the Allied powers.

Ernest Becker: Was a cultural anthropologist whose Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Denial of Death* (1973), inspired the development of *terror management theory* within the field of social psychology. He is known for his claim that much of human culture and behavior is directed toward denying the fact of our mortal fate.

Evil (Becker's definition of): According to Becker, humans perceive that which opposes our vitality or continued existence as evil. Evil can take the form of either direct threats to our physical, bodily self or as threats to our symbolic self and the cultural structures that support it. When we are threatened by an opposing individual or worldview, we tend to lash out against the threat which we perceive as evil, thus becoming a source of evil ourselves. Hence, Becker claimed that evil often paradoxically results from human attempts to eliminate evil.

Existential: Relating to existence; concerned with human existence as it is experienced by humans. Existential is an adjective used to denote a conceptual link to experiential existence. Existential concerns are ones involving existence such as mortality, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness.

Existential anxiety or Dread or Terror: Most commonly these terms refer to the anxiety and fear that comes with knowing that we will eventually die. Existential anxiety can also refer more broadly to the unease that accompanies thinking about any potentially unpleasant aspect of our existence including meaninglessness, mortality, isolation, and freedom and responsibility.

Existentialism: A branch of philosophy that proposes that we humans must create our own meaning in life. Or, in Jean-Paul Sartre's famous words, "existence precedes essence." That is, we are born into a meaningless world in which we must fashion our own meaning in the face of the absurdity of the world and our own inescapable death. Because, the world is devoid of any inherent meaning, existentialism holds that we are entirely free and, therefore, personally responsible for making our own meaning in life.

Existential psychology: A field of psychology that concerns itself with the study of how humans deal with their experienced existence which entails a confrontation with meaninglessness, mortality, isolation, and freedom and responsibility.

Existential threat: An existential threat is a threat to existence (e.g., *mortality salience*) and sometimes refers further to threats to the psychological constructs that help us to make sense of our existence as simultaneously physical and symbolic beings.

Fetishization (or Partialization): For Becker, fetishization is a psychological strategy that involves narrowing our conception of oneself and the world to limited dimensions that afford well-defined, and attainable ways to act in a valued manner. Because

fetishes provide a stable and manageable way to attain personal significance (i.e., *self-esteem*), we invest excessively in these constructs and their symbolic representations and, thus, come to rely on them unduly to make sense of our world.

- Example: Someone who has fetishized their country and its symbols might come to believe that the country's flag is a sacred object that is directly representative of the nation and, thus, that anyone who burns it should be thrown in jail or stripped of their citizenship.

Fetishization of evil: Occurs when we locate evil (i.e., threats to life) to a single, recognizable and manageable source that can then be blamed for our suffering. The fetishization of evil occurs when we take all that threatens our physical and symbolic selves, and confine it to a person, group of people, or an ideology and label that entity or group as evil; we think that if only it wasn't for them, life would be good and then seek to dispose of that entity. It is the process of channeling the overwhelming dread of death into smaller terrors and then seek to remove them from our lives. We convince ourselves that if we could only eliminate that one thing, we would then be freed of all suffering and evil.

- Example: The Nazi Party's final solution which sought to eliminate all Jews because they were seen to be the ultimate source of Germany's problems.
- **Scapegoating:** Similarly to fetishizing evil, the process of scapegoating entails blaming a person/group. Fetishizing evil takes this idea further. Not only is a single person or group blamed for a perceived (and simplified) problem, but also there is a call for the elimination of that person or group. For example, blaming immigrants for a struggling economy is scapegoating, while calling for deporting (or worse) immigrants is fetishizing evil.

For more information see our [page on the fetishization of evil](#).

Heroism: Is the struggle to win out against *evil* by developing and utilizing our talents and personality in such a way that we meaningfully contribute to a culture and its ability to transcend death and suffering. We aim to heroically triumph over both our own personal death and the death of our culture through which we hope to live on. (See also *causa sui project*.)

Individuality-within-finitude: Ernest Becker used this phrase to refer to the human condition: we are a self-aware consciousness that seems to stand out from nature, yet we are clearly confined to a natural body that is doomed to die and decay. In other words, we are both a symbolic self and an animal body at the same time. Because of this unpleasant paradox, we spend a lot of time trying to symbolically separate ourselves from our fragile bodies.

Meaninglessness/Absurdity/Thrownness: These are terms used, somewhat interchangeably, in *existentialism* to describe the fact that humans are born into a world devoid of meaning and forced to face this reality and our inevitable deaths. We are meaning seeking animals who have been thrown into the therefore absurd position of living in a world that is indifferent and often hostile towards us.

Mortality salience: The state of having death on your mind. When we say mortality is salient, it means that one has been reminded of death.

Mortality salience (MS) hypothesis: posits that *mortality salience* (i.e., a death reminder) increases people's motivation to defend and uphold their existentially protective *cultural worldviews* as well as seek anxiety-buffering *self-esteem* through culturally endorsed pursuits. Put simply, if cultural worldviews and the self-esteem extracted from them function to reduce the terror of mortality, then death reminders should increase the necessity for and defense of these psychologically protective structures. Hundreds of terror management studies have shown that exposing

individuals to death reminders causes higher levels of *worldview defense* and *self-esteem* striving.

Proximal/Distal defenses: Proximal defenses are behaviors aimed at avoiding dying and pushing death thoughts out of conscious awareness (e.g., thought-suppression) while distal defenses serve to build or protect one's existentially buffering *self-esteem* and the *cultural worldviews* through which it is attained (e.g., worldview defense).

Self-esteem: The feeling that one is a valuable member of a meaningful world. When we live up to the values and standards of our culture, we gain self-esteem that helps protect us from our anxiety about death and serves as a measure of our eligibility for literal or symbolic immortality.

Symbolic immortality: The sense or belief that we are connected to something that has lasting permanence (e.g., a country, a family, a school, a project like a book, etc.,) and that a piece of ourselves will live on through that culture or object via our contributions to it.

Literal immortality: The sense or belief that when our physical bodies die, we, or our immortal souls, really live on either here on earth or somewhere else (e.g., we are reincarnated in another form; we go to heaven).

Survival: The actual avoidance of death. Throughout human history, we have sought to delay or altogether dodge death using magical and scientific methods. This dream of deathlessness endures today in the form of freezing corpses in the hopes of reanimating them at a later date, in our attempts to cure ageing, and in our motivation to upload our minds to undying computers.

Terror management theory (TMT): Is a subfield of social psychology that is derived from *existentialism* and the works of Ernest Becker. TMT posits that our awareness of death conflicts with our evolved desire to live and that this creates the potential

for debilitating existential anxiety (i.e., “terror”). Furthermore, it proposes that humans have attempted to psychologically resolve the problem of death by inventing and sustaining self-esteem-yielding cultural worldviews that help to manage this anxiety. These cultural systems enable people to curtail death related anxiety by providing hope for immortality. According to TMT, immortality can be literal, such as a belief in an afterlife (e.g., heaven). However, we can also attain symbolic immortality through a cultural system (e.g., one’s country) which allows its adherents to construe themselves as valuable members whose memory and contributions will persist posthumously through the permanency of that culture or the objects that it fosters.

Transference (Becker’s definition of): Is a form of *fetishization* that entails the psychologically comforting tendency to see authority figures as protective parents. We elevate our leaders and cultural heroes to a level at which they seem invulnerable to the concerns of us mere mortals and then lean on them for protection from our fears and insecurities. We can then become *heroic* by simply living up to the commands and expectations that the transference object has prescribed. In this sense, we unquestioningly adopt their *causa sui project* as our own which removes the anxiety provoking need to fashion meaning and purpose in life for ourselves.

The twin ontological motives: Humans are driven by two opposing existential motives: they are 1) the motive to stick out from the masses and become an individual that is special, and 2) to fit in and feel securely embedded in a culture. This tension leads to the sense that if we become too much of an individual, we might lose the existential protection derived from our cultural worldview; when one sticks out from their culture too much, he or she experiences guilt that often causes a retreat back into the safety of cultural conformity.

The vital lie: Ernest Becker referred to *character* as a vital lie because it is a necessary but illusory psychological construct that

allows us to deny our mortality and avoid the resultant debilitating anxiety.

Worldview defense: When our *cultural worldviews* are threatened (see *worldview threat*), we react defensively against the entity that threatens them in order to reinstate and reaffirm their validity and ability to protect us from death anxiety. In response to these threats, we often engage in compensatory reactions (especially if *mortality is salient*) which can be categorized into the following forms of *worldview defense* :

- **Derogation:** The belittling of others who espouse a different worldview. If we are able to dismiss an opposing view, we thereby dismiss the validity of their worldview in relation to our own.
- **Assimilation:** Involves attempts towards converting worldview-opposing others to our own system of belief.
- **Accommodation:** Modifying one's own worldview to incorporate some aspects of the threatening worldview. This is the least destructive of the four worldview threat defense strategies.
- **Annihilation:** The most extreme example of a defense against worldview threat, annihilation involves aggressive action aimed at killing or injuring members of the threatening worldview.

Worldview threat: Occurs when the beliefs one creates to explain the nature of reality (i.e., *cultural worldviews*) to oneself are called into question, most often by a competing belief system of some Other. Because worldview threat weakens our psychological defenses against the awareness of our mortality, we often enact compensatory behaviours against competing worldviews (see *worldview defense*).

(Created by Andy Scott, 2018)

18. Becker, TMT, and Existentialist Video Resources

CATHRYN VAN KESSEL

Check out these videos to learn more about Ernest Becker and terror management theory, as well as other existential ponderings!



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<https://openeducationalberta.ca/grimeducator/?p=102>

Mother Forkin' Morals with Todd May: Existentialism

Dr. Todd May, Professor of Philosophy explains existentialism and existential crises in relation to the TV show, *The Good Place* (4:11).



A YouTube element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://openeducationalberta.ca/grimeducator/?p=102>

Speculations on Ahuman Existentialism: Educational (Im)possibilities with Cathryn van Kessel

In the context of climate catastrophe, homo sapiens are called upon to face their precarious situation. Given that human animals experience precarity in highly different ways from each other and that other species are also facing extinction, we ought to consider more helpful (or, at a minimum, less harmful) ways of existing on the planet. One aspect of this task is to decentre assumptions of human exceptionalism and reduce harmful human defensive compensatory reactions—to consider human creatureliness and limitedness through a monstrous hybrid of existentialist thought and ahuman approaches mutated from fields such as philosophy and social psychology, among others.

<https://www.lecturesonahumanpedagogy.com/video-archive/sept27-cathryn-van-kessel-speculations-on-ahuman-existentialism-educational-impossibilities>



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<https://openeducationalberta.ca/grimeducator/?p=102>

The Philosophy of Darth Vader

Wisecrack summarizes Becker and relates his ideas to Darth Vader (12:30).



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<https://openeducationalberta.ca/grimeducator/?p=102>

Existential Bummer

How do we life live, knowing that we will die (2:53)?



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<https://openeducationalberta.ca/grimeducator/?p=102>

Grave Matters lecture by Sheldon Solomon

Lecture by Sheldon Solomon, PhD, Professor of psychology at Skidmore College and co-author of *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (1:26:16).



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<https://openeducationalberta.ca/grimeducator/?p=102>

4 stories we tell ourselves about death

In this TED talk, Stephen Cave talks about ways we strive for symbolic and literal immortality (15:53).



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<https://openeducationalberta.ca/grimeducator/?p=102>

Think you can cheat death by eating and living well?
In this darkly funny video, College Humor shows us how
everything will kill us (2:57).



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<https://openeducationalberta.ca/grimeducator/?p=102>

The Death Problem



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<https://openeducationalberta.ca/grimeducator/?p=102>

Stephen Cave lecture

Whether physically, spiritually or perhaps through a legacy, philosopher Stephen Cave discusses how the relentless quest to live forever has influenced and shaped civilization since the dawn of humankind (51:42).



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<https://openeducationalberta.ca/grimeducator/?p=102>

Academy of Ideas–Ernest Becker and heroism

In this lecture The Academy of Ideas investigates what Ernest Becker called the universal urge to heroism. We look at the different ways Becker proposed individuals strive for heroism, and introduce what he called genuine heroism (9:23).

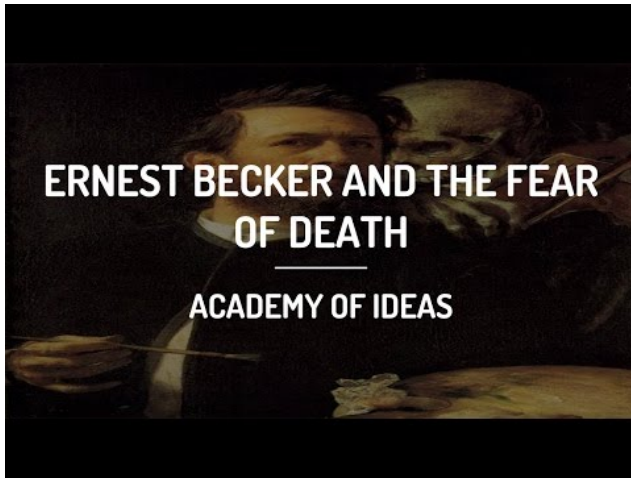


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The Human Condition

Jason Silva on the Human Condition, inspired by Ernest Becker (2:41).



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<https://openeducationalberta.ca/grimeducator/?p=102>

Ernest Becker and the Death Problem

In this lecture The Academy of Ideas looks at the 20th century cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker's ideas regarding how the fear of death haunts the human being, shaping one's experience of reality. We look at how Becker thought individuals alleviate this fear by striving to live meaningful and significant lives (8:49).