

# METHOD

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## ERNEST BECKER AND BERNARD LONERGAN: AN INITIAL MEETING

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CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGIST ERNEST BECKER won a Pulitzer Prize for his 1973 work, *The Denial of Death*.<sup>1</sup> I view *The Denial of Death* as a work that beckons its readers to be authentic. The same might be said of philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan's 1957 work, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* and his 1972 work, *Method in Theology*. This commonality alone would be a suitable reason for putting these works into contact, but there are in fact many other points of overlap. Comparing and contrasting their views on such points, including on what it means to be authentic, proves surprising and fruitful. It is surprising in that there is often an initial concurrence between Becker and Lonergan; it is fruitful in that their ideas come into sharper focus through the exercise. It is the act of comparing and contrasting itself that interests me in what follows, not defending either Becker's or Lonergan's views. My subtitle, "An Initial Meeting," is meant to convey that point – as well to convey that I will only be appealing to *The Denial of Death*, *Insight*, and *Method in Theology*. To consider other works by Becker and Lonergan would be to undertake a much lengthier endeavour.

Whether Becker knew of Lonergan is something I cannot pronounce upon. In the opposite direction, Lonergan clearly knew of Becker, for he refers to his work on two occasions. In a footnote in *Method in Theology*, Lonergan refers to a span of pages from Becker's 1968 work, *The Structure of Evil*; the span covers a section entitled, "A Post-Freudian View of the Hu-

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<sup>1</sup>To be specific, Becker won the 1974 Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction. For a biography of Becker, see Sally A. Kenel, *Mortal Gods: Ernest Becker and Fundamental Theology* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988), 9-27.

man Personality."<sup>2</sup> Becker makes some contentions in this section that are foundational in *The Denial of Death*. Therefore, despite the fact that *Method in Theology* appeared a year before *The Denial of Death*, Lonergan was exposed to some ideas from that work while writing *Method in Theology*. In a footnote in the 1980 article, "Prolegomena to the Study of the Emerging Religious Consciousness of Our Time," Lonergan refers to *The Denial of Death* as a whole.<sup>3</sup> I will refrain from analyzing the context of these references; I mention them only to highlight the fact that Lonergan found sufficient common ground with Becker to refer to his work. At the same time, the restriction of these references to footnotes, as well as the absence of additional references, indicates cautiousness in Lonergan's appropriation of Becker.<sup>4</sup>

My approach in what follows will be to first supply an overview of *The Denial of Death*. My overview will not be exhaustive; it will focus on areas of overlap with *Insight* and *Method in Theology*.<sup>5</sup> I will then explore Lonergan's views in those areas, pointing out compatibility and incompatibility with Becker's views.

### 1. AN OVERVIEW OF ERNEST BECKER'S *THE DENIAL OF DEATH*

Becker obtained a Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology at Syracuse University in 1960 and went on to teach at institutions in the United States and Canada. He authored nine books over the course of his life. *The Denial of Death*, pub-

<sup>2</sup>Lonergan's reference reads, Ernest Becker, *The Structure of Evil* (New York: G. Braziller, 1968), 154-66. See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 284n8.

<sup>3</sup>The reference appears in a footnote affixed to this statement: "Freud's mechanist assumptions have been exorcised by various types of hermeneutic." See Bernard Lonergan, "Prolegomena to the Study of the Emerging Religious Consciousness of Our Time," in *A Third Collection: Papers*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), 65n16.

<sup>4</sup>Lonergan scholars have also found it worthwhile to engage Becker – with reservations. For example, see Robert M. Doran, *Psychic Conversion and Theological Foundations*, 2nd ed. (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2006), 38n47, 50, 51n94, 93n93, 130, 180; Glenn Hughes, *Transcendence and History: The Search for Ultimacy from Ancient Societies to Postmodernity* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 202-13.

<sup>5</sup>I have chosen not to rely on secondary sources in composing my overview of *The Denial of Death*. Although my decision has the benefit of keeping the length of the present endeavour manageable, there is also a certain risk involved in offering a personal overview. As Jarvis Streeter explains, "While Becker was a brilliant intuitive thinker, his presentation of his theories is often diffuse, lacking in systematic clarity, thereby making certain and clear interpretation of aspects of his overall perspective difficult." Jarvis Streeter, *Human Nature, Human Evil, and Religion: Ernest Becker and Christian Theology* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2009), xiii.