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## **Rousseau and Becker on the problem of recognition: A comparative analysis.**

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### **Abstract**

This article identifies the main parallels that exist between Rousseau and Becker on recognition. Rousseau and Becker argue that people are motivated by a desire to achieve recognition from others. Their work explains how the craving for recognition contributes to the common good, but they also address the serious problems that can arise. Whilst the human striving for recognition is often beneficial for society, their work describes the devastating consequences that accompany this existential desire. The article begins by outlining their work on *amour-propre* (Rousseau) and heroism (Becker) before tracing the similarities and differences between their work in relation to restricting destructive forms of behaviour. The overall aim of this comparative analysis is to highlight the connections that exist between Rousseau and Becker and to show how Becker's insights concerning mortality awareness and heroism provide an important contribution to contemporary scholarship on self-worth and recognition.

### **Keywords**

Rousseau, Becker, morality awareness, amour-propre, heroism, violence

### **Introduction**

The philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau ([1755] 1999) analysed the psychological origins of inequality. Rousseau was the first philosopher to fully examine the importance of recognition (Neuhouser, 2010) and the need to be positively valued by others is central to his work (Rousseau, 1979, 1999, 2000). The cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker (1971a, 1971b, 1975, 1997) also understood the importance of social distinctions and recognition. How people view themselves and how they believe they are perceived by others is essential to his work on death denial, heroism and symbolic immortality. Rousseau and Becker were both interested in the question of human motivation. This article traces the main parallels that exist between Rousseau and Becker on self-worth and recognition. Whilst both viewed the desire to achieve recognition to be beneficial for society, their work also examined the devastating consequences that accompany this existential craving. After outlining their respective positions, I move on to address the possibilities Rousseau and Becker identified for securing less destructive forms of recognition. This part of the article attends to the similarities and differences between their work in relation to taming and restricting destructive behaviour. Despite the connections that exist between Becker and Rousseau, Becker's work is absent from much contemporary scholarship on recognition (i.e. Honneth, 1996, 2007, 2012, 2021; McBride, 2013; O'Neill; Schmidt am Busch and Zurn, 2010; Smith, 2012). This omission is surprising as his psychoanalytic approach offers an original and important contribution to the philosophy of recognition.

## An uncanny intuition

In 'The Lost Science of Man' (1971a) and 'Escape from Evil' (1975) Becker provides a critical and occasionally sympathetic account of Rousseau's 'Discourse upon the Origin and Foundation of the Inequality Among Men' (1999). For Becker, Rousseau had an 'uncanny intuition of what was significant' (1975: 38) but firmly believed his idea of the 'state of nature' was 'fanciful' and unable to fully grasp the human condition (1975: 43). Rousseau famously argued that human beings have become corrupted by society:

So long as men were content with their rustic huts, so long as they confined themselves to sewing their clothes of skins with thorns or fish bones, to adorning themselves with feathers and shells, to painting their bodies different colors, to perfecting or embellishing their bows and arrows, to carving a few fishing canoes or a few crude musical instruments with sharp stones; In a word, so long as they applied themselves only to tasks a single individual could perform, and to arts that did not require the collaboration of several hands, they lived free, healthy, good, and happy as far as they could by their nature be, and continued to enjoy the gentleness of independent dealings with one another; but the moment one man needed the help of another; as soon as it was found to be useful for one to have provisions for two, equality disappeared, property appeared, work became necessary, and the vast forests were changed into smiling fields, that had to be watered with the sweat of men, and where slavery and misery were soon seen to sprout and grow together with the harvests. (Rousseau, 1999: 167)

Rousseau argued that the 'first step' towards inequality is also the first step towards vice, vanity, scorn, envy and shame. As the above quotation demonstrates, once these 'preferences' emerged they proved 'fatal to happiness and innocence' (1999: 166). Becker (1975) remained unconvinced by Rousseau's analysis and maintained there was never a time in human history where people lived with such uncorrupted innocence. Becker thought we should move beyond this form of utopian theory. People have never been free from their nature. As Brown argued, 'if the slave is somehow in love with his own chains' (1959: 242) then there is a deeper and more profound psychological question that needs to be addressed. Drawing on insights from psychoanalysis, especially the work of Otto Rank (1998), Norman Brown (1959) and Erich Fromm (1969), Becker examined how human beings create their own psychological prisons. He showed how we carry within ourselves 'the bondage' we need 'in order to continue to live' (1975: 43). According to Becker, the naïve assumptions of Rousseau provide a distorted and unrealistic view of human nature. Human beings have never been free in the sense that Rousseau postulated, and Becker's oeuvre provides a powerful and comprehensive critique of this position. Nevertheless, as Becker (1975) notes, we should not retreat too hastily from Rousseau's work as he also provided one of the first comprehensive psychological explanations of inequality. Rousseau examined the personal distinctions people use to judge themselves and others. Echoing Rousseau, Becker provides a pertinent example to show how personal qualities create distinctions of power and status:

Skilled hunters and warriors could actually display these special powers in the form of trophies and ornamental badges of merit. The scalps of the slain enemies and the teeth, feathers, and other ornaments were often loaded with magical power and served as protection...The elaborate decorations of the warrior and hunter were not aimed to make him beautiful, but to show off his skill and courage and so inspired fear and respect. This gave him automatic social distinction; by wearing the tokens of his achievements, the visible memories of his bravery and excellence, he could flaunt his superiority in the eyes of everyone who couldn't make similar displays. (1975: 41)

Human beings create social distinctions to view and judge others and Rousseau (1999) is rightfully credited by Becker for making a significant contribution to understanding the psychological causes of social inequality. Nevertheless, whilst Becker does note the importance of Rousseau's analysis, he failed to examine the subtle complexity of Rousseau's work on recognition. This is unfortunate as there are similarities between their accounts of this existential desire. Although both authors understood how the search for recognition is often beneficial for society, they also show how this striving is responsible for bringing untold suffering into the world. In addition to this, their proposed solutions for countering the problems caused are similar and do not rest on the suppression of either *amour-propre* (Rousseau) or heroism (Becker). Before examining Becker's theory in more detail, I will first turn my attention to Rousseau's sophisticated account of *amour-propre*.

## Amour-propre and recognition

Rousseau's position on social distinctions is fully addressed in his discussion of *amour-propre*, which is defined as a form of self-love. Rousseau (1999) makes a useful distinction between *amour-propre* and *amour de soi-meme*. *Amour de soi-meme* is concerned with self-preservation. To protect ourselves we need

to find shelter, food, water and clothes. We need to look after our body by having time to exercise, rest, and sleep. The satisfaction of these needs does not depend on how well other people have managed to protect themselves. However, if the house I live in, the clothes I wear, the food I eat, the exercise I enjoy have been chosen to achieve the admiration of others, then this is an example of *amour-propre*. Rather than being concerned with self-protection, *amour-propre* is concerned with the judgments of others. Rousseau notes the importance of not confusing these two forms of self-love. These are 'two very different passions in their nature and their effects'. *Amour de soi-meme* 'is a natural sentiment which inclines every animal to attend to its own self-preservation' whereas the vanity of *amour-propre* 'inclines every individual to set greater store by himself than by anyone else, inspires men with all the evils they do to one another, and is the genuine source of honor' (Rousseau, 1999: 218). Individuals can think highly of themselves as they believe they have a position that is valued and admired.

Unlike *amour de soi-meme*, *amour-propre* is inherently social. It connects us to the opinion of other people. This explains why Rousseau (1999) describes *amour-propre* as artificial (see Neuhouser, 2008). As stated above, *amour de soi-meme* is a 'natural sentiment'. All human beings need to eat, drink, sleep, rest, find shelter and clothing, regardless of the kind of society they inhabit. This form of self-love is therefore seen as a natural rather than social phenomena. Rousseau describes *amour-propre* as artificial to highlight how esteemed values reflect and maintain the social arrangements of their society. There will always be ways to gain recognition from others, but how recognition is achieved is highly varied and contingent. Both the natural and artificial forms of self-love are given equal status by Rousseau (Neuhouser, 2008) and are necessary for the physical and psychological survival of the self.

#### *The dangers of Amour-propre*

As soon as men had begun to appreciate one another and the idea of consideration had taken shape in their mind, everyone claimed a right to it, and one could no longer deprive anyone of it with impunity. From here arose the first duties of civility even among savages, and from it any intentional wrong became an affront because, together with the harm resulting from the injury, the offended party saw in it contempt for his person, often more unbearable than the harm itself. Thus everyone punishing the contempt shown him in a manner proportionate to the stock he set by himself, vengeance became terrible, and men bloodthirsty and cruel. (Rousseau, 1999: 166)

Rousseau reasoned that 'sociable man' craves recognition from others – we are 'forever asking of others what we are, without ever daring to ask it of ourselves' (1999: 187). When individuals overly rely on the perceived judgements of others, when 'the sentiment of his own existence' (1999: 187) is solely drawn from external preferences, there are dangers that occur. As Rousseau explained, people can become 'cruel' and 'bloodthirsty' and punish the contempt they feel from others. Whilst not an essential feature of *amour-propre*, combative passions are the principal cause of violence, conflict and malice. This disposition is dangerous as the competitive craving for recognition can lead individuals to constantly imagine how they are perceived. Are they seen as a success or a failure? Is their work taken for granted by others? This is an uncertain, insecure, and ongoing process that serves to create further frustrations and conflicts. *Amour-propre* goes askew when people become preoccupied with the perception of others. Rousseau described this as a form of enslavement and explains why some people can only 'be happy and satisfied with themselves on the testimony of others' (1999: 187). People who live 'outside' of themselves sacrifice their own freedom by internalising and valuing the judgements of others. As Rousseau stated, when everything is 'reduced to appearances, everything becomes factitious' (1999: 187).

Living a life that is preoccupied with gaining the approval of others involves feelings of respect and *disrespect*. If one does not feel they have not been accorded the accolade they deserve, that they have been disrespected and not gained appropriate recognition, there can be disastrous consequences. As Neuhouser has noted, *amour-propre* that has gone awry often produces vice:

In this context, vice is understood as a callous disregard for the sufferings of others or, in its more pernicious forms, an inclination to harm others or to take delight in their misfortunes. Defined in this way, vice requires a suppression of our natural pity...if doing well for oneself is conceived as doing better than others, then it is possible to promote one's own well-being by doing harm to those with whom one compares oneself. Once I measure my own standing in relation to others', I can further my standing either by improving my own lot or by worsening yours. (Neuhouser, 2010: 27-28)

The ferocious desire for recognition is responsible for conflict and human misery. Inflamed *amour-propre* can be all-consuming and suppress the pity that people have for others. Rousseau's discussion of compassion (1979, 1999) is important as this reveals how strong the passions of *amour-propre* can become.

Rousseau posited that human beings are naturally sensitive to the pain of others. This sensitivity works to reduce or tame peoples selfish desire to solely focus on their own well-being. In Rousseau's words:

It is pity that carries us without reflection to the assistance of those we see suffer...pity that will keep any sturdy savage from robbing a weak child or an infirm old man of his hard-won subsistence...pity that...inspires in all Men this other maxim of natural goodness...*Do your good with the least possible harm to others.* (1999: 154)

Nevertheless, *amour-propre* is protected so passionately that the craving for recognition can overcome and erase the compassion we naturally feel towards others. The results of *amour-propre* can be pernicious, but the desire to feel a sense of superiority is not necessarily a feature of *amour-propre*. Rousseau believed it was possible to encourage more educated and life affirming forms of recognition. For example, doing something to the best of your ability and being better than others at 'wrestling', 'running' or 'games of skill' (Rousseau, 1979: 339), is fundamentally different from the destructive desire to feel superior to others. A person can strive to be 'the most competent at working' to gain esteem and prestige without a malicious desire to feel superior to their colleagues.

#### Less destructive alternatives

Rousseau advocated restraining the deleterious effects of *amour-propre* by restructuring social institutions (2000) and promoting educational reform (1979). *Amour-propre* can produce vice and cruelty, but it is also responsible for compassionate loving relationships and morality. The attempt to eliminate *amour-propre* would be an attack on what makes life meaningful and worthwhile. It is true that the 'repulsive' passions of *amour-propre* can be vengeful and evil, but there are also *amour-propre*'s 'sweet passions' that nourish 'goodness', 'commiseration' and 'beneficence' (Rousseau, 1979: 223). Rousseau's proposed solutions aim to limit envy and hate and strengthen *amour-propre*'s 'attractive' passions (Dent 2008). To combat the darker 'irascible' desires, Rousseau believed it was necessary to limit the kinds of inequality that plague society. For example, people should be entitled to the same political rights and should not be permitted to enslave others (Rousseau, 2000). The desire for self-esteem should not be based on feelings of superiority. He suggests more practical ways to improve inequalities in wealth such as progressive taxation and restrictions on inheritance. Economic extremes need to be brought 'as near to each other as possible' so that no-one is 'poor enough to be forced to sell himself' (2000: 225). Institutions should be structured to ensure they offer non-destructive opportunities to gain recognition.

In addition to strengthening institutions, calming the competitive character of *amour-propre* requires educational reform. This is fully explored in Rousseau's *Emile* (1979), where the child is specifically taught in a way that minimises *amour-propre*'s dangerous passions. As discussed, the natural ability to pity others precedes the passions of *amour-propre*, so it is important to encourage children to empathise with the suffering of others and to imagine themselves in their place. Imagination enables people to empathise with the pain and suffering of others. Rousseau believed that education should reinforce a strong sense of compassion to counter the vindictive passions of *amour-propre*. Such desires can be tamed by showing how arbitrary someone's social standing is. If someone is more wealthy or powerful it does not *necessarily* mean they deserve their social position. Nor should it be assumed that such a person leads a more content or satisfied life (Rousseau, 1979). Rousseau shows how power and wealth are often accompanied by additional conflicts and insecurities that directly impact on personal well-being. The aim of *Emile*'s education is to protect him from being enslaved by the opinion of others:

[H]e will not worry about arbitrary evaluations whose only law is fashion or prejudice. He will have the pride to want to do everything he does well, even to do it better than another...But he will hardly seek advantages which are not clear in themselves and which need to be established by another's judgment, such as being more intelligent than someone else...still less will he seek those advantages which are not at all connected with one's person, such as being of nobler birth, being esteemed richer, more influential, or more respected, or making an impression by greater pomp. (1979: 339)

Institutional change and educational reform are required to combat the dangers of *amour-propre*. Children should be taught not to overestimate their social standing (Rousseau, 1979), and institutions should be reformed to encourage non-destructive ways to gain recognition (Rousseau, 2000). By reducing levels of inequality, Rousseau believed it is possible to create a society that would 'allow neither rich men nor beggars' (2000: 225). This would limit the power of *amour-propre*'s hateful passions (see Neuhaus, 2008). The proposed educational and social reforms would encourage people to gain a sense of recognition that promotes human well-being:

He will not precisely say to himself, 'I rejoice because they approve of me,' but rather, 'I rejoice because they approve of what I have done that is good. I rejoice that the people who honor me do themselves honor. So long as they judge so soundly, it will be a fine thing to obtain their esteem.' (Rousseau, 1979: 339)

Rousseau's work shows how the desire for self-esteem has both positive and negative consequences. It is important to impose limits on hateful behaviour, but the passions of *amour-propre* also bring to the world love, friendship, admiration, morality and rationality. In the right conditions it can be perfectly fine to obtain esteem from others. *Amour-propre* is responsible for conflict, jealousy, and vice, but the cognitive ability to imagine oneself in the place of others and make comparisons is also of great benefit to society.

### Death, heroism, and recognition

Men are not naturally kings, or lords, or courtiers, or rich men. All are born naked and poor; all are subject to the miseries of life, to sorrows, ills, needs, and pains of every kind. Finally, all are condemned to death. This is what truly belongs to man. This is what no mortal is exempt from. (Rousseau, 1979: 222)

The awareness of death and the impact this has on human affairs is central to the work of Ernest Becker. In *The Denial of Death* (1997) and *Escape from Evil* (1975), Becker explores the miseries, sorrows, needs and pains that Rousseau refers to and documents how human beings cope with the knowledge of their own impending mortality. Becker describes this as *the* unique existential predicament human beings are forced to contend with. Whilst Rousseau acknowledged that death 'is what truly belongs to man' and is something that 'no mortal is exempt from', he does not explore the disastrous implications that result from mortality awareness. In *Emile* Rousseau states that 'death is the remedy for the evils you do to yourselves' (1979: 281), but for Becker (1975), coping with the knowledge of our own death is responsible for bringing evil into the world. Rather than being a 'remedy' that ends personal suffering, Becker argued that knowledge of our mortality and strategies of death denial are responsible for atrocious forms of cruelty, destruction and violence.

Becker starts his analysis by focusing on self-conscious awareness (1971b). Becker explains how human beings are imaginative symbolic beings who can reflect on their experiences and imagine future possibilities. The ability to scan between the past, present, and future allows people to reflect on their experiences and imagine future scenarios. Becker shows how we are symbolic beings who are always somewhat ahead of ourselves (1975: 34). Whilst self-reflexivity allows people to live imaginative, creative and meaningful lives, our imaginative capabilities make people aware of their own mortality. Self-conscious awareness is both a blessing and a curse (also see Leary, 2004 and Yalom, 1980, 2008). We know we have the freedom of living with a symbolic inner self, but at the same time we also know that we live in a 'heart-pumping, breath-gasping' material body that will inevitably 'decay and die' (Becker, 1997: 26). As Becker argued, human beings are 'a union of opposites':

He was given a consciousness of his individuality and his part-divinity in creation, the beauty and uniqueness of his face and name. At the same time he was given the consciousness of the terror of the world and of his own death and decay. This paradox is the really constant thing about man in all periods of history and society; it is thus the true 'essence' of man. (1997: 69)

Human beings live their lives with the knowledge that they live in a physical body that will 'rot and disappear for ever' (1997:26). We are therefore 'half animal and half symbolic'. Becker refers to this paradox as the 'condition of *individuality within finitude*' (1997: 26) and his work fully explores the implications that arise from this existential dilemma.

Becker maintains that everyone has a basic and natural fear of their own mortality (also see Solomon et al, 1991, 1998 and 2015). Whether this fear is conscious or unconscious, death anxiety affects the way people live their lives (Hardie-Bick, 2016). Becker identifies two main defences people use to protect themselves from the fear of death. Both defences relate to how people imagine they are perceived by others. The first defence people use to control their death anxiety is referred to as 'the vital lie of character' (Becker, 1997). The vital lie serves as a form of 'character armour' that provides a sense of ontological security. People build psychological defences by strongly identifying with their social roles. This allows people to construct a sense of meaning, stability, importance and self-worth that keeps the fear of death unconscious. The distractions of the vital lie enable people to live their lives as if 'the vital truths' about mortality had not yet been fully realised. This unconscious form of defence against death anxiety involves 'a necessary and basic dishonesty about oneself and one's whole situation' (1997: 55). People avoid feelings of existential anxiety by being dishonest about the 'real nature of the world' (1997: 63). Becker believed it is too terrifying

to honestly confront our existential predicament. Without this form of defence people would have to confront the 'full flood of despair' (1997: 57) and as a result, thoughtless, routine activities would become impossible.

The second form of defence relates to the need people have to make a difference and be seen as *heroic*. Becker's contention is that all societies can be seen as 'symbolic action systems' that provide 'a structure of statuses and roles, customs and rules of behaviour, designed to serve as a vehicle for earthly heroism' (Becker, 1997: 4). This form of defence works alongside the vital lie and is central to how people manage their fear of death. Becker notes that 'it is not so much extinction, but extinction *with insignificance*' that people fear (1975: 4). People need to feel their life is significant and will continue to influence people after they have died. This is achieved by contributing to the 'cultural-hero system' of their society:

It doesn't matter whether the cultural-hero system is frankly magical, religious, and primitive or secular, scientific, and civilized. It is still a mythical hero system in which people serve in order to earn a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning. They earn this feeling by carving out a place in nature, by building an edifice that reflects human value: a temple, a cathedral, a totem pole, a skyscraper, a family that spans three generations. The hope and belief is that the things that man creates in society are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outlive or outshine death and decay, that man and his products count. (Becker, 1997: 5)

Contributing to the cultural-hero system allows people to feel recognised and valued by others. The 'mythical hero-system' provides a meaningful framework so people can view their actions as making a positive contribution to their society. One way to make a positive difference is by contributing to art, literature, academia, science, music, politics, architecture, or poetry. Not many people will manage to achieve a 'high' form of heroism such as the award-winning journalist John Pilger, or political leaders such as Winston Churchill, but there are many mundane heroic actions that people perform on an everyday basis. For example, parents, teachers, social workers, doctors, nurses, political activists, and coast guards all have the potential to make a lasting difference to the lives of others. The 'cultural-hero system' allows people to symbolically transcend their own death.

Symbolic immortality projects can make very real differences to peoples' lives. Engaging in heroic acts such as trying to reduce inequality, or by making a scientific breakthrough that improves the chances of surviving Covid-19 or cancer, are clearly noble and altruistic. These are examples of what Becker refers to as non-destructive immortality projects. Nevertheless, there is a dark side to the search for recognition, 'the side of human evil and viciousness' (1971b: ix). Becker argued that the desire to make the world a better place to live can have the most disastrous consequences.

### *The paradox of evil*

Becker explains how violence, torture, war and genocide often result from heroic attempts to oppose and eradicate evil. This is referred to as the paradox of evil:

The man who dropped the atomic bomb is the warm, gentle boy who grew up next door. The kings of Dahomey who signalled annually for the heads of hundreds of murdered prisoners to be piled in heaps very likely had a child-rearing experience that Margaret Mead could have written about favourably. The reason is positive and simple: man aggresses not only out of frustration and fear but out of joy, plenitude, love of life. *Men kill lavishly out of the sublime joy of heroic triumph over evil* (Becker, 1975: 141)

If someone is convinced their cause is right and just, people can be persuaded to engage in a heroic struggle. The paradox of evil refers to how violence, suffering, fear and terror often result from the good intentions people have to isolate and eradicate evil (also see Hardie-Bick, 2012 and Pyszczynski et al., 2003) Becker's theory explains how Hitler and Stalin could both be responsible for unspeakable crimes against humanity, whilst firmly believing their actions would improve society. As Glover (2012) has shown, the Nazi SS believed they demonstrated 'heroism' and remained 'morally pure' whilst committing atrocities. Stalin and Chairman Mao justified atrocities and firmly believed their actions would lead to a fair society where people could live their lives with equality and dignity. Pol Pot believed his enemies deserved their fate as they were a barrier to human improvement and progress. Previous research has demonstrated the connection between idealism, mass violence, cruelty, and genocide (Bauman, 1989; Glover, 2012; Hardie-Bick, 2017; Lifton, 2000; Staub, 1989). Becker shows how heroic intentions are directly linked to mortality awareness. Heroism is a death denying strategy people use to protect themselves from devastating feelings of insignificance and provides a sense of 'purity, goodness, righteousness - immunity' (1975: 150). The desire to make a lasting difference is the 'driving force' that makes 'the earth an even more eager graveyard than it naturally is' (Becker 1975: 96). This is why Becker understood the problem of heroics to be the most

significant problem. Indeed, protecting ourselves from the terror of death 'goes deeper into human nature than anything else' (Becker, 1997:7).

#### *Non-destructive immortality projects*

Becker's work examined the destructive consequences that arise from mortality awareness. Despite his focus on the darkest aspects of human existence, Becker was keen to open a dialogue to encourage less destructive life affirming ways to feel heroic. He argued that our need for feelings of heroism do not need to target a human enemy. He actively promoted an alternative to automatic, thoughtless, and destructive forms of heroism. Becker's alternative approach 'takes into account man's basest motives', but creatively provides an 'ideal not directly negated by those motives' (Becker, 1975: 144).

Becker did not believe it was possible or desirable to abandon heroics, but it is possible to think critically about how to be heroic. Becker urged people to acknowledge their unexamined desires. The 'need for heroism' is not easy to admit but a conscious awareness of how one earns feelings of heroism could result in more humane immortality projects. (Becker 1997: 6). Rather than satisfying our need for heroic victory by victimising, derogating and excluding others, contributions to the cultural hero system could become more meaningful and dignified. Immortality formulas can be pragmatic and life affirming. Becker advocated for the development of more intelligent immortality strategies to 'guarantee some kind of indefinite duration' (Becker, 1975: 63). The necessity of hero systems explains how it is possible for people to act so inhumanly towards one another, but Becker also encouraged an honest examination of our motives to demonstrate how hero-systems can create possibilities for living in a less cruel and destructive world.

#### **Discussion**

Rousseau and Becker were interested in human motivation and their work examined why 'people act the way they do' (Becker, 1971b: vii). For Rousseau, people are motivated by a desire to be recognised. Individuals gain self-esteem from the opinion of others. People need to feel admired for their achievements, and the 'sweet' passions of *amour-propre* are essential for encouraging compassionate and loving relationships. A life without *amour-propre* would be a life without meaning, love and morality (Neuhouser, 2008). Becker also addressed the need people have for gaining recognition. The basic human motive is the 'need for self-esteem', the need 'for a feeling of primary value' (1975: 139). People gain self-esteem through their social roles and by contributing to the cultural hero system. Together the 'vital lie of character' and the 'cultural hero-system' allow people to feel valued. Whilst Rousseau and Becker address the importance of recognition, there are important differences. Unlike Rousseau, Becker was fortunate to be writing after Schopenhauer (1958), Nietzsche (1982) and Freud (1984) and was able to address both conscious and unconscious motivation. His work therefore provides a more detailed analysis concerning the underlying reasons *why* people need to feel valued. Becker's position is that people need to live with a sense of self-worth as this provides a powerful defence against mortality awareness. Unlike Rousseau, Becker's work specifically addresses the importance of *enduring* significance. People engage in the cultural-hero system so they can continue to be influential after they have died. Contributing to the cultural-hero system provides a meaningful defence against death anxiety.

Rousseau and Becker both document the darker consequences that arise from the desire to be recognised. Whilst Rousseau discussed the 'sweet' and 'attractive' passions of *amour-propre*, he also described the envious and hateful passions that can be stirred. Indeed, Rousseau believed that *amour-propre* is the main cause of violence, conflict and misery (Dent, 2008; Neuhouser, 2010). *Amour-propre* is not necessarily destructive, but he is very clear about the distressing consequences that arise. Rousseau understood how the craving for recognition can become all-encompassing and destructive. These desires encourage people to become preoccupied with the opinion of others. Rousseau viewed this form of imagining as a form of enslavement. People can become moulded by the imagined perceptions of others. As Rousseau explained, living your life in accordance with the expectations of others results in a fundamental loss of personal freedom. Imagining the kind of judgments others are making may well provide a sense of being valued, but it may equally involve feelings of disrespect and encourage feelings of resentment.

Becker's work shows how the search for recognition has positive and negative consequences. The desire to be recognised as heroic is hugely beneficial to society. The contributions made to art, literature, politics, architecture, science, academia, and music are all examples of symbolic immortality projects. These achievements provide a sense of enduring significance and often make a positive difference to peoples' lives. The cultural hero system allows for more mundane forms of heroism to be achieved by being a loving parent, or a courageous fire-fighter, or police officer. There are many ways to achieve feelings of recognition and self-worth that are positive, but much of Becker's analysis focused on the disastrous consequences that accompany this human desire. Becker explained how heroics are responsible for 'mountains of human life' (1975: 126). The desire to identify and heroically triumph over evil brings into the world even more violence

and misery. This is the paradoxical nature of evil. Evil often arises out of 'good' rather than 'wicked' intentions (1975: 151) and explains why people can kill those they perceive as evil with excitement rather than frustration and fear. Becker shows how both destructive and non-destructive heroics provide a defence against mortality awareness. Feelings of heroism protect people against feelings of insignificance and ontological insecurity.

The role of imagination is central to both Rousseau and Becker. Rousseau's account of *amour-propre* is only possible because people have self-conscious awareness. The capability to self-consciously reflect on how one is being perceived by others is responsible for *amour-propre*'s 'sweet' and 'vengeful' passions. Self-reflexivity allows people to make comparisons and judgements, experience feelings of love and hate, and to seek due recognition from others. Self-objectification is essential to his account of *amour-propre*. Rousseau's work on self-objectivity anticipates Mead's (1934) account of the reflexive social self that describes a dynamic process of action and reflection (also see Hardie-Bick, 2019). It is not surprising that Mead influenced Becker's work on imagination and self-conscious awareness. The human capability for self-reflexivity is essential to Becker's analysis:

[T]he individual has a self-awareness that enables him to conceptually 'back away from himself.' We get a feeling of this in the formula 'I can think of *me*.' In other words, 'I am conscious of experiences happening to *me*; I am not simply undergoing experiences, but I am *experiencing myself*.' No other animal can give this rich substance, this added dimension, to itself. 'I am tired,' 'happy,' 'hurt,' 'I'm *bleeding!*' and so on. Common actions a cat performs hourly with hardly a realization become, with names, heavy with meaning and thrill: 'Look, I'm *jumping!*' The fact is momentous: *Man is the only animal – in the universe, for all we know – who sees himself as an object, who can dwell on his own experiences and on his fate*. It is this that makes him fully and truly human; it is the most interesting fact about him. (Becker, 1971b: 23)

As self-conscious beings we are aware of our own awareness and have the imaginative capacity to step outside of ourselves and view ourselves as objects (Lippens, 2009). Our internal observer (Wollheim, 1984) constantly monitors our feelings, thoughts, beliefs, behaviour, emotions, intentions, values and desires, and we are able to judge ourselves in the same way as we monitor and judge others (Hardie-Bick, 2018). This cognitive ability is central to Becker's work as living with high levels of self-awareness means that people have knowledge of their own mortality. Becker explored self-reflexivity in more depth than Rousseau, but both recognised how the problems and solutions to the respective dangers of *amour-propre* and heroism involve this distinct human capability.

Rousseau's proposed solutions to limit and restrict the dangers of *amour-propre* are detailed and complex. One of the most interesting aspects of Rousseau's (1979) analysis concerns his approach to educational reform and how children can be taught to minimize the destructive passions. Self-reflexivity should be nurtured to encourage children to imagine what it feels like to suffer. Rousseau believed this would reinforce a strong sense of compassion and provide a powerful defence against the corrosive opinion of others. By encouraging children to develop their natural inclination to pity others, they would learn not to place too much weight on their social standing and to have empathy. This would help combat the cruel passions of *amour-propre* and promote life enhancing strategies for individuals to gain feelings of self-worth, independence, and recognition.

Becker highlighted how self-reflexivity can combat destructive forms of behaviour. High levels of self-conscious awareness allow our 'destructive motives' to be 'open and amenable to clear analysis' (1975: 144). As Becker noted, we have the potential to become conscious of our own impulsive irrationality. However, there is an important difference between Becker and Rousseau's account of self-reflexivity. Becker shows how the problem of heroics is not necessarily reduced by empathising with others. Becker's work unintentionally provides a powerful criticism of Rousseau's account of compassion. The paradox of evil explains how people can commit atrocious acts with perfectly good intentions. From this perspective, sympathising with those seen as oppressed can create even more violence and suffering. This is the paradoxical nature of human evil. Rousseau's idea of strengthening the natural inclination to feel pity for others does not necessarily limit destructive forms of heroism. Nevertheless, self-reflexivity still plays an essential role for encouraging less destructive immortality formulas.

Becker's work on how to create a more humane world was not addressed in as much detail as his work on violence and evil (Lippens, 2015), but towards the end of his life he reflected on how to develop non-destructive immortality formulas. People need heroic illusions, but these should be 'life-giving' (Becker, 1975: 126) heroic myths rather than the deadly unreflective heroisms Becker outlined. The cultural-hero system



provides a framework for directing an 'objective' hatred. As Becker argued, hate objects do not have to be a 'special class or race or even human enemy, but could be things that take impersonal but real forms' such as poverty, want and disease (Becker, 1975: 145). Becker encouraged people to intelligently reflect on their need to engage in heroic acts. His work on evil intended to shock people to kindle a dialogue about the irrational dangers of heroism (Becker, 2005). Becker hoped his analysis of heroism would allow people to develop more dignified, creative and truly *heroic* contributions to life. Becker believed in 'the possibility of a non-destructive yet *victorious* social system (1975: 126). There are intelligent and creative ways to contribute to the quality of human life. The urge to engage in forms of heroism does not necessarily result in narcissistic forms of violence and Becker hoped to provide a 'minute measure of reason to balance destruction' (1975: 170)

### Conclusion

This article has addressed the work of Rousseau and Becker in relation to self-worth and recognition. Whilst Rousseau's work on recognition is well known (Dent, 2008; Honneth, 2021; Neuhauser, 2008, 2010; Shaver, 1989; Taylor, 2021), Becker also made an important contribution to the problems that accompany the desire to be recognised. Becker and Rousseau were both concerned with the human striving for recognition.

There are previously unacknowledged overlaps between their work. Rousseau and Becker claimed that people are motivated by a basic desire to be recognised by others and they understood this desire to be beneficial. The desires of *amour-propre* and the heroic acts described by Becker provide a vital contribution to society. Nevertheless, Rousseau and Becker both reveal the dark side of this existential craving. *Amour-propre*'s passions and the acts of heroism Becker identified are responsible for aggressive and vengeful behaviour. Their work documents how the craving for recognition is responsible for bringing evil into the world. I have also highlighted another similarity between their work. Although *amour-propre* and acts of heroism are responsible for much human suffering, Rousseau and Becker advocate forms of restraint rather than seeking to eliminate *amour-propre* or the cultural hero-system. Both believed there are life affirming ways for people to secure recognition from others. Rousseau thought institutional change and educational reform would restrict enmity and hate from taking hold. Becker believed the social structure for promoting the common good was already in place. Each culture has a hero system that allows people to gain a sense of personal significance. Becker argued that this is a universal feature of all human societies and allows people to live meaningful lives. For Becker, the problem of heroics related to *how* people gain feelings of heroism. More acts of heroism would become life enhancing if people consciously reflected on their need for feelings of self-worth and recognition. As Becker stated, we 'cannot abandon the heroic' (1975: 159), but we can become more conscious of our strivings for symbolic immortality to combat against the deadly and unreflective heroics people engage in. We can 'argue about heroism, assess the costs of it, show that it is self-defeating, a fantasy, a dangerous illusion and not one that is life-enhancing' (1975: 159). Becker believed it was possible to establish non-destructive alternatives to these dangerous illusions.

Becker's work makes an original contribution to recognition theory. His theory problematises Rousseau's focus on compassion by highlighting the paradoxical nature of evil. Rousseau (1979) believed it was important to be moved by the pain and suffering of others, but Becker shows how this form of imagining can fuel attempts to eliminate evil and ultimately result in further suffering. In Becker's words, it is 'impossible hopes and desires' that have 'heaped evil in the world' (1975: 5). This is an important criticism of Rousseau and opens up a deeper level of analysis concerning human motivation. Becker provided many insights in relation to mortality awareness, self-reflexivity, and psychological defences, but his most significant contribution concerns his work on how people search for enduring forms of recognition. Becker explains how our desire for recognition and feelings of self-worth directly relate to our mortality awareness. People need to feel they count, that they have made a difference, and that their actions will continue to influence people after they have died. To transcend their 'physical fate' (1975: 63), people need to feel their life has significance, and that they will leave 'a trace that has meaning' (1975: 4). This explains why Becker believed there is an urgent need to reflect on how we acquire social recognition. Understanding the desire to feel heroic is, Becker argued, 'the main self-analytic problem of life' (1997: 6). By taking a sober look at our existential motives we can 'understand the nature of evil in human affairs' and potentially 'take back some control over our own destiny' (1975: 90). I will conclude with a quotation from Becker's last book: 'It is man's ingenuity, rather than his animal nature, that has given his fellow creatures such a bitter earthly fate' (1975: 5). Perhaps Rousseau would have agreed.

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