Communicative Meaning: Otherwise than the Denial of Death

Douglas John Marshall

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COMMUNICATIVE MEANING: OTHERWISE THAN THE DENIAL OF DEATH

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Douglas John Marshall

December 2012
COMMUNICATIVE MEANING: OTHERWISE THAN THE DENIAL OF DEATH

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ABSTRACT

COMMUNICATIVE MEANING: OTHERWISE THAN THE DENIAL OF DEATH

By

Douglas John Marshall

December 2012

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Ronald C. Arnett

The overall assumption of this dissertation project is that there is something wrong with how humans typically communicate about death in regard to both the acknowledgment of one's own death as well as the passing of others. Through the primary utilization of the work of Ernest Becker and Viktor Frankl, this deficit of human communication is discussed, defined, and reoriented toward finding meaning in the moments of life that are often mistook for being meaningless. This metaphorical march of this project is toward finding the music in both life and death that allows the importance of both to be at the forefront of conscious communication. This project engages elements of sociology, philosophy, psychiatry, and the rich culture of New Orleans in order to uncover meaning-rich communicative spaces in which one can begin to consider the inherent power and responsibility that one must communicate about death. Though this project is guided by the
metaphor of mythical Grim Reaper, the reader should not be confused about the menacing tone; ultimately this dissertation is about life more than it is about death.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the elementary school teacher who informed my parents that I would be lucky to graduate high school and to never expect me to go to college. More so this project is dedicated to my parents who knew better than that teacher. My mother has never read Ernest Becker, but she taught me to not deny the things in life that cannot be controlled. She has never read Viktor Frankl, but she showed me how to do the right thing, appreciate others for what they give to you, and to find meaning in all aspects of life. My father has never been to New Orleans, but he has taught me to honor traditions, enjoy myself, and not give a damn about what I look like when it is time to celebrate.

I also dedicate this project to the most beautiful city in the world—The Crescent City, The City That Care Forgot, The Big Easy, America’s Most Interesting City, N’awlins. I love New Orleans and this dissertation is dedicated to the people, the traditions, the culture, the music, the musicians, the food, the parades, the beads, the bars, the religious, the pagans, the history, and the Kings that one may encounter when visiting.
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I would like to thank Dr. Ronald C. Arnett, who has inspired me and motivated me throughout this process. Dr. Arnett’s guidance has helped form me into a young scholar and teacher with a dedication to service. His example has been the most influential aspect of my entire academic experience thus far. I would also like to thank Dr. Janie Harden Fritz and Dr. Richard Thames, who have been great allies and mentors throughout my time at Duquesne. I would like to thank the entire Department of Communication & Rhetorical Studies at Duquesne University, including Rita McCaffrey, who has been one of the best professional friends that a person could ask for. I also owe so much gratitude to my friend and dissertation editor, Heather Blum.

There is not enough space to mention all of my classmates who have guided me through the strikes and gutters of graduate school, but they know who they are and I will spend a lifetime repaying my debt to them. I must also thank the people in my personal life that supported and loved me throughout this process. Jabe, Abby, Matt, Roy, and Kiley—I could not have done this without your friendship.

Lastly, this project could not have been accomplished without the support and understanding of my family. They did not always understand what I was writing about, but their unwavering support served as my motivation to the very end.
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Chapter One
Dancing with the Reaper

“Death is a companion. One does not quarrel with one’s friend.”—Tom Robbins, *Jitterbug Perfume*

The subject of death is simultaneously consequential and often avoided. All who have been graced with life must eventually take their final dance with the grim reaper. There is a rich history of philosophy that discusses death, meaning, and the afterlife, but many of these conversations become solely religious in the context of popular culture and public discourse. In the midst of the ignorance of this subject, brave scholars and philosophers like Ernest Becker and Viktor Frankl speak boldly about the meaning of life that one can find through the drama of death. This project aims to examine the search for meaning within the communicative act of the jazz funeral, using the work of Becker to define the problem and Frankl to guide potential solutions.

Introduction

The goal of this project is to utilize the powerful work of philosophy in order to understand how and why human beings should communicate about the final dance with the reaper. The major notion that should come from this project is that death matters and, while it may not be pleasant to experience, it generates meaning. Those who are facing death themselves or are struggling with the death of a loved one have a choice—treat death as a meaningless “harm” (Benatar 11) or communicate life’s meaning through the journey to death.

This five-chapter project seeks to engage the problems associated with the denial of death and offer communicative praxis for finding meaning during one’s ultimate meeting with the reaper. In the next chapter, *The Denial of the Reaper*, the work of Ernest Becker and
the metaphor of denial will expose normative communicative deficiencies inherent to the engagements of death in modern societies. Following this will be *Confronting the Reaper in Western Philosophy*, in which the work of Fred Feldman and William Barrett will be used to uncover historical perspectives located within Western philosophy that find meaningfulness and honor in the existential engagement of human expiration. The project will then turn back to the work of Ernest Becker in *Conversations in the Shadow of the Reaper*, which will look to Becker’s deathbed interview in order to see his thoughts on death put into scholarly communicative action. Finally, all of the philosophers and metaphors discussed throughout this project will interact with an exemplar of how meaning is conveyed and communicated through death in *Marching Alongside the Reaper: The Jazz Funeral*. The work of Viktor Frankl will be found at the end of chapters two through five, as his legacy and spirit serves as a natural guiding companion in the search for communicative meaning.

Within this introductory chapter, eight sections are offered in order to situate this project. The first of these sections is *Meeting the Reaper*, which serves as an introduction to the myth and metaphor of the Grim Reaper. The second section is *The Denial of and Conversations with the Reaper*, which serves as a place of introduction to Ernest Becker and his works. This section will also preview the upcoming chapters that are dedicated to the philosophical and practical thought of Becker. The third section is *Resisting the Reaper*, in which the Dylan Thomas poem “Do Not Go Gently Into That Good Night” is examined in order to understand a historically relevant and artistically significant example of how death is understood. *Philosophical Perspectives of the Reaper* is fourth section and will provide a preview of some of existential themes of Fred Feldman and William Barrett that will be used in a later chapter of this dissertation project. The fifth section, *The March, the Music, and the Reaper*, will introduce the offer a short description of the Jazz Funeral that will eventually serve as the
major artifact of this dissertation project. The sixth section, *Singing with the Reaper*, explores the literature found within the field of communication that explicitly deals with music. *The Stand Against the Reaper*, the seventh section, will serve as a basic introduction to Viktor Frankl in order to position his work in regard to his ongoing search for meaning. Frankl’s search will also be echoed at the end of each chapter of this project. Finally, *Engaging the Reaper: The Communicative Dance* will briefly recap chapter one and will serve as a guidepost for the upcoming chapters.

Though many of the philosophers that will be mentioned within this project are not exclusively connected to the field of communication, this work offers significance for communication. This overall project seeks to reclaim meaning within the darkest moments of life, challenging society to consider its communication about issues regarding death. What we say and how we say it matters, and we must consider that idea when engaging in every communicative act, be it a brief conversation or a ceremonial act associated with death.

**Meeting the Reaper**

American author Hunter S. Thompson once stated that “fear is just another word for ignorance” (Glassie). Many in the American culture fear death; perhaps this is caused by ignorance. One could easily argue that our popular culture is ignorant to the process of dying, and all living humans are ignorant when it comes to what actually happens to us when the metaphorical “lights go out.” This project will seek to examine bold cultures and individuals who chose not to meet death with ignorance, but instead choose to find life’s meaning in death through the communicative act of ritual and music. The human is capable of showing a range of emotions and thoughts through his or her speech acts, but this range is often dismissed or downplayed during serious discussions of mortality. When mortality is greeted with reverence and rebellion it seemingly leaves a message in the stead of those who
remain speechless. Every so often a tradition emerges that presents a model that advocates the meeting of death in a helpful and joyous way while also reminding those left behind of the importance of life and the unavoidable truth of death.

This examination will strive to focus on the many ways people have dealt with the shock of death and dying. The reactionary emotion to one’s death or critical illness often overshadows the importance and meaning behind cultural rituals of death (Metcalf and Huntington 2). Additionally, there seems to be a deep and inseparable connection between ritual and emotion that is often associated with the survivors rather than the deceased (Metcalf and Huntington 2). The aim of this particular project is to look at the specific people and cultures that have taken an alternative standpoint toward the idea of coming to terms with the certainty of death. Chapters two and four will explore the work of philosopher and anthropologist Ernest Becker for an examination of his insights on life and what he calls the “denial of death,” as he attempts to explain the phenomenon of a culture that is widely frightened by death (13). The third chapter of this project will begin with an examination into the history of Western philosophy to examine what major existential thinkers have said about the notion of death. In the fifth and final chapter, this work will then be placed into context through examination of a specifically American ritual, the New Orleans jazz funeral.

The ideas of death, ritual, and meaning have significance for communication research on several levels. A general look at the current research tells us that death brings forth many important communicative acts. Perhaps most significantly is the notion that when one discusses one’s own mortality, it forces others to consider death and communicate those thoughts and fears appropriately (Nussbaum 294). Death is one of the most complicated issues of human life to discuss calmly and clearly. Because of that, it is
important to look to those who have proven the ability to clearly and flexibly communicate about meeting the grim reaper in order for us to discover a beneficial pathway into conversation about death.

The living have long feared the meeting of the grim reaper, whose roots begin with the ancients. The reaper’s lineage seemingly begins with the Greek god Kronus and the Roman god Saturn, evolving into the scythe-carrying menace reflected in today’s popular culture (Birx 510). Though many forms of art have utilized the character of the reaper to evoke fear and despair, there is a more powerful way to engage this personification of death. Wright, in a discussion that focuses on the normative serious tone that is associated with death, begins to describe the grim reaper as a humorous character while still recognizing the actual need for the service that he provides. For her, the clichéd notion of death knocking at one’s door is funny but necessary, and she sees a real relationship between the human and the reaper. She refers to it as “befriending” and offers a way to think about death as a frightening figure, but one that serves one of life’s purposes (Wright 5). This is precisely the same path that this project chooses to follow when discussing the human individual’s final appointment in life with the reaper who brings death. There is recognition of the necessary relationship that should be acknowledged and communicated with honesty and gravity. This recognition is championed by Ernest Becker, who provides a sociological blueprint for how one can find meaning and value through the acceptance of death.

The Denial of and Conversations with the Reaper

This project takes seriously the idea that there is a problem with how humans think and communicate about death. Ernest Becker recognizes this sociological problem and explores it through the metaphor of “denial.” Chapters two and four will utilize the work of Becker, a “cultural anthropologist” (Hughes 202), to examine a unique view that
characterizes death as a central and often ignored notion of human life. Ernest Becker, who won the Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction for *The Denial of Death* (1973) in 1974, textures the exploration of death through what has been described as a commitment to learning that crosses disciplines (Kenel 9). One of the interdisciplinary questions that often guided Becker’s work was a variation of “What makes people act the way they do?” (Liechty 11). Becker ultimately uncovered that anxiety moves most human thought and action, and he spent the majority of his career attempting to discredit the work of Freud (Kenel 11). During his life his peers often ignored him. Some have attributed this to his intellectual disagreements with Freud’s work and also to his dedication to altering the American liberal education system (Kenel 17). Becker died in 1974, two months before *The Denial of Death* won the Pulitzer, leaving him unaware of the ultimate impact that his work would have on the disciplines that he had hoped to unite: psychology and theology (Kenel 23). Becker took death and human meaning seriously, and it is for this reason that his work provides an understanding of how human beings approach the fact of death.

Chapter two will begin with a brief overview of Becker’s life and work in order to place him into context within a history of ideas. The chapter will briefly discuss several of Becker’s works and then move to an intense examination of Becker’s *The Denial of Death*, where key elements and metaphors will be extracted and discussed. These meaning-centered metaphors will join Frankl’s work in a conversation that revolves around the communicative importance of speaking otherwise than the denial of death. The metaphors of Becker will be echoed in chapter four as the project returns to Becker’s deathbed interview in which he embodies his theory of death.

Chapter four will begin with a detailed examination of the final interview that Becker gave as he was preparing to meet his own death. Through this interview with philosopher
Sam Keen, one will see how Becker’s work, which will be outlined in chapter two, comes alive through the practices of a dying man living out his own mortality-driven theory. After an account of the interview, Becker’s metaphors will be discussed in a communication context before engaging the work of Viktor Frankl. At this point, the work of Becker and Frankl will be unified in order to find spaces in which human beings can uncover communicative meaning in death.

Becker’s work is used within this project because of his non-therapeutic approach to understanding the notion of what death means to human life. During his younger years, one of Becker’s foundational entry points for scholarship was an interest in discovering “what makes people behave the way they do” (Kenel 11). It is within these early works that Becker begins to uncover his ideas on how anxiety is the ultimate motivator for how humans act when faced with their own existence and mortality (Kenel 11). This anxiety is eventually dealt with in some very interesting ways, as Becker feels that the human ego battles to conceal the unease caused by mortality (“Socialization” 494).

Becker’s mission also rested on the idea that a legitimate “theory of culture” (Hughes 203) could be discovered, and that one must take seriously the “science of man” (Kenel 27). These two ideas are persistent throughout much of his work. The work of Becker has a substantial connection to the previous authors and philosophers mentioned who are focused on where and how humans find meaning in life and death. Hughes reveals that Becker tied the element of meaning to honor (203), which became a powerful insight on how to live life and face death. Could it be that humans live a meaningful life by honorably approaching life and death alike?

The forthcoming investigation of Becker’s work will focus primarily on how meaning is found in human existence, but it will also focus on explaining Becker’s
straightforward account of how a person tricks the self into believing that one can escape
death. Humans, according to Becker, build elaborate structures in order to cope with the
anxiety of looming death. This becomes a denial of the “terror of death” (“Denial of Death”
xxi); for Becker, it causes unhealthy behavior throughout many aspects of human life. The
utilization of Becker’s work will be necessary to view normative human reactions to death
through the metaphor of “denial,” juxtaposing this normative response against those
exemplars in human life that take an honorable and brave stand against death. Becker clearly
unveils the notion that humans often deny their inevitable meeting with the reaper.
Additionally, poet Dylan Thomas (1914-1953) offers a classic model of resistance, rather
than denial, of death in his work “Do Not Go Gently Into That Good Night” (1951).

Resisting the Reaper

Many great works of philosophy, poetry, and sociology have focused on how one
meets one’s own death and takes a stand against the inevitable. Sometimes the meeting of
man and the reaper is powerfully defiant and, at other times, it is soft and defeating. As an
entrance into this particular project and as an avenue for experiencing the type of feeling that
will be discussed, this introduction will briefly discuss Dylan Thomas’s “Do Not Go Gently
Into That Good Night.”

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

This poem is, perhaps, the pinnacle literary example of how one faces the issues of aging and mortality.

Some characterize Thomas’s poem as “defiant,” a refusal to give in to death (Martin 34). While these themes are apparent, the poem is also somewhat of a warning signal. Thomas, born in Swansea, Wales in 1914, had a surreal recognition of his own mortality at the early age of twenty-one. It was during this year that he told his friend that he expected to be dead within two years. Thomas felt as if his earthly days were numbered simply because he recognized his problems with alcohol and the rowdy behavior associated with such intoxicants (Stanford 7). Later, it became clear that Thomas felt that death was merely a conduit that would release him into an eternal afterlife (Reddington 5), and his ability to grasp the often frightening idea of his own death became a motivating force that gifted him with the ability to avoid procrastination (Stanford 7).

This situated connection and understanding of death does not insinuate that Thomas would deny human grief or sadness while experiencing loss. It has been noted that Thomas fully embraced life’s joys, but he also expected and appreciated the “grief of the death that must come” (Sinclair 233). This dedication and struggle with the issue of death, coupled with Thomas’s ability to use his writing to “communicate” (Moynihan 4), establishes this poet as one of the most brave soldiers standing up for the cause of communicating the importance
of acknowledging mortality. This focus on death and the muddiness of life is a consistent part of his life’s work.

Though the focus on mortality and the nasty aspects of life became a long utilized theme within the work of Dylan Thomas, it is the previously mentioned work that most powerfully expresses Thomas’s prescription for meeting the reaper. The poem has been said to be the result of a tumultuous relationship between Thomas and his father, and the great sadness he experienced while watching his father refuse to leave this world a rebel (Emery 52-55). A discussion of Thomas’s interpersonal or familial issues is not the aim of this specific study of the communicative power of death; rather, this poem offers a view of how one prolific poet and author suggests how one should carry oneself when it is time to pass on.

This particular poem has been placed into the poetic genre of “villanelle.”¹ One of the most typical poetic elements of a villanelle is that it remains rather docile and would seldom be considered forceful. This poem allows the audience to feel not only the “tenderness and sympathy,” but also the forcefulness and passion in which the author addresses the issue (Stanford 117). Thomas provides a view of death as something that one should dynamically stand against, while remaining open to the inbuilt dramatic effects that this act entails.

Derek Stanford discusses the words of Thomas as words without intention to advocate the denial of the worthiness of life, but rather speaks of them as a reminder that all choices and actions remain important up to the end of one’s life (117). It would seem as if Dylan Thomas felt a legacy is not simply what one has done with a life, but also how one

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¹ A poem defined by Merriam-Webster as “a chiefly French verse form running on two rhymes and consisting typically of five tercets and a quatrain in which the first and third lines of the opening tercet recur alternately at the end of the other tercets and together as the last two lines of the quatrain.”
meets one’s own death. The proposition that one should exit this world with a “bang instead of a whimper” (Stanford 117) is a major theme in the writing of a man who spent most of his adult life disturbed by, and preoccupied with, the idea of death (Reddington 29).

Thomas, despite being haunted by the finality of death, offers a compelling avenue to understand death, as well as a manner in which to boldly meet it. Thomas pleads with his father to “burn and rage” rather than to “go gently” into the night. This demonstrates the idea of leaving this world with a “bang” and is an ultimate expression for one to “not lose heart” during the darkness of one’s final hour (Stanford 117). Perhaps the idea of not losing heart during this unavoidable moment in life can best be discussed as the unity of negative and positive, a recognition that life consists of both light and darkness and neither should be ignored. Stanford notes that Thomas wants one to both accept death and recognize that there is worthiness and righteousness found within it (118).

The poetry of Dylan Thomas suggests a communicative stance that encourages the reader to, despite the frailty of the human body, not allow the reality of death to make one’s spirit weak. This poem has been described as one that defines the reputation of Thomas and points toward an “external world of action, event, suffering, and relationship” (Davies 311). One could make a claim that these elements are vital to the character or significance of any human communicative act. Perhaps all communication is ingrained with issues of action, place and manner, and the inherent suffering and joy found within human relations. What makes Thomas’s message so important is that it is a denunciation of how common culture would offer views on death. Thomas’s ultimate suggestion is that the human individual must not perpetuate or conform to these approaches to death while finding the ability to “rage” and “burn” during what some consider the darkest hour of life (Emery 54).
“Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night” offers an understanding of death that does not treat the process as something hollow, but rather as something that carries a great deal of meaning. The idea that there is intrinsic meaning found in how one meets death echoes the insights of Viktor Frankl, who will be discussed later in this chapter and more in depth in chapter five. It would seem as if Thomas provides an exemplar for how to understand the elements of Frankl’s work. Thomas’s work echoes the notion of what one have given as well as taken from the world, but ultimately a major giver of meaning comes from one’s stand against the inevitable (Frankl, *Psychotherapy and Existentialism* 15). It is unmistakable that Thomas had some sort of internal belief that how one takes one’s final stand in the face of death truly matters, not only for the victim of death’s clutches, but also for those who are left behind in bereavement. Dylan provides a model for meeting the reaper with resistance. In order to better understand a range of philosophical perspectives, this chapter turns to Fred Feldman, who provides us with insights regarding confrontations with the reaper.

**Philosophical Perspectives of the Reaper**

It is important to acquire a historical understanding of what the philosophically minded have said about the concept of death. Death, as an event that one cannot avoid or predict, is a common topic within philosophical inquiry. It would appear that the extremes found in our popular culture are to ignore the idea of death or to focus on morbid representations in the horror film genre; neither extreme takes death seriously. One wonders what has happened to the once fashionable metaphor of death as a traveler taking up a final journey that Segal offers in reference to the work of Shakespeare (3). Segal notes that religious structures often provide the dominant narrative for death, but it is a matter that has been explored since the birth of Western philosophy (4).
Chapter three seeks to offer respect for concrete existence through a discussion of how the narrative of existential philosophy has treated the meeting of the reaper. The first section within this chapter will engage elements of Fred Feldman’s *Confrontations with the Reaper: A Philosophical Study of the Nature and Value of Death* (1992). Feldman offers a historical understanding of various philosophical perspectives of death, ultimately providing guiding metaphors such as “value” and “meaning.” Following the discussion of Feldman’s work, William Barrett’s text, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (1962), will be examined in order to find spaces in which the greatest minds in existential philosophy come to agreement on how the human being should meet the reality of death. The work of Feldman and Barrett will be used to offer communicative metaphors that will ultimately interact with Frankl at the chapter’s end.

It is clear that many philosophers consider the topic of death a fundamental area of contemplation. For example, Aristotle recognizes the fear associated with death as “a boundary,” and that when death comes things for the deceased are neither good nor bad (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1115a 26-29). Aristotle’s picture of death is one that is unavoidable yet unsettling, because there is only darkness on the other side. This outlook may be a detraction from a religious perspective, but it continues to echo the previous discussion of where meaning is found within life.

Aristotle also looks to the element of bravery in order to examine how one meets one’s end. Aristotle’s concept of bravery is the interplay between fear and confidence; he contends that the “stand against things painful” is what creates bravery (1117a 30-340). This idea of bravery defined by how one meets death perhaps informed Frankl in his formation of the “stand against the inevitable” (*Psychotherapy and Existentialism* 15); both Aristotle and Frankl contend that the value of human life is greatly influenced by how one confronts the
darkest moments. Aristotle also acknowledges that the brave person will find much pain in his or her wounds of war, but will “endure them willingly” for the reason that failure is not an available option (1117b 5-10). Aristotle suggests that the brave individual will not necessarily be joyful in the moment of death, but will likely accept the end based on the realization that no other options remain. This is one example of the philosophical history that finds life’s meaning grounded in death.

Feldman’s *Confrontations with the Reaper* provides a gathering place for some of the major philosophical work that has been done. It also offers context and commentary for topics such as the above discussion of Aristotle. Using the springboard metaphor of “reaper,” Feldman recognizes the mystery and “democratic” nature of death, an inescapable event that the “reaper” beckons us all toward (3). Feldman begins a journey that reveals Western philosophy’s elite, providing a roadmap for how many thinkers saw death as the opposite of a menacing mystery of life (4). The work of Feldman provides a review of the philosophical inquiry that takes death seriously while simultaneously believing it to be something meaningful.

Feldman divides his text into two distinct sections, which equally embrace the nature and the value of death. These two lenses for viewing death are complimentary to the position of this project in its entirety, which seeks to honestly recognize the finality of expiration of the human body while also searching for a way to communicate the meaningful value that death brings to life. Feldman furthers the marriage between death and life by making it very clear that he finds that interest in the philosophical questions of death is inherently also interest in what it means to be alive (22). Feldman rejects the idea that death is the ultimate mystery of life by taking a position that life itself is mysterious (54), thus making this union even stronger. This process of thought allows for an alignment that is
complementary to this project, searching for meaningful attributes to be recognized in death. This essay seeks to reject the idea that death is a “harm,” a thought that rejects a tradition of philosophical notions that believe that the trials of existence itself are an innate harm (Benatar 11). Society may have moved from a tradition that respected the value of death to one that considers death to be something that is an ignored, meaningless conclusion, but there is a lineage of wisdom that gives credence to the meaningful properties of death. This specific project focuses on the idea of the good and of meaning that comes out of death. How does a specific tradition and culture take what Frankl calls the “stand against the inevitable” (Psychotherapy and Existentialism 15)? What does it mean for the life of the deceased? What does it communicate to those who have been left behind? Feldman’s work provides a review of how Western philosophers have discussed confronting the reaper and is helpful for gaining a historical and thematic notion of those meanings.

Additionally, the work of William Barret will provide a natural transition to the work of Feldman. As Feldman discusses the actual nature and value of death from a philosophical perspective, Barrett looks to existential philosophers in order to find the value of life and death that is associated with existing in a natural world. Through the use of four exemplars of existentialism—Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre—Barrett will show how existential philosophy can provide the human being with the necessary tools for discovering the “whole image” of the human being despite living in a “dark and questionable” set of circumstances (22). Barrett’s portrayal of these existential exemplars, in conjunction with their own philosophies of death, will provide communicative metaphors that will connect naturally with Becker, Frankl, and the culminating artifact of this project, the New Orleans jazz funeral. Up to this point, there have been many metaphors used to discuss how one engages the reaper: refusal, denial, resistance, and confrontation. These metaphors and
approaches to meeting the menacing shadow of the reaper reach a crescendo in the drama explicated by the jazz funeral.

**The March, the Music, and the Reaper**

The fifth and final chapter of this project will investigate a musical death ritual that is almost entirely embedded in the public and speaks to both the meaning of life and death. The jazz funeral is almost entirely and uniquely practiced in the city of New Orleans, Louisiana; yet, research shows that African American cultures throughout the Southern United States have been cultivating the tradition for many years (Raeburn 212).

This final chapter will first review the work that had been provided in chapters two, three and four. The metaphors from these chapters will be placed into communicative categories and organized in order to discuss their inherent value for the study of communication. The second section of chapter five will look at the origins of this tradition, the specific narratives that are portrayed through it, and what such an event communicates about death and how one should live a life. This section will provide a historical account of the practice of the jazz funeral, as well as highlight New Orleans authors and residents who continue to advocate for the importance of this ritual. The third section will place the communication metaphors into conversation with the jazz funeral in order to find the communicative implications inherent in the search for meaning within the funeral tradition of New Orleans. The culmination of this exploration will take place with a discussion of the impact and importance of the jazz funeral tradition in conjunction with Frankl’s views that human beings uncover meaning in the most dire of life’s circumstances.

While there are many perspectives in which to view the jazz funeral, this project seeks to take a broad and holistic view of the act, examining what this event signifies about paying tribute and respect to the dead, as well as its message to those who continue to live.
Tom Piazza, author of *Why New Orleans Matters* (2008), touches upon some of the key issues that make the jazz funeral a multifaceted communicative experience. For example, Piazza speaks of how the funeral is not for just any one individual, but a message to the community about the responsibility to keep life going and to enjoy the time that remains (31). This vital acknowledgment becomes greatly important in a historical moment that is riddled with “individualism,” an idea that one completely abandons the needs of society to instead focus on one’s own needs and desires (Tocqueville 481). According to Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, one can assume that the idea of the jazz funeral is more aligned with “selfishness,” protecting the community in order to both protect and enhance the self (481). The jazz funeral is a ritual conceived of many motives, ranging from honoring the dead to reminding the community of the precious qualities of life (Piazza 31). This cultural expression of mourning and celebration is not performed for the benefit of any one honoree or participant. While it may serve beneficial purposes for the individual, the wellness of the entire community and the attention to past and future remain at the forefront.

The city of New Orleans offers many cultural eccentricities that are unique to the region and are often misunderstood as mere foolery. While it may be common to think of New Orleans as a city based only upon the drunken antics of the Mardi Gras season, there is so much more to these traditions and rituals that are rarely mentioned within popular literature or press. In his defense of the city that he finds culturally necessary, Piazza addresses this very issue. He makes it a point to portray the utter seriousness in which those who live within this culture take these rituals. He contends that music, dancing, local cooking, and costumes are taken with the utmost seriousness in order to create a “cultural cuisine” within New Orleans (Piazza 35). Through exploration of the jazz funeral, one can see how this long-standing tradition involves all aspects of what makes New Orleans an
extraordinary place. This tradition is clearly a resistance to the negative stigma given to the reaper, and a denial of the view of death as unnatural. Ultimately, music is vital to the culture of New Orleans and the jazz funeral; several authors and communication scholars have provided insights into how the reaper may be engaged through the rich meaning found within music.

**Singing with the Reaper**

The jazz funeral is a multifaceted event that unites tradition, vocals, instruments, dancing, interpretation, and spirituality. Because of the overt musical nature of the tradition, it is vital to discuss research that has been done in the field of communication that specifically engages several aspects of music. The study of music as communication is an emerging field; this section will offer a sampling of what has been said in regard to music and communication, including how scholars in the field contend that music is a legitimate and proven form of human communication and expression. Because of the nature of this project as a whole, this research will be viewed through the metaphor of “meaning” in order to explore how meaning is found through the communicative act of music. This overview will allow one to witness how the jazz funeral brings to life the interplay of music and communication.

Though more scholars have focused on the connection between music and media, some have looked at the topic of music itself in communication and as communication (Larson and Kubey 13; Williams 199). For example, some attempt to advance a way of thinking about communicating and utilizing music to help make that point. Lopez, one of these thinkers, looks at the act of metaphorical communication as a social practice and not one that is primarily cognitive. Lopez does not discuss the fundamental communicative attributes of music itself, but rather uses music as an overarching metaphor for the entire
piece (9). This approach to research is a recognition of the power of music to derive and create meaning, allowing the reader to make connections through this device.

While researchers like Lopez recognize the immense power of music as a metaphor, or a comparative way to understand something that one may consider complex, there are others who use a variation of “music as metaphor” in order to understand the art and practice of communication. Raymond Gozzi constructed a straightforward metaphor that commented on what a new “musical” model of communication might look like. Gozzi contends that the typical linear models of communication may be something of the past, and that the field of communication may need this new “musical model” to allow for advancements within the field (90). Gozzi, like Lopez, is attempting to uncover new ways of finding meaning within the field of communication through music. The picture painted by Gozzi in regard to this new model is one that focuses on systems performing in their given roles where different genres and note structures will communicate in diverse ways, and that an act of communication, much like a musical number, will be unique in style, duration, and effect (“Linear Myths to Musical Models of Communication” 89-91). One can see how a familiarity with music brings meaning to the text that Gozzi describes within this piece.

Gozzi, in a later article, not only uses music as a metaphor for a new model of communication, but also discusses music as communication itself. In this piece, Gozzi compares human emotion to specific musical language such as “crescendo” and “diminuendo.” He also uses several submetaphors, such as “harmony,” to provide proof that there are connections between how humans communicate and how music is performed and understood (“Communication as Making Music” 207-09). It is through this description that one finds meaning between the actual communicative action and the musical metaphors.
One particularly helpful and enlightening area of Gozzi’s study is a comparison of the similarities and connections between interaction in communication and interaction in music. Within Gozzi’s provided illustration, the first column shows the communication process that one may be familiar with and the second shows the metaphor that brings it into the territory of music. For example, the precise substance of the communication would be equal to the lyrics of a song. Additionally, communication in which one person dominates the communicative action would be compared to a lead singer who sings louder and more often than those who provide the backup vocals (“Communication as Making Music” 207-09). Communication seen through the metaphor of music can be powerful for providing meaning, specifically through the idea of familiarity.

Taking somewhat of an unusual angle, the term “communication” has also been used as a metaphor within the field by those who study music. For instance, there are those that believe the implicit purpose of music is to provide firm structure to the listening audience. David Temperly states that this process depends on a relationship in which rules and roles are mutually understood and performed, thus finding the meaning of the relationship between the specific rules and roles. He continues by stating that there are scenarios in which rules are not understood clearly, and that there must be some sort of evolution where learning takes place. He calls this “communicative pressure” (Temperly 313-37), where the growth of meaning is found within the relationship.

Moving to a more rhetorical perspective, many have looked at the actual text of musical writings in order to uncover the meaning embedded within. Some of the most important and informative works of this kind are rhetorical analyses that discuss the music itself and what the communication strategy may be. Deanna Sellnow reveals a method that uses the musical catalogue of Bruce Springsteen in order to view his ongoing relevance and
variety throughout his musical career. Sellnow chose to focus on Springsteen’s body of work within three major areas of investigation. The first was to find out exactly how and why major shifts take place over the career span of a particular artist. The second area focused on how those shifts affect the overall work and appeal of the artist. The final area concerned how these changes impacted other contemporary artists (Sellnow 48). Sellnow’s work focused on the stories and messages of an extremely popular musician while placing a great deal of weight on lyrics and the historical moment, but it did not forget to lend an even more purposeful dimension to the overall work (60). This rhetorical analysis offered a substantial proposition to other musicians who desire to have their stories and work become as influential as Springsteen’s. The suggestion is that popular music artists may “consider strategically shifting their stories and styles to maintain or broaden listener appeal over time” in order to most effectively foster and inspire meaning (Sellnow 60).

Bruce Springsteen is not the only musical icon that has had his diverse compositions critiqued and analyzed at the mercy of a communication question. Stephen King and Robert Jensen attempted to better understand the music of the deceased reggae artist Bob Marley. Their examination of the communicative power of Marley’s music was encouraged by an initial fascination with the Rastafarian religion and the notion that Marley’s popularity brought forth an “awareness of the faith” (King and Jensen 18). King and Jensen declared that it was Marley’s superb use of metaphors that helped make Rastafarian principles fashionable. This essay revealed how Marley utilized the dialectic between good and evil, as well as his ability to offer hope and tangible strategies for life’s toil (King and Jensen 18).

Important as well is the idea that reggae, richly laden with metaphor and narrative, can be considered persuasive when attempting to motivate an audience or generate a meaning-rich narrative structure (King and Jensen 33).
This idea of persuasion as an omnipresent aspect of music is not merely a position held by King and Jensen. Sellnow also conducted interpretive work dealing with persuasion and the Mary Chapin Carpenter song “He Thinks He’ll Keep Her.” Sellnow argued that the rhetorical composition of this song serves as a persuasive tool to promote the feminine role and power within a society dominated by masculinity. This song is recognized as a form of social and domestic protest, an attempt to derive meaning, within contemporary country music (Sellnow 67).

With regard to context, Theodore Matula drives home the importance of this issue in music, communication, and rhetoric. He states, “Signs and symbols—words, music, images—gain their meanings because they are associated with contexts, and their presence triggers residual effects of these contexts” (Matula 221). In other words, if the issue of context dictates all communication, one cannot discount the intriguing power of context when discussing the art form and communicative practice of music. Matula also touches on the aforementioned idea of the communication model that simply involves a sender and a receiver and their various messages. Matula points out that music tends to be a more multifaceted means of communication that works on a much higher level, and that the content cannot be easily transmitted between the sender and the receiver. He claims that in order to find the true meaning in the concept of music as a form of communication, music must be understood as extremely context laden and not just an arrangement of symbols (Matula 235).

Moving slightly out of the subject of the rhetorical properties of music to the meaning-rich communicative nature of music, James Lull’s work stands out as a triumph of how these two ideas come together in order to offer coherency. Lull explains that communication occurs through the channel of music in three meaning-bearing stages—
physical, emotional, and cognitive—which are respectively interpreted as dancing, emotionally reacting (or feeling), and the act of processing the information that the music is sending to the audience (Lull 368). This notion makes it easy to see how music communicates and communication happens through music, opening up the hermeneutic door and providing some guiding questions for attempting to gain more knowledge in this area. What does the physical act of dancing communicate? How does the musical piece touch human emotions? How does a given piece of music transfer meaning and information effectively? Lull argues that music encourages movement, involvement, and socialization through the very act of dance or through the acknowledgment of memorized lyrics (368).

The work of Lull may provide some of the most vital research in the area of how music communicates a message and meaning from one individual to another. These questions can be explored using the idea that music makes us act, feel, and think—the communication field’s foundational issues of ethos, pathos, and logos. The elements of interpretation, or deciphering meaning, continue to become important as this discussion moves forward.

Some time has been spent specifically looking at music as a form of socio-political expression. Everett states that music, particularly rock and roll music, is most definitely a valid means of expression, and that the primary means is purely based upon the music’s qualities. Everett also points out that the secondary means of expression is a sociological function that depends on the listener and the audience to interpret and redefine in order to create meaning (ix). Everett, in order to establish rock music as a legitimate means of expression, first admits that popular culture takes first priority in the functional properties of music before attempting to explain the social implications of musical expression. In other
words, one will typically enjoy music for stylistic preferences before finding the meaning that is contained within the piece.

Along with the clear sociological and obvious means of expression that music exerts, some see music as a powerful giver of meaning as it allows for the expression of one’s inner-self and emotions. Colin McAlpin, who dedicates an entire volume of study to music and expression, specifically addresses music as a meaningful expression of what he calls “social sense” (295). McAlpin discusses music as something that begins as isolated and then, after being shared, becomes a publicly recognized expression of meaning (295). McAlpin states that music “speaks the one true language of the soul,” suggesting that the medium, in connection with the message, is a means of making all humans interconnected and acting as one social unit (297). The power of music has been recognized by many (Lieberman 29; Sellnow 66), but it is McAlpin who goes into depth of how music is used to bring human cultures together through structures of shared meaning, thus referring to music as the “one great unifier” (298).

Perhaps the best way to understand music as a legitimate expression of meaning is to look to Walter Fisher’s work on human communication as an act of narrative. Fisher discusses in depth about what makes human communication and understanding a viable use for the metaphor of narrative, but he specifically states that people tell stories in order to communicate (5). He also contends that people buy into specific narratives through adherence to what he refers to as “good reasons”: “matters of history, biography, culture, and character” (5). This view of narrative allows us to see music as another form of human communication. Information is passed through the expressive vehicle of music; this is information that regards historical accounts, tales of heroes and villains, communicative
genres that speak to ideals and norms of a culture, and story songs that pass along a message, a warning, or a moral.

These perspectives on finding the communicative meaning in music illuminate another side of the powerful character of the jazz funeral. However, Viktor Frankl’s work moves the jazz funeral from resistance and denial to a feisty representation of the stand against the inevitable meeting of the reaper.

The Stand Against the Reaper

Contemplation about the notion of meaning found within death makes the work of Viktor Frankl very significant. In *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1946), Frankl discusses his philosophical evidence for the meaningfulness of life. Frankl’s work is not grounded in abstraction, but penned from the position of a man who experienced the suffering associated with the concentration camps operated by the Nazis during World War II (Arnett and Arneson 210). It is because of his unique wisdom in finding meaning within the darkness of life and death that his work offers significant implications for how humans think about making and finding meaning through communication.

Frankl’s work is important for bringing together all of the previous notions through his metaphor of “meaning” and taking the stand against the inevitable. In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Frankl states that despite the negative effects of suffering and exploitation, the experience itself can yield a return that makes a person feel purposeful (67). Frankl explains that there is room for a purposeful life that is not in the constant throws of “creativeness and enjoyment” (67). These thoughts are just one place were one will be able to see the range of philosophical thought, from the classics to Becker, intersect with the tradition of the jazz funeral. Death, loss, and suffering can be meaningful experiences despite the inherent physical and emotional pain these experiences produce.
Each chapter of this project will end with an engagement of the life and work of Viktor Frankl in order to provide a stronger understanding of how his thoughts on death and meaning were fostered. Four of Frankl’s works will be used within the remaining pages of this chapter, including *Psychotherapy and Existentialism* (1967), *The Doctor and the Soul* (1986), *The Unheard Cry for Meaning: Psychotherapy and Humanism* (1978), *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1946). All of these texts will be investigated in order to find touch points between the history of the philosophy of death, existentialism, the work of Ernest Becker, and the practice of the New Orleans jazz funeral.

The examination of Frankl’s ideas is crucial for pulling together the concepts of the history of the philosophy of death, the sociological viewpoint provided by Becker, and the actual playing out of the ideas through currently practiced traditions and artistic expressions. Perhaps the most beautifully worded sentence that Frankl pens within *Man’s Search for Meaning* is found within his discussion of human choice and how true meaning is forever stored within that vault of the history. “At any moment,“ Frankl begins, “man must decide, for better or worse, what will be the monument of his existence” (121). The words of Frankl illustrate his belief that the legacy that one leaves behind is based upon choices, in both actions and words, during the course of a lifetime, and that those choices are what constitute the heritage of meaning. Frankl is not alone in this feeling, and the reader will hopefully find that there are many communicative spaces in popular culture, the arts, and in traditions and rituals that engage the end of a life while also providing a monument for an individual’s existence.

**Engaging the Reaper: The Communicative Dance**

This introductory chapter has introduced a communicative dance with the reaper. Chapter two will explore Becker’s recognition of the human tendency to deny the call of the
reaper. Chapter three confronts the reaper through Feldman and Barrett’s explorations of the topic of death in Western and existential philosophy. In chapter four, the reaper is engaged in a conversational dialogue as Becker’s final interview provides communicative possibilities in which his theory becomes practice. The reaper is marched, in chapter five, alongside the powerful and meaningful ritual of the New Orleans jazz funeral. Throughout all of the chapters, Frankl sets an ethically-charged and meaning-centered communicative tone that sets the pace and teaches the steps of this communicative dance.
Chapter Two

The Denial of the Reaper

“Death was this world’s tribute and the other world’s bequest. To shun it was to cheat both sides.”

—Tom Robbins, *Jitterbug Perfume*

If one states the importance of taking communication study seriously, then it would also be accurate to say that how one communicates about death within our society truly matters. Ernest Becker (1924-1974), throughout the entire body of his work, recognized the problem that is created when one denies the eventual meeting of the reaper. Ernest Becker did not have an easy life and he placed his career on the line for what he held to be socially and politically sacred. It is because of his tenacity and bravery that this chapter turns to his body of work in order to understand the communicative problem associated with our normative practices regarding how we deal with death. Through the metaphor of “denial” Becker provided insights into how human beings are socialized and set up to fail. This failure eventually cheapens life through the denial of death.

**Introduction**

There is a significant problem in regard to how humans discuss death and how, if at all, meaning is found within the darkness that is connected to such a moment. Ernest Becker recognized this problem, which became a vital aspect of his life’s work that he addressed as a “denial” of death. In denying death, a human pretends that the reaper’s gaunt fist will never knock as his or her door. Through the metaphor of denial, as well as “anxiety,” Becker tells the story of how human society has become paralyzed by the terror and subsequent denial associated with temporality. This chapter seeks to explore this problem through the eyes of
Becker in order to recognize the inbuilt communication problems associated with such rejection of reality.

The first section of this chapter, *Situating Becker within an Era that Denied Death*, places the work of Becker within the historical moment in which he lived. The second section, *Becker’s Contributions to an Era that Denied Death*, offers an account of Becker’s career. Following this is *Becker’s Understanding of the Reaper*, which explores the four strands of Becker’s major project regarding death and anxiety. In the fourth section, *In Extremis: Becker’s Final Contribution*, one will see how Becker put his thoughts into action during his own meeting with the reaper. Finally, Becker’s work will be viewed again through the lens Viktor Frankl as the chapter ends with *The Communicative Importance of Engaging the Reaper*.

This chapter, grounded in the work of Becker, is vital to the entire project as it sets up the fundamental communicative problem regarding how humans meet and discuss death. If the focus of this project is to explore how one may communicate about death in a way that inspires conversation and expresses genuine meaning, then the root of the communicative problem must be examined. Becker argues that this problem is at our very core and if one is to begin to find a way to transcend it, they must understand why it exists and not simply act unreflectively without acknowledging the issue. In order for this project to gain any momentum, one must establish that there is, indeed, a communicative defect inherent in how humans communicate about death.

**Situating Becker within an Era that Denied the Reaper**

In order to understand Becker’s work and project, one must also consider the nature of the world in which Becker lived. It is vital to situate Becker within a historical moment in which social conflict was both a national and international centerpiece. Conflicts regarding race, politics, poverty, and religion were major struggles in daily life (Isserman and Kazin ix).
Becker received his Ph.D. in 1960 and spent the rest of the decade producing numerous works on human existence. The 1960s, the decade when Becker wrote most of his books, were defined by extreme recklessness and rage that, somehow, simultaneously produced some of the best cultural examples of literature, art, and music (Isserman and Kazin 5).

Internationally speaking, this era was marked by the Vietnam War. This war had both national and international impact, lasting nineteen years and becoming the longest war that the United States was ever engaged in (Isserman and Kazin 67). The 1960s also brought forth an incredible amount of conflict in the Middle East, much of which still has cultural and political impact on how life is lived there today (Tucker xxi). However, it was the Cold War, considered the pinnacle of individualism and multinational struggle of this era, that was more frightening than the actual violent conflicts that were breaking out during this period. All of these examples seemingly point to a decade hindered by fear and serving as an almost daily reminder of what the human individual is trying to deny and escape—death.

In their work Habits of the Heart (1985), Robert Bellah and his colleagues discuss the idea of individualism gone mad through the metaphor of “therapeutic culture” and explain the extreme danger associated with this particular self-focused orientation toward life. Bellah states that those who move through life with a therapeutic mindset are unable to take a stand for what is just while distrusting the idea of morality all together (129). Bellah’s hypothesis is that real work and accomplishments no longer matter; what trumps are personal feelings and individual experience (102). Finally, Bellah asserts that a therapeutic mindset limits our true understanding of community, how we make sense of human relationships, and our understanding of personal responsibility (138). Becker would likely agree that those very elements of a therapeutic culture allowed for the denial of death to become so ingrained within our contemporary society. Bellah adds further evidence to the idea that the constant
focus on the self and the limited experience of life’s authentic joy and pain marked not only the current historical moment, but also the decade of the 1960s.

Becker’s major works emerged out of this historical moment that was defined by tragic conflicts and brutality. The dire and dark historical moment of the 1960s may be an easy focus for a discussion about denying death, but perhaps more interesting are the candles lighting the darkness, the champions who responded to self-obsessed historical moment of the 1960s. Folk heroes like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez represented the world of music. The beatniks and poets heard their voices on the pages written by Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs. Those who fought for equality and civil rights looked to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Gloria Steinem. It was because of this historical moment that the liberal arts and social sciences received their own hero, Ernest Becker, who would never truly find appreciation during his life. Becker’s bravery and feistiness served as a brilliant response to the brutishness and uncertainty that characterized the 1960s.

**Becker’s Contributions to an Era That Denied Death**

Both history and context do indeed matter; it is for this reason that one must take a holistic look at the life of Ernest Becker in order to truly understand his work and its significance. It is not the desire of this project to explain away Becker’s positions based on his personal or professional life. This is not an attempt to use amateur psychology to judge the work that a person leaves behind. Instead, this project approaches the work of Becker with recognition that his struggles serve as a vital lens for understanding Becker within the context of his brief and often difficult life. Becker sought to discover why humans act as they do (Kenel 11). Through a brief exploration of how Becker lived his life and approached his work, one is able to see how this question sprouted from the seemingly dead philosophical ground of his historical moment and claimed field of study.
**Prior to the Denial Project.** Becker may have gained respect and passion for the exuberance of philosophical ground through his Jewish upbringing in Massachusetts. Born in 1924 to immigrant parents, Becker was a war hero before he seriously studied the philosophical implications of the ugliness of human warlike tendencies (Leifer 45). It is probable that his military service during World War II and his role in the liberation of the Nazi-controlled concentration camps brought Becker face to face with the horrors of war that informed his later work, which ultimately deals with death, denial, and violence. As a Jewish-American, Becker witnessed firsthand the destructive and unreflective nature of modernity before stepping foot in a classroom at Syracuse University, which he attended after the war ended (Leifer 45).

After completing his undergraduate work, Becker, as a true cosmopolitan, took up government work were he became deeply connected with Paris, France for several years. Although he was enamored with French culture and the academic lifestyle so respected by the Parisians, he eventually grew tired of his work and began to think more existentially about what may prove to be the human individual’s most complicated subject—himself. Becker, perhaps due to the repulsive acts of war that he witnessed coupled with his new life as a military intelligence liaison, began to question the specific meaning of his own existence (Leifer 45). The consideration of one’s purpose in life creates the necessary conditions in which one begins to ponder one’s own death. Philosophically thinking about the wonders of life seem to naturally call forth eventual meditations regarding the end of such earthly wonders. This initial inquiry and reflection propelled Becker’ overall project and encouraged him to explore the dark and terror-filled reality of human life.

**Becker’s Scholarly Contributions.** Ernest Becker’s thoughts were not simply a product of his own considerations, but rather a dedication that he remained true to during

**Academic and Professional Struggle.** Though Becker’s most celebrated work focused on the terror and denial associated with death, this work only took place over the span of a few short years. Becker’s scholarly career lasted roughly fifteen years in which he tackled some of the major questions of human existence (Liechty 11). He has been called “nomadic” in his role as an academic as he was often denied the safety of a tenured position (Liechty 11). Becker, who was always attempting to examine why people do the things they do, was eventually offered refuge at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada (Leifer 48). During his time at Simon Fraser, Becker continued his academic battle for multidisciplinary study; however, more importantly, this is where he penned his final three works. These books, *The Birth and Death of Meaning, The Denial of Death, and The Escape From Evil*, are akin to an artist’s canvas in which his thoughts on death and human nature became colorful and painted what would become his legacy. Though these books will be discussed in more depth and clarity later in this particular chapter, it is important to note that these were Becker’s final offerings to a question that he spent many years attempting to answer.
Aside from the struggle involved with attempting to answer what he considered to be life’s ultimate disgrace, Becker’s career at the university was seemingly a constant battle against normative conventions. Becker’s career was marked by pain and disappointment as he attempted to continue his work. There are several factors that contributed to Becker’s inability to fit in with the academics, but likely the chief reasoning for this was his quest to drastically alter the system of higher education in a way that would provide a multidisciplinary framework to study what he called the “human sciences” (Leifer 48). It was his refusal to blindly accept the status quo that led Becker to experience conflict and friction in nearly every academic appointment that he had ever held.

Becker’s ability to attract academic warfare through his desire to fundamentally alter the face of liberal arts education was an ongoing theme as he moved from one university to the next. The idea of human anxiety and the problems that it created, which would later become part of his legacy, informed the first major disturbance of his professional life. In 1962, Becker presented material that challenged the idea of mental illness being viewed as a medical issue, suggesting instead that it be considered a “problem of the living” (Leifer 46). This reframing of mental illness called for, from Becker’s standpoint, psychiatry to be incorporated into the study of social reconstruction, education, and sociology, otherwise known as the science of man. This notion challenged the very academic foundations of psychiatry and enraged many in the practice and study of psychoanalysis. The New York State Department of Mental Hygiene eventually forbade Becker and his mentor/collaborator, Thomas Szasz (b. 1920), from teaching interns and residents within the psychiatric field in New York. Becker’s poking of the metaphorical lion brought forth immediate conflicts, including boycotts of his work, departmental strife, and his eventual dismissal from Syracuse University (Leifer 46). Though his mentor was not fired due to the
protection that tenure offers, Becker was ultimately fired for his personal support of and collaboration with Szasz, demonstrating his loyalty to his colleague as well as his allegiance to pure academic freedom (Leichty 14). Becker’s seemingly promising theories never gained gravitas within the academic or medical communities. Instead, this rejection merely instigated Becker’s long and torrid pattern of having prickly passion for ideas that would not win him power or immediate praise.

Becker spent nearly a year in Rome dissecting and refining his thoughts regarding human behavior before returning to an unlikely place. In the fall of 1964, Becker returned to Syracuse University where his allies had secured him a single-year appointment working with the departments of sociology and education (Leifer 47). Ignored and mocked by the formal medical school that he was once intimately connected to, Becker’s focus of attention remained on scholarly productivity and his blossoming theory of man. Becker continued to produce and maintained an active work life, but once again began to irritate the upper administrative hierarchy at Syracuse by publically criticizing the relationships that existed between the university and outside corporate/governmental organizations (Leifer 47). Becker was not asked to return for another semester.

After his professionally disastrous experiences at Syracuse ended, Becker plotted his course toward the west coast. He spent two years as a single-year contract employee at the University of California Berkeley where he was loved by students so much that they raised the funds to pay his salary when the university refused to hire him for a third year (Leifer 47). Sadly, this gesture was not appreciated by those in power who felt that it was a student-orchestrated plot to interject themselves into the practice of hiring and firing (Liechty 11). It has been noted that this amazing display of student support, where over two thousand students signed petitions in support of their much-loved teacher, made Becker somewhat of
a pariah among University of California Berkeley faculty and administration (Liechty 14). In a short and swift move, Becker took a position at neighboring San Francisco State University where he taught social psychology. Becker cherished his time in San Francisco, but he ultimately left this new teaching position for political reasons. Liechty states that Becker’s official reason for exiting was that “he could not teach freedom with the police on campus” (48). Becker, walking out on a limb and leaving for what he felt was a moral reason, was particularly bold because he had no foreseen possibility of employment at the time of his departure. Hence, Becker continued his journey, becoming what many have described as a “gypsy scholar” (Liechty, “A Four Part Sketch of Ernest Becker”).

A Scholarly Home. In the latter half of 1969, Becker’s nomadic academic life called him to Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, British Columbia, where he was appointed professor within a combined department of sociology, anthropology, and political science (Leifer 48). At this point Becker had spent his scholarly career moving from one academic position to another. In this time Becker had experienced the hell of war, earned his Ph.D., and published several academic works. After thirty years of strife and constant movement, Becker found his scholarly home. It was at Simon Fraser where Becker penned what have been lauded as his finest works, The Birth and Death of Meaning, The Denial of Death, and Escape from Evil (Leifer 48). It was during the 1969-1970 academic year that Simon Fraser University became a significant place of meaning for Becker, as he was finally granted full academic tenure (Liechty 14). Tenure insured that he would never again be the subject of an ideological witch-hunt with the sole purpose of silencing his ideas and running him out of the established institutional thought process. Becker’s journey thus far was comprised of exile, conflict, and institutional drifting; however, despite these hardships, Becker managed to publish roughly one book project per year since earning his Ph.D. in 1960 (Liechty 14).
Disciplined and principled, Becker was just beginning to earn respect as his theories on life and death were seemingly reaching the pinnacle of poignancy. Unfortunately, for Becker, the reaper had different plans. Simultaneously poetic and tragic, Becker’s untimely meeting with the reaper came in 1974.

Becker’s death is a vital piece of his story that will be explored later in this chapter. Becker’s experiences were certainly painful, but not surprising in a historical moment in which the individual self was so privileged. This era was seemingly governed by the very warnings that Becker presented in his writing. Though Becker would say that the human has always had a drive for violence and denial of death, it appears as if those two notions became particularly agitated during the 1960s in the United States.

The next section of this chapter will investigate the important contributions of Ernest Becker’s philosophy. Becker diligently fought an academic and existential battle against what he believed to be extremely damaging attributes of Western society. He labored for years in order to identify a theory for how humans meet death and the subsequent implications of following the path of denial. Becker’s philosophical aim and scholarly agenda continuously pointed him in the direction of searching for the reasons why humans act in strange ways. In the following section, Becker’s question will be illuminated in order to discover how he identified the problem of the denial of death.

**Becker’s Understanding of the Reaper**

The previous sections of this chapter have painted a biographical portrait of Becker, a man who was deeply passionate about social practices that convey honor and integrity. It is clear that Becker took his philosophical questions seriously and spent his short life battling social norms in order to expose the oft-ignored problem of death. In this section, several
categories of Becker’s thought will be explored in order to gain a comprehensive view of his contribution, as well as his identification of the uniquely human death problem.

While the crux of Becker’s theory has already been discussed, there is significant texture to his theory that must be explored. Daniel Liechty, author of *The Ernest Becker Reader* and vice president of the Ernest Becker Foundation, has spent many years attempting to provide a context in which Becker’s work can become more easily understood and culturally accepted. Liechty and Sam Keen, author of the foreword to *The Denial of Death*, have both attempted to break down Becker’s pioneering work into categories that help the novice understand how the story can be told in a more concise way. Specifically, Liechty identifies the four major points of emphasis found within Becker’s contribution: (1) the world is a terrifying place; (2) the basic motivation for human behavior is the need to control our anxiety, to deny the terror of death; (3) since the terror of death is so overwhelming we conspire to keep it unconscious; and (4) our heroic projects, aimed at destroying evil, have the paradoxical effect of bringing more evil into the world (15-16). The remainder of this section will explore and describe these themes in Becker’s work.

**A Terrifying Place.** The first step in Becker’s philosophical project is the recognition that humans are embedded inside a frightening world. Liechty states that the basis for Becker’s project is to oppose those in philosophy who believe that humans are continually evolving toward perfection (15), a common theme in the therapeutic culture in which Becker resided. Becker’s body of work points toward the notion that he believed that human posturing and self-promotion were moving the species toward the dissatisfying end of the myth of progress. Becker, who did not pretend to know what destiny had in store for the human species, surpassed the fantasy-driven notions of perfection and focused on
something that he could see—the terror associated with daily life as a human being (Liechty 15). This idea would be explained within his major texts.

Becker addresses this issue regarding the terrifying qualities of the world in several of his texts, but most distinctly in his final three offerings. It is in The Denial of Death that Becker spends the most time discussing the terror that consumes life because of death. Within this treatment of terror, Becker notes that many things motivate the human subject, but the most powerful motivational arm of existence is the very thought of inexistence (The Denial of Death 11). Therefore, the world is a chilling place because one is constantly confronted with the many ways one may be removed from it. One will see all of the death and pain associated with human life and inherently know that there are an incredible number of ways in which precious life could end at any moment. This idea, Becker states, is something that every major religious structure has taken on the burden of dealing with (The Denial of Death 12). Becker points to a long history of dedication by public structures to both recognize and attempt to find ways to come to grips with the frightening realization that death is real and permanent.

Becker articulates a paradox that he believes to be the inherent problem of man. Becker’s argument is based upon a notion that human beings consider themselves to be “symbolic” entities while still being natural beings. Man has so many unique attributes, such as a personalized name and an individual narrative, and is donned with a creative mind. This human ability allows one to be a “creator” and to play the role of a “small god” (The Denial of Death 26). Thus, the human ego appears to be empowered by the ability to think, create, and give names to the natural world into which he or she has been thrown. One could easily speculate on the possible problems inherent within this scenario, but one must also recognize how extremely unique the human mind is. Even though the human mind and
capability to function creatively is astonishing, Becker does not halt and begins to show the unpleasant side of human existence that creates confusion and fear.

One may ask, what could possibly knock the power-fueled human off of his or her throne and frighten them beyond belief? This disruption comes in the form of the temporal body. Harkening back to Eastern wisdom, Becker states that “man is a worm and food for worms,” creating the paradox that shakes the human species to its very core (The Denial of Death 26). The fragile human body is weak, experiences pain, and eventually dies. Becker paints the picture of a fractured human being left in two parts. This being is attentive to his or her own special qualities that allow them to rise above the seemingly mindless and uncreative animal population; however, the king of beasts and ruler of the earth is doomed to a death in which there is no control or escape (The Denial of Death 26). Becker’s treatment of this special and uniquely human problem shows why the world is such a frightening and terrifying place. The human has power and bountiful creativity; yet, he must concede to inescapable and everlasting death. This is where Becker sees the ultimate terror of human life in the manifestation of the daily reminder of death that “haunt[s] one’s dreams on even the most sun filled days” (The Denial of Death 26). This duality of the human spirit regarding death’s power calls one to consider how the reaper taunts even during life’s happiest moments.

Becker’s treatment of the terrifying nature of the world is quite simple to understand in this context. How could the human not be confused and frightened by a simultaneous feeling of both power and helplessness? It is also important to note that Becker routinely discusses how animals meet death in comparison to humans. Becker points out that animals are driven by unseen urges to feed, reproduce, and survive, arguing that this does not stop with the lower species, but is also a quality of human beings. The major difference is that the
animal fears death when necessary and, in the end, faces a slight experience of terror while humans are reminded daily that all living organisms shall one day cease to be (*The Denial of Death* 27). Therefore, the price that humans must pay for being at the top of both the metaphorical intellectual food chain and the literal biological food chain is the burden of walking through daily life knowing that one has an expiration date that is a complete mystery, the reason behind the seemingly mad human stance on death. The human must somehow grapple with sitting at the top of the food chain while still facing death, decay, and a return to the dirt in the same way that any lower species would. For this reason, the world is a frightening place and serves as the cause for the basic anxiety of human life.

**The Basic Anxiety.** One can now see Becker’s reasoning for why the world is such a terrifying place in which humans must live and interact. The next line of Becker’s major theory and argument sets up what this realization of death actually causes in the human experience. According to Sam Keen, as penned in the forward to Becker’s *The Denial of Death*, the realization of the fragility of human life causes the chief anxiety of existence. Humans strive and battle to manage and maintain power over anxiety, and that struggle becomes the basic motivational structure for nearly every move, choice, and engagement. That control becomes exercised through the denial of death (*The Denial of Death* xii). Human life may be filled with anxiety; yet, it is this particular angst that serves as the basic anxiety that undergirds nearly every human choice and communicative act.

Becker begins to discuss the idea of the anxiety associated with denying death as the interplay between anxiety and denial through the course of a lifetime. Becker uses children as an example of the damage caused by anxiety before the denial drive kicks in. He shows that the “denial systems” of the young are not fully developed, leaving children prone to eruptions of anxiety when meeting a fearful event (*The Denial of Death* 21). Many people have
witnessed this type of behavior and it may be easily attributed to children; however, one will see these impulses continue into adulthood and create ongoing friction in human life.

Any individual can observe the world around oneself and sense the anxiety that human beings experience on a daily basis. It has been noted that Becker’s theory behind the cause of this anxiety does not point toward the realm of sexuality that is often inferred by Freud and his followers (Liechty 15). Rather, it is self-awareness that serves as the foundation of fear and anxiety within the human subject; specifically, the self-awareness that it takes to realize that our human bodies are temporal and will one day cease living (Liechty 15). Although there are many important and necessary aspects of human life, none are as troubling to live without than our own consciousness of life. Perhaps the reason why urges inherent to human life, such as sex and food, are so significant to individuals is because they share the same goal of prolonging one’s life and instating one’s legacy.

One will see that many of these problems are uniquely human. Humans may be the only living creatures that worry about finances or ponder over their children’s poor behavior in school. The very same human capability that allows for such realizations also causes the so-called basic anxiety for human existence—one’s own self-awareness. Because of the blessing, or curse, of human recognition of self, one’s own temporality becomes starkly unavoidable. Becker’s argument is that humans are constantly exposed to the reality of ongoing catastrophic events, which creates anxiety-laden panic in adults. Interestingly enough, Becker also points out that what people interpret as “impending catastrophe” are often harmless events, but it is the ongoing and underlying basic anxiety of death that causes one to overreact during safe moments (The Denial of Death 21). The problem that is created for people occurs once they understand that death is inevitable. It is as if humans are so afraid of the single moment of death that the relatively safe nature of daily life is treated as a
potential danger. The human being goes through life with their basic anxiety focused on the uncontrollable future rather than the present moment in which they are currently taking part.

The uncovering of this enduring basic anxiety found in human existence leads to further problems. It would seem that by living life as if it is dangerous, combined with the previous recognition that death can be denied, would ultimately devalue everything. Becker discusses this very theme through examination of the clinical work that has been done with children who deal with extreme anxiety disorders. He asserts that we split from less-intelligent animals with our uniquely human problem in which both life and death lose value. What Becker describes is a human being that is afraid of both life and death concurrently (The Denial of Death 53). Not only is the importance and meaning behind death lost, but the fear of death creates a barrier between one fully experiencing life and knowing one’s self.

Becker, a champion of multidisciplinary study, moves this conversation beyond mere discussion of traditional physiological observations and depends on existential philosophy to provide evidence for his claims. He credits Martin Heidegger with bringing the notion of fearing life and death to “the center of existential philosophy,” considering him not only a contemporary, but also an unknowing partner of likeminded psychologist, Otto Rank (The Denial of Death 53). Becker shows that Heidegger’s chief blame for what caused the ongoing human anxiety was based upon “being in the world,” in which the human being is apprehensive of fully experiencing the world and thus becomes devalued (The Denial of Death 53). One begins to see a philosophical lineage of people thinking about how the frightening aspects of the world and the persistent fear of death may stand in the way of fully experiencing the life that stands before one.

Throughout The Denial of Death Becker discusses how this underlying and ongoing experience of anxiety shakes and shapes the human soul. Becker draws a vivid picture as he
unmasks some of the major psychological and phenomenological problems that the basic anxiety causes. This is truly the path toward the denial of death and the devaluation of life itself. As attention is focused upon an uncontrollable end, the authentic joyful experiences of life are ignored or corrupted because of the image of a lingering reaper.

The Unconscious Conspiracy. The first two major points of Becker’s position on the engagement of death are now clear. The world is a terrifying place in which one is constantly battling against the real or perceived threats that could end life at a moment’s notice. The realization of terror creates a scenario in which the human being engages life with a core anxiety about death, which clouds both death and life. Becker’s next question is interested in what humans do in order to negotiate the ongoing anxiety that is associated with the awareness of our eventual death. This section will discuss what has been called the “unconscious conspiracy” (Liechty 15), which becomes the main engine for how death is ignored, devalued further, and denied. There may be many conspiracies, or lies, that the human engages in, but the unconscious conspiracy becomes the pivot point for nearly all human unhappiness, destruction, and the loss of meaning.

Though Becker describes the reality of the underlying conspiracy that humans take part in, one should not confuse this machination as simple. The building and dispersing of the conspiratorial ideals are complex and dangerous. The development of this conspiracy begins with repression before one unleashes “the entire range of psychological defenses” in order to keep the anxiety at bay (Liechty 15). The following step is not just about the individual person, but a culture that supports certain values and beliefs that legitimize the conspiracy. Western culture validates heroics, a term that Becker hinges his theory upon and will be discussed in more detail within the latter part of this section (Liechty 16). It is the heroic system that gives the death denier a symbolic and everlasting life. This section will
explore Becker’s notion of the unconscious conspiracy and how heroics play a vital role in suppressing anxiety.

At the heart of this conspiracy is a creation that has allowed the human being to be fooled into thinking that the reaper will never truly come for his or her soul. This creation manifests as sophisticated hero structures that human beings have put into place in order to become, in a sense, bigger than death itself. Becker notes that the true nature of heroism is “first and foremost a reflex of the terror of death,” and that the most true form of heroism comes in the form of acts of valor despite the lingering possibility of death (*The Denial of Death* 11). The act of death defiance is celebrated, repeated, and emulated. Becker describes in great detail how the greatest of honors are bestowed upon these heroic individuals who face death and return victorious, specifically pointing toward an ancient view of true heroism in which a person who could enter the spirit world of the dead and return alive would achieve the ultimate hero status (*The Denial of Death* 12). One can see this form of heroism exemplified in the beliefs of ancient societies, as well as at the center of every major religion.

It is important to understand Becker’s argument regarding the longstanding human relationship with the heroic engagement of death. However, the very core of the current problem is the repression of the anxiety caused by lingering death. There are some, according to Becker, who claim that the repression of the anxiety is proof that the fear of death has been replaced and is no longer there. However, he cites scientific experiments that measured bodily responses when one was questioned about death which, according to his research, shows that, despite the repression, the unsettling fear of death churns at the core of the human soul (*The Denial of Death* 20). In other words, repression may mask the fear of death, but it does not remove it. Nor is that ill feeling cured through repression.
Although the debate regarding the value of repression continues, Becker’s next move is to show how hero structures are built upon a foundation of death repression. He calls this “man’s tragic destiny,” the very idea that one must spend the course of a lifetime proving one’s own value. One interprets him or herself as the main object in all of creation in order to prove that his or her own existence is worthy of being greater than death (The Denial of Death 4). In order for this conspiracy to function, humans must not only repress but also create an unrealistic self-image. This great lie is not simply one that we whisper into the ear of our own psyche, but one that is performed in nearly every function of life. Becker takes care when outlining the many things that humans do in order to build themselves as heroes acting in defiance of perceived authority and attempting to find meaning through the channel of other human beings. He states that humans engage in “symbolic” relationships in order to find meaning, all the while becoming enslaved further and perpetuating the lie that was self-told (The Denial of Death 56). In essence, when a life is grounded in the denial of death, then the very life of that individual becomes tainted and unreal. It would seem as if every step in this heroic structure sets the human being up to fail in regard to true experience of emotions, significant relationships, and the negation of the human journey to find meaning.

It should be noted that Becker does not reject the notion of genuine heroic courage, though he feels that these acts are rare. Becker points toward the idea that most individuals who are considered “heroic” often do nothing courageous for the benefit of other humans (The Denial of Death 47). This lack of real human courage is problematic for Becker and is based on the way in which meaning is created. Ultimately, it becomes an issue regarding authority. According to Becker, humans lack true courage because our meaning structures stifle any recognition of true authority. Becker states that for most people, meaning is
created from the outside; our authority and self-worth only come from our interactions with others and are not based upon inherent human worth (*The Denial of Death* 48). This notion is problematic and adds integrity to the idea of a devalued, false self that creates inauthentic meaning and denies death.

Becker’s work shows how hero structures are built both socially and psychologically. It also shows the detrimental tolls that these structures take on an unreflective life. One’s role in society, as well as one’s own character, are developed unconsciously through complex repression (Liechty 17). How can these competing structures last throughout the life of a person? How long can the repression and falsified image of a hero last before crumbing?

The following section will discuss the paradox that this conspiracy pivots upon.

**The Heroic Paradox.** At this point, one can see that the denial of death is a legitimate concern and that it clearly does not exist without some real underlying fear of death. The fear of death in a frightening world creates the anxiety that requires the human being to take part in unconscious repression and creation of unreal heroic structures. This next section will move from the unconscious conspiracy to a more in-depth look at Becker’s metaphor of heroism. This paradox, according to Keen in the introduction to *The Denial of Death*, is Becker’s major concern and prescription for overcoming the problems associated with heroism. One must engage death directly in order to not cheat oneself out of the importance found within the experience of death (*The Denial of Death* xxi). Human life is filled with paradoxes; however, Becker points toward the notion that this particular paradox reigns supreme. This is the paradox that devalues all human heroics because of the path of death and destruction that is caused by it.

The notion that has been touched upon several times thus far is that humans are not denying death or creating these hero structures out of malicious intent, but rather as a
byproduct of societal and psychological influences. Born from good intent, the human builds a world in which he or she can deal with the terrifying aspects of existence and hide from the terror of death. Instead, the structures of heroism become counterproductive. Thus the paradox—what was intended to remove “evil” from the world instead creates more evil (The Denial of Death XII). If the structure of heroism is built upon the unstable ground of repression, the structure becomes faulty and people get hurt.

At the core of Becker’s troubling paradox is the matter of how humans engage the world around them. With the recognition of the horrifying nature of death and the subsequent repression, what happens next is that humans tend to take typical, everyday situations and turn them into something much larger and perceivably more tragic than needed. No matter if it is interactions with other people or conflicts over ideology, religion, politics, or race, humans process these situations as threats to his or her own existence, turning them into physiological “life or death situation[s]” (Liechty 16). One may ask what life is without serious engagements with other people or without leaning into ongoing issues of religion or politics. This is simply another attribute of the mosaic of human life, when the outcome rubs against the issues and ideas that one may find disagreeable. Becker explains that what really bothers people is the “incongruity” of life. Humans by and large are not content to meet and engage life where it meets them (The Denial of Death 34). Every movement in human life is seemingly an obstacle course of threats to existence, no matter if those threats are genuine or perceived.

Becker would again blame the duality of the human being when discussing why and how these issues, regarding how we treat other people and the inherent conflicts between human nature and society, come to light. The idea that the humans are driven by the repression of anxiety caused by the recognition of “animal limitations” is how Becker
accounts for almost every move that is made within this system of heroics and repression (The Denial of Death 87). People experience the ugliness of death and pretend that it is not there, deny their own animal limitations and human existence, and then battle against all others who attempt to expose the great lie that has been whispered into one’s own ear. The human being strives to live a life in which he or she is one with the natural and spiritual worlds while simultaneously attempting to stand alone as something unique (The Denial of Death 151). The psychological motives for this behavior are astounding, but also add credibility to the very nature of Becker’s paradox.

Though it is often frowned upon to assign motives to individuals, Becker attributes two distinct motives to the notion of wanting to be part of the world while simultaneously being separated from it. The first motive for this phenomenon is that people inherently want to be part of something that is larger than themselves. This motive is born from fear of isolation and desire to understand all of the mysteries that are part of human existence (The Denial of Death 151). The second motive appears to be for the “development of self powers,” in which the heroism structures come into play and the human subject yearns to transcend the rest of the pack by unveiling his or her unique, godlike qualities (The Denial of Death 153). One sees the competing paradox in which people crave to be part of something larger than oneself in order to belong, but also want to rise above that connection in order to assert dominance, uniqueness, and legacy.

Ultimately, for Becker, this is the most painful part of the paradox that one experiences at the hour of one’s own death. A lifetime has been dedicated to becoming a unique person; yet, none of it matters to the reaper who indiscriminately comes knocking. Despite heroic efforts, the denial of death, and an attempt to become a god among men, all of life eventually comes to an unavoidable end (The Denial of Death 269). If one is not
careful, death will negate all that one has done with a life. Heroic structures are meaningless in the face of a death that removes the momentum fostered by the self-told lie.

Becker does offer starting points for how to solve the paradoxical idea that human-created heroic structures cause more harm than add benefit. However, he does not seem particularly hopeful about the final outcomes of any major attempt to correct it. Becker admits that he often diverges from Freudian thought, yet agrees with the line of thinking that centers around offering truth to human beings in a helpful manner. Both Freud and Becker feel that the main avenue for correction is to observe and analyze massive amounts of people through psychoanalysis, which Becker feels is an attempt to force a “less evil world” (The Denial of Death 283). The time and psychological manpower for this mass healing exercise would be impossible, forcing Becker to abandon the idea. He sees that evil is not just within the flawed human soul, but also exists within nature itself. He admits that taking this method seriously would mean not taking real life experiences seriously enough (The Denial of Death 283).

The way to fix the problem is not through manipulation and forced acceptance of reality. Manipulation, coupled with what Becker calls “utopian science,” would weaken humans rather than support healthy structures (The Denial of Death 284). Attempts to manipulate the human being into realizing the error of his or her ways would only serve to strip him or her of what it means to be human. The removal of the drive for heroism and victory would create more meaninglessness at the forefront (The Denial of Death 284). Becker points toward a fork in the road in which either direction will cheapen human life and create more discontent.

Becker’s words from The Denial of Death feel bleak; yet, he offers hope in his final work, Escape from Evil (1975), which was published posthumously. Becker believes the true
paradox in human existence is that the hero structures that were built to overcome evil have somehow created more evil in this world (*The Denial of Death* XII). It is in *Escape from Evil* that Becker discusses at length the very idea of human evil, the destructive paradox, and his final offering of hope. While the hope component of Becker’s contribution revolves around the presence of evil, which is out of hand, one must look to this final work in order to place his classification of evil into context.

Much of Becker’s thoughts on evil and the destructive paradox were described in *The Denial of Death*; however, this final work most plainly states the fundamental problem. Becker concedes that all living creatures strive for survival even if they do not have the awareness to understand the finality of death. Because of human knowledge of death, our attempt to gain power becomes an attempt to control and eliminate death’s intrinsic evil (*Escape from Evil* 148). The entirety of human life is a matter of battling the awareness of death through an attempt to become bigger and more powerful than it. Becker plays out this paradox as he points toward what he feels is the true tragedy of human nature, that by trying to control evil humans see evil in all aspects of life and accuse and judge the wrong facets of life as evil (*Escape from Evil* 148). This process not only destroys the perceived enemies of the human being, but also does great damage to the human himself, thus bringing more evil into the world.

This is perhaps the darkest of Becker’s thoughts on human existence. Entire lives are spent attempting to become gods among men, heroes that are able to defy death and destroy evil. However, the role of this flawed heroic structure causes one to see evil in even the most unlikely of places, causing one to feel as if the only way to have the everlasting life of a hero is to destroy all enemies and perpetuate one's own heroic status. The hero becomes a savior to him or herself by spilling the blood, no matter how brutally, of other humans in the world.
In order to take control of the fear of death one becomes part of the problem, and these brutal actions make the world a more defective, dangerous, and evil place.

Becker’s final words ring of a tempered hope. Through a career that focused on the flawed and wicked ways of humans, Becker ends his last published text by questioning what realistically can be done at this point in human history. He feels that there will always be cases of humans attempting to rid the world of evil through unspeakable acts upon those who are the closest and most like them (Escape from Evil 168). However, he sees an opening for addressing this destructive issue on a certain level. If the motive to murder and destroy is driven by animalistic fear, then Becker feels that it can be observed and pacified. On the other hand, if the drive to kill is simply the lustful facet of human nature, then our entire species is defective and we must live with “butchery” (Escape from Evil 169). While it does not offer a sense of incredible hopefulness, Becker ends his final work by cementing that he does not believe that humans may ever be able to truly transcend the evil that living with the awareness of death imposes. Nevertheless, he states that through multidisciplinary study and a respect for science, psychology, and religion, we may be able to “throw something solid into the balance of irrationalism” (Escape from Evil 170). Humans must insert even the smallest amounts of reason into the madness of human life in order to balance the destruction, but not end it completely (Escape from Evil 170). This message of hope is realistic. It does not speak in universals. It does not claim to know any one way to fix the problem on a mass level. It simply offers an avenue to curtail the destruction and fight our delusions on a small level. As one will see in the next section, the end of Becker’s life was a manifestation of this final message of hope.

**In Extremis: Becker’s Meeting with the Reaper**
The major components of Becker’s argument about the destructive implications of the denial of death have been laid out at this point. However, it is important to look not just at the words that Becker spoke regarding death, but how he navigated his own meeting with the reaper. Though the mission of this project is not to engage Ernest Becker based on his personal life, there is value in understanding how his thoughts on death and denial came into play during his final hours. Becker, a man who had so much to communicate about the troublesome manner in which humans walk through life, offers additional insights through how he faced his own untimely death.

Though he was incredibly productive Ernest Becker did not live a long life. Becker, after being diagnosed with cancer nearly a year and a half earlier, died on March 6, 1974 at the age of 49 (Leifer 49). As noted previously, Becker’s life had been mired with a series of professional disasters, betrayals, and scholarly disturbances. Despite what some would consider a tumultuous career, his work was beginning to catch fire prior to his death. During his concluding years, Becker would finally achieve academic tenure. On May 6, 1974, exactly two months after his death, Becker was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction (Leifer 49). One can only imagine how pleased Becker would have been to know that his life’s work was recognized as well as respected. Becker, a man ahead of his intellectual time, was a tragic victim of modernity in which his calls were ignored. The right time and place for his more postmodern dedication to multidisciplinary study would find an intellectual home toward the end of his life rather than his time as a young scholar.

Even though his work was not widely discussed or cited until after his death, Becker sensed the value of his project up to the minute of his passing. Likely, the most intimate and clear account of Becker’s final days comes from the foreword to *The Denial of Death*, in which philosopher Sam Keen describes his first and final engagement with a man about to meet the
reaper. Keen describes his first meeting with Becker, which occurred when Keen was working for a psychology periodical. After reading *The Denial of Death*, Keen decided that it would be important to interview this man whose thoughts on death were original and titillating. After learning from Becker’s wife Marie that the final stages of cancer had set in and that an interview would be too much for Becker, Keen had conceded that the meeting would not take place (*The Denial of Death* xi), depriving the world of the interview because of Becker’s bleak and ill-timed circumstances.

Instead, after Becker had learned about Keen’s request for an interview, he asked his wife to contact Keen, informing him that Becker wanted to meet him at once and inviting him to Vancouver for the interview (*The Denial of Death* xi). Keen made it to Becker’s hospital room while he was still coherent, having both the physical and mental strength to engage in what would be his final interview. As Keen entered the room where Becker’s body was dying but where his mind continued to reign, Becker uttered the following words to began the interview:

> You have caught me in extremis. This is a test of everything I’ve written about death. And I’ve got a chance to show how one dies, the attitude one takes. Whether one does it in a dignified, manly way; what kinds of thoughts one surrounds it with; how one accepts death (*The Denial of Death* xi).

The beginning of this exchange between Becker and Keen marks the interesting manner in which Becker begins to take his work out of the abstract and place it into the reality of everyday life. One may argue that Becker’s work always expressed a realistic tone. It is at this point in which Becker begins to look at the range of issues and problems noted through the course of his career and place them into the context of actually facing his own mortality.
Becker was now in the unique position to put years of theory into practice, using himself as the subject with death as the eventual result.

Becker’s opening words to Keen are particularly interesting when considering the Latin phrase that he utters, “in extremis.” Merriam-Webster’s dictionary states that this phrase means “in extreme circumstances,” most often at the point of one’s death. This is a powerful phrase for Becker to utter as he acknowledges that his breath will soon stop and that there is no turning back. Becker’s recognition, coupled with his apparent desire to die in the same manner that he had advocated in his writing, adds credibility to the scope of his entire argument regarding death. This is a man not defying death, but defying the temptations of denial. His desire was to talk about his own death, not in a therapeutic manner, but as a means to serve as an example, or case study, of the philosophical positions that he offered to the world.

Becker lived in a world in which he could assume what one would do at the hour of one’s own death. Now he was seeing life come to an end and offering even more textured and influential insight. Keen states that their conversation was deep even though they had never met prior. The normal conversation of the everyday was absent as both men were aware that their time together would be brief. During this conversation they spoke of evil, what death looks like when one is forced to face it, and the wicked nature of cancer. When the conversation had ended they drank a small glass of wine together, said their farewells, and parted ways (The Denial of Death xi). In less than three months, Becker would be dead and Keen would be left with a life changing experience, recorded in later editions of The Denial of Death.

In the years since this meeting, Keen has become somewhat of a disciple of Ernest Becker. This meeting left an impression on Keen in which he saw the bravery that Becker
had displayed in the face of death. He felt as if Becker’s ideas became sharper during this moment due to the pain that he was forced to withstand and felt that it was an honor to see Becker’s “heroic agony” as his body failed and his ideas took flight (The Denial of Death xi). The reaper may claim the soul while the Earth inherits the body; yet, one’s important ideas transcend death, becoming the only way in which man can escape it.

This account of Becker “in extremis” is not meant to tug at one’s heartstrings, but rather to add credibility to Becker’s life’s work and the arguments found within his later works (The Denial of Death xi). He lived a life based upon multidisciplinary study of medicine, philosophy, psychology, and religion. Although many of his projects failed during his life, there are no accounts of him blaming any one area; with an enduring spirit, Becker continued to teach, think, learn, and write. When faced with an untimely death before age 50, Becker did not reject his thought system or belief structures. He, like the soldier that he was during his younger years, stayed the course, accepted his mission and met the reaper with the open-mindedness, courage, and dignity that he had hoped all humans would one day learn.

The Communicative Importance of Engaging the Reaper

Up to this point a holistic view of Becker’s life, work, and death has been offered. It is clear to see how the three cannot stand alone. His life informed his work and his work informed how he engaged death. As Keen illustrates, Becker’s life and meeting with death left a lasting impression and legacy in which Becker’s work could and would be engaged. However, because of the proposed goals of this project, one may ask what the connection is between Becker’s work and the study of human communication. This final section will utilize the work of Viktor Frankl’s Psychotherapy and Existentialism to place Becker’s work in the context of communication ethics theory.
Ernest Becker’s work has a fundamental grounding in action that is informed by theory and reflection. This may be the primary notion that is found in the work of both Frankl and Becker. For example, Frankl begins his work by discussing the foundations of logotherapy, a tool that he created in order to help people discover meaning in their lives. Frankl states that his project is not simply interested in analysis, but therapy as well (17). Frankl’s project feels similar to that of Becker as neither is solely interested in examining and deconstructing the ways in which humans make their way through life. Just as Frankl is interested in observation and eventual therapy, Becker is interested in the same. It is not enough to stand aside and talk about the way in which the world works; it must be coupled with some sort of action. The communicative implications are deep as one considers what the point of observation without action would be. This notion, for Frankl, is demonstrated through the metaphors of will, freedom, and meaning.

**Freedom of Will.** Frankl continues his explanation of logotherapy and creates spaces in which one can see interconnectedness between the work of Frankl, Becker, and communication ethics. Frankl states that the philosophy behind logotherapy hinges upon three interrelated assumptions: Freedom of Will, Will to Meaning, and Meaning of life (18). Freedom of will is defined by the power in which the human has control over the world in which he or she is embedded. Frankl talks about this idea of freedom as “freedom within limits,” and that human life is often a struggle with finding control in all of the realms of life in which one largely has no control (19). Though the notion gives the initial impression of powerlessness, human freedom comes from the ability to take a stand in the midst imperfect conditions (Frankl 19).

Frankl’s take on Freedom of Will is that the attitude one takes toward the flawed aspects of human life gives one power and freedom. It would seem as if Becker advocated a
similar position. Becker states that this false power accompanies the lack of a stand against what one is powerless against, such as death. Frankl begins to discuss this idea in a way that offers value for communication. His ideas suggest that humans have the power to not only take a stand against themselves, but also to reject their own fears (Frankl 19). Therefore, a communicative answer is given to the “death” problem as defined by Becker. While one may choose to not communicate to others or themselves about death, genuine freedom is found within the recognition and communication of what one is defenseless against.

**Will to Meaning.** Frankl’s next move is to discuss the metaphor of meaning. In regard to Will to Meaning, Frankl states that one does not find meaning through a “will to pleasure” or “will to power” because when one’s mission is to simply obtain pleasure or power, both ends are destroyed as a byproduct (21). Both the Will to Power and the Will to Pleasure are consequences of what the human truly needs, which is the Will to Meaning. This is in line with the work of Becker, who finds both pleasure and power for its own sake to be offensive and destructive. To use our communication as a means to gain power or experience pleasure strips communication from advanced meaning. However, one can easily see how genuine communication with the goal to uncover meaning could result in pleasure and power that is authentic, healthy, and enduring.

Perhaps Frankl’s most powerful idea on the Will to Meaning is the metaphor of a boomerang. Frankl explains that general wisdom would tell you that after a boomerang is thrown it should return to the person who launched it. However, the boomerang is an Australian hunting device and only returns to the hunter that has not made contact with his or her target. Frankl sees this as a metaphor for the human struggle to find meaning. Humans return to and focus on themselves only after their metaphorical target is missed.
That target is finding meaning in life (Frankl 24), which has direct connections to ideas discussed within the work of Becker.

For Becker, the human being wants to be part of something bigger while simultaneously focusing on his or her own individual autonomy (The Denial of Death 151). Frankl’s words are a helpful supplementary piece for Becker’s argument. We see the boomerang effect as humans attempt to connect themselves to something bigger; the persistent emptiness will turn them back toward themselves. It can be argued that we see this same scenario in human communication. If one is not able to connect with others and engage in meaningful communication, the target is missed, the boomerang returns to the speaker, and one is left to focus on the individual and not the community. The power of the boomerang metaphor has real value in the work of Frankl, Becker, and the study of communication.

One’s will toward meaning shows a healthy way in which to search for meaning within life; yet, Frankl gives the reader a last foothold on this process as he begins to engage the idea of the meaning of life. Frankl states that once the determination toward meaning is established the next step is to discuss the ultimate meaning of life (28). His argument revolves around the things in life that give it meaning. For Frankl, even if one does not realize it, there is constant meaning experienced until the moment of death. As the human finds meaning through work, deeds, and creativity, he or she will also find meaning through the experiences of truth and beauty offered by the world, and by the meeting of other human beings and the “unique qualities” that are brought forth by both parties (Frankl 29).

**Meaning of Life.** Frankl states that even when the human being is deprived of his or her creativity or receptivity, meaning can still be found. Even in the most hopeless situations the human being is allowed one final chance to embrace the ultimate meaning of
life (Frankl 29). In other words, grief has value. Becker’s contributions are surely in line with Frankl’s in regard to where one finds meaning within life. If the human acts in a manner that stifles creativity, silences others due to one’s battling hero structures, and considers death unimaginable or a devaluation of human life, one will sabotage the opportunity for finding meaning during life and in the face of death. From this standpoint, our communicative contributions truly matter for both the self and other. How one chooses to communicate about the world functions as a regulator for meaning. One cannot expect to communicate meaning if the other is being met as a constant enemy. Life cannot be considered meaningful if one engages it as a threat. There is no possible way to find meaning in death if the reaper is seen as an adversary rather than a necessary interlocutor.

The importance of the recognition of death is vital to both Frankl and Becker. Frankl states that a major contributing factor of his philosophy is that the temporality of human life does not make life meaningless and that man’s flaws give meaning where conventional wisdom states the opposite (30). Becker, through his work, points toward the idea that by denying death, one treats life as meaningless and therefore creates the very discontent that Frankl is attempting to alleviate. If one communicates about life as if it is devalued by death, one strips life of all of the possibilities to find and engage meaning. In order to communicate the value of life, what is needed is a paradigm shift. Death is not the death of the search for meaning. Death is not a nullification of the wonderful experiences that one has had. Rather, death is the culmination of a journey to uncover meaning through our daily engagement with the world and other human beings.

In this current historical moment and in our popular culture, there is a general sense that our words do not really matter. There is conventional knowledge that leads people to believe that how they chose to live their own lives will have no impact or bearing on the lives
of others. One of the major arguments of this project is that our communication does matter, especially when we must communicate about the important and unavoidable aspects of life. It is clear that Frankl and Becker both feel that how one meets death, no matter if it one’s own or the death of others, will likely impact how others greet the same moment. Simply put, there is communicative value in how one meets the reaper and it is time to find ways in which one may discuss, meet, and respect the communicative power that death offers for human life. The following chapter will begin to explore how the idea of death has been approached by various schools of philosophical thought in an attempt to recapture the importance of one’s final moments to not only the self, but also the community.
Chapter Three  

Confronting the Reaper in Western Philosophy

“Death hath more than one way to defeat a man, it seems. Death bests thee even while thou liveth.”—Tom Robbins, *Jitterbug Perfume*

Ernest Becker sets up the problem of the modern human through his account of all the pain and destruction that the denial of death causes for a given life. While the work of Becker sets up this pain-causing predicament, one must seek a more broad understanding of the reasons for how human existence has become so marred by the problem of death. One must understand that our current historical moment is not comprised of new experiences and never before seen problems. One must recognize that there are a myriad of philosophical perspectives regarding death and perhaps some of the most intriguing of those perspectives are rooted in the work of existential philosophy. If one seeks to discover how to communicate meaning in the dark moments of death, then existential philosophy will offer a rich means for entering some of the most overlooked and detested conversations that occur in one’s life.

**Introduction**

In order to understand all of the problems that the denial of death can cause, one should consider the concrete ways in which human beings experience existence. This question of how the human being experiences existence has been engaged in every historical moment throughout the span of Western Philosophy. The notion of denying death naturally points toward the work of existentialism and how the conditions of reality comprise human life and essence. It is dangerous to assume that current human flaws are sophisticated and new. It is also dangerous to act as if these flaws have not been recognized, addressed, and expounded upon by some of history’s premiere thinkers, namely those who were part of the
existentialism movement. This chapter seeks to offer respect for concrete existence through a discussion of how the narrative of existential philosophy has treated the meeting of the reaper.

The first section of this chapter, *Confrontations with the Reaper*, will explore Fred Feldman’s text of the same name, within which Feldman provides a philosophical overview of death and offers several metaphors, such as “confrontation,” “nature of life,” and “value of death,” which will be used in the following section. That specific section, *Meeting the Reaper in Existence*, will utilize William Barrett’s 1962 text *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy*. This chapter will serve the dual role of introducing the ideas of existentialism and providing an opening discussion for how particular existentialists negotiated the idea of how one must engage the reaper. The final section, *The Communicative Importance of Confronting the Reaper*, will look to the work of Viktor Frankl, Feldman, and the major players of existential philosophy in order to offer value for the study of communication ethics.

The significance of this chapter for the greater project is completely rooted in the philosophical perspectives that will be discussed. If communication ethics can be comprised of “how” we do certain communicative actions, then one must explore the “why” behind the how. To understand the idea of philosophy of communication is to engage the philosophical “why” behind the “how” in order to consider the history of ideas that have an impact on how humans communicate as they do. If those who study communication ethics are concerned with the communicative choices that are made when engaging the Other, then they must also be concerned with the background knowledge that has been informed by a history of ideas. Feldman’s metaphors and the wisdom of existentialism provides the background for the “why” possibilities that will be uncovered and placed into context as the
project begins to find the “how” prescription for communicating wisely about death and dying.

**Confrontations with the Reaper**

The previous chapter engaged the question of how one meets death in terms of Ernest Becker’s view of human existence. However, Becker was neither the first nor last to take up arms against the human engagement of death. One must consider that the very idea of historicity has brought this same question to every historical moment. This section will look to Feldman’s work, *Confrontations With the Reaper*, in order to start the conversation about how one can begin to find meaning and value through confronting death. Feldman’s text offers valuable metaphors for the search for meaning in death that are grounded in reality. The following section serves as an entry point for understanding Feldman’s philosophical perspectives and metaphors of confrontation, nature of life, and value of death.

**Discovering the Reaper.** Fred Feldman engages a sampling of the many philosophical perspectives of death and dying that human beings must endure as a natural culmination of human life. His book, *Confrontations With the Reaper* (1992), is one of many texts that philosophically engage the reaper’s arrival; however, the tone and enthusiasm displayed by this particular text allows it to rise above the others. Shelly Kagan, professor of philosophy at Yale University, teaches an undergraduate course on the philosophy of death. In personal correspondence, he recommended the use of Feldman’s work, stating that it is one of the few texts on death that utilizes “serious philosophy” (Kagan). Feldman’s initial thoughts on death were developed into a project that, without question, engages thoughtful philosophical questions regarding meaning in death.
In order to appreciate Feldman’s work, it is helpful to understand the foundations of his project. Feldman, a professor of philosophy at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, began thinking about the subject of death when his sixteen-year-old daughter Lindsay became very ill. In the preface to *Confrontations with the Reaper* Feldman gives an account of how he and his daughter would discuss the elements of death and what it means for not only the dying, but also those left behind (Feldman NP). Feldman and his daughter agreed that those left behind clearly assume the larger burden, a notion which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Lindsay Feldman sadly met the reaper in 1987, thus propelling Feldman’s eventual formalization of his thoughts on how humans meet and experience death, which are now collected in *Confrontations with the Reaper*. This text directly encounters the mystery associated with meeting the reaper in a way that does not discount the conventional idea that death is an evil. However, this text’s dialectical tone and philosophically-grounded engagement gives credibility to two schools of thought: those who think that death is evil and those who feel that death is virtuous (Feldman 5). Feldman states that his manuscript is about the “nature and value (or, perhaps more properly, disvalue) of death” (5), and offers a dialectical engagement for understanding negative and positive views of death through the metaphors of “confrontation,” “nature of life,” and “value of death.”

**Confrontation.** The idea of confrontation may be considered the premiere metaphor that Feldman uses to engage his philosophical journey through the notion of how death is met within Western culture. He places those who have philosophically considered death into two separate camps: those who feel that death is something and those who feel that death is nothing. On one side there are people who believe that the final confrontation is what human beings grapple with throughout the course of their natural lifetime. On the
other side, there are people who believe that death causes no harm to the dead and that
decision means nothing (Feldman 5). Feldman does not immediately discount either side of the
debate, but does consider the idea that how one confronts death, whether as an evil or as a
necessary end, is impacted by the camp that one has sided with.

The answer of which camp has more credibility is not immediately apparent in
Feldman’s work. However, the very title of the work sets up the metaphor of
“confrontation,” and nearly every theoretical move that is made engages the moment in
which one must inevitably encounter the reaper. Feldman points toward the idea that death
opens up possibilities. The ensuing confrontation is what uncovers perhaps the most unique
quality of human life (Feldman 225). Feldman shows the reader that the moment in which
one must confront the reaper will inspire reflection, and it is for that reason the metaphor of
“confrontation” becomes vital for this particular project. The anxiety of such a moment
creates all of the possibilities for how one reflects on a life and makes choices about how to
accept the reality of death.

Experiencing the Reaper’s call is not simply about the moment of confrontation;
confrontation allows one to engage life and death simultaneously. In other words, the
moment of the confrontation allows one to explore the meaning of his or her life. Inherent
in confrontation is a consideration of the value, or meaning, of death. The “nature of life,”
as will be discussed next, allows one to philosophically consider life on personal and
communal levels.

**Nature of Life.** A major misconception about the study of death is that the main
focus is death alone. Life and death serve as a type of dialectic in which you cannot be
human without the experience of both. The necessary essence of life is that it will one day
end; you cannot experience death without having first experienced life. This is perhaps one
of the most inspiring distinctions that Feldman makes as he divides his text into two sections, the first dealing with the nature of life and the second dealing with death. He admits that his text does not ultimately resolve questions of life and death; rather, his hopes lie in the very engagement of philosophical thought about the death that we all must experience (Feldman 228). It is for this reason that Feldman’s work becomes fundamental. It does not claim authority and only seeks to bring these questions into the ongoing conversation about death within Western culture. It engages death through the importance of the lens of life.

According to Feldman’s view of death, there is not a singular problem of death, but rather multiple problems of death. He states that the categories that these problems fit into are psychological, legal, and biological. Legal questions of death surround many of the social and political issues of the day. These questions include thoughtful perspectives on the legal rights of the dead and if human beings should have the authority to end their own lives (Feldman 11). The biological questions surround the reasons in which humans are indeed finite organisms (Feldman 11). These questions are framed toward death, but the underlying question revolves around life. The same can be understood in the third category that engages the psychological questions of death.

The most serious philosophical engagement of how one confronts the reaper stems from the psychological aspect of how one feels about one’s impending death, as well as how one feels about the looming death of one’s loved ones (Feldman 11). There are certainly elements of confrontation found in the basic overview of the legal and biological aspects of death consideration; however, the anxiety associated with confrontation takes flight in the psychological. Most importantly, these questions again turn to the duality of life and death. It
would seem as if the psychological anxiety that rests at the heart of all considerations of death is really about life and how to embrace it.

What one understands through a close reading of Feldman’s work is that life and death are intimately joined. Fundamental to this chapter is Feldman’s notion that “in order to understand death properly, we must first understand life” (39). He spends much time in the first section of his text outlining theories of life before discussing interpretations of death. While his methods are not identical to the spirit of this project, what becomes important is the idea that one must consider life and death as two inseparable experiences. One cannot experience one without the other.

Feldman uses a gardening metaphor to beautifully explain his thoughts on how death and life cannot be separated. He describes tomato plants that are ignored and left outside in the winter. The winter elements kill the tomato plant; yet, inside the dead plant are seeds that hold potential life, which may grow when spring arrives (Feldman 55). This metaphor provides two outlooks for the relationship between death and life. First, this metaphor shows that death is never devoid of life, and life is always situated within the context of death. The second outlook points toward the idea that though temporal bodies will pass, the ideas, relationships, and essence of the deceased have the potential to transcend death. There is always a chance that you will unwrap the package of death and find life.

Feldman further textures his argument about the importance of life and its inseparability from death in first section of his text. Feldman carefully explains the “termination thesis” and how subscribers of this thesis believe that when a person dies they “cease to exist” (89). Although this statement seems seem simple and incontestable, further investigation unveils some problems. Feldman believes that the major thinkers behind this thesis negate life through this view. He claims that it takes existence out of the picture and
ignores the idea that one’s life may still exist after one’s body ceases to function (Feldman 90). According to Feldman’s interpretation, the termination thesis states that once one meets reaper, that person is gone and the sum of their contributions and relationships no longer matter.

It is clear that Feldman is not satisfied with the answers provided by the “terminators” and discards the idea that if a person’s body ceases to exist then so does the person (91). Feldman’s determination about this thesis is that it has a multitude of inconsistencies regarding the legacy or crux of a deceased human. Those who follow the termination thesis take an individualistic approach toward death, treating life as if it only matters to the living. This theory states that humans live together, but die alone. Ultimately, Feldman rejects this thesis based on the belief that people do in fact exist after they have passed away (105). They human body may decompose, but the substance of one’s existence remains in the human world of the living, leading to Feldman’s discussion of the “value of death.”

**Value of Death.** In the second section of *Confrontations with the Reaper* Feldman begins to discuss what value death holds for human beings. At this point he has established the idea that there are indisputable and inseparable bonds between life and death. In order to stay true to this mode of inquiry he discusses what is to be the flip side to life and seeks out life in the face of death. This is where the third metaphor will be explored in an attempt to find how value, or meaning, can be found in death despite a popular misconception that death is empty, meaningless, and the greatest evil that humans must withstand.

It is clear in the second section of Feldman’s text that his mission is to uncover the value associated with death. His battle is against the notion that death is “an evil for the one who died” (Feldman 125). For Feldman, death is a hardship for those left behind, and it
does not directly impact the dead in a hurtful manner. Similar to Becker and Frankl, Feldman states that, despite these common misconceptions, it is a rational enterprise to welcome death (126). Death is a necessary fact of human life and if one is at peace with it they may welcome its unknown journey.

Even though all people must die there is a sliding scale on how horrible death is for the dying. It is Feldman’s sense that death is always considered to be the most terrible thing that can happen in human life, but it is the end of young life that is considered the most painful hardship (Feldman 127). It is easy to observe our own past in order to see that Feldman’s assertion is relatively accurate; how often has the young dead been referred to as leaving before his or her time?

Feldman, however, moves this thought into a discussion of Epicureans and their beliefs regarding death. Epicureans, followers of the philosophical teachings of Epicurus, have a very dedicated system of belief when it comes to the subject of mortality. According to Feldman, the Epicureans, who neither fear nor hate death, believe that death is of no consequence for the person who dies. They believe that people who view death as the greatest misfortune of life are “wholly irrational” and, for them, this is fact and not mere opinion (Feldman 128). This is important when considering the value of death because if death does not hurt the person who has died, then it does not negate the person’s life nor rob his or her life of meaning. The value of a person’s life is the culmination of years of action and relationships that are not devalued at the time of death. The reaper is not seen as foe, but rather a final visitor to a life filled with meaning. It is those who are left behind to mourn who must deal with the fallout from death.

Epicurus himself contributed an interesting piece of wisdom regarding the value of death for human life. In his “Letter to Menoeceus,” he states that “so long as we exist death
is not with us,” which gives credibility to the idea that one should not live a life with a focus upon death. He goes on to state that once one meets death the person no longer exists; therefore, death does no harm to the individual (Feldman 128). While there may be many qualms with the tenants of an Epicurean lifestyle, Epicurus makes an important argument. We must live a life without worrying about when the reaper will come knocking. At the moment of hearing the knock, we must not fear death because there is nothing left to be afraid of. Simply put, “once we are dead, we will feel no pain” (Feldman 129).

If one believes that death is not inherently bad for the person who dies, then the value of death again points back toward the person who lives in the wake of losing a loved one. The Epicurean argument admits that death can be bad for those left behind. Death cannot be bad for the dead, but it does impact those who are left (Feldman 130). This idea is another example of finding value in death. The life that is lost touches the living and it is for this reason that death has value. Despite the feelings of pain and grief, there is value in death in so far that the life of the deceased has left a void in the lives of people who continue to live. If death negates the meaning of the former lives of the dead then there would be no reason to mourn, remember, or celebrate the people who pass on.

Feldman’s next discovery of value in death moves beyond thoughts about who is left behind to the association between the value of life and the value of death. Feldman argues that in order to find the value of death we must look to how the deceased person’s life “benefited” others (146). One finds value in one’s death by reflecting upon how that person impacted others and moved through life. Feldman also states that there are other ways to find value in death related to how much value had been given to one’s life through the engagement of other people. In other words, “how much of the things that are good in themselves fell to him?” (Feldman 146). This line of thinking allows one to find the value in
death in regard to how the human being both gives and receives meaning to and from other people.

Feldman points toward the idea that self-concept and self-sense of value do not matter when addressing the issue of finding meaning in death. He states that this idea has nothing to do with the amount of value that a person “thinks” they received from life; the person may be misguided (Feldman 147). This idea is vital for finding value in death. Although it would be wonderful if every human felt as if their life had value in the face of death, importance comes with what value-rich actions and engagements actually took place. As Feldman states, “he may be wrong”; the value of death is a shared experience that goes beyond individualistic attitudes and points toward the importance of the community left behind.

Feldman leans into this idea further as he harkens back to the Epicurean notion that the human ceases to exist after death. Again, Feldman takes aim at the idea that the individual who dies experiences a misfortune. According to Feldman, if we agree that death ends consciousness and suffering, then the human being experiences no “bad-offness” once dead (153). This is a clear declaration that the value of death is that nothing bad can happen to the dying human once life has ended. All value and meaning associated with death exists in the past life of the person and the future of the people that he or she leaves behind. Death does not negate life; death does not declare life inconsequential.

Feldman’s philosophical discussion of value in death concludes with no universal answers. Feldman argues that it is a long-standing philosophical tradition that, despite the mystery, “we must try to understand death” (225). It is the voyage that is at the forefront of the matter; one should not hide from the fact of death, but rather should meet it with a thoughtful mind. Through his exploration and search for value and nature, Feldman’s goal is
to “explain how death relates to life” (225). He warns that one must “resist the temptation to accept the answers that make it seem easy” (Feldman 228). Feldman points toward an existential meeting of life and death simultaneously to engage the real problems and unique characteristics of the human being.

The Communicative Significance of Feldman’s Project. The work of Fred Feldman announces several questions about the human struggle to understand death. Feldman’s work has great value due to the practical and existential nature of his project. The motivation for the text is based upon Feldman attempting to understand what death really means for human beings after meeting the subject face-to-face through the death of his teenage daughter. Feldman meets existence in a way that pays tribute to the young life lost, but also as a means of attaining individual growth. He wants to understand the philosophical implications of death and his work is of great value for him as a father, but also as an offering to his readers. Feldman’s project is an unambiguous example of finding meaning in what many would consider the senseless loss of a young life. The project is an illustration of communicating in a way that does not undercut the meaning that can be found in death; rather, it makes a modest offering to a conversation in which every living human being has a stake.

However, in regard to this project, what will become helpful is Feldman’s three metaphors, which provide great value for finding meaning in death. The first of those metaphors, “confrontation,” is the metaphor that undergirds nearly every moment of thought in Feldman’s text. Feldman’s idea is that the confrontation with the reaper, the realization of death, reveals possibilities for people. This is important for communication scholars to recognize. If creativity is born of our limitations, the conversation about death becomes of great value. That moment of confrontation allows one to honestly realize the
restrictions inherent in human life, thus allowing one to find true meaning and not delusional fantasies. It is Feldman’s notion of confrontation that points the ongoing conversation back toward reality.

Feldman’s second major metaphor, “nature of life,” too has great significance for this project and the belief that there is a communicative value in death. What one will understand is that this metaphor is a redirection of popular conceptions about death and dying, namely that discussions about death are only about death. Feldman’s work binds life and death together in a way in which one topic always stands behind the other. For example, the previously mentioned gardening metaphor states that there are always instances in which life is housed in moments of death and that if one aims to understand life, one must simultaneously understand death. Communicatively, this notion is fundamental, as one must remember that there are always teachable moments and opportunities in times of conflict and strife. Though death is emotionally painful, the real value of death comes from the communicator’s orientation toward the nature of life. Genuine light can be found in these moments of darkness, and how one chooses to communicate will announce not only one’s orientation toward life, but also the way life can be validated and honored through the commutative choices that are made.

Feldman’s final metaphor, “value of death,” also has strong implications for this project. His examination in the latter section of his text guides the reader toward an understanding of death’s value being ultimately tied to life. Here, the value of death is removed from the deceased and positioned back toward those who are still alive or yet to come. The value of death is not an emotive metaphor for the dead and dying, but rather is the meaning that can be expressed and understood by the living. Therefore, the value of death lies in how one’s communication about the subject reflects on the community. One’s
communication should be used to remind the community of the values upheld during the life of the deceased. Discussion of the examples set for the ongoing traditions that are held as sacred will remind the bereaved of the importance of the deceased person’s life. Death is an opportunity to remind the community of what it means to live a good life.

Feldman explains that all people must confront the reaper. He takes great care to show the nature of life. He struggles successfully to show that it is possible to find value in death. Feldman’s work points toward the existential engagement with life and death by meeting the inescapable through thoughtful interaction and philosophical inquiry. It is for this reason that the following section will turn to the work of William Barrett. Barrett, considered “one of the foremost American interpreters of the philosophy of existentialism,” explains the tradition of existential philosophy and points the reader to the major players in existentialism (Honan). It is through Barrett’s work and the ensuing coordinates he provides that one will be able to understand how confrontation, the nature of life, and the value of death fit within existential philosophy.

Meeting the Reaper in Existence

In order to move forward in this study one must reorient the focus toward a particular school of thought within the tradition of philosophy. Existentialism deals with the human being in existence and explores how that person meets the certain truths of life, specifically anxiety and individual action (Crowell). This chapter turns to the work of existentialist scholars in order to explore how the human being meets the inevitable aspects of existence and grapples with anxiety and fear during that moment. While many authors have offered a detailed historical account of the importance of the existential philosophical movement, the work of William Barrett in *Irrational Man* situates the tradition within a history of ideas and points toward the pinnacle of existential thought. This section will
briefly position Barrett’s project and then discuss the idea of death and anxiety within the
work of notable existentialist thinkers highlighted by Barrett—Kierkegaard, Nietzsche,
Heidegger, and Sartre.

**Barrett’s Existential Project.** William Barrett has been described as “one of the
foremost interpreters of the philosophy of existentialism” and is considered as one of the
initial philosophers to introduce the notion of existentialism in the United States (Honan).
Thus, this section will be grounded in Barrett’s explication of existentialism and the
subsequent major players found within the tradition. It has been noted that Barrett took
great pride in his investigations into the history of philosophy and that he enjoyed tracing
existential themes through that history (Lachs 69-70). When reading his text, one witnesses
this enjoyment and pride take flight toward understanding how existential thought
corresponds with the problem of denying death that has been discussed throughout this
project.

Existential philosophy is based upon the actual conditions of the world and human
life. Barrett claims that this branch of philosophical thought is not about abstracts, but rather
how humans exist in a modern world (4). Because of this, the notion of existentialism is
fundamental for this particular study regarding death and how the human being can find
meaning in death. If the argument against most of the catalogue of Western philosophy is
that it ignores the real conditions of the world and works in abstractions, then the ideals of
existentialism may provide a philosophical bridge between the human experience of life and
the human experience of death.

Barrett begins his seminal text by evoking a metaphor used by Kierkegaard that cuts
to the core of many of the problems associated with how the human engages both life and
death. Kierkegaard tells the tale of an unreflective man who is so disconnected from his own
life and the reality of being human that he wakes one morning to “find himself dead” (Barrett 3). While this is a clear story that pleads with the audience to embrace the realness of life before it is too late, it is also a tragic story for how human beings do not engage life and simultaneously deny death. Barrett states that when one wakes up dead like the man in Kierkegaard’s story, a facet of life is seemingly wasted. In fact, Barrett states that when this unreflective man dies he does so “without ever having touched the roots of [his] … own existence” (Barrett 3). Barrett’s claims regarding the importance of existential philosophy are fundamental for considering how the human being meets death. Without reflection and leaning up against actual conditions of human life, one will never truly know oneself.

Thus, Barrett’s thesis and goal appears. He points out that the human being is unreflective, seemingly cheating oneself from experiencing true knowledge and reality. However, from Barrett, the remedy for this grave mistake is philosophical thought. Barrett states that philosophy is the tool that helps humans save their souls. For Plato, according to Barrett, philosophy is a “deliverance from the suffering and evils of the natural world” (5). More importantly, Plato does not give primacy to any one philosophical school of thought (Barrett 5). Barrett claims that philosophy is how humans search for redemption. The outcome will be that existential philosophy ultimately meets the problems of human life and death with the most relevance for a modern or post-modern age.

One must understand its origins in order to truly understand the many facets of existential philosophy. This approach to philosophical thought came out of Paris during World War II (Barrett 7). When it came to the United States there was some amount of interest because of its unusual name, stimulating interest through a “slogan” (Barrett 8). According to Barrett, yearning for “meaning” undergirds American life even when it is not at the forefront of thought. Existentialism was born from the tragedy and turmoil of World
During World War II, the world experienced death and devastation like never before. Non-philosophers, “ordinary mankind,” sought a manner in which meaning could be found in human existence (Barrett 9). Although much of the culture was increasingly following the death denial path that Becker warned of, there were many who sought to tackle these issues. The themes of existentialism, the truths of human life, were and are important. Barrett contends that the themes of analytic philosophy are the same as everyday human life: “anxiety, death, the conflict between the bogus and the genuine self, the faceless man of the masses, and the experience of the death of God” (9). These are issues that humans must rub against no matter if they choose to embrace or deny the often-unpleasant feeling that is associated with these truths.

Though Barrett clearly makes connections between the problems that existential philosophy seeks to uncover and the real problems of human life, there are also connections to why these issues regarding death surface in the first place. The American, by Barrett’s distinction, by and large has not yet grasped the notion of human finitude. It is this recognition of the finite state of our human bodies that does not become clear until the very end; until then, death is an abstraction (Barrett 10). This is a fundamental point made by Barrett, which shows the flawed nature of how the human thinks about the end of his or her life. One can think about heartbreak because they have most likely had their heart broken. One can consider failure and success because life is filled with a multitude of both. One can even think philosophically about the death of loved ones and ponder over the end of those particular lives. However, one’s own death is not as easily thought about because it has never
been experienced. Unlike the broken hearts and successes and failures of life, an individual’s own death is an abstraction that can only be experienced once, leaving no room for afterthought or reflection.

The questions of how death impacts human life and community are ongoing themes within existential philosophy. While most strains of philosophy may focus on overarching ideas, existentialism in Western philosophy focuses upon “the unique experience of the single one, the individual” who meets the darkest questions that mankind must contemplate (Barrett 13). Existentialism also pulls together “all the elements of human reality into a total picture of man” (Barrett 21). It is for these reasons that existentialism again becomes significant for questions surrounding death. While there is quality work that has been done regarding the supernatural occurrences that may happen to the human soul after death, the focus of this project is to gain a clear picture of what makes a human being and how the knowledge of death impacts his or her communicative practices in the search for meaning.

The connection between the traditions of existential philosophical thought and how the human meets death seem to be closely connected as Barrett moves through the early chapters of his work. Perhaps the greatest argument that can be made from Barrett’s work toward the importance of this connection is found within his description of the power inherent within the tradition. Again, he suggests that existentialism is a tool to help one fully understand human nature; however, Barrett states that the search for the “image of the whole man” is vital despite the collateral damage that may bring “to consciousness all that is dark and questionable” in the existence of a human being (22). The picture that Becker paints in the previous chapter is a destructive image of the human being crippled by the fear of death. It is the work of the existentialism that will embrace this fear, the byproduct of the
inquiry of the human being, in order to point toward spaces in which life is understood and
death is meaningful.

Finding meaning in death is not a lofty goal and, as has been discussed in earlier
chapters, one can understand the places in which death is still approached with a great sense
of significance. Many humans only want a meaningful life, which is also the ultimate goal of
an existentialist. Karl Jaspers, during the historical moment of modernity, described
existential philosophy as the “struggle to awaken in the individual the possibilities of an
authentic and genuine life” (Barrett 32). The words of Becker seem to echo this statement,
as one ponders what the human being loses when death and life are misunderstood and
denied. As Jaspers professes existentialism to be about knowing real life and the uncovering
of human possibility, one is reminded that a shallow view of death will enslave genuine
experiences of meaning. Thus, death becomes vital for existentialists. Existentialism, born of
tragedy, allows the human to understand oneself (Barrett 35). Death becomes a teacher for
how to live a life.

The idea that death is a great teacher for life has great value for this particular project
on death. Barrett’s work thus far has provided spaces in which one can comprehend how
existentialism is a natural companion to serious thoughts regarding the search for meaning in
the end of life. Existentialism cannot be simply understood on its own merit and there must
be well-tested vessels that bring the philosophical tradition to life. In *Irrational Man*, Barrett
identifies four spokespersons for existentialism that have served as some of the greatest
educators on the subject of how man meets the murky reality of human life—Kierkegaard,
Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre. The following discussion will use Barrett’s work to situate
these four philosophers within existentialism and, principally, will turn to their respective
primary texts in order to discover how each specifically engaged the murkiest of all human topics—death.

*Kierkegaard.* Danish philosopher and author Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) has been described as a multi-disciplinary sage whose work cut through “philosophy, theology, psychology, literary criticism, devotional literature and fiction” (McDonald). Barrett describes Kierkegaard as “immensely intelligent,” an acknowledgment that Kierkegaard, too, brandished upon himself (Barrett 149). Barrett indicates that Kierkegaard was not boasting but rather grappling with a gift that was ultimately used for the betterment of understanding how the human being meets existence. This section will first explain Kierkegaard’s particular contributions to existentialism before looking at instances in Kierkegaard’s work *Either/Or,* in which he directly discusses the notion of death and how the human being meets this experience.

Barrett portrays Kierkegaard as not only intelligent, but a notable example of how a philosopher meets and engages life. His description of Kierkegaard is of a man who admits that “being is in the flesh” and that his philosophy is played out in the actual doing of philosophy through lived experience (Barrett 151). The existential project of Kierkegaard is important because he is a man who lives life with a purpose and does not use abstraction as a way to learn how to live a good life. Though he did not always make friends and has been criticized by the scholars of history for having a weak, “ill-favored body,” Kierkegaard was a man of passion and devotion (Barrett 152). This passion and devotion would seemingly lift a man of weak body into philosophical importance for meeting all of life’s issues.

As stated above, Barrett’s depiction of Kierkegaard is a man who was not gifted with an incredibly healthy body. Historians have castigated Kierkegaard as a boring man who sacrificed his only true romantic relationship for the benefit of his faith and philosophical
mission (Barrett 153). Despite this characterization, Kierkegaard left mankind with some of the best examples of how to engage life despite the many reasons to be consumed with anxiety and dread. As Barrett suggests, it would be simple to disregard Kierkegaard’s work based on his life and demeanor in an attempt to classify him and figure out his psychological makeup. However, it is much more simple to go to the work of Kierkegaard in order to allow him to offer his own explanation (Barrett 155). Kierkegaard was a man of honest self-reflection.

Self-reflection was the centerpiece of Kierkegaard’s existentialism, and his engagement with the world that reflected his project was just as much about reflecting on his own life as well as how human beings fit into the world around them. Barrett situates Kierkegaard within a world of modernity dedicated to progress. He discusses how Kierkegaard’s peers became famous and successful based upon their modernity-driven projects to make life easier for humans to engage. Some made life easier by utilizing modern technology while others used their own philosophical projects to create a path for easing and calmness (Barrett 157). Kierkegaard, however, chose to engage human meaning and experience under different terms that were in contrast to his modernity-grounded peers.

The route that Kierkegaard took was indeed something of an anomaly at the time. Where the aim of his contemporaries was to make things easy, then perhaps it was his goal to make things more difficult (Barrett 157). His fear was that the world was too easy, and if the world became too much of a simplistic and unreflective space, then there may be a clamoring to have the difficult path made clear once again. Barrett suggests that this is the intellectual space in which Kierkegaard imagined would define not only his career, but also his destiny (157). His project is not dissimilar to the projects of the many thinkers that have been discussed throughout this work thus far in relation to how to find and communicate
meaning within death. It would seem as if Becker, Frankl, and Feldman have all engaged their work to open the door to the difficult questions in life. Perhaps there is an innate feeling in truly thoughtful people that a treatment of life and death as easy and shallow deadens meaning.

Through Barrett’s discussion of Kierkegaard one can easily understand his importance for existentialism. He is a man of extreme self-reflection who learned through his own body and not by simply abstraction or professing to others what they should be doing. Barrett credits Kierkegaard as a subjective thinker with an impeccable ability to put “himself within the subjectivity of a person” (170). This is fundamental for why Kierkegaard’s work is important. One must respect that he did not look down upon a world in an attempt to place things into rigid categories. He did not diagnose the human race while thinking that he was above such trivial actions. Kierkegaard walked among other humans. Despite his weakness of body and prowess of mind, he planted himself within the lives of others and the experience of human existence. Again, this is why Kierkegaard’s work is fundamental for existentialism and a project that takes death seriously. One cannot engage death without the realization that it impacts every living person in different ways. While Kierkegaard embraces the darkness of life’s difficult problems he offers many insights to how to find meaning through the sunny and shadowy times of life.

Much of the work in this project thus far as emphasized the interplay between life and death during the journey to uncover and express meaning. Kierkegaard too sees the importance of such a connection. In his work *Either/Or* Kierkegaard immediately exposes the idea that much of human life is wasted and that the gifts given are rarely unwrapped. Humans demand freedoms that they do not have while almost ignoring the freedoms that no one can remove from them (Kierkegaard 19). Specifically, he mentions freedom of
speech, which is demanded, and freedom of thought, which is innate; yet, one can understand this as a general statement toward human existence in that humans often demand things from death while simultaneously ignoring life.

Kierkegaard was comfortable with the assumption that humans have a rich history of engaging in existential demand. However, he continued to call for a commitment to the unification of life and death in order to embrace the existentialist foundational quest to allow man to find meaning in the midst of reality. To make this clear, Kierkegaard utilizes somewhat of a crass example of insects that die during copulation. He compares this to all elation of human life, stating “Life’s highest, most splendid moment of enjoyment is accompanied by death” (Kierkegaard 20). Kierkegaard sounds not like a death denier nor does he sound like the type of person who feels that death strips life of meaning. Instead, one finds Kierkegaard to be a realistic philosopher who recognizes that life and death cannot be separated. All of life’s best moments are the background of the foreground of death.

Further, on the subject of death, Kierkegaard juxtaposes life and death through a discussion of the very end of life and the very beginning of life. He states that “No one comes back from the dead; no one has come into the world without weeping. No one asks when one wants to come in; no one asks when one wants to go out” (Kierkegaard 26). Kierkegaard is a true existentialist as he tells the tale of the human being that never asks to be born, is thrown into life, and must tolerate the shell of a temporal human body. The focus is on life and the lived experience. Kierkegaard’s statement points toward a recognition of the human struggle to wonder why one was called into this world and yet have no desire to exit the very experience that one does not understand.

Within Either/Or, seemingly in jest, Kierkegaard plays with the anxiety and despair associated with existence. He sets the scene of mourners at a funeral and the ritual that
accompanies it. Kierkegaard states that the mourners go home and consider the long life ahead of them, but how long is seventy or so years? According to Kierkegaard, seventy years is not that long at all, and one might as well return to the grave, give up, and be buried with the departed (Kierkegaard 29). While it is not directly stated, this anecdote is likely meant to stir thoughtfulness in the mind of the reader. More important to the spirit of this project is the idea that Kierkegaard leans against the very idea of anxiety, dread, and despair that has been discussed at various points thus far. He recognizes the swiftness in which people can give up, disconnect with meaning, and stumble into despair.

Kierkegaard parodies the propensity of the human being to engage in existential demand and cure face. As he addresses “wretched fate,” Kierkegaard curses life’s final outcome (Kierkegaard 30). We enter the world, we sleep, and we die; this is Kierkegaard’s description of what the human life amounts to. He shouts to the personification of fate, “you promise nothing, you hold everything” (Kierkegaard 30). This is about as authentic as human desperation gets when engaging the simultaneous anxieties associated with living and dying. Everything that occurs until the end of life encompasses the experiences that make up the meaning that one will gather from existence. However, there are no promises, no playbook, or cheat sheets that hold the key to finding meaning in the midst of anxiety.

Kierkegaard engages genuine experiences of life that hold great value for how one attempts to find meaning in both life and death. Barrett allows one to read Kierkegaard as a true pioneer of human existence. Though, as Barrett points out, “the problem of man” was beginning to gain momentum (178). Surely this created problems for the human being, but it also called forth many other wise human beings to engage the important subjects that Kierkegaard merely scratched the surface of during his short career. While many would come after Kierkegaard, it is Nietzsche who begins to engage how humans meet existence in
a radical manner that has greatly impacted philosophy, communication, and a myriad of other disciplines.

*Nietzsche.* German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) is best known for the extreme, perhaps misguided, controversy caused by his statement that “God is dead” (Wicks). As stated previously, Nietzsche took up the mantle of lived human experience and the problems that human beings engage within a life filled with darkness. However, Barrett notes that while it was Kierkegaard’s aim to utilize Christian culture in order to know oneself, Nietzsche turned to the Greeks for answers to the crucial questions of man (177). This section will first explain Nietzsche’s particular contributions to existentialism before looking at instances in his *Human, All Too Human,* in which he directly discusses the notion of death and how the human being meets the experience.

Barrett begins his exploration of a young scholar at the age of twenty-four years old. At that age Nietzsche was made professor of philology at the University of Basel and was considered a phenomenon among German scholars (Barrett 177). The skills of Nietzsche were many as he was not only a student of language, but also a proficient musician. Like Kierkegaard before him, Nietzsche had an incredible amount of health problems that plagued him throughout his life. Nietzsche ultimately blamed his later health issues on the “excessive labors of scholarship” (Barrett 178). Perhaps the many toils related to his health allowed Nietzsche to grapple with the murkiness of life in a way that ultimately enriched existentialism.

It is not just an unspoken sense that Nietzsche’s lifetime of health problems impacted his philosophical contributions. Barrett states that when Nietzsche’s eyes began to deteriorate at the age of 34 and left him unable to read scholarly texts, he was forced to look inward into himself—“a text that culture up to that time had obscured” (Barrett 178). It
seems that when Nietzsche turned inward he began to find himself attracted and devoted to the Greek god Dionysus. In Dionysus Nietzsche found a figure that brought together the best aspects of human culture with the animal instincts of man. Nietzsche’s life and work has been described in a very similar manner (Barrett 178). Interestingly, the description of Dionysus and the project of Nietzsche mirror the problem of human death that has been discussed previously. An entire collection of human culture and knowledge cannot definitively bury the animalistic fight to survive and escape the reaper’s grasp.

Nietzsche brought turmoil, while others offered solace, during the time of modernity when human beings were attempting to find solid answers and definitive ways to encounter the world. Regarding Nietzsche’s contribution, Barrett states that he did not bring “peace but a sword” (179). This is a fitting statement for a man who would seemingly never feel personal peace, yet altered the study of philosophy in such an extraordinary way. Prior to Nietzsche, many would attempt to explain away the human being as an “animal species within the zoological order of nature,” but the “problem of man” could never return to the same state that is was before Nietzsche’s work (Barrett 179). This is precisely why one should turn to Nietzsche when thinking about how the human being meets death within contemporary society. The destruction of life becomes important in his work, and it is clearly important in this project, as the presupposition is that meaning comes from aspects of both life and death.

Nietzsche’s notion that “God is dead” has had multiple interpretations since he penned these infamous words. Barrett carefully unpacks Nietzsche’s words and motives and offers his own interpretation to the phrase that has painted Nietzsche as a villain in the eyes of Christians for so many years. As a true existentialist, Nietzsche uses the death of God to explain how the human being meets existence and carries through life. Barrett explains that,
for Nietzsche, the human being killed off God because it became unacceptable for anyone to have the ability to view one’s “ugliest side” (182). Nietzsche encouraged culture to learn to live without gods. He had faith in humankind insofar that he characterized the human being as “the most courageous animal” that will be able to “survive the death of his gods” (Barrett 185). In this case, one may interpret Nietzsche as a man who feels that the human being must meet existence without fearing what happens after death. If there is no immortal beings, than one must find meaning from life and experience.

Barrett continues his journey into the work of Nietzsche as he discusses the character of Zarathustra. While Barrett feels that there are many psychological underpinnings of the Zarathustra character that would explain Nietzsche, the account focuses on the idea of rebirth. One of the many lessons found within Thus Spoke Zarathustra is that the human being has chances to be reborn. The themes of rebirth and resurrection are placed throughout the novel and the ultimate question is about how men and women “become really healthy and whole” (Barrett 189)? Nietzsche likely viewed many of the same behaviors that are currently seen within Western culture that seemingly sicken and tear apart the human soul. Nietzsche points to departmentalization and specialization of human life that ultimately forces the human being to become fragmented. It became the task of Nietzsche, as well as many other existentialists, to place those fragments back into their proper order (Barrett 189). As with the theme of this entire project regarding finding meaning with death, the utmost important goal is to find spaces in which people can pick up these pieces and begin to find meaning as a whole person in a fragmented world.

The themes of rebirth and resurrection are most notably found within Nietzsche’s notion of the “Eternal Reborn” (Barrett 194). Born of logical and scientific objectives, Nietzsche embraces the idea that humans are all part of a universe in which particles are
used and reused and that nothing is ever wholly new in the universe; human beings and
everything in nature will “repeat over and over again eternally” (Barrett 194). While this
theory has been repeated several times throughout human scientific history, the general idea
has numerous implications for a culture attempting to find meaning within life. Life is never
truly over and the traditions and meanings found within life will transcend death and be
reborn in the lives of those who are left behind or come after. One can understand that
Nietzsche’s existentialism takes on the many toils that the human being must negotiate in
order to find meaning in life and death. We now turn to Nietzsche’s *Human, All Too Human*
in order to uncover specifics of how he leaned into the human’s relationship with death.

In Nietzsche’s essay one will find mentions of death peppered throughout his
aphorisms and brief explanations of his philosophical thought. One can sense that Nietzsche
finds great power and comfort in the thought of death. Nietzsche takes on the idea of the
death penalty and how it is considered a justice; however, there is no such justice that
permits the human being to take his own life. Nietzsche considers it “cruelty” that people
are put to death for offenses against the community; yet, they are not permitted to end their
own lives (44). Nietzsche’s thought indicates that there is a certain power associated with
death, namely the element of death that allows one to die with dignity at a time of his or her
own choosing. While he spends little time in this particular section discussing suicide, it is
interesting to comprehend Nietzsche’s engagement of the implications of a society that
supports the death penalty but rejects an innocent individual’s right to die.

Nietzsche, however, moves on to discuss religion in connection to how death is met
in different cultures. Through a discussion of religious cults, Nietzsche asserts the notion
that human beings must always attribute supernatural explanations for natural law. He states
that every human movement or experience is the result of “magic,” and that a divine being is
working in the background of all movement (57). For Nietzsche, even the idea of death is the result of “magical influences,”; good and evil forces are in a constant battle for the human soul (57). While he clearly feels that this is nonsense, it is his sense that man ignores nature in order to follow supernatural hogwash; Nietzsche feels that the true meaning of death and illness is lost when the focus of attention is placed upon gods and demons that remain unseen and unexplained.

While Nietzsche criticizes religion in *Human, All Too Human*, he shows again that he believes in the finitude of death. He rails against the followers of Christianity who are taught to live life toward a fear of death, but who also understand “death as a portal” to the final punishment or reward (Nietzsche 59). However, Nietzsche points toward a human action that is less controversial than his problems with religion. Through a description of what he calls “the comic element,” Nietzsche states that human beings are ready for “battle” and “death” at any moment (Nietzsche 80). If the human being has a near-death experience, when the moment of intense fear passes, the moment will be met with cheerfulness and even laughter (Nietzsche 80). This is a hopeful observation that is made in regard to how man meets the fear associated with death. While Nietzsche would not deny that death frightens the human to his or her very core, he would, however, point toward the lighthearted reaction that is expressed once the moment has passed. Nietzsche goes on to state that “there is far more comedy than tragedy in the world; we laugh much oftener than we are agitated” (Nietzsche 80). Here one understands that the fear of death is certainly repressed most of the time. Once the grave situation is encountered and dismissed, the fear once again slides into the distance of human thought.

Nietzsche returns to the seriousness of engaging life by recognizing the importance and values associated with death. He encourages the reader to not waste life, to forgive
oneself, and to see beyond the walls of religion in order to become familiar with human history. Nietzsche acknowledges life as a “painful journey” in which one’s ambition is a result of the “trials, errors, faults, deceptions, love, and hope” (120). The meaning of life comes from the times in which things go wrong and the relationships that are made in the midst of anxiety. If this is recognized then death will be encountered with a “joyful cry of knowledge” (Nietzsche 120). Nietzsche eloquently points toward the notion that the meaning of life does not come from abstract philosophical beliefs, but rather meaning comes from struggle and darkness. In the end, according to Nietzsche, death is met with joy as one has experienced life as an individual, on one’s own terms, and not the terms of an obsolete religious structure.

One final place in which Nietzsche’s thoughts on death have particular meaning for this project is his idea of what the actual notion of death has done to the real existence of the human being. While he recognizes that death must be part of the whole of every human life, he takes forceful aim at how the fear of death has impacted people. Nietzsche’s notion of the contemporary sense of death is akin to a “poison, [with an] unpleasant taste” given by an unnamed “druggist” of the soul (370). He goes on to state that this poison, which has dripped into the well of the human soul, has made “the whole of life hideous” (Nietzsche 370). Nietzsche’s thoughts are toward a particular understanding of death as a natural and needed companion of life. However, the fear of death that has been inserted into the everyday of human life has mutilated his classical understanding of the necessity of death. A life that is dithered by the fear of death is revolting.

What is clear from this brief look into the work of Nietzsche is that he understands the world in two different ways. He wants the human being to embrace death based upon the meaning that is established during lived experience. However, on the other hand, he
understands that humans move through life with an innate fear of death, which ultimately devalues life and the sum of the experiences that one had throughout that particular lifetime. While Nietzsche engaged his own life with a controversial philosophy that spent much time focused on the negative aspects of religion, Heidegger stands out as another controversial philosopher in his own right. Heidegger leans into some of the problems associated with Being and existence, offering yet another view of how existentialism can provide an understanding of the problems of death and anxiety.

Heidegger. German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) has been described as one of the most influential contemporary European philosophers (Wheeler). Like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche before him, Heidegger became a controversial figure in his own right due to his participation in and affiliation with the Nazi party in Germany (Wheeler). While this point has been debated at great lengths, it is clear that Heidegger is a major spokesperson for existential philosophy and has made contributions regarding how the human being finds meaning in moments of life and death. This section will first offer a general view of Heidegger’s contributions to existentialism before looking at instances in his most famous work, Being and Time, in which he directly touches upon the notion of death and how the human being meets that experience.

Heidegger is certainly an interesting figure in the history of existential philosophy. Caught somewhere between rationalism and irrationalism, Barrett describes Heidegger as a “wanderer in the forest” who is attempting to clear paths to push the human mind beyond the rigid categories of both rationalism and irrationalism (206). In contrast to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Heidegger is described as wholly academic and less poetic. While his style is different, the outcome is similarly dramatic and powerful as Heidegger uses his academic “lingo” in order to offer something new to the history of philosophy and existentialism.
Heidegger clearly inserts himself into the realm of existentialism; however, he is distinct from his predecessors in many ways.

Barrett describes Heidegger as a philosopher who lifted the burden of those before him in order to contribute to existentialism. The existential project to this point deals specifically with what happens to the human when he or she becomes alienated from his or her own Being. The “estrangement from being” becomes the central thematic element of Heidegger’s work (Barrett 207). While those engaged in existential philosophy before him were focused on the questions of Being, Heidegger believes that modernity is not to blame and that one must look to the past in order to expose where the problem began. It is his sense that the problem comes from how the human thinks about “Being” itself (Barrett 208). As Heidegger reframes the major problems of man to be directly connected to how “Being” is engaged, one sees essential parallels between the questions of man and the questions of death. The fundamental issues for why the human being feels disconnected and lost within this world are likely connected to how one understands Being in the world.

Heidegger’s work was intimately connected to the idea of how the human can once again find peace within a world in which he or she is disconnected and alienated. It is his goal to study and unveil understandings of “what is at once nearest and farthest from man: his own being and Being itself” (Barrett 209). It seemingly bothered Heidegger that people had become so unfamiliar and existentially disoriented regarding the very element of their person that made them human. Barrett’s exploration into the world of Heidegger moves into a discussion regarding this area of disconnection for human life: Being. Being is a subject in philosophy that has been discussed from the very inception of metaphysical thought; yet, the notion tends to lie dormant and unconscious within the mind of ordinary people (Barrett 210). Heidegger points to problems associated with language that make it nearly impossible
to understand or embrace the concept of one’s own Being and, as Barrett announces, Heidegger aims to work within the tradition in order to “destroy it” (210). The hope for Heidegger would be for imaginative understanding to spring forth from a barren understanding of Being.

In regard to Heidegger’s understanding of Being, he takes a radical turn in order to recapture the notion toward a contemporary understanding. He proposes “repetition of the problem of Being,” in which humans would once again return to the philosophical path given by the Greeks when leaning into the problems associated with Being in the world. Heidegger supports “standing face to face with the Greeks,” and ultimately, advancement is born of the destruction of Western thought on the subject of Being (Barrett 211). Barrett explains that it is Heidegger’s belief that humans have lost the connection to being because of language issues; philosophical thought has become focused upon “what is” rather than “to be” (212). Heidegger’s allegation is that the human being has become irrationally focused upon what they are rather than what they should be.

Heidegger’s thoughts on Being have become fundamental to understanding the way in which he meets the history of knowledge. As a radical he attempts to move Being out of abstraction and into a view that allows one to realize that Being surrounds the human being “up to our necks and indeed our heads,” providing a view of Being that is relatable and vital for all living humans (Barrett 213). Seemingly, Being is the underpinning of Heidegger’s entire project. Barrett suggests that the entirety of Heidegger’s thought is to bring “Being into the light” (213). As one moves into other areas of his thought, one will find that this attempt is clearly in the background of all of his opinions.

Heidegger was an early adopter of phenomenology and this philosophical practice has shaped his understanding of Being. While Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology aimed to
designate human experience in the world without “preconceptions or hypothetical speculations,” Heidegger used the tool of inquiry in a slightly different fashion (Barrett 213). Heidegger, while attempting to abandon preconceptions and speculations, focused on words in an attempt to get to the root of meaning (Barrett 214). Therefore, while predeterminations are unwelcomed, it remains absolutely fundamental for Heidegger to look to the origins of language in order to follow a historical path of meaning and understanding. This method lends hand to his notion of truth, which revolves around truth that occurs when “what has been hidden is no longer so” (Barrett 215). It is apparent that Heidegger wants to find truth by uncovering all of the biases and preconceptions that comprise human life.

Being and existence become intimately connected in Heidegger’s work. Existence is to “stand outside oneself, to be beyond oneself,” in which Being in spread throughout the “care and concern” of happenings in the world (Barrett 217). This field of Being is referred to as Dasein in which the sum of human experiences and ultimate existence can be found within (Barrett 218). Heidegger points toward a picture of the human in which one must truly know oneself in order to engage the problems associated with Being. Heidegger goes on to explain that existence is constituted of mood or feeling, understanding, and speech (Barrett 219). These areas create the field of Being and, when recognized, offer a means for examining the human being in a way that no other had offered up to that point.

Barrett depicts Heidegger as a philosopher who utilized the philosophical traditions of the Greeks as well as the state-of-the-art-work that had been provided by his teacher, Husserl. It is vital to understand Heidegger’s contributions in a broad sense; however, one must look to his specific notions of death and anxiety in order to understand how he becomes valuable for the spirit and mission of this project regarding meaning and death. While Barrett’s portrayal of Heidegger’s project encompasses specific work regarding death
and anxiety, that particular area of his project will be next in conjunction with Heidegger’s primary work, *Being and Time* (1927).

Much of Heidegger’s work that specifically touches upon death can be found within his most important work, *Being and Time*. Barrett spends time in his own account of Heidegger to describe the ongoing themes of death, anxiety, and finitude within this particular text. Barrett states that Heidegger’s offering in regard to death is the acknowledgment that human beings do not think seriously about death when it is “outside of ourselves” (225). In Heidegger’s work, death becomes meaningful and impactful when one must meet or consider one’s own end.

Heidegger engages death in conjunction with his concept of Dasein and things coming to an end. Dasein, which is translated roughly into the human’s “Being in the world,” is placed into two categories when one is meeting death: the coming-to-its-end and the not-yet-at-an-end. It seems as if all humans are simultaneously stumbling toward death and that once these classifications are met and death is assumed, the human becomes associated with “no-longer-Dasein” (Heidegger 233). Heidegger implies that when one begins to acknowledge impending death, one will eventually lose connection with Being. This becomes vital for Heidegger as one begins to consider, as Feldman previously, what happens to the legacy of the human once he or she has passed. What happens to Being?

Heidegger answers this question as he moves on to describe the relationship between Dasein and death. He states the nature of Dasein is that there is a “constant lack of wholeness” (Heidegger 233). This lack of wholeness creates much of the human struggle. Heidegger moves forward by stating that the lack of wholeness that the human being must endure finds an end in death (233). He further points to the idea that human life is “outstanding” until the moment of death. His use of the word “outstanding” does not
signify something exceptional, but rather closer to a debt that is not fully paid. Here, Heidegger suggests that life, Being, or Dasein are incomplete until death (234). Death becomes the final payoff for a life in which the human feels a lack in his or her own Being.

Heidegger, despite advocating that death is the only way in which to achieve wholeness, points toward the importance of the sum of life’s experiences. When discussing the end of Being, he uses several metaphors to state that death does not negate the value of life. If the road ends, the road up to that point is still there. Just because the road ends all previous tracks of road do not cease to exist, though he states that one cannot collect these experiences as a prerequisite for the completion of Dasein (Heidegger 235). As soon as a child is born he or she is able to die, despite the lack of “fulfillment” that people may attribute to the experiences mentioned before (Heidegger 236). The value of life again comes from experiences, how existence is met, and the choices one makes. Being is still meaningful despite the metaphorical road coming to an end.

Heidegger admits that there is a mysterious nature to death and that some questions may never have a concise answer. He explores a history of philosophy that searches for meaning in death, but says that all of those questions “presuppose an understanding not only of the character of being of death, but the ontology of the universe of beings as a whole” (Heidegger 239). Therefore, it is nearly impossible to adequately understand the true nature and implications of death since no one has died and then explained it to the living. Perhaps this is where existential uncertainty erupts in regard to the human fear of death. There has been no human who can explain death in a fully accurate way unless they are describing it from the position of a biologist.

Thus, for Heidegger, the only path toward “authentic existence” is to lean into the notion of one’s own death (Barrett 225). Barrett’s concise interpretation of Heidegger is that
anxiety does not equal fear, but rather is “nothingness.” That “nothingness” is the result of meeting one’s own death with the idea that one will cease to exist as a human in the world (Barrett 226). Heidegger’s understanding of Being and nothingness is vital in regard to how the human being encounters his or her own death. However, it is Jean-Paul Sartre who takes specific aim at Heidegger and moves the conversation forward.

*Sartre.* French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) is considered the most popular philosopher of the twentieth century (Flynn). Sartre fits in well with the genealogy of existentialism as he builds upon the work of Nietzsche and Heidegger in order to advance his own brand of understanding the question of human experience. He is known for his literary contribution as well as he is for his philosophy. His worked has been described as lacking “heroism”; yet, the manner in which he engages existentialism has created much room for those who continue to discuss death, meaning, and anxiety (Barrett 239). This section will first offer a general view of Sartre’s contributions to existentialism before looking to instances in *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology* (1943), in which he directly engages the notion of death and how the human being meets his or her final end.

Much of Sartre’s understanding and interpretation of existentialism can be understand as a reaction to the horrors of World War II and the occupation of France by the Germans. Barrett begins his description of Sartre’s philosophy by pointing to the rare work regarding the notion of heroics that came out of his writings and directly engage the problems of that specific international conflict. Barrett showcases the wartime experiences of the French through Sartre’s writings because he feels that many Americans do not understand the terrors that the French endured at that time (240). It is important to situate Sartre within major events that were occurring around him as he was penning his
multifaceted works. This historical moment, as well as the years leading up to World War II, allowed Sartre to understand most of the world as “decay”; his first novel, Nausea, (1938) is an allusion to the nausea caused by “existence itself” (Barrett 241). This initial description of Sartre does not give the sense that his work is lighthearted; however, the idea of decay and nausea are counterbalanced by Sartre’s beliefs that one can rebuild the existential mess in which one finds oneself.

Sartre’s pathway to rebuilding establishes one of the most powerful themes found within his work, the theme of freedom; yet, his particular version of freedom differs from other philosophers and political thinkers throughout history. According to Barrett, Sartre’s view of human freedom, a “final freedom that cannot be taken from a man, is to say No” (241). Despite being framed in the negative, according to Sartre, creativity is also spawned through this response. Sartre sets up his freedom of No, which is grounded in the work of Descartes, as a way of offering “final dignity” to the human being in times of trouble and hopelessness (Barrett 242). What is essential is the idea that the human being is never powerless and has the ability to reject the will of others that is imposed upon them. To say no is ethically charged and powerful. Sartre’s view is similar to that of Viktor Frankl; this relationship will be discussed at the end of this chapter.

Although Sartre relates to Descartes, his work is very distinct from Descartes’ offerings. Barrett states that Sartre is a Cartesian; however, the experiences of war and the symptoms of modernity have altered his outlook on the world. Sartre advocates the rejection of “all beliefs so long as they can in any way be doubted, to resist all temptations to say Yes until his understanding is convinced according to its own light,”; what he is left with as his only trusted attribute is “his own consciousness” (Barrett 242-243). While Descartes gives ultimate freedom to God, Sartre hands that particular freedom to human beings (Barrett
244). Sartre gives power to the human consciousness; the power to question the presuppositions of the world that surrounds the individual and allows one to find meaning within experience is not altered by other humans, ideologies, or philosophical arrangements.

Another vital theme found within the work of Sartre is his specific take on Being. Much of his philosophy is “based on a dualism,” which can be found in his descriptions of “Being-in-itself” and “Being-for-itself” (Barrett 245). Being-in-itself, or en-soi, is described as the “self-contained being of a thing.” (Barrett 245) The example used to describe this concept is that of a stone, which is nothing more or nothing less; the “being of the thing always coincides with itself”—what you see is what you get (Barrett 245). Being-for-itself creates the entire plane of consciousness. Because “the nature of consciousness is perpetually beyond itself” our human thought continues to progress beyond what is in the moment, to the past and future, as well as toward the parts of existence that one cannot see but can only imagine. Being-for-itself is in a constant state of transcendence; thus, Barrett states that humans “are always beyond ourselves” (Barrett 245). This is important to understand Sartre’s thoughts regarding how the human being meets existence. While Being-for-itself is a constant struggle of looking backward and forward, with perpetual strands of negativity and positivity, it is a better choice than Being-in-itself, as one would no longer have human consciousness.

This dualism creates more problems for Sartre. There is a general sense that, because the human being is constantly attempting to find his or her place in the world, there is an attempt made to seek safekeeping by “grounding our existence” (Barrett 246). By grounding one’s existence in an attempt to give oneself a name, label, or even place in the world, one meets existences with the fervor of the “self-contained being of a thing,” thereby seeking to become Being-in-itself (Barrett 246). Human consciousness makes this completely
impossible, as the basic human experience is constant growth and decline as experiences give way to new perspectives of the world. Later, Sartre marries Being-in-itself and Being-for-itself; yet, it is of great importance to feel the tension between the rocklike solidarity of Being-in-itself and the unpredictable trajectory of Being-for-itself. One may want to be solid and dependable, but human existence requires flexibility and multiple interpretations.

This tension creates, for Sartre, a picture of the self that showcases the destructive nature of human beings in existence. Sartre compares “nothingness” with all of the foul odors of the body; the “nothingness” associated with the human being “stinks” (Barrett 247). There is seemingly nothing at our metaphysical center of Being because human consciousness is constantly striving toward that center in itself (Barrett 246). This sense of self, born out of the human as being-for-itself, is an empty bubble in which meaning is not self-contained. Meaning can only be created or found within the human being through “the free project that he launches out of his own nothingness” (Barrett 247). Thus, one has no given center or prescription for human existence; the only way to find meaning is through the choices that are made regarding a particular life.

Barrett spends time discussing Sartre’s literary contributions as he moves through the history of his existentialism. While important, Barrett does not give the impression that his literary work was consequential on a large scale. One gets the sense that Sartre’s literary works were merely a theoretical means to engage his own philosophy and not necessarily aimed toward storytelling or the advancement of literature (Barrett 250). Barrett deconstructs Sartre’s work and describes him as a man “who writes too much” (252). More important, in Barrett’s view, are Sartre’s contributions to existential psychology.

Sartre, in regard to psychology, turns away from some of the popular psychological minds of his time. In an attempt to locate the “essence of man,” Sartre rejects Freud’s
notion of the Oedipus complex and Adler’s inferiority complex. Sartre textures this conversation through a pronouncement that the essence of the human being comes from the choices that are made and that the human “makes himself what he is” (Barrett 255). Where Freud and Adler suggest that a human being is constructed through outside forces, Sartre believes that meaning comes from the sum of the choices and not in the unconscious mind. For Sartre, “a man is his life”; the human being is nothing more or less than “the totality of acts that make up that life” (Barrett 255). This idea becomes fundamental regarding how the human being engages the questions associated with existence and death, an idea that will be revisited at the end of this chapter. As one considers this brief sample of Sartre’s existential project, this section now turns to Sartre’s own words in which he specifically engages the death of the human.

Sartre first explicates upon the notion of death in a discussion of Being in his text *Being and Nothingness*. He discusses the idea of destruction of being and uses the metaphor of a storm in order to show that a storm does less to destroy than it does to simply move objects around in a different order than they once were. He states that even if a storm causes the death of living beings, it is “destruction only if it is experiences as such” (Sartre 8). Therefore, while living beings may come to an end, destruction is a matter of characterization. Sartre explains his existential notion of death as wholly vital, but not destruction unless human beings label it as such.

Another instance in which Sartre speaks of death is in regard to the anxiety or fear of dying. He states that often when the human being says that he or she is afraid of death the real connotation is that they are “afraid of being afraid” (Sartre 29). The unknown of death is not easily dealt with and people cannot understand all of the implications of no longer living. Therefore, anxiety swells and they meet the fear of the unknown with even more torment.
The anxiety connected to fear brings “the threat of death into reality” (Sartre 30). Again, Sartre points toward the idea that death is often in the background and it is legitimate fear that brings it into the foreground of human life.

Sartre also engages the previous existential thread dealing with the legacy or ultimate worth of the deceased’s past. He begins with the question of whether one who “was … can still exist in the present”? In other words, can one’s death negate one’s life (Sartre 88)? One has heard this question previously asked by Feldman, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger; however, Sartre offers yet another view of this issue. Sartre explains that a modern-day answer to that question is that all aspects of the human being disappear upon his or her death. The dead, “along with their pasts are annihilated” (Sartre 88). He ultimately states that while the person and past may not be located in the physical present, they can be established through “internal relations” (Sartre 89). Therefore, the dead and their legacy can be located in the mind of the living that grieves the loss.

Perhaps the most meaningful notion of Sartre’s existential engagement of death comes in the form of his description of how the human being meets his or her own temporality. The horror associated with temporality is a recognition that “the chips are down” and “there remains not a card to play” (Sartre 91). Death causes a person to become reunited with one’s own self and they become “defenseless before the judgment from others”—those left behind now decide what kind of person the deceased was (Sartre 91). Sartre effortlessly describes this transfer of power in a manner that makes sense in regard to the anxiety that people experience when considering their own deaths. No longer will the individual be able to guide or direct his or her own legacy, and the sum of their life choices will be left as a jigsaw puzzle for those who remain. Those left behind have the power to
make choices, praise the deceased, or describe them as dreadful. Death removes the individual’s ability to repent, conceal, or direct his or her own public persona.

Sartre’s final discussion of death revolves around how the human being should move through life knowing that the reaper will someday knock at the door. According to Sartre, “death cannot be awaited unless designated as my condemnation of death”; such a person being told that they will be executed at a certain point in time (511). This conversation about the dangers of personalizing death has great value when one considers the points made in the previous chapter about how most humans feel about death at their core. To walk through life with one eye always looking toward death is a waste of time that misdirects the focus of attention from the true and vital experiences of life where meaning is actually generated.

The Communicative Significance of Barrett’s Project. Barrett’s undertaking is a thorough representation of the existential project as he offers basic interpretations of existentialism and those who carried the torch for the existential cause. His work, *Irrational Man*, offers many perspectives that carry great value for the study of communication and, specifically, communication ethics. One of the major themes found within Barrett’s work is a description of the existential call for an individual to come to know oneself. As Barrett suggests through the use Kierkegaard’s “man who wakes up dead” analogy, the true call of existential philosophical thought is understanding the meaning of life through the meeting of existence before it is too late. Therefore, the sum of an individual’s communicative project is to search for meaning in life prior to death. Sartre adds credibility to this thought as he suggests that meaning is truly a byproduct of a lifetime of human actions and decisions. As life ends, those who are left behind will determine the legacy of the dead. Therefore, one must engage communicative acts with the notion that one’s final meaning is created through
every communicative choice that is made. Since one cannot communicate after death the only way to contribute to one’s own legacy is through the choices made during one’s life.

It is also clear in Barrett’s work that existential philosophy is an attempt to fix the mistakes made by other philosophical traditions. Existentialism is concerned with the conditions of the individual soul and many schools of thought have turned human beings away from reflection, limiting a person from living life to its fullest. Through Barrett’s descriptions of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre one hears this objective repeated over and over again. It seems as if their aim is to encourage humans to reflect on the nature of their own Being as they make their way through life. It also appears as if all four of Barrett’s existential spokespersons want to save the soul of the individual and an actualization of the human being. The value for communication comes from the idea of speaking a metaphorical language that incites self-engagement of one’s own soul and circumstances. While some may feel that a primary focus on the self is destructive and unhelpful, the existential project is about learning how to engage life for what is presented and not what is desired. Communication, from this standpoint, would require honesty, reflection, and supportiveness as one makes one’s way through a life that is sometimes painful and unpredictable.

As previously suggested, perhaps the biggest contribution of the existential tradition is the idea of not demanding things out of life, but rather meeting what life offers. Barrett’s exploration into existential philosophy proves that the major directive is to not hide from reality. Barrett and the existential philosophers ask the human being to straightforwardly engage the darkest questions of life in order to become fully aware as an individual in the world. The world is often unfriendly and fragmented; yet, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre speak toward the hope for a whole picture of the human being. This
notion may well become the centerpiece of the communicative project to find meaning in death. As the existential goal moves toward finding meaning through honest reflection of what it means to be human despite ugliness in the world, the call is to ask humans to gather the pieces of a fragmented world through communicative practices. One must communicate toward reality based possibility rather than what one desires. This is not to say there is no room for ambition or aspiration, but the existential project seems to suggest that desire is appeased through engaging and recognizing what “is.” One must communicate without blind ambition toward the future and with an open mind toward what is actually occurring in the moment.

The focus of this chapter now turns to the project of Viktor Frankl in an attempt to engage the human soul through his notion of logotherapy. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Frankl is a unique figure as he engages medicine and psychology as a true existentialist. One can appreciate Frank’s work as his entire catalogue of writings attempt to find ways to help the individual find meaning in the world. Frankl’s work is invaluable for meaningful communication ethics theory and there are inherent relationships between his work, the metaphors of Fred Feldman, and the existential project of William Barrett. When brought together, these three bodies of work announce a communication theory that may allow the human being to more easily find meaning in the meeting of the reaper and the experience of death.

Feldman and Barrett. There is no question that Feldman and Barrett engage vastly different philosophic projects; yet, their purposes and messages are surprisingly similar. Feldman’s project seeks to find the meaning and value in life as well as death. Barrett’s focus was to show the value of existential philosophy, as well as to explore who he considered to be the chief spokespersons of that particular tradition of philosophical inquiry. However,
through the metaphors provided by both Feldman and Barrett, one is able to find a common thread between two starkly different approaches to scholarship.

As a reintroduction to the metaphors offered by Feldman and Barrett, the following brief list will remind one of what has been covered to this point:

Feldman
1. Confrontation
2. Meaning of life
3. Value of death

Barrett
1. To know oneself
2. Repairing of past philosophical traditions
3. Demand of life

Through the previous discussions of these metaphors and major themes, one can sense a conversation that silently occurs between these two authors of different moments in time. The crux of the conversation points toward the idea that the very motivational factor for Feldman’s inquiry was caused by the undercurrent of existential approaches found within his problem. The very idea of confrontation opens up possibilities for the life of a person, including the opportunity to know oneself and to repair philosophical traditions of the past that no longer work. Confrontation is an unspoken component of existentialism as one must confront life on life’s own terms and not engage in a demand that runs from toil and unease.

As previously discussed, Feldman’s metaphors of life and death are deeply interconnected in a manner that allows one to become extremely dependent on the Other. Here too we see the significance of these two metaphors, life and death, in harmony with Barrett’s existential project. The way in which Feldman finds meaning in life and value in death is created through the very existential project to discover one’s true self. One must get to know oneself through a questioning of philosophical presuppositions that have been left unquestioned. Along the way, there must also be a repairing of the traditions and schools of thought that detract one from truly understanding oneself. Finally, Feldman’s path to
uncovering meaning in life and death seems to be a process of understanding reality by tackling the positive and negative aspects head on with an open heart. Here we see a connection to Barrett’s existential exposition as he explains that meaning is found through dealing with tangibles and not abstractions. To not engage in existential demand clears the path to understanding and meaning in both life and death. The following section will put Feldman and Barrett into conversation with the work of Viktor Frankl, as this project aims to uncover the communicative importance that death creates for knowing a meaningful life.

The Communicative Importance of Confronting the Reaper

This chapter has taken an in-depth look into Feldman’s work *Confrontations With the Reaper*, establishing three central metaphors—confrontation, nature of life, and value of death—and beginning a discussion of existentialism grounded in the work of Barrett. Barrett highlights four major voices of existential philosophy—Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre—which this project engaged in terms of their specific philosophy concerning death. In order to place this project in the context of communication ethics theory, the writings of Viktor Frankl will once again be used to unveil how meaning is found. This chapter will turn to Frankl’s *The Doctor and the Soul: From Psychotherapy to Logotherapy* (1986), in which Frankl pays close attention to the interplay between the meaning of life and the value of death. This work of Frankl will be discussed before finding spaces where in which Frankl, Feldman, and Barrett unite in order to unveil communicative meaning regarding death.

**Confrontation Between the Doctor and the Soul.** There are several significant issues within Frankl’s work that offer great communicative value for human life. *The Doctor and the Soul* has implications for a historical moment in which institutions and faith structures are being questioned. Frankl states that “humanity has turned from the priest to the doctor” when dealing with the existential problems of man (Frankl xv). While Frankl would not
discount religious belief, he does recognize that common practice has turned one away from religion and toward psychology when one attempts to answer the questions of the weary soul. It is not his mission to take this responsibility away from the priest; rather, he pragmatically states that the doctor must now be equipped to deal with this trend (Frankl xv). Frankl's aim with this brief introductory statement is to assist patients with questions of meaning during an era that feels the effects of God’s supposed death.

There are many noteworthy themes within Frankl's text; however, the idea that the doctor is the new priest is the clear thesis and cornerstone of his overall project. Frankl (1905-1997) lived in a time when human beings were grasping for meaning while simultaneously moving away from the structures that were once the primary meaning centers for humankind. He points again toward the notion that the doctor should not take the place of the minister, but the doctor must be prepared to make “value-judgments” and “take positions” (Frankl 274). This is a view of medicine and science that aims to philosophically meet the existential problems of man not because there is a desire to be more powerful than the religious leader but because it is an issue of responsibility.

Responsibility for both the healer and the patient becomes central in this text. Frankl feels that most psychological problems are, at the core, about a lack of responsibility or the attempt to remove personal responsibility from life (Frankl 4). However, it is responsibility that plays a primary role in creating a total human experience. It is Frankl’s belief that “both consciousness and responsibleness play the basic roles in the drama of existence” (5). In order to understand all of the nuances inherent to life, one must be not only conscious, but also always prepared to attend to the basic responsibly that they are burdened with—a general lack of responsibility could lead to major difficulties.
Frankl also restates his position in regard to the importance of logotherapy. While psychotherapy attempts to “bring instinctual facts to consciousness,” logotherapy “seeks to bring to awareness the spiritual realities” (Frankl 25). This process is about making the individual aware of his or her own personal responsibilities regarding what it means to be a human being in a fractured world and an ever-changing society. For Frankl, responsibility is an “obligation” that “can only be understood in terms of a meaning”—the specific meaning of a human life (26). One will understand the importance of this concept when considering the mission to uncover meaning in the seemingly meaningless. Frankl wants to lead human beings to a sense of responsibility and obligation in order to assist them in finding meaning within their individual lives.

The next major theme within Frankl’s work is the notion of how the individual meets the existential responsibility of human life. In the introduction to The Doctor and the Soul, Frankl announces a mission to help lost souls find meaning in their lives. He calls life “a task,” stating “man should not ask what he may expect from life, but should rather understand that life expects something from him” (Frankl xxi). It is vital to not meet life in a manner that protests human struggle. Frankl states that the human being must make the final decisions regarding how his or her life will be lived and that one’s path toward finding meaning is dictated by the sum of those decisions (Frankl xxi). Therefore, the meaningful aspects of life are born out of one’s answer to the question, “What does life ask of me?” and not “What do I demand from life?”

The idea of freedom is also vital to this particular work of Frankl. Frankl believes in a freedom that exists despite times of great pain and imprisonment, stating that the human’s ultimate freedom is to “give shape” to his or her own existence (97). While freedom is commonly spoken about in much different terminology, one feels the power that comes
from a freedom that situates a human’s worth in the sum of his or her own choices
regarding how to approach and meet existence. Again, meaning is created from the manner
in which the individual meets existence and makes choices. Frankl states that the tension of
human life lies between the recognition of “what actually is on one hand and what ought to
be on the other hand” (108). Frankl’s position is that meaning comes out of the “creative”
ways in which one meets existences (43). Meaning and creativity occur in the midst of the
tension that forces one into action. Tension provides a rich opportunity to allow one’s life to
take shape.

The notion of finding meaning is Frankl’s final major theme within this work. As
stated previously, Frankl’s chief aim is to help his patients find meaning. Frankl engages the
notion of the meaning of life and states that ugly things happen to the human soul when a
person understands life as meaningless. For Frankl, meaninglessness is wretched (29). The
ultimate sadness is the inability to recognize or understand that any human existence can be
meaningful despite the sorrowful times that often accompany life. Perhaps the reason why
people cannot grasp meaning is because their orientation is toward something they simply
cannot understand. He states that just as an animal cannot properly grasp the “world of
man,” then perhaps it is out of the human’s reach to grasp the ultimate meaning of the
universe (Frankl 31-32). While human beings expect to find meaning within a world they will
never fully understand, meaning comes from understanding the conditions of one’s own
soul.

Meaning is also created due to the fact that one does not live for an eternity. Frankl
points toward a contemporary argument that states that “death does away with the meaning
of life altogether”; life is important because it is “finite” (Frankl 63-64). As one cannot
understand a universe that is bigger than oneself, one cannot expect to understand a death
that they are yet to experience. Death does not negate meaning and, contrarily, the very reason life has meaning is because there is a limited amount of time to make choices and engage life. Frankl goes on to explain the actual worth of a life that is finite. Through the metaphor of a final exam he states, “It is less important that the work be completed than its quality be high”—the student must be prepared for “the bell to ring,” which signals the end (Frankl 66). Death is simultaneously situated in both life and death, just as it is important to both finish the exam and be prepared for it. One must have a view of death that does not negate life and simultaneously live a life that includes a genuine search for meaning.

Frankl’s view is that the finite structure of human life creates spaces for meaning to be found. In regard to life, death is “not something that robs it of meaning” (Frankl 63). Some contemporary formations of death would support a standpoint that treats life as meaningless when it can so easily and quickly end. Frankl understands innate human defiance as the means in which meaning can be found in the moment that one must accept and confront death (84). Frankl furthers this notion of defiance by stating that value comes from “the manner in which a person resigns himself to the inevitable” (112). Here lies the heart of Frankl’s search for meaning—death does not contradict the meaning of life. Meaning is cemented when one must meet unavoidable conditions, defy the temptation to demand something from life, and meet the inevitable with vigor and courageousness.

**Confronting Existence Through the Philosophical Importance of Death.** The goal of this project is aimed at finding spaces in which meaning can be communicated in regard to the subject of death. This chapter will now attempt to extract communicative value from the rich philosophical metaphors and traditions discussed thus far. The work of Frankl is communicatively rich and the themes identified in the previous section will help situate the work of Feldman and Barrett within the discipline of communication ethics.
The first theme identified in Frankl’s work is that of the transfer of trust from the priest to the doctor. As Frankl discusses, those searching for meaning have turned away from the clergy and turned toward the doctor. As Feldman suggests, people are looking for a way in which to extract meaning from the world in order to recognize the interplay between the nature of life and the value of death. It is Frankl’s doctor who now has responsibility to offer this meaning. This is not to say that the doctor is the only assistant in the search for meaning, but the point is that the structures that were once universally trusted no longer claim that authority.

Barrett’s project gives a similar impression. Of the four existential philosophers highlighted by Barrett and mentioned above, only Kierkegaard had a clear dedication to one structure of faith. Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre criticized religion and believed people were in need of better ways in which to find meaning and value in a fragmented world. However, according to Barrett, an aim of existentialism was to fix broken philosophical traditions and return to a focus on the human being. Though Frankl and the philosophers outlined by Barrett may ultimately come to different ends regarding who has this responsibility, it is clear that they are all engaging a world in which meaning is lost. These brave thinkers were looking for new places in which to discover and extract meaning. Therefore, the communicative value of the relationship between these diverse works is that it is the obligation of the reasoned communicator to help the lost find meaning in life. Where people see structures as broken and disengaged, it is the burden of the communicator to rebuild and reengage.

The second major theme that becomes clear in Frankl’s text deals with the metaphor of responsibility. His words suggest that in order for the human being to find meaning, he or she must recapture a sense of responsibility for the life that is before them. As one must be
responsible to the existential challenges before one, Feldman’s words ring true in regard to the importance of the moment of confrontation. To engage in the confrontation is to creatively meet the possibilities found in life. One must look to the final confrontation of death with a deep sense of responsibility. This is where Frankl and Feldman unite, suggesting that the lack of existential responsibility will only lead to meaninglessness.

This focus on the inherent responsibilities of human life is clearly echoed in the existential project offered by Frankl. Frankl’s focus is on responsibility in order to make the individual aware of the inherent meaning of his or her existence. The same is true for the philosophers discussed by Barrett in *Irrational Man*. The entire existential project is about redirecting the human focus of attention to actual existence rather than intangible and abstract aspects of the world that can never be fully understood. Barrett’s work suggests the end of hiding from reality and instead advocates for a focus on responsibility for actual human conditions. Frankl’s existential responsibility returns our communicative focus to the aspects of life that are genuine—one must speak out of grounded reality and not toward fantasy. In order to uncover meaning one must keep one’s focus on actualities.

The third major theme found within Frankl’s text is the idea of meeting life where it stands. Frankl’s general sense is that one should not ask more from life, but rather ask what they can give to life. One should not feel entitled just because they are alive. The debt is owed to life and meaning comes from what you give back to existence. This thought is clear in Feldman’s work as he feels that the true value of death comes from the legacy that is recognized by the people left behind who spread the deceased’s memory. A life spent giving back to life will foster meaning in the moment of death. Here, one’s task is to understand the demands of life and to communicate in such a way that understands that meaning is created during life and it is the burden of those left behind to communicate the value in death. The
communicative importance of a life comes in speaking of how a person contributed to life instead of what they tried to remove from it.

Barrett’s project has natural connections to Frankl’s work regarding the meeting of life. Existentialism is about knowing oneself despite a world filled with darkness. Life if about engaging what life “is” rather than what life “should be.” Just as Frankl supports the engagement of reality and not fantasy, Barrett’s existential engagement suggest that one can only come to know oneself and not the fragmented mysteries of the world. Hence, one must communicate about tangible possibilities and not about what one would prefer to demand from human existence.

This idea is also engaged in Frankl’s next theme, the notion of freedom. For Frankl, freedom gives the individual the power to shape his or her own existence. This freedom spawns the creativity that allows for a meaningful life. This freedom can be found in both metaphors of nature of life and value of death in the work of Feldman. Feldman’s freedom comes from understanding and appreciating life and death simultaneously. The freedom that inspires meaning is the confrontation between life and death. Perhaps the freedom that lies within our communicative practices is the acknowledgment that our words shape our lives. How one meets moments of turmoil and strife will have an impact on an individual’s search for meaning.

One also sees this orientation toward freedom within the work of Barrett. Each of his major philosophers point toward a freedom that is created by the human coming to know him or herself. For Sartre, this freedom is born out of one’s ability to say “No,” and is also scattered throughout the scope of Barrett’s entire existential exposition. There is freedom in moments of crisis in which one literally has the ability to choose the direction of one’s own life. How one communicates in moments of darkness could very well alter the
course of a life. This powerful freedom, to speak words that have meaning and power, can never be stripped from the individual.

The final aim of Frankl’s work is a battle against the sense of meaningless in human life. Frankl finds value in the seemingly devoid and intends to allow his patients to discover that same sense of meaning. Feldman’s three metaphors have the same goal of finding meaning, and meaning is found through the interplay of the three. The moment of confrontation creates possibilities for meaning. The relationship between life and death without the devaluation of either gives extraordinary meaning to both. One should communicate with an eye toward confrontation, meeting the moment that life reveals. Life should be communicated in a way that does not avoid death. Death should be communicated in a way that does not cheapen life.

Frankl’s search for meaning is clearly the major focal point of his existential project. Additionally, Barrett’s work reveals philosophical thinkers who want the individual to know him or herself and embrace existence in order to live a genuine life. Through the work of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre, one understands that their goal is to not destroy structures and abolish meaning. Their project is about rebuilding the structures of meaning inside of the individual in order to battle unhelpful fear and anxiety. Thus, an ethical call sounds for communication that is honest about the true conditions of life. Our communication has the power to both build and destroy structures. It is the goal of this dissertation project to create spaces in which meaning can be rediscovered and to rebuild structures that modernity has left barren. How one chooses to communicate about a subject as serious as death truly matters and can both inspire or devastate. Frankl, Feldman, and Barrett prefer inspiration.
The primary message from this chapter is that there is communicative value in how the notions of confrontation, life, and death are engaged. The confrontation of the inevitable matters predominantly so that that moment of struggle negates neither the value of death or the value of life. There is an interconnectedness between how one confronts the inevitable, the value that is gained from life, and how meaning is found in death. The following chapter will return to Ernest Becker in order to gain a clearer picture of his confrontation with the reaper, which did not negate, but rather inspired. The work of Becker and Frankl will be used in order to offer yet another way to confront existence and create a more textured understanding of meaning in both life and death.
Chapter Four

Conversations in the Shadow of the Reaper

“Death is impatient and thoughtless. It barges into your room when you are right in the middle of something, and it doesn't bother to wipe its boots.”—Tom Robbins, *Jitterbug Perfume*

The problems associated with the human engagement of the topic of death are vast. The exploration of the work of Fred Feldman and William Barrett have shown the importance of confronting the existential demand that is inherent to human life. Meaning and value are clearly and coherently tied to how matters of life and death are handled, embraced, and communicated about. This chapter returns to the words of Ernest Becker and examines his final interview that was conducted by fellow philosopher Sam Keen. This exploration will seek to find spaces in which one can see Becker’s theory turn into practice as he straightforwardly meets his own death. Becker’s words have great value for finding meaning in the seemingly meaningless experience of death. Becker enters into conversation with the reaper in order to find philosophical places in which meaning can be found, built, and explained in light of the darkness of death.

**Introduction**

In order to take philosophy seriously one must find possibilities in which abstract thoughts and principles can be placed into the reality of human circumstances. Ernest Becker’s description of death denial was outlined in the second chapter of this work. Becker allows one to see the value of confrontation in a way that gives meaning to life and value to death. The philosophical mistakes of the past can be repaired through reexamination of how humans must actually live in the world and journey toward true knowledge of self. This is seemingly done through meeting existence on its own terms and not through an idealized
notion of what one deserves, but rather through what life offers. This chapter seeks to show true confrontations with the deadly reaper in a way that speaks to the wonder of life rather than the darkness of death.

The first section of this chapter, *Becker’s Confrontation of the Reaper*, will explore the remarkable example that Ernest Becker made for others through the moment of his own death. This section will look to the final interview with Becker, mentioned previously in chapter two, in order to illustrate how Becker’s confrontation of his own death offered a meeting of death in which the primary focus remained on life. The second section, *The Communicative Importance of Becker’s Confrontation* will look to the specific communicative value that one gains from how Becker speaks about his death. The section will also explore the major themes of Becker’s final interview through the lens of human communication. Becker and Frankl will be placed into conversation in the final section, *Locating the Importance of Frankl’s “Meaning” Within the Communicative Importance of Becker’s Confrontation*. In this section, the metaphors and themes found in Becker’s final interview will be carried into the work of Viktor Frankl in order to offer the communicative significance for living a life of meaning that is otherwise than the negation of the value of death.

The significance of this chapter for the greater project is rooted in the examples and roadmaps that will be offered by the work of Becker. Becker unveils the dark nature of the denial of death. However, Becker’s final interview shows a transcendence of death that creates spaces for meaning to be found in the realm of the living. As Becker ends his philosophical project, the nature changes and the darkness of death refocuses toward the joyousness of life. It is in this transition from shadows to light that this work becomes important for the study of communication ethics. Becker discusses a legitimate problem that must be communicated about. Becker and Frankl in congress illustrate how to communicate
the subject of death in a way that takes life and death seriously while exposed to a worldview that is jubilant and festive.

**Becker’s Confrontation of the Reaper**

This project has discussed several philosophical positions on how human beings meet the moment of death. As reviewed earlier, Ernest Becker spent his scholarly career discussing the problems associated with the denial of death and the subsequent destructive path that humans embark upon. However, Becker’s own meeting with the reaper came unexpectedly, creating an opportune space in which he could publicly attempt to die in the manner suggested by his writing. With Sam Keen interviewing him at his bedside, Becker would give his final interview and confront the reaper with dignity and composure. This section will examine the transcript of that final interview in order to show how Becker’s philosophy moved from theory into practice. While Becker’s words are important, the main focus of this project is on his meeting the moment of death in accordance with his own philosophy in a way that may offer hope for finding communicative meaning in death and darkness.

Becker’s deathbed interview took place just a short time before Becker’s death on March 6, 1974 and was later published in *Psychology Today* (Keen 1). What is clear is that Becker seemingly felt a sense of urgency in his final days as he met with Keen. From the very first question, Keen directly addresses Becker’s impending death by asking if this moment was a “test” of his theory (1). Becker’s reaction was forceful as he explained that it was indeed a test as all of his work and writings would be put on the table as his own death was examined. He was not only interested in confronting his own death in the “proper” way; his focus of attention was also on testing his theories during his final moments.
Becker’s life and work were tied closely together as he developed his theory over the course of many years. As Keen begins the interview he states that he is looking for a “story” of Becker’s life in terms of how his own work was born (1). Becker states that his major objective was “the merger of science and religious perspectives,” and that he wanted to “deliver science over to religion,” a topic that had been discussed in many of Becker’s published works (Keen 1). However, Becker clarifies this statement, stating that science and religion are basically in the same category and share a common subject matter. Becker was a champion of the human sciences and searched for ways to negotiate the major problems of life and death through multidisciplinary study; this notion of the “merger” of science and religion is consistent with Becker’s body of scholarly work.

The conversation between Becker and Keen turns toward the subject of unhappiness and feelings of meaninglessness. Becker discusses the work of Sigmund Freud and his contemporary psychologists as putting forth an argument that the human being is nothing more than a “creature” (Keen 1). While Becker partially agrees with this sentiment, he aptly describes the dual nature of humans insofar that human beings are creatures that use all of their self-created major structures to deny their “creatureliness” (Keen 1). Becker makes a connection between the human sciences and religion as he hears the same statements echoed in theology. Thus, one understands the overall theme of Becker’s project as the combination of science and religion, which is further emphasized during his deathbed interview.

Becker moves on to describe the faulty and damaging heroic structure of human life. He relays Max Horkheimer’s words that humans are essentially abandoned on the Earth, and that human transcendence can only take place when mankind “form[s] itself into communities of the abandoned” (Keen 2). Becker is drawn to the metaphor of community and offers potential insight as to how he would have ultimately offered a path away from the
heroic structure; yet, he also sees this as a way to scientifically speak for the notion of the human being as a creature. He then discusses the idea of evil as he states that all of the human’s war-faring ways are public statements to denounce the inherent creaturely nature of humans. This leads to a battle of who is “more” human, in which the “degradation” of others is used to establish a more heroic and life affirming self-quality (Keen 2). Thus, the heroic structure has good intentions but destructive conclusions, illustrated, according to Becker, by the horrific actions of the Nazis that were born of this desire.

Though Becker previously indicated that the problem with heroics is primarily an issue within Western cultures, it is in this interview with Keen that he specifically identifies the problem as one that is detrimental to American culture. He states that the people of the United States have always been searching for a way to live a heroic life, but do not “know how to express it,” which causes destruction and pain (Keen 2). Becker hints toward a potential solution that places the burden upon society itself to make people feel heroic in a “nondestructive” manner (Keen 2). What Becker is suggesting is a path toward “constructive heroics,” including aspects of justifiable war, public works projects, and civil rights projects. These particular projects are for the greater good where traditional destructive heroics are based on individualism (Keen 3). This is a fundamental thought in attempting to understand that heroics are not inherently destructive, but they must be tempered by what is good for the community and not merely the individual.

As Keen presses Becker on potential flaws of his heroics theory, Becker unveils something that is of great value for uncovering a constructive, meaning-rich view of heroics. Becker states that his notion of true heroism occurs when “one marks one’s passage on earth by leaving behind something that heightens life and testifies to the worthwhileness of his existence” (Keen 3). Heroics need not amount to a tremendous accomplishment that amazes
the world. The person who has taken care of a family and provided for his loved ones has accomplished an act of constructive heroics, according to Becker (Keen 3). Keen pushes Becker’s theory forward by relating the problematic vision of heroics to what he refers to as the “myth of self-sufficiency,” an argument that Becker agrees with (3). One realizes the inherent need for community in order to battle against the destructive side of heroism. Heroism can be positive if it is for the benefit for the community, but heroism becomes caustic when the human being acts as a means for standing alone, above the community that he or she is connected to.

Becker claims that the need for heroism and storytelling are linked to the belief that stories allow for a sense of immortality and human beings need to tell their stories to others. Keen asks who the audience is for these stories of heroism (Keen 3). Is the audience other humans, for the betterment of society and community, or is the audience the self for the solidification of a god-complex? Becker states that true heroic storytelling is about the sustaining of human life and is oriented toward the past, present, and future. The audience is the dead that humans are attempting to remember, the memory and traditions, while simultaneously attempting to remind the present members of the community of what is important for creating a prosperous future (Keen 3). While this is a notion of heroic communication that is ancient, there are still gestures toward that style today found in continuing rituals and actions.

According to Becker and Keen, modern, negative heroics are destructive because the modern view of heroics is that something new must be created and past traditions are simply not enough. Keen praises Becker’s placement of the psychological into the ontological plane, meaning that he was able to place these questions of the mind into the realm of philosophical inquiry regarding existence (4). Becker explains that, much like the union of
science and theology, the psychological questions cannot be removed from the existential struggle of human beings. Becker continues to define the problem of the human being as one of being lost in the world, caught in feelings of hopelessness. The “paranoid animal” is unimportant and does not understand its natural surroundings (Keen 5). Becker does not fault the human being for this paranoia, but moves the psychological notion of paranoia into the ontological domain of existential strife.

Becker changes the path of the interview, moving away from philosophical conversation about the problems of the human being and toward his past scholarship. Becker declares that he has “great misgivings” about the work he did as a young scholar, stating that he ignored the textured “history of ideas” and instead attempted to focus on the prospects that the decade of the 1960s offered for his specific project (Keen 5). He also expresses great sadness that his most important projects were ignored and states that “nothing happened” in regard to his desire for a “science of man” to be created, for mass reform of the university educational system, and that there had been no fusion between disciplines working toward the goal of understanding why the human being does the things he or she does (Keen 5). The interview turns personal, allowing Becker to reflect in an unusually self-deprecating manner, as he is no stranger to giving himself the credit that he thinks he deserves. Instead we see a man at the end of his life and career lamenting for his passions that fell upon deaf ears.

Returning to the problem of human death, Becker, imparting wisdom from his Book *The Denial of Death*, states that the goal of human life is “to use ourselves up,” meaning that people have a finite amount time on the Earth as living beings and it is our duty to gather as much experience in order to eventually “burn ourselves out” (Keen 6). Becker explains that one should not “give life second thoughts”; he transfers the burden to the true intellectual,
as he or she must question life and lean into tough questions because of the state of
awareness that has been bestowed upon them (Keen 6). This is importance because Becker
feels that the gift of life is only correctly used wisely when a person leaves everything on the
field and plays the game without second guesses or regrets. However, he permits room for
intellectuals and philosophers to second guess and reflect in order to find the good life that
all humans naturally strive for.

Becker then moves on to discussing how one actually goes about achieving true
mental health. Keen asks Becker if he had once stated that the only way to be mentally
healthy is to be “obsessed about something” or to engage in “compulsive obsession” (7).
Becker confirms Keen’s question and explains his position further by stating that “mental
health would be controlled obsession,” a dedication to something and the proper channeling
of one’s creative energies (Keen 7). He states that ambitious humans are always attempting
to constantly create. He uses himself as an example. He is dying in a hospital yet still is
moving all of his energy into what he understands as important. It is a drive and a
fascination that is focused upon “clarity” (Keen 7). Again, one can sense a harkening back
toward Becker’s previous work. Life is not about regrets and the only way to die with honor
and peace is to give as much as one has been given and to die with no energy left to expend.

The following pages of the interview are extremely helpful for attempting to
understand Becker as a man and his ongoing projects. Keen asks Becker to tell the “story”
of how he reached his current intellectual position. Becker answers by stating that he was a
“searcher” as a young man, striving to uncover what his talents were. He admits that his
experiences as a participant in World War II called forth a desire to understand “what makes
people act the way they do” (Keen 7). He admits that he went to graduate school for the
“meal ticket,” but ended up falling in love with ideas. He hated overly complex intellectual
themes and wanted to find “simple-minded patterns” that would allow average people to better understand the human struggle (Keen 8). This section of the interview portrays Becker as a scientist who wanted to find the philosophical truth of human nature while abolishing academic fluff that hides information from a public that is searching for value and meaning.

As Becker further explains his life’s work, he defends himself against some of his critics. His work and obsession with death were not born of his own sickness and he wants to ultimately show that the fear of death is essentially the other side of a fear of life. Keen offers respect for Becker as he unifies life as both “awesome” and “terrifying” (9). Becker notes that often work needs to be done that is in direct opposition of unquestioned trends and the trend that he felt very uneasy with was that of the “cheerful robots.” While everyone else talked about therapeutic pleasure, it was his duty to uncover what they were continuously ignoring (Keen 9). Fundamental is the issue that there are both sides to human life. There is both light and darkness to experience during the human experience. To ignore one devalues the importance of the other.

Becker continues to discuss his own work and what he feels to be his talents. It is his mission to pull together what others have said and studied in order to simplify it for the masses. He wants to explain why we have “scapegoats” and why each culture and subculture needs “somebody to kick.” He notes that when one has that scapegoat to kick around it gives the person a feeling of “specialness” (Keen 10). Again, one can sense the trend in Becker’s work as he attempts to show what is wrong and dangerous with the heroic projects of Western society. He notes that there are good reasons to look happily at the world that surrounds one, but after what the Jews went through it is “no longer possible to have a naturally optimistic view of the world” (Keen 10). Becker shares this dualistic view of
the world with many of the Jewish scholars and philosophers that experienced the tragic nightmare of the Holocaust. He sees the world as a place of great beauty, but also a place in which the reality of evil exists.

Becker and Keen's conversation is grounded in the importance of living a reflective life. Becker discusses the idea of “character armor,” the human defenses that allow one to protect his or her version of one's own character and how a focus of attention that is placed only on the protection of the armor ignores reality (Keen 11). Becker feels that life is wasted when the focus of attention is in the incorrect place. A life passes by and relationships suffer because too much attention is placed upon the inward fascination with character armor.

Ultimately, Becker attributes this misaligned focused on the fact that humans have knowledge of death and work extremely hard to ignore it (Keen 11). This is not surprising as most of Becker’s work returns to the problems associated with human awareness of death, but it is a stark warning that Becker offers: undue focus of attention can ignore genuine life that is happening all around one.

Keen questions Becker about his ideas concerning death as he asks why it is so important for the human being to attempt to beat death and live as if immortal. Becker returns to the notion of the human being as a “creature” and states that a “creature hungers for continued experience” which leads to the desire to surpass death (Keen 12). Keen points toward tribes and cultures of the past in which the individual was not of the utmost importance but Becker takes particular aim at his assertion, stating that in these ancient tribes death was interpreted as the “final promotion” as part of the rites of human passage. While these communal understandings of death are healthy and helpful, Becker sees that such beliefs regarding death are simply no longer prominent (Keen 12). One may experience a lingering connection to the tragic mistakes of modernity within these words as the world
has transformed into a place in which primacy is allotted to the individual agent. Becker suggests that the tribes of a pre-modern world were able to successfully respect both the individual and the community in their death rites. The individual went through the final steps of death alone with a spiritual reward, but all for the good of the community.

As Becker and Keen engage the next topic, the notion of communication moves to the forefront of the conversation. At this point, Keen is attempting to push Becker into discussing some of the new age ideas of the day, specifically the phenomenon of ESP. Becker says that he is not concerned with notions such as ESP when, after several years of marriage, couples continue to struggle with true communication about differences and outlooks (Keen 13). While Keen wants to put all humans together on a cosmic level, Becker keeps human beings of separate minds and separate bodies. Becker states that most “people don’t communicate” and the ones who truly do know how to communicate with others are those who have rejected certain “conditioning” and know who they really are (Keen 13).

Here, Becker preaches a model of communication that is reflective and complex. In order to truly pass along a message the human must be able to drop pretense, breakdown the heroic structures, and communicate toward reality. It is all of the structures that have been built that disallow one from both sending and retrieving true communicative messages.

Becker was driven to uncover why humans act in such destructive and unreflective ways as they move through existence. As Becker moves on from the idea of communication, he states that “illusions must be broken” and that it is his goal to uncover pathways out of habits that have made life caustic and seemingly unbearable (Keen 14). Much to the chagrin of his detractors, Becker has attempted to break down the walls that create massive illusion in human life. This is why he feels uneasy with those, as mentioned previously, that are unduly positive and joyful while ignoring human sadness and suffering. He finds this
behavior “spooky” and, despite his devout belief in God, Becker does not understand the “evangelical fundamentalist movement” (Keen 14). Becker is comfortable with mystery and the questioning of human built structures, yet does not discount them fully. What he discounts are the followers who do not question and spend their time demonizing those who do not fall into a particular narrative or doctrine.

Though much of the first half of Keen’s interview with Becker was deeply philosophical and academic, the second half gives way to a more intimate portrait of a dying man and an enlightening conversation between two men with a great deal of respect for one another despite their philosophical differences. Keen asks Becker to directly address his own death to a culture that often hides from such conversations. Becker returns to his religious grounding in which he states that what he has offered is nothing new; he offers an anthology of what others have said. His position is that humans are meant to be “used for divine purposes,” but it is apparent that humans are often “misused” (Keen 15). Even though his religious perspective points him toward the notion that humans are to be used for divine purposes, it is obvious to him that modern humans are imbedded in a secular world. In fact, he sees that it is not easy for secular men and women to accept the fact of death and that it is treated as an “injustice” (Keen 15). In other words, without being pulled toward and motivated by a higher power or meaning, death will feel like the ultimate end and an act of thievery.

As Keen asks Becker to discuss society’s awareness of the apparent meanings that construct their own lives, Becker addresses the problems associated with modernity. He states that the “greatest deception of social life” is that the individual human being is his or her own person (Keen 16). Keen offers the metaphor of “possession” as he alludes to the idea that all humans are socially owned by others. Becker agrees, stating that the individual is
a “construct”; one can never truly be one’s own person (Keen 16). The individual not only owes others, but also owns others. As Modernity places a focus on the individual and personal preference, Becker’s position is that every human life and self-sense of personhood is defined by the others in their particular community and social circles.

Becker, though never explicitly mentioning modernity, is aware of the problems that arise from an overarching focus on the individual. If one is to recognize that the individualistic nature of human life is merely a construct that cannot lead to happiness, the simple removal of the mindset is not enough to lead to happiness. It will cause one to feel “vulnerable” and “weak” once the focus on the self is removed. It must be redirected to a new “power source,” which, in Becker’s language, is God (Keen 16). This enhances Becker’s previous speculation that the individual cannot bear the weight of life alone and must have connections beyond oneself. A belief in God and connection to other humans clear pathways to meaning and happiness as there is “no way to program society so that people aren’t helplessly dependent on other people (Keen 17). Here, one is able to view Becker as constructive rather than deconstructive. He wants to deconstruct the destructive lie of the individual self, but he does not stop there, as it would lead to meaninglessness and wandering. Instead, he removes the focus on the individual self and places the focus upon a higher power and interpersonal relationships that serve as the ultimate providers of meaning.

Keen then asks Becker about the mythologies that are built upon death within society in regard to how Becker sees his own impending death. Becker responds that he does not connect with myths in regard to this event and considers death to be “peaceful” as opposed to “turbulent” (Keen 18). Becker sees not the destructive myth of the “reaper,” calling it a “peaceful kind of darkening” rather than referring to the mythological metaphor of moving toward the “light” (Keen 18). Becker has one foot planted in each camp of the
secular and the sacred. He rejects overly joyous theories on death, as he sees it as a darkening. Yet, the darkness for Becker is not something to be afraid of. As one must learn the inherent good of turning off the lights to get a peaceful night’s rest, Becker advocates for the darkening of one’s life to achieve the ultimate act of death in the honorable completion of life.

Keen continues to press Becker on personal topics. Specifically, Keen is curious about what Becker would consider unfinished business. Becker states that he wants to discuss “power and people” and that he feels that a fruitful area of study lies in the notion of “plugging into sources of other power” and explicitly wants to look at the ongoing notion of freedom (Keen 22). Becker feels that, despite what people want to believe, humans cannot altogether experience freedom and that there can be no great advancement in psychology or economics until society itself comes to the realization that humans are always beholden to others (Keen 22). Becker addresses the problematic characteristics of modernity as he feels that human beings are both “conditioned and unfree” (Keen 23). One must understand that human life is always tied to other humans and, despite attempts to feel autonomous, freedom is always tied to the connection to others. Furthermore, human beings are not autonomous in the sense that action and behavior come from conditioning.

Even though Becker often offers constructive pathways out of the destructive nature of the human being, the trajectory of this particular portion of the interview leads him to discuss the dark side of human nature. Becker tackles the idea of evil and blames much evil on human beings trying to turn the natural world into something that it is not. He states that people want to make Earth “free from death, free from accident, free from creatureliness,” and it is this attempt that causes true evil (Keen 24). Becker knows that this is counterintuitive, but it is his thought that the denial of what the nature of the world is leads
to more death and destruction. Human beings become increasingly disconnected with what it really means to be human. This notion is in conjunction with his idea of heroic projects and helps one to understand that repression of human nature does in fact lead to the darker side of what it means to be human.

Becker recognizes the push and pull between the highs and lows of human life. It is that tension that provides the opportunities to grow, learn, and find meaning. Keen states that “love” and “trust” can only grow from the tainted ground of disappointment (Keen 24). Becker agrees with this statement as he feels that “joy is something achieved after much tribulation” (Keen 24). Becker proves to be a champion for seeing the world through the lens of a true philosopher. This notion touches upon the ongoing theme that life is not intrinsically bad or intrinsically good. Life simply is. The highs do not negate the lows and the same goes for the opposite. However, in order to truly experience joy one must recognize and accept the struggle. Perhaps the only way to make it through the struggle of conflict is to look forward to the joyous payoff that is provided by the educational battle of dark times in human life.

As the interview draws near a close, Becker begins to open up about his personal feelings regarding his dwindling time. Keen tells Becker that he will send him copies of the interview recording and the transcripts once they are completed. Becker discusses his desire to leave behind some kind of legacy, but more specifically mentions his family, who will soon be without a father and husband. While it is important for him to give his ideas to the world, he also wants to “leave behind a chunk of royalties” for his family to live off of (Keen 25). He knows that this interview will likely bolster sales of his books and asks Keen if he enjoyed the *The Denial of Death*. Keen acknowledges that he did even though it often made him feel uncomfortable (25). Becker agrees that his account can be tough to accept, but his
mission is of the utmost importance and seriousness. Becker is about “knowing how to insist on what is significant and to hammer at it,” which one can see throughout his works (Keen 26). Becker’s ideas were controversial and remain so today. He was uninterested in writing books for popular press and preferred to offer something that could help create better lives.

In the mid 1970s Ernest Becker was not widely read or understood. However, Becker is cognizant of his various achievements. He notes that he has fans who are also famous intellectuals. In an apparent humorous manner Becker states that he is aware that he is patting himself on the back, but feels he can “permit myself as a dying man a few kudos” (Keen 27). He goes on to state that Abraham Maslow wrote him a letter explaining how much he had enjoyed reading Becker’s work. Becker is happy about this even though the book itself “dropped dead” (Keen 27). Here one recognizes the innate humanity of Becker. Despite his previous statement that he prefers that his words fade into the background as he amplifies the real problems of human life, he still brags about his famous admirers.

As he looks back at his academic life Becker laments the current state of the university. He states that he has “no hope” for the university outside of the idea that it serves as a sanctuary for ideas. He desperately yearns for “an accumulative body of science about the human condition,” a body of science that he spent his entire academic life fighting for (Keen 27). Becker had advocated for this mixing of disciplines in several of his books and, as stated in previous chapters, he had been vilified and ousted for these beliefs. At this point in the interview, one gains the sense that Becker was not overly personal about his own death and has a deep desire to die in the respectful manner that his work advocated. Becker’s ultimate grief is not directed toward himself, but toward the academic institution of which he had dedicated much of his life. Becker sees multidisciplinary study as the only way to truly understand and support the bevy of lost human beings. Despite his perseverance he
would not see even the beginnings of this ambitious educational endeavor. However, Becker’s true nature as a bilateral thinker constantly engaging in dialectic allows him to see the wonder of the other side of this educational deficiency. He believes this culture of “miseducation” is what has led him toward no particular concentration. Keen agrees by evoking Joe Campbell’s words, “the beauty is in the fault” (Keen 28). Becker’s desire for multidisciplinary study was not achieved during his time on earth, but he still benefitted from the murky waters of the educational system in the United States.

Becker does not spend a great amount of time discussing his particular failures and moves to reflect on the interview that is still taking place. He was surprised by his intellectual performance and knows that his mind continues to be sharp as his body deteriorates. He is happy that Keen made it to his bedside as he does not “know where [he] will be even this week end” (Keen 28). Becker does not fear this prospect, but is happy that he was able to achieve something during these final, dire moments of his life. He does, however, continuously encourage Keen’s work, as he knows that this will become part of his legacy. Becker laments, “Gee, I am sorry I won’t get to see it probably,” referring to the printed version of the interview (Keen 28). Keen assures him—“I will do a good job for you” (28). Their conversation reflects the seriousness of the subject matter for both Keen and Becker.

Becker begins to consider himself as a man whose time is rapidly running out. “You don’t always have to see everything,” he states, explaining that one need not be “selfish” (Keen 29). Even though he obviously would like to see how Keen’s readers understand this final testimonial, he knows that life must continue without him. Becker then discusses his contentious time at Berkeley in which he was loved by his students, hated by the administration, and ultimately rejected from further employment with the university. He harkens back to the academic energy that he shared with the students who would listen to
his lectures and then stay awake all night in order to further the conversation within small
groups. The tired students would miss classes taught by other professors, causing him, as
Becker believed, to become hated by both faculty and administration (Keen 29). Becker,
looking back at this controversial time in his career, grows nostalgic instead of angry. His
time at Berkley was powerful for both him and his students and now, as the end of his life,
he seemingly has no ill feelings about being forced out of that particular university.

Becker continues to defend the style of teaching that resulted in his tumultuous
career within academia. He states that people must alter their normal way of doing things
and “awaken imaginations” and “shake up the whole campus” (Keen 30). He acknowledges
the “ham” and “megalomaniac” that reside inside of him and credits the combination of
those two traits for making him a “dramatic” educator (Keen 30). It is that theatrical style
that Becker ultimately credits with allowing him to be able to deliver philosophically-rich
ideas to those who may not be as knowledgeable as he. He states that his talent is to take the
“simple idea and still approach it as though it were a great discovery” (Keen 31). It is this
passion for ideas that allowed for his work to be so intellectually prolific while still readily
assessable.

As the interview comes to its end, Keen and Becker disclose a few helpful words to
one another. Keen describes Becker as someone who “thinks” with his life, painting an
accurate picture of Becker who was not afraid to take chances and align with unpopular
positions (Keen 31). He also states that Becker is very much like some of his favorite
thinkers who “lived their thinking and lived their lives” (Keen 34). Becker did attempt at
every possible junction to live out his philosophical and social thought. He did not do so at
the expense of a happy life. As Becker powerfully states, “most of one’s social life...consists
in helping people patch the kinks in their armor as your are talking to them” (Keen 34).
Human interaction is about helping other human beings and repairing their flawed, broken souls. Each utterance is for the other and not the self.

As Becker and Keen prepare to say farewell, Becker describes himself as “wistful,” regretting that he will not be around to see where his work finds a place. He sees changes happening around him and realizes that he will no longer be part of the “game” (Keen 35). Keen responds by stating that so many humans are emotionally empty when it comes time to die and it is more miserable to not be wistful (35). With no grand words or long goodbyes, the interview ends. One sees the dialectical nature of this conversation as Becker’s feelings of sorrow are co-opted by Keen’s assertion that it is better to feel wistful than to feel nothing at all. Perhaps this is the ongoing theme of the entire interview. One contributes to an ongoing narrative, but has no power in how the narrative began. The contributor will also never see how the narrative is played out over years, decades, and centuries. All one can do is feel sadness that they will not be able to see the results, while taking comfort in the fact that their own words guided a conversation that is ongoing and perhaps never ending.

As Becker predicted and Keen sensed, Becker would never see the publication of this final interview. The full text represents a spirited and academic conversation between a seasoned scholar and a philosopher just beginning to gain notoriety. The conversation is an unambiguous example of one staying true to values even when faced with the most trying of times. Becker is staring the teaper in the eyes, yet undaunted he speaks with candor, courage, and charm as he leaves his legacy in the hands of Keen and an academic world that never really appreciated him. One can easily understand why Becker, who had so little hope in the university, would be “wistful” when pondering what would come of his work after drawing his terminal breath. To both honor Becker and respect his body of work, the next section will look at the specific themes discussed in the Becker/Keen interview in order to consider
the communicative implications that this final meeting has left for those who are interested in finding a way to have a dialogue about death that is both meaningful and productive for human life.

**The Communicative Importance of Becker's Confrontation**

Much can be said about how a person meets his or her own death when directly faced with the fact that there will be no cure, no saving grace, no coming home. As one may imagine, the moment is likely filled with fear and sadness as one recounts a life that has been lived and a future that will happen but will not be experienced. Despite these common notions regarding death, Becker conducts this interview with integrity and composure. He is still a teacher in that moment and, because of Keen’s efforts, he remains a teacher today. This section will look at lessons from this great educator of the human sciences in order to find implicit connections between his work and the study of communication.

The first connection to communication is the notion of Becker’s brand of praxis as he gives his deathbed interview. He is literally playing out his theory of death, which Keen calls a “test” of everything that Becker has said about how the human being engages his or her own death (Keen 1). This is the overall theme of Becker’s final stand against the reaper and he literally shows how to communicate about the tragic times associated with human life. Though he admits to having misgivings about his previous work, Becker does not take this time to lament or pity himself (Keen 5). He uses this moment as an opportunity to place his theory into communicative action as he completes his life in the way that he had spent his career advocating for.

Becker’s impending death can be understood as a significant stand against the inescapable. He never loses his mindset of working to advance his project. As he credits his “compulsive obsession,” Becker does not give up his philosophical endeavor just because his
body has given up on him (Keen 7). His goal of creating simple modes for understanding complex ideas persists even at the end of his life, allowing one to see Becker continuing to communicate about what is vital even though very soon he will no longer be around to fight the battle. He continues to communicate for the betterment of others and the overall community. Furthermore, Becker teaches that what is valued should be communicated about, even in the face of an end that cannot be avoided.

One also sees Becker living out his final act by stating that it is his charge to provoke the human imagination with his teaching (Keen 31). It is apparent that he did so by living out his theory. His chosen mode of communication during this ominous time continues to inspire as one considers what it means to die with dignity. As Keen suggests, Becker really did think as though his life was on the line even when it came to the end of the line (Keen 31). To think with one’s life, to live one’s life in a consistently thoughtful manner, is an appealing metaphor for how to communicate during times of struggle. If one is to believe that the conversation has started prior to oneself and will continue long after, it is a powerful notion to think with one’s entire being as that may be one’s only lasting contribution after death.

The next theme that connects to the study of communication is Becker’s ongoing dedication to multidisciplinary study. Becker had long wanted to combine science and religion in order to not only give hope to human beings, but because he felt as if the two easily united and complemented one another (Keen 1). As previously noted, Becker had worked toward multidisciplinary study for most of his career. This should strike any communication scholar as fundamental due to the fact that one cannot place the discipline into a particular niche. Communication inherently crosses disciplines as one engages both the positives and negatives of human communication in every area of life, no matter what
discipline, workplace, or interpersonal relationship. Becker’s dedication to this unification of disciplines is important due to the nature of human communication itself, and it also opens up places for the discipline to grow when applied to areas that are not specifically in the realm of communication study.

Becker’s devotion to the ideals of multidisciplinary study comes with some ill feelings for Becker as well. He feels that there has been no “fusion” between disciplines (Keen 5), and that there is no hope for the modern university (Keen 27). Though he laments this, he comes to be thankful for the “beauty in the fault” of the academic system in the fact that he has personally learned more about things that he ever had expected (Keen 28). In regard to communication, one must always look at human communication with a certain amount of wonder as to how one learns. Though messages are flawed, human beings continue to get work done together. The flaws and faults are needed because, through trial and error, the uneasy moments in communication often become the greatest of teachers.

The next area in which Becker’s final thoughts work in congress with the study of communication deals with his notion of the true nature of human beings. Becker spent much time talking about how humans deny their creature ways and how their heroic structures lead to dangerous ends. These heroic structures are subconsciously built to deny inherent truths of humankind (Keen 1). The human, as a “paranoid animal” (Keen 5), must build character armor in order to further suppress these human truths (Keen 11). On a very practical level, this helps one understand why some people communicate in the ways that they do. Becker leads one to the conclusion that all communication may be in defense of the individual’s faux armor. While this may not give a definitive answer on how to assist people in learning better communicative habits, it does allow one to begin to understand why certain people make certain communicative choices. If one were constantly building and
repairing one’s own heroic structure, it would only be natural to assume that how one communicates is the largest provider of meaning in this area.

Becker’s notion of community also opens spaces for understanding communication. Becker identifies the human being as often feeling “abandoned,” and people need community in order to abolish this feeling of homelessness (Keen 3). Community tempers the dangerous side of heroic structures (Keen 3). One must consider that a commitment aimed at the good of the community is a natural and helpful desire when attempting to benefit others. As Becker states, death was once and should continue to be for the community (Keen 12). The communicative implications are significant, as one should remember that all communication is not based on the modern principle of individualism, but rather should be for others in the community. When death is used to remind others about values and virtues, the community benefits regardless of the desolate feelings associated with loss.

Another key to understanding the importance of community in Becker’s concluding interview is in direct opposition with modern “emotivism,” decision making by personal preference, and individualism (cite MacIntyre). Becker takes great care to show the human’s self constructs of identity and character are never his or her own; they are a composite of self and the community within which one is embedded (Keen 16). Becker discusses the lie of freedom and the notion that people are never really free because one is intrinsically beholden to those who help shape one’s individual personality and character (Keen 22). Becker positions the inner good of communication toward the other and away from oneself. In order to be a coherent communicator one must recognize that one is never really one’s own person. There is a history and a narrative that has been decided upon by the community that
has a direct impact on creating the person that stands before the other. Communication should be in regard and respect to that very notion.

Becker considers the value of community as the place where human beings can experience authentic joy in lives that are marred with so much sorrow. It is in the community that one finds the ultimate source of joy, harkening back to the idea that human beings are not solely independent creatures (Keen 19). Becker also notes that joy can only be experienced after the experience of tribulation (Keen 24), offering the idea of reflective joy, which holds great value for communication. If one is to truly communicate about and experience joy, one must also reflect on the past and honestly communicate about darkness. This world is neither exclusively black nor exclusively white, but rather a complex infusion of the two. To deny one would simultaneously discredit the other.

The final portion of this particular discussion resides in what Becker said in this interview that has overt connections to human communication. Becker specifically makes connections to communication during a discussion of the importance of reflection. For Becker, the only way to locate truth is during the act of reflection; one must “speak” toward reality in order to combat destructive behaviors in human nature (Keen 13). The lesson for the communicator is strong, as Becker does not support living in a faux world with manufactured joy. One must be reflective and speak to the true nature of the way things are in order to communicate successfully and honorably. Becker, though he never mentions phenomenology, is focused on meeting experience that is tied to reality and not abstract philosophical drivel.

Becker believes that human beings have been connected to a faulty “power source” for quite some time, which has led them down the path of destructive heroics. Advocating for a “new power source,” Becker states that one should fill the void with a higher power
such as God (Keen 16). Becker points to a model of communication that is not tied to the person, but rather to an outer source of power that dictates ethics and meaning. Associated with this thought is the notion that Becker’s major gift was to “hammer on what is important” (Keen 26). He certainly did hammer home the important aspects of his thought up to the very end of this interview and, simultaneously, his life. One must remember that for Becker, the most vital aspect of social life is to help other people work out their “kinks,” which serves as a valuable model for constructive human communication (Keen 34). Becker continuously directs the focus of communication away from the self and toward the other, which is his position on the nature of the burden of communication. This burden is one that must serve others as human beings make their way from birth to their eventual death.

The goal of this section was to locate elements in Becker’s final interview that could compose his communicative theory if he had lived long enough to develop it. It is evident that the notion of human communication is both covert and overt in Becker’s work as one begins to understand that communication undergirds nearly every act and scenario of life. The following section will place Becker into conversation with Viktor Frankl in order to see how together these two men can offer avenues for understanding human communication about death and meaning.

**Locating the Importance of Frankl’s “Meaning” Within the Communicative Importance of Becker’s Confrontation**

Up to this point the primary focus of this chapter has been on the philosophically-driven action of Sam Keen’s final interview with Ernest Becker, taking great care to not only explore the mood, context, and specifics of this interview, but also to find places in which Becker’s final philosophical act prior to meeting death had both overt and covert implications for the study of communication. This final section will offer further
understanding of how the work of Viktor Frankl works in congress with the work of Becker, as well as how Frankl’s work offers a roadmap from Becker’s primary concerns toward a better understanding of how one finds meaning through communication about the inevitable moments of human life.

**Viktor Frankl and the Unheard Cry for Meaning.** Viktor Frankl is a scholar, philosopher, and author whose primary directive was to uncover meaning in places that were once thought to be meaningless. In *The Unheard Cry for Meaning: Psychotherapy & Humanism* (1997), Frankl once again attempts to battle the unquestioned good of psychiatrics while simultaneously adding to the ongoing conversation of how and where to find meaning in a broken world. The following provides a general overview of the major themes found within this particular work by Frankl.

Frankl, as discussed in previous chapters, was the founder and major proponent of logotherapy. While the process of therapy has been described in other texts by Frankl, it is in *The Unheard Cry for Meaning* that a better understanding of the practice actually takes flight. Frankl classifies logotherapy as “therapy through meaning,” clarifying that there are no inherent religious connections to the practice of therapy (Frankl 19). This “meaning-centered” mode of therapy is candidly not concerned with building new structures or deconstructing old structures, but rather is founded upon the notion that meaning is already present within the individual’s realm of being and understanding (Frankl 19). Frankl’s mission is not to rebuild and insert meaning within the individual human life, but rather to help the human being rediscover his or her own given meaning in life.

Frankl criticizes some of the problems that are intrinsically tied to modernity. He describes the typical Western mindset that if one had more money then one’s problems would be lessened, thus creating more personal happiness. He states that as the “struggle for
survival” is no longer at the forefront of human thought in the world, people have begun to question why one has even survived in the first place (Frankl 21). In other words, where is individual meaning and why do we live? The surprising idea, as Frankl articulates, is “more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for” (21). This is the importance of Frankl’s particular therapeutic brand as he is no longer interested in the survival of a species from an outside enemy, but rather the enemy who resides within the individual mind. This enemy takes the form of emptiness, nothingness, and meaningless. The “meaningless” monster is dangerous, not because it seeks to harm the body, but because it seeks to harm the soul, deceiving the individual into believing that there is no thing or person that life is worth living for.

In questioning what it means to have something meaningful to live for, Frankl recounts a letter that he once received from a prison inmate named Cleve. Cleve informed Frankl, “Here in prison…there are more and more blissful opportunities to serve and grow. I’m really happier now than I’ve ever been” (21). Frankl sums up the content of the message by stating: “Notice: Happier than ever—in prison” (21). This letter from the inmate is striking because it is counterintuitive to what some would consider common knowledge. The constraints are important. The restrictions provide meaning. The limitations provide a sense of duty toward self and others.

Frankl also describes a letter that he received from one of his readers who utilized Frankl’s material when his father was suffering from a terminal illness. The author of the letter and his father both read and discussed Frankl’s various texts, and his father never complained about his undeniable fate. The father grew calm from Frankl’s words and the son experienced great joy with his father over the last few months of his life. According to Frankl, “someone is happy in the face of tragedy and in spite of suffering—but in view of
meaning” (Frankl 22). This serves as an example of an engagement of death that is joyful with assured pensive undertones. These men, who were dealing with tragedy and loss of life, were able to see beyond the individualistic implications of death and reorient their focus on the goals of the work and the life that still remained.

Frankl, in the opening pages of his work, describes the realm that this problem of meaninglessness fits into. Although he does not discount the normal, contemporary means of therapy, he believes the ideals of logotherapy move beyond basic therapy. He wants to “stress the human dimension” that he believes is much bigger than the field of psychology (Frankl 22). Simply stated, Frankl wants to believe that the human being is, at the core, an animal, and must be treated as such in conjunction with inherent psychological elements of humanness (Frank 23). Again, Frankl believes that there is room for modern phycology, but the search for meaning requires one to address the very animal nature of being human. Moreover, Frankl states that, while humans are animals at heart, people are no longer guided by “drives and instincts,” and while the behavior and value structures of human beings of the past were once guided by “traditions,” the modern human being also lacks these makeups (Frankl 25). Meaning and moral compass are set by instinct and tradition, and modern society has largely become disconnected with both notions.

Also fundamental to Frankl’s work is the idea of “Will to Meaning” that was discussed in the previous chapter of this project. For Frankl, the “Will to Meaning” is the main concern of human beings and the current society does not allow for the proper fulfillment of that urge (29). Current psychology sees the human being as “either reacting to stimuli or abreacting his impulses”; however, Frankl uses the metaphor of “response” as the human being is “responding to questions that life is asking him, and in that way fulfilling the meanings that life is offering” (29). Again, we see Frankl placing the human being in
conversation with his or her own very existence. Meaning does not come wholly from a
reaction, but rather is created through responding to the world that surrounds one. How one
engages life’s questions will create or diminish meaning. Meaning is not found in theories or
objects; rather, meaning is in the air and the human’s task is to respond to life in a way that
allows him or her to extract that meaning.

Frankl also addresses the notion of freedom as tied to living a meaningful life. He feels that freedom is tied directly to what it means to be human, but it is a limited freedom. While the human being does not have freedom from “conditions,” he or she does have freedom in regard to how he or she responds to those conditions (Frankl 47). This notion of limited freedom is important for understanding how meaning is found within human life because, once again, meaning is not given to a person because he or she is inherently special or sacred. Meaning is provided by how one responds to conditions of life and how one answers the questions that are presented to one. As Frankl states, “man is not subject to the conditions that confront him; rather, these conditions are subject to his decision” (48).

Meaning and freedom are found within the response to the conditions that are out of a person’s direct control. One does not have a choice about the conditions that are presented, but does have complete control over how one meets the particular moment.

Later in The Unheard Cry for Meaning Frankl discusses the problem with unreflectively following structures that mass culture has simply taken as true and good. He calls for the end of the “divinizing of psychiatry” and for society to begin “humanizing it” (Frankl 86). Frankl wants people to realize the differences between mental despair and despair that is caused by existential factors. Humans feel despair because there is seemingly no meaning in their world and the zenith of human achievement, from Frankl’s perspective, is the “quest” for meaning in life (87). One sees again how Frankl approaches these issues from a dualistic standpoint,
as he does not directly discount traditional forms of therapy. There are spaces in which
therapy can be helpful, but Frankl’s primary aim is to recognize the unique nature of people
and then direct the individual toward finding meaning in their existential world.

The final subject of note for this particular project is Frankl’s discussion of issues
regarding communication and language in connection with the quest to find meaning. First,
Frankl’s belief is that “writing follows speaking, and speaking in turn follows thinking,”
leading to the idea that meaning is the subject of human thought and speaking and writing
become ways to express and discuss meaning (89). Frankl then states that “language is more
than self-expression” in the sense that all communication is about more than the individual
agent, but about something that needs to be said for the purpose of uncovering meaning
(89). Furthermore, Frankl states that as one speaks one is “overlooking himself,” making one
sympathetic and imaginative and leading one to understand that language is never for the
self, but for the outside audience of the other (89). Frankl also explains that this type of
communication is inherently sacrificial and inspirational, both giving and creating meaning
for the self and other.

These basic principles from Frankl’s The Unheard Cry for Meaning provide a familiar
yet valuable understanding of the importance of meaning for the development of meaning-
filled human life. The final part of this chapter will place Frankl and Becker into
conversation regarding the subject of communication and meaning in the face of death, as
many of the communicative principles outlined by Frankl have clear and thoughtful
connections to the final words of Becker as he prepared to meet his inevitable death.

Confronting the Reaper Through Frankl and Becker’s Notions of Meaning.
Some may classify Viktor Frankl and Ernest Becker as scholars and philosophers who were
dedicated to opposing fields of study. However, when read side-by-side, one sees a
relationship between the two men and their meaning-driven projects. While it is possible to make a long list of the similarities and differences between their individual approaches and goals, there are several philosophical spaces in which the two meet in order to offer genuine communicative value for the mission of finding meaning in death and reorienting the human focus on death. This final section will place Frankl and Becker in conversation in order to uncover communicative meaning.

The first place in which Frankl and Becker meet within the context of Becker’s final interview and Frankl’s *The Unheard Cry for Meaning: Psychotherapy & Humanism* is regarding the issues of therapy and meaning. Frankl’s project is about redefining the popular notion of therapy through his invention of “logotherapy.” Frankl’s main goal is to repair the human soul through the reintroduction of meaning in life, not simply through psychiatric practices. Becker too feels that human beings cannot be repaired through the practices provided by Freud and his contemporaries; rather, people must focus their attention on something that is external to themselves. For Becker, this is chiefly a focus on God, but he also reorients the focus toward other human beings within the community. Both Frankl and Becker reject the modernity-driven structures of therapeutic practices that focus on the individual; rather, they want to uncover meaning in the duties, obligations, and beliefs that already reside within the human being. Thus, one of the major and ongoing themes found in the union of Frankl and Becker is that communicative meaning is never found within the self, but is always found when a sense of meaning is placed within an outside higher power or a stronger obligation—for example, in God or the community in which one participates.

Another place in which Frankl and Becker meet in communicative understanding centers upon the very idea of why there are so many problems regarding the destructive nature of humans in the world. The very title of Frankl’s work addresses what he calls “the
unheard cry for meaning,” a belief that all human beings are longing to feel and experience meaning and metaphorically cry out for meaning through actions and engagements. Becker, too, echoes this thought as he states that human beings feel powerless in this world due to a longing to be part of nature; however, they also yearn to stand above it. Becker states that human hopelessness comes from the idea that human beings feel as if they have been abandoned in a world that cannot be controlled and the reality of death that cannot be avoided. It would appear as if this feeling of abandoned existential homelessness is what leads to the cry for meaning that Frankl suggests in his work. Becker and Frankl again focus the importance of communication on finding meaning for those who feel abandoned and meaninglessness. The communicative focus is not upon rehashing the meaninglessness and strife associated with being alive, but rather upon the places that give people a sense of home and meaning.

Most of the issues of agreement between Frankl and Becker have the cumbersome backdrop of modernity hanging in the distance. In other words, many of the problems that human beings experience have been either caused or intensified due to a society that is dedicated to the principles and beliefs of modernity. As one can see in Frankl’s work, Modernity removes obligations and constraints that make it very hard to uncover the inherent meaning of human life as he gives examples of how constrains and obligations within the community provide happiness. Becker, too, brings the problems of modernity to light as he points toward meaning being found between the individual and the community, not simply within one or the other. Becker, too, identifies the largest modernity-driven ruse of human life as being the lie that the human individual is his or her own person. For Becker, happiness and meaning can only be found once the individual realizes that his or her life has been shaped and directed by many people within the community. Becker also plainly
states that it is the duty of the individual to help and support others. The communicative problems that were ushered in with the practices of modernity are many, but Frankl and Becker both offer an escape from this cycle of meaninglessness and despair. Happiness and meaning are found within the relationship between the individual and other people within given communities. One’s communication will likely always have an individualistic element, but should be tempered in order to respect and benefit the community in which one is embedded.

Frankl and Becker’s projects were both heavily influenced by and focused upon death and the meeting of the experiences in life that one cannot change. One of the major ideas that Frankl presents in *The Unheard Cry for Meaning* is that there is still meaning to be found at the end of a life and that death is not oriented toward the individual alone. Becker, too, offers a similar idea through his discussions of tribes in which death was about the community and tradition and not about an individual feeling of loss for a given person. Death was once concerned with the opportunity to heal and remind the community of traditions and values that are considered important. This, as this dissertation project has continuously argued, is evidence that how one communicates about death truly matters. This notion is not meant to diminish the sense of loss felt by a particular individual; rather, it serves as a reminder that death is an opportunity to remind the community about what is vital to the ongoing human narrative. The focus of attention should be placed upon the traditions of the past, the loss experienced in the present, and the aspects that are vital for the community’s ongoing survival in the future.

The next theme in which Frankl and Becker unite is in regard to the question of what a human being actually is. Frankl takes much care to show how traditions are crumbling and causing what he refers to as the existential vacuum. In order to combat this
vacuum, Frankl concentrates on finding the human animal or, in other words, treating the human being as a complex, dynamic creature with basic animalistic tendencies. Becker takes a similar position as he attempts to get to the creaturely nature of human beings. According to Becker, human beings once had traditions and, as animals, once had instincts. Because of modern culture human beings now have neither instincts nor traditions on a widespread level. The communicative importance of this notion is that communication should be used in order to rebuild tradition and instinct. One must continue traditions that remain vital while recognizing that the animalistic nature of the human being is important for understanding and uncovering meaning.

Frankl and Becker both approach the subject of freedom, which is inherent in their mission to benefit the human discovery of meaning. Frankl believes that freedom is not as important as the present patriotic definition of the term would suggest. His view suggests that there is no real freedom; there is only response to conditions. The conditions of life are what people have no control over, but true freedom springs forth from how one exercises choice in regard to how one meets that particular condition. Becker’s are in agreement with Frankl’s, with Becker stating that human beings are never completely free because of an ongoing and unbreakable connection to other human lives. Frankl and Becker maintain similar thoughts about freedom, which are helpful for understanding how one must uncover meaning. Communication will always be based upon conditions that are out of the control of the communicator. The communicative act of the response is vital for creating and uncovering meaning through the acting out of the only true form of freedom. As one makes these freedom-oriented communicative choices one must recognize that all conditions and responses are grounded in connections that one has to other human beings. Communicative
choices and contexts are never presented or played out in a vacuum, but within a complex arena in which the individual agent is never the lone actor.

The final area in which Frankl and Becker unite for the understanding of communication ethics and communicative meaning concerns the idea of the human sciences. Frankl, while not finding the practices to be fully successful, takes great care to never denigrate the work of his contemporaries in order to find curative psychological solutions for the suffering. Frankl not only sees a place for therapy that is sometimes in opposition to his notion of logotherapy, but he also reaches across disciplines in order to understand why the human being behaves in certain ways. Echoing Becker’s desire for multidisciplinary study, Frankl sought help from the arts, humanities, popular culture, and athletics in order to explain how meaning can be created and discovered. Likewise, Becker’s goal was to cross disciplines in order to understand the human sciences. As stated earlier in this chapter, this notion has great value for understanding communication and the attempt to locate communicative meaning. Communication is never about the discipline of communication alone. The study of communication is flexible and allows scholars to cross academic fields in order to understand how meaning is found within varying disciplines. This is a principle that Frankl and Becker both fought for and demonstrated within their individual scholarly works and has great value for those who take communication ethics seriously.

The primary message of this chapter is that there is value embedded within every communicative act that takes place during human life. As one sees a dying Becker, his life slipping away, the very picture is of a human being who continues to communicate toward meaning and not the negation of life. Becker’s confrontational choices and the themes associated with his final interview allow for a remarkable pairing between himself and
Frankl. These two men spent their careers searching for ways in which the human being could live a life that is constructed upon the ground of meaning. The belief is that communicative choices matter for not only the individual soul, but also the greater community. The following chapter will place all of these previously discussed authors into context with one of the most defiant and meaning-centered communicative acts that occurs within the United States—the New Orleans jazz funeral.
Chapter Five

Marching Alongside the Reaper: The Jazz Funeral

“Our people hold such elaborate and energetic funerals. We entertain the immortals in order that they might be persuaded to help us recover the strength and unity stolen from us by death”—Tom Robbins, *Jitterbug Perfume*

Communicative structures that meaningfully focus upon the tragic moments of life take on a musical quality as one can hear the harmony of positivity and constructive acts rising from communities around the world. It is clear that there is a long academic and philosophical tradition that focuses upon communicating otherwise than the denial of death that is often the default setting for an individualistic society. Much like the jazz greats, Barrett, Feldman, Frankl, and Becker are masters of improvisation as they find opportunities for find meaning that are not written in the tablature of normative conventions. In that vein, this chapter will present a call and answer between the philosophical groundwork that has already been presented and the defiant and joyous communicative practices of the New Orleans jazz funeral, in order to illustrate how constructive communication occurs in the midst of death.

**Introduction**

Written music would be quite useless if there were no instruments to interpret the vision of the composer. Much the same, theory is empty without well thought out practices that bring the theory to life. Each of the previous chapters have dissected several scholarly works in order to find ways of communicating that locate legitimate value and meaning in all aspects of human life. Now that the sheet music of communicative meaning has been composed, one must find musicians and instruments that allow a song to be heard. This chapter listens to the mysterious and joyful tradition of the New Orleans jazz funeral in
order to hear a communicative anthem of meaning composed by traditions of the oldest cities in the United States. This chapter ultimately seeks to show a musical demonstration of how the reaper is confronted through a festive communicative dance that harmonizes death and meaning through a focus on the important values of a particular community.

The first section of this chapter, *Locating Meaning During the March of the Reaper*, seeks to revisit the major metaphors from all of the previous chapters. The communicative value of the combined works of Barrett, Becker, Feldman, and Frankl will be reexamined and placed into categories that are driven by the study of communication ethics. The second section, *The New Orleans Jazz Funeral: Admission and Resistance*, will detail the history of the festive funeral ceremony as well as discuss a popular view of the cultural importance of the event put forth by author Tom Piazza in *Why New Orleans Matters* (2005). The third section, *The Communicative Importance of the Meaningful Dance with the Reaper*, will place the metaphors from the previous section into conversation with the artifact of the jazz funeral in order to find the communicative implications inherent in the search for meaning within the funeral tradition of New Orleans. Finally, *Lagniappe: Frankl and the Jazz Funeral* will look to the definitive work of Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*. This concluding section will discuss the final implications for understanding Frankl’s search for meaning in conjunction with the New Orleans jazz funeral.

The significance of this chapter for the greater project is twofold. First, this chapter will arrange the notes of communicative metaphors from the previous chapters in a way that shows the inherent relationships between the philosophically-oriented work and the practical search for communicative meaning within everyday human engagement. Second, this chapter will utilize the tradition of the jazz funeral in order to provide an exemplar of these communicative metaphors for human life in communicative action. While the words of
Barrett, Becker, Feldman, and Frankl have been placed into the context of the discipline of communication throughout the overall project, this chapter will march their theory into a subculture of the United States that provides meaning, respects value, fosters community, and literally hits the streets with a mind toward the celebration of the unity of life and death. It has been noted that Viktor Frankl often quoted Nietzsche’s assertion that “He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how” (Arnett and Arneson, 208). Perhaps that is the true spirit of this final chapter in which one will understand the act of the jazz funeral in concert with the communication metaphors that provide the “why” for “how” to uncover communicative meaning.

**Locating Meaning During the March of the Reaper**

Before one begins to understand the powerful communicative march of the jazz funeral, one must recall the cadence of Barrett, Becker, Feldman, and Frankl. This chapter listens for the common metaphors from chapters two, three, and four, which will be grouped into major categories that follow a common communicative theme. The categories that will be presented in the subsequent paragraphs are as follows: reflective communication, communicative freedom, communicative focus of attention, and the ultimate communicative goal. While the categories are broad general communication topics, the individual metaphors within are specific theories that have been explored and developed throughout this project. The metaphors that comprise these categories will act as figurative musical notes that will eventually allow the melody of the jazz funeral to be heard as this chapter marches to its end.

**Reflective Communication.** This dissertation project has driven toward a constant and ongoing search for spaces within the works of Barrett, Becker, Feldman, and Frank, in which a communicative theory may reside. The first of these spaces presents itself within the idea of reflective communication. Reflection is a major theme within the work of these great
philosophical minds and their combined work created a cumulative call for the importance of deliberation in human life. The first metaphor that falls under this category is the difference between deconstruction and construction. It is apparent that all of the scholars mentioned are dedicated to constructionism, which is most obvious in the interplay between the work of Frankl and Becker. Neither is interested in using their methods to merely view and judge human nature. While both do often take liberties with deconstructing the problematic human narrative, each takes the extra step and contributes to a conversation toward the end of repairing the human soul. This notion is inherently tied to a reflective model of communication because what is revealed is that observation without action is relatively empty in the search for meaning.

The second metaphor categorized with the notion of reflective communication is choice. The metaphor of choice becomes important in respect to the existential explanations put forth by Barrett’s work. His argument is largely focused upon the idea of meeting existence in order to find meaning before time runs out. As Sartre states that meaning comes from consideration of the decisions and actions that have been made during the course of a human life, Barrett represents the need for reflection of choice in communication. If one does not reflect on choices made, in action or words, one will never locate meaning within a life. Communicative meaning comes from the acknowledgment and reflection of the sum of choices made in everyday communication.

The idea of reflection in Barrett’s work was a consistent theme found within the works of the philosophers that he discussed. The repeated call that comes from Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre is to recognize the true nature of Being before one’s life ends. The metaphor that these thoughts tend to revolve around is recognition of Being. The need to reflect upon circumstances is crucial for the existential call to engage in
otherwise than an existential demand and to meet life for what is given. To recognize and accept Being is to inspire a mode of communication that asks one to speak honestly and openly about his or her own circumstances. As Barrett’s spokespeople all called for an actualization of the human soul through honest reflection of the real nature of life, so exists the same call for reflective communication that asks people to be authentic even during their darkest moments. Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre point out in their own manners that life is fragmented; their specific projects work toward the end of gathering those pieces. Reflective communication about the nature of the being assists in the collection of those fragments.

The metaphor of reality brings the work of Barrett, Becker, Feldman, and Frankl together as they all supported engaging life through what it is and not what it should be. As previously mentioned, the existential project that Barrett presents is about the meeting of life filled with darkness and eventually coming to know one’s true self. Throughout the texts discussed so far, all of these philosophers have recommended a meeting of reality and not fantasy. The pieces of a fragmented life can only be collected through communication that allows humans to focus on the possibilities put forth by the real conditions of human life and not fantasy-fueled naivety.

**Communicative Freedom.** It is popular during our current, politically-divisive times to hear multiple interpretations of the Western ideal of freedom. It is, however, the belief of this dissertation project that the notion of freedom that springs forth from the work of Barrett, Becker, Feldman, and Frankl is one that speaks to the power of communication. The first metaphor that falls under the notion of communicative freedom is control. Frankl gives the impression that freedom ultimately comes from the power that a particular person has over the world in which he or she is embedded. He discusses the idea
of one having freedom within limits, freedom over the elements of life that one has either
total or no control over. This project has discussed that notion as it ultimately points toward
a definition of freedom that exists in decisions that are made through the lens of control.
This is of weight for communication because one should strive toward making the best
decisions based upon the limits and constrains of control.

The notion of control is played out further through the work that places Becker and
Frankl into conversation. The metaphor of **power** comes to the forefront as Becker and
Frankl both reveal ways in which the human being can gain power in order to define his or
her own individual freedom. Frankl’s work allows people to take a stand against their own
inner struggles and fears. Becker’s work shows that a lack of power comes when one is
unable or refuses to take a stand against what cannot be controlled. If genuine freedom is
found within the recognition of what one is defenseless against, then it stands to reason that
communication toward such an event is immensely vital. Communication has the power to
create and uncover meaning in moments of fear, uncertainty, and even death.

Additionally, the metaphor of **responsibility** offers communicative value for the
notion of freedom. Feldman was the first to engage the metaphor of responsibility as he
states that without a proper understanding of responsibility, meaning cannot fully be
discovered. One must be responsible to the existential challenges that are presented, but also
responsible in all communicative acts. If meaning is partially born out of responsibility,
communicative choices will either support or negate the quality of meaning structures.
Frankl supports this metaphor as he believes that the awareness of one’s responsibility will
make that person conscious of their inborn meaning structures. Lack of responsibly brings
meaninglessness. Lack of responsibility removes freedom and allows others to dictate one’s
own individual meaning.
Becker and Frank provide the next metaphor as they discuss the notion of responsiveness. Frankl does not believe in absolute freedom, but gives credibility to the power to respond to certain conditions. This relates to the previous metaphor of choice in so far as how one chooses to respond to these conditions will generate the only tangible ideal of freedom in human life. Becker, too, sees this lack of freedom as he points out that humans are always tied to responsiveness to others. One must realize that communication is always in response to other human beings even when one is unaware of that particular focus. Communication is based upon conditions that are out of the control of the communicator. The communicative act of response is key when attempting to create and uncover meaning. Freedom-oriented communicative choices must recognize that all conditions and responses are grounded in connections to other people. Communicative choices occur within a multifaceted space where the individual agent is never the lone actor.

One of the final ways in which the notion of freedom becomes important for human communication is due to the imaginative component that it provides to human life. Frankl shows that creativity is yet another way in which people find meaning within a given life. The idea of limited and interconnected freedom creates spaces in which human beings must exercise their creative nature. Feldman plays out this ideal of creativity through his belief that the human being finds meaning in the tension between life and death. Freedom is inspirational and allows for the discovery of meaning in both life and death. Barrett finds this creative element of freedom when one chooses to say no, an act that counter-intuitively opens possibilities. Creative freedom lies within our communicative practices in which words shape life. How one creatively meets moments produces communicative meaning.

**Communicative Focus of Attention.** The next category of communicative metaphors found within the work of Barrett, Becker, Feldman, and Frankl revolves around
the focus of attention in which our communication is directed toward. The first major
metaphor that comes from this category is **boomerang**. While it may seem like an
unorthodox metaphor to use, Frankl discusses the Australian hunting tool in a way that has
value for communication. If one misses the communicative target then the boomerang of
meaning will turn back on the individual. The communicative focus should be on the other
in order to connect with something bigger than any one person. However, when
communication is done poorly, the focus is placed upon the self. Becker, too, sees the
human desire to connect with something bigger than oneself while also attempting to grasp
some element of individual autonomy. The boomerang metaphor provides an understanding
for what happens when others are not the focus of communication and the focus of
attention is constantly on the self.

Many of the philosophers mentioned did not advocate a method of therapy or
discovery of meaning that was inwardly focused, making way for the next metaphor,
**external focus**. In fact, while others focused on the individual as primary, Becker and Frankl
in particular attempted to find an external focus in which meaning could be located. This
external focus could be on other humans, the community, or a higher power. All of these
philosophers had to deal with the specter of modernity, in which an unfair focus upon the
individual is presented. Communicative meaning cannot be found within the individual
alone. Meaning is unearthed through communicative practices that are focused on other
people, meanings that are larger than oneself, and a community that fosters support and
continuance.

**Modernity** itself is a strong metaphor for some of the problems associated with the
misaligned communicative focus of attention. Many of the philosophers used for this
discussion find inherent problems when the modern focus of attention on the self takes
dominance in human communication. Frankl takes great time to discuss how a dedication to modernity removes conventional constraints and responsibly that are connected to a meaningful engagement of life. Becker points out that meaning is found within the interplay between the individual and the community, which is something that modernity rejects. Modern communication structures lead one to believe that one is, in fact, one’s own person without ties to the community. Thus, while much of human communication is mired in individualistic tendencies, communicative meaning develops when focus is placed upon others.

The final metaphor that touches upon the communicative focus of attention is that of the nature of the human being. All of the philosophers mentioned have spent much time talking about the animalistic, creaturely nature of humans. Additionally, Becker and Frankl specifically discuss how traditions are in question and crumbling. Frankl suggests that one battles this existential emptiness by treating the human being as a complex person with basic animalistic tendencies. Becker, too, wants to respect the nature of the human while simultaneously honoring tradition. Communication, in this context, should be used to foster instinct and tradition, forging yet another path to uncovering communicative meaning in human life.

The Ultimate Communicative Goal. This final category and underlying metaphors deal with communicative goals. One will see through the work of these philosophers that there is a constant focus upon the goal of human engagement with others. Discussion of the first metaphor, pleasure, is led by Frankl, who believes that pleasure may be a result of meaning, but meaning will never be a result of pleasure. In other words, if one is to communicate for the basic purpose of experiencing pleasure, meaning will never present itself. If communication is used to gain power or experience pleasure, communication will be
stripped of meaning. Genuine communication with a goal of uncovering meaning may result in pleasure and power that is authentic, healthy, and enduring. This theory of communication states that the objective should be the discovery of meaning and never the discovery of pleasure alone.

The idea of meaning discovery is also a metaphor for the ultimate goal of communication. All of these philosophers attempted to find meaning in human life in order to create happiness and peace, often through understanding oneself and nature. In Frankl’s experience, meaning was always present even during the darkest times of life. Becker’s entire objection to current human heroic structures was because they suffocate creativity and vilify other humans. Becker also sees the human’s denial of death as something that devalues life and conceals meaning. The communicative value of this thought is that one must always speak in order to uncover and discover meaning. The existentialists were concerned with the emptiness of the human agent; Frankl, Becker, and Feldman agree as their combined communicative theory would be toward the collection of structures of meaning in every aspect of life, including death.

Another important metaphor for the ultimate goal of communication is rebuilding meaning structures that have been greatly damaged. Barrett’s project portrayed the existentialist goal as rebuilding flawed philosophical structures that do not focus on real people. Becker, Frankl, and Feldman also consider these seemingly broken structures and offer hints for repairing and rebuilding meaning structures. What these philosophers have in common is that they understand a world in which meaning has been lost and their goal is to recapture that meaning. The communicative value of this rebuilding effort is that the obligation is on the communicator to help the lost find meaning in life. The meaning-oriented communicator has the burden of rebuilding, through words and action, the
structures that are broken and disengaged.

The final metaphor within this section is the notion of **human sciences**. Becker introduces this idea because he wants to do away with disciplinary claims of territory and focus on a combination of disciplines and academic minds. This idea spreads through the work of Frankl, Feldman, and Barrett as they all are dedicated to establishing meaning in human life anywhere possible. The sum of these works offers the notion that there is no one primary discipline; rather, the goal should be finding meaning using any possible resource. Therefore, Becker’s goal for multi and interdisciplinary study is of great importance for the current communicative scholar. Communication is the human science in which meaning is to be established, discussed, and recaptured through how humans engage the world. Communication should always be concerned with building meaning while continuing to work within diverse and varied circumstances.

The music found among Barrett, Becker, Feldman, and Frankl often contains different lyrics, but follows a common tune. These philosophers were all responding to a wicked disease of the human soul, which they viewed as a curse to life. There was no crescendo of communicative theory within their work; however, one can hear the diminuendo of communicative theory within the above categories and metaphors, creating a space for people to talk about the ethical value of communicating about death and life. This dissertation project has looked to philosophers in order to uncover concrete ways in which people can create and uncover meaning in death. The project will now pause for a natural breath in order to examine the artifact of the New Orleans jazz funeral.

**The New Orleans Jazz Funeral: Admission and Resistance**

In musical language, the term modulation is used to describe the establishment of a new key within a given piece of music. This section serves as a textual modulation as a new
key focus is introduced. This section provides a historical overview of a tradition that is virtually unique to the United States. There are many communal rites that correspond with the transitional moments of life. Some rites celebrate the union between two individuals in marriage, and others commemorate birthdays, anniversaries, and retirements. There is no shortage of celebration of events of achievement in human life, but none capture the dual tone of life and death simultaneously as the New Orleans jazz funeral. Inherent to the jazz funeral is the beautiful sound of admission and resistance in concert together. As this event admits to the fact of death, it also continuously resists normative conventions regarding how death should be met. The jazz funeral marches toward the end of uncovering and creating meaning for people during a time of grief and sadness.

**The Origins.** The jazz funeral that is practiced in New Orleans today has historical roots in the pasts of several cultures and is not the sole creation of any one ethnic group or cultural tradition. It has been noted that, like few other areas in the United States, the history of the south in particular is one in which white, English immigrants and settlers were only a “small minority” (Joyner 13). Traditional southern culture, specifically that of the city of New Orleans, has been shaped by the French and Spanish, as well as a variety of Native American civilizations, just to name a few that comprise the city’s extensive list (Joyner 13). The mixture of cultures and traditions created a society in which traditions constantly rub against one another. One can recognize how the uniqueness of New Orleans was born of cultures that worked and grew together in order to transform into something quite different than the original intent. While this influence can easily be seen, the African culture explicitly has had a tremendous influence upon the traditional landscape of New Orleans, as evidenced by the jazz funeral.

History shows that traditions often follow groups of people despite their movement
to other geographical locations. This occurred when African slaves were transported to the United States during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One of the traditions that followed the Africans, who, by force, were moved to New Orleans, was their notion of the funeral rites. The Yoruba, a West African tribe, believe that death can fall into the realm of the natural or supernatural, occurring either by natural causes or by the practice of witchcraft. In the case of witchcraft, the Yoruba believe that other members of the deceased’s family are in danger; thus, certain rituals must be performed to protect the living (Ellis 155). The Babalawo, an African priest, invokes the soul of the dead to go on a safe and peaceful journey toward a final destination outside of this world. This particular practice employs “professional mourners” who sing a song that honors the dead and invites the living members of the family to reside in peace (Ellis 157). From the very inception of this traditional march toward death, the music that aides the spirit to travel to his or new home is a standard component. Not only is the dead ushered to the great beyond through song, but the ritual is also a service to the grieving family who may now feel calm in the face of a loved one’s death.

This African tradition continues when the body is laid atop of boards and carried through the streets by the men of the community. Friends and relatives carry the platform, with the dead body on top, while singing songs of praise for the memory of their loved one and tossing cowries, or shells, to those who have gathered to view the procession. As the evening draws to a close this funeral ritual takes the dead body to his or her final resting place near the home that they once lived in (Ellis 157). After the body is buried, “drinking and shouting amid the firing of muskets, the jangle of native gongs, and the dull thud of the drums, continues all night” (Ellis 157). This African tradition shares many similarities with the funeral tradition practiced by the residents of New Orleans today. Although the
traditional African ritual is focused upon metaphorical “soloists,” in which one person remains the center of attention, the current jazz funeral is about the metaphorical “choir” of the community coming together in harmony.

In West Africa, to not “hold the proper ceremonies” for the dead is considered “the greatest disgrace” (Ellis 161). The fate of the deceased’s soul is believed to be directly dependent upon the care in which these last rites are performed within the particular community. The belief is that only legitimate ceremonies can properly shepherd the soul to its “new career” (Ellis 161). So important are these death rituals that when West Africans were brought to the new world they sought ways in which to guarantee the practice of these funeral rites. Burial societies were formed, where members made payments while alive so they could be properly buried after death. Members of such societies were expected to attend the funerals of other members. Parades of men in elaborate costumes carrying banners with various symbols were accompanied by a band, which was often commissioned to guide the festivities (Ellis 161). Tradition was of the utmost important in these cultures.

These practices are considered to be the “roots of the jazz funeral” and have connections to several secret societies that were established by the West Africans to take care of fellow members and to guarantee that this vital burial process would take place after their passing (Thursby 39). Over the centuries, the secret societies would adapt and evolve into associations of people who were focused on benevolence toward the community. Specifically, in New Orleans, these societies developed into the Odd Fellows, the Society of the First African Baptist Church, and the Society of Sons and Daughters of Mount Pleasant Baptist Church; these societies continue to exist in New Orleans, in addition to smaller groups that have formed for the same communal effort (Thursby 39).

During the period of slavery in the United States, in most parts of the country, slaves
were forced to forget and reject the important traditions of their past. From surnames to religious practices, slaves were largely forbidden to maintain any connection to their homelands. Interestingly, the funeral customs of the slaves in New Orleans survived because they were not forced to abandon these major pieces of their culture. As most slaves were forced to cut ties to their homeland, learn English and practice Christianity, the multicultural ground of New Orleans allowed for something different (DeVaux and Giddins 76). The slaves in New Orleans were allowed to keep their own languages, beliefs, and customs because of the sympathetic nature of the city’s Caribbean and South American influences (DeVaux and Giddins 77). Despite the evils associated with slavery, the diverse and tolerant nature of New Orleans allowed for the respect of the customs and practices of the African slaves. Although these traditions do not live within a vacuum, New Orleans has a way of sharing traditions, beliefs, and influences in a manner that makes the city, and the feeling of living there, incredibly unique.

It can be argued that the United States was built upon the intersection of beliefs and traditions of the many cultures of its natives and settlers in order to create a varied culture that some refer to as a melting pot. However, the blending of several cultures in New Orleans began to take shape near the historic French Quarter (DeVaux and Giddins 77). Congo Square, a continued treasure in New Orleans, is a large field located on the outskirts of the French Quarter where current and freed slaves alike were permitted to meet on Sunday afternoons. The gatherers would spend the entire afternoon dancing and playing music as they shared a partial day of rest. Groups of musicians played drums, stringed gourds and other homemade instruments, while dancers moved to traditional African rhythms (DeVaux and Giddins 77). Given the freedom to celebrate and unreservedly practice music, the African’s musical traditions began to intersect with the music from
European traditions. As the slaves were allowed their own funeral festivities the starkest example of this musical intersection came courtesy of the music that they had adapted from the songs of the French military (Thursby 38). The African slaves had brought their tradition of festively ushering the dead to their final resting place to their new homes on the plantations of southern Louisiana (Joyner 66). This demonstration, in conjunction with varied musical influences, eventually “metamorphosed into the jazz funeral parade” that one can witness on the streets of New Orleans today (Thursby 38). One begins to see the pieces of this complex and meaningful practice falling into place.

The traditional jazz funeral parade observed today demonstrates elements of its African roots and European influences. The slow, mournful music that begins the jazz funeral disappears by the end of the march to the cemetery. The music begins as “somber,” but the celebration that occurs after the body is given to the Earth turns both “improvisational and lively“ (Thursby 38). Jacqueline Thursby offers a colorful description of today’s New Orleans Jazz funeral:

The music proceeds from its first slow, mournful, and soul-moving tones to the joyful sounds of the second line. Waving handkerchiefs, uniforms, umbrellas, brilliant colors, and increased musical liveliness, following the tradition of long established order, raised the experience of the participants to an emotionally tangible sensation (39). Just as the African tradition called for a specific ceremonial funeral procession the jazz funeral became the standard for the city of New Orleans.

When a traditional jazz funeral takes place today one can view many cultural elements of the past, as well as current day practices that have evolved over time. The societies that cared for and organized the funeral rituals of the past are still alive in New Orleans. These current organizations that are responsible for coordinating the funerals for
their members spare no expense. An account of the costs for such a funeral celebration states, “Brass bands cost around $1,500, a police escort costs $600 and members sometimes spend as much as $1,000 on shoes” (Burns 9). In these organizations, which are many in number, the focus is continuously upon the community. The tradition of the funeral in congress with music has become reflective of cultural pride and community spirit. As Ellis L. Marsalis Jr. notes, “it is common to hear bands play popular songs of the day in place of the long time standards handed down for the older musicians, and the stately march to the grave site is becoming a thing of the past” (Thursby 40). New Orleans trumpeter Greg Stafford says such practices come as no surprise. “The music has to evolve, and it’s going to evolve; you’re going to have people playing differently” (Burns 47). Just as this particular practice has evolved so has the music that is used for the event.

Longtime New Orleans jazz funeral participant Milton Batiste had a desire to explain the tradition of the past to the present and recorded a narration and explanation of a traditional New Orleans jazz funeral. In the album by Magnificent Seventh's Brass Band, *Authentic New Orleans Jazz Funeral*, Batiste begins by describing the process that occurs before the parade begins. Batiste describes the wake service that takes place in the home of the deceased or in the church as a way of comforting the family through the use of familiar church or gospel songs (Magnificent Seventh’s Track 1). The next day, following the wake service, there is a “dismissal” of the person who has died. During this time “the band turned to dirges and somber music” (Magnificent Seventh’s Track 5). The dirges and somber music are not only a reflection of the moment, but are likely a reflection of the emotions of the participants of the jazz funeral.

In accordance with the wishes of the family of the deceased, the dirges vary in speed and style. As Norman Smith, a New Orleans resident, observed, “the dirges were very
distinctive—maybe that was a characteristic of the musicians who played them. Those old guys played a different kind of music—it was deeply spiritual” (Burns 7). During this portion of the jazz funeral, the brass bands play music from traditional Baptist hymn books, wear “uniforms and parade caps,” and perform with “great reverence and restraint” as the slow march takes place (Burns 3). Traditional music heard today includes “Just a Closer Walk,” “Bye Bye Black Bird,” and “Second Line,” and it has been mentioned that the music and style of the particular presentation “reflect[s] the contemporary nature of the musicians (Burns 3). This “living art form” still remains relatively somber, yet includes music that is faster, brighter, and sharper (Burns 3). Here we see a tradition with spaces in which it is permitted to grow and adapt. As the jazz funeral remains loyal to particular practices that continue to be considered important, there is room for evolution in order to bring the practice into a present-day culture.

As the wake or traditional funeral service ends, the journey toward the cemetery, the dead’s final resting place, begins. Batiste continues, “when the body would hit the door of the church and outside the crowd becomes quiet, you can hear the beat on the bass drum three licks, on the fourth beat it would bring in the band” (Magnificent Seventh’s Track 5). At this point, the band follows the hearse or horse-drawn carriage in a slow march. The leader of the band, also known as the grand marshal, sets the pace at which the procession will move. This grand marshal typically wears a sash and carries a parasol as he takes to “setting the tempo for the marches,” utilizing “slow, sculpted steps, one foot ahead, a pause, the other foot dragging in a stutter-step” (Berry). This particular role is a coveted one, filled with responsibility as one leads an ongoing tradition through the streets of New Orleans.

If possible, the procession will pass the former home and some of the favorite places of the deceased on the way to the cemetery. Joining in the procession is the famous “second
line,” people who are not actually family of friends of the departed, but who join the march as participants in the funeral service (Magnificent Seventh’s Track 5). The leader of the second line carries “an umbrella decorated with sequins, feathers, flowers, or fringe struts along the funeral route” as this procession begins to take on a greater communal tone (Dresser 197). Those who follow mimic the leader of the second line’s “exaggerated” dance moves (Dresser 197). The funeral dance begins to “snake” through the city streets as “soloists dance free form but, the second liners maintain their special steps: toe, whole foot, knee flex, and twist” (Dresser 197). The second liners are identified by their dress and actions to those watching the parade. One will witness handkerchiefs that wave with the rhythm of the music as well as “rolled up trousers” that signify that they are in fact part of this ceremony (Thursby 40). Legendary New Orleans trumpeter Louis Armstrong once described the second line as “a bunch of guys who follows the parade [who] are not the members of the lodge or the club” (Burns 5). Armstrong goes on to state that literally any person can participate in the second line despite their attire or connection to the deceased” (Burns 5). One realizes that this tradition is not only to honor the dead and to ease the pain of the family, but it also calls to the surrounding community to participate.

As the jazz funeral procession continues, the band forms two parallel lines on each side of the street, thus allowing the casket to be brought forward through the formation of well wishers as part of the ceremony of the “cutting loose,” or the burying of the body (Magnificent Seventh’s Track 5). At the gravesite the dirges continue until the preacher or minister performs “last rites” and shouts, “lay him down” (Magnificent Seventh’s Track 5). When the body is placed in the grave the mood of the ceremony changes dramatically. As Batiste describes this scene, “On our way back to wherever we started, there’s happy music, happy feeling” as the tempo of the music becomes “bright” (Magnificent Seventh’s Track
The change in the mood of the music is reflected in the change of the mood of the jazz funeral participants. “Everybody’s walkin’ and clappin’, singin’ with the music and dancin’ along. So on the way back can’t do no more for him. So let’s be happy about his spirit going to the right place” (Magnificent Seventh’s Track 11). The end of the New Orleans jazz funeral provides proof of “joyous human triumph” over grief, death, and loss as the deceased is laid to rest and “energetic life continues for the living” (Thursby 39). As the dead is honored the significance of the event is transferred to the living.

The jazz funeral is an important part of the historical and cultural heritage of New Orleans. New Orleans jazz musician Sidney Bechet states, “music here is as much a part of death as it is of life” (Thursby 39). The United States is often considered a melting pot of cultural traditions and New Orleans is perhaps the epitome of mixing people, cultures, and their traditions. Much like how standard pieces of jazz music change for a current era, the traditions of the jazz funeral evolve according to the needs of the times while still carrying historical and cultural meanings that are unquestioned and immovable. I now turn to author Tom Piazza, who joins this second line parade of meaning, offering a contemporary account of the jazz funeral as he explains its true importance and value.

**Locating Pitch: Spaces of Meaning Between the Lines.** The genre of jazz itself is very interesting for many reasons, but perhaps the ideal of interpretation is one of the most vital aspects of understanding that particular family of music. In jazz, the notes of a given standard piece of music are known by heart for the artist. However, no two artists will perform the piece in the same way because of interpretation. As the historical notes of the jazz funeral have now been presented, one must now consider how interpretation impacts the tradition. The historical notes can be considered facts, but the interpretation is what allows these facts to portray this ritual’s significance for the community of New Orleans and
the individuals who continue to honor the practice. While the belief behind this particular project is that the jazz funeral has inherent value for understanding meaningful communication, that issue will be discussed in a later section. The next few paragraphs will hand over the historical notes of the jazz funeral to author and longtime New Orleans resident Tom Piazza, who, through his interpretation, will allow the meaning of the funeral ritual to come to a crescendo.

Piazza’s work, *Why New Orleans Matters*, is akin to forte, a musical command to sing or play loudly, and is a boisterous argument for the importance of New Orleans. Born and Raised in New York City, Piazza visited the city of New Orleans several times before becoming a permanent resident in 1994 (7). Written by a man who genuinely believes that New Orleans is one of the most special places in the world, the text creates an argument for the continuance of the city along with its integral traditions. Written as a response to certain attitudes that followed the devastation of the city by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Piazza tirelessly marches onward to explain why New Orleans is a city worth saving despite its faults. He states that it may be difficult for people who have never visited the city to understand why New Orleans is vital to American culture and that so many of the reasons are “between the lines,” meaning that one must walk through the streets of the city to realize why New Orleans truly does matter (Piazza xx). The text channels the spirits of both Billie Holiday and Woody Guthrie as a ballad for New Orleans, just as much as it is a protest song directed toward the political and social forces that continue to thrash the city long after the flood waters of Katrina have receded.

An introduction to the jazz funeral is to introduce the idiosyncrasies of the citizens of New Orleans. Much the same way that the style of New Orleans jazz music spans many genres and styles, one cannot easily place the cultural aspects of the city into rigid categories.
For instance, religious celebration is not just found within the walls of churches, but is often present in meals, music, and even alcohol-fueled street parties. Piazza refers to New Orleans as the “most religious place” that he has ever visited even though most of the people who live there are “profoundly profane, pagan, and steeped in the seven deadly sins and some that are not even listed” (23). The harmony between virtues and vice within the culture of New Orleans must be considered before pondering the communal significance of the jazz funeral. This is a city filled with contradiction; however, it is a welcome contradiction by New Orleanians who love God while simultaneously (and joyfully) breaking his commandments.

A second line parade ceases to exist without the call and answer provided by the brass band. Without moving, grooving participants to follow the brass bands throughout the city streets, the music becomes performance and not participation. As Ezra Pound once stated, “music begins to atrophy when it departs too far from the dance” (14). Piazza believes in the inherent relationship between the dance and the music when it comes to New Orleans. Piazza points to the notion that the songs of New Orleans traditions share a common goal, which is “to short-circuit time in its dumb, earthbound mortal sequence, and restate things that will last and constantly renew the world” (26). The repeated utterance of this particular refrain marches through the humid streets of New Orleans in the shape of the jazz funeral. However, while this all seems quite magical, nothing happens without people on the ground to grieve, sing, dance, and march. Piazza’s words invoke harmony through the jazz funeral participants as the streets swarm with acquaintances who cannot gain access to the church portion of the ceremony or friends who cannot bear the thought of sitting for hours in a sweltering building. Some are mere acquaintances of the dead, others “have only heard” of the honoree, and others have never even heard of the person, but just want to
attend a jazz funeral (Piazza 27). The human harmonic is found within people who contribute to a given tradition. This harmony consists of various goal-centered participants commonly marching to honor the dead, caring for a community in spite of personal or interpersonal connections.

Piazza moves on to discuss the mood that is felt when the dead is brought from the church to the street where the jazz funeral procession begins. He states that the inquisitive members of the crowd will push themselves close in order to get a look at the event. Some will be “thinking about their own death,” some want to see the person they once knew, and some are perhaps not even thinking of anything specific at all (Piazza 28). The actual motivation for attending the funeral service is inconsequential. The focus of attention is placed on the notion of singing the praises of the “tradition itself,” no matter if these are members of a grieving family or “those who never liked that dead mother****r one little bit but who needed to attend for one reason or another” (Piazza 29). The explicit nature of that statement may require a “Parental Advisory” sticker to be placed on the cover of this dissertation project, but it reveals a crucial element of the jazz funeral—there are priorities inherent to the jazz funeral that are focused upon the significance of the tradition itself and not on individual feelings.

The music of meaning inherent to the jazz funeral sings praises to the dead and about the importance of community. Piazza highlights the theatrical aspects of the celebration, which is akin to a performance. Most participants of the dirge, or hymn, portion of the procession “wear officially sorrowful expressions” (Piazza 29). Although many of these sorrowful expressions are truly solemn, sometimes they are a “masque of grief that is being staged,” which Piazza labels as an act of respect for the very notion of mortality, as well as a ritualistic stage in which mourning is sometimes faked for the sake of the tradition
itself (29). These New Orleanians are participating in a ceremony with clear rules of behavior, both spoken and silent; however, the next part of the ritual is another contradiction that is classic New Orleans style. As any good jazz standard follows certain rules, its uniqueness and value comes from the improvisation that occurs within these limits.

As the march continues the jazz funeral participants remain loyal to the rules, but are now allowed to improvise. Piazza, in his description of the sudden change of mood, notes that the subdued nature of the procession is almost “undercut” by this transformation (30). As the funeral dirge ends the commanding brass band “launches into a jubilant, life-affirming stomp,” and the second line crowd follows suit by bursting into dance (Piazza 30). The dancing and the music takes center stage and the community unifies in order to enjoy these moments together. Some people will simply drink beer as they watch the procession from the sidewalk, others will dance alone, and some will compete in impromptu dance competitions. People dance on porches along the parade route, climb light poles, and even dance on the roofs of cars. The point is that everyone is dancing and celebrating in various and unique ways. The meaning behind the dance, as Piazza explains, stems from the fact that “it isn’t their time yet to be inside that carriage” that carries the dead body to the gravesite (31). The revelry and drinking takes place for hours long after the participants have formally said goodbye to the deceased. Once again, one sees that the focus is simultaneously placed upon life and death. The citizens of New Orleans celebrate in order to honor the dead, but the primary reason for the merriment is because there is still life to experience. The meaning behind the improvisational jazz of this march focuses upon a particular piece of music with recognition that no song is greater than the genre itself.

The song of the jazz funeral is composed for both mourning and celebration. Piazza posits about which is genuine, the grief or the celebration, and the answer is “both,” which is
“why it is profound” (31). This ritualistic contradiction leaves room for almost any emotion that could be experienced at a funeral service. Piazza points out that most traditional funerals in the United States are to remind those who gather together that “we are dust, and to dust we return” (31). While there are elements of this intrinsic to the jazz funeral, the message in the New Orleans style funeral is that “life is bigger than any individual life,” it will continue forever, and for a “short time…your individual life joins the big stream of Life” (Piazza 31). The silent repeated lyric of the jazz funeral, as it is with most New Orleans traditions, is that there is a limited time that individual souls participate in life and one should enjoy the time one has.

The argument being made about the jazz funeral is not intended to discount other funeral rites found within society. While many of these rites can be placed into various genres, the song of the New Orleans jazz funeral belongs to a genre that thematically gives consistent meaning despite the ceremony’s many inconsistencies. The lyrics of the jazz funeral song verbally and non-verbally repeat the idea that “No individual life lasts forever, and it is the responsibility of those left outside of the walls of the boneyard to keep life going” (Piazza 31). The party that is had on the streets is not a song of “escapism or denial,” but is about recognizing the aspects of life that cannot be changed (Piazza 32). Some may surely see this type of death celebration as blaspheme or an offense to the seriousness of death, but it is quite the opposite. As Piazza notes, New Orleans, despite often outlandish and over-the-top celebrations of all kinds, is “never just silly, in celebration, and never maudlin in grief” (31). He attributes this to the ability to live out the contraries that define human life in a manner “that allows the individual, and the community, to function with style and grace, and even wit, under the most adverse circumstances” (Piazza 31). In other words, the people of New Orleans are as strong as their traditions. There is never absurdity
just for the sake of absurdity; there is always a subtext of meaning in each tradition and especially in the jazz funeral.

There is an old term in jazz music, “free,” that refers to the blending of genres in which musicians play a style that crosses barriers and places an emphasis on given performers. What is central to understanding “free” jazz is that there are always implied barriers and rules that are observed despite any absurdity within the performance. When one begins to look at these traditions and the way of life that is specific to New Orleans, there is a strong sense that these people embody free jazz as the motives and meaning that these structures are built upon are consistent. Piazza calls it a “cultural synesthesia,” in which the music becomes the food, and the food a dance. Actual dance, for Piazza, is a means of “dramatizing the fact that you are still alive for another year, another funeral, another Mardi Gras” (33). The subtext that undergirds each New Orleans tradition is an affirmation of life even when the tradition’s text is death. Piazza continues to insist on the importance of this particular tradition of the jazz funeral for the spirit of the individual and the spirit of the community. He states that while many believe in a spirit that never ceases to exist, “the spirit can be broken, and killed” and it dies of “neglect” (Piazza 33). This is why traditions such as the jazz funeral are so vital because it keeps the spirit alive throughout generations as a narrative continues far beyond the lifespan of individual people. The people of New Orleans take everything seriously, from their music to their food, and these celebrations are not just “entertainment” (Piazza 35). There is legitimate meaning tied to every sip of a hurricane, every bite of a beignet, and every second line parade that follows a funeral in counterintuitive joyous merriment. Every piece of New Orleans creates meaning and teaches the next generation about a standard that should be continued, practiced, and improvised.

The significant melody of the jazz funeral reaches beyond the often cartoonish,
morally neutral manner in which the city of New Orleans is often discussed. The traditions of New Orleans are a vital part of the creation and continuance of meaning within the communities. Piazza quotes the vibrant black gospel tradition of New Orleans by stating, “No cross, no crown” which means, in his description, being human is a burden. One must recognize that burden and the fact that life does not last forever. One’s “finiteness” is as important as “suffering,” and more important are the “people around you” (Piazza 77). Without accepting and respecting those aspects of life, one will never reach “heaven” (Piazza 77). It is a reminder of suffering and death that is focused on life and the people with whom one shares a life. The only way to transcend normative conventions and think otherwise than the denial of death is to participate in the march alongside the reaper. The tone of important suffering that Piazza pens will later harmonize within the work of Frankl, as suffering is too important to his search for meaning. As this project marches forward, Barrett, Becker, Feldman, and Frankl join the second line parade in order to find unifying harmony between the communicative metaphors noted previously and the New Orleans jazz funeral.

The Communicative Importance of the Meaningful Dance with the Reaper

Thus far this chapter has featured many soloists playing music for ritual, meaning, and death. However, the remainder of this project is dedicated to the unification of these soloists so that they may, in jazz influenced improvisation, find meaning that is powerful but not governed by rules. The focus now turns to placing the general communication metaphors outlined above into the particular communicative act of the jazz funeral. One could simply make an argument that the jazz funeral is important exclusively based upon tradition and history. This section will argue that the ritual is of communicative importance as it serves as an example of how to communicate death in a constructive manner that uncovers meaning. The communicative categories will be used to inspire harmony between
the jazz funeral and the metaphors of Barrett, Becker, Feldman, and Frankl. The metaphors are akin to musical notes that help guide meaning as the notes alone have specific value, but more meaning occurs when they are used together in concert.

**Reflective Communication Inherent to the Jazz Funeral.** In order to truly understand and appreciate the music of today, one must also understand the old standards. In the same sense, in order to capture the inherent meaning of the jazz funeral one must reflect constantly to make sense of what is occurring in the moment. The metaphor of **deconstruction/construction** described meaning-centered communication as a theory oriented toward building structures rather than tearing them down. Just as the improvisational element of jazz changes certain aspects of a standard, it also contributes something while remaining true to certain foundational rules of the original piece of music. The jazz funeral is a firm example of a constructive communicative practice due to the focus on providing meaning for all participants of the event. This ritual has experienced change over time and has been reimagined in order to remain current and relevant. However, the basic practices and ongoing narrative of the event has remained the same. While some element of the jazz funeral has certainly dealt with a component of basic deconstruction from within, it has been toward the means of rebuilding the practice. The jazz funeral does not attempt to create new music, but appreciates traditional songs while continuing the foundations of the ceremony.

The metaphor of **choice** advocates that all communicative decision be revisited and considered in order to locate and create meaning. The metaphorical notes of choice and meaning are connected as a dyad, which must be played simultaneously. If meaning comes from the sum of choices that are made, namely when experiencing demanding and catastrophic situations, then one must continuously reflect upon those choices to be able to
uncover meaning in one’s life. The jazz funeral has a nonverbal backbeat that encourages participants to consider choices that are made through a given life. If one of the predominant goals of the jazz funeral is to remind people that life is indeed finite, then the choices one makes within this temporal state truly matter for the sum of meaning in a given life. The choices that one makes when confronting unchangeable circumstances in existence matter, and the jazz funeral requests that participants reflect upon past, current, and future choices.

It is apparent that the jazz ensemble of modern society is often filled with the voices of over ambitious soloists who want to project the sound of their own instrument in a refusal to harmonize with others. The recognition of Being sings the importance of both the soloist and the ensemble, allowing the soloists to have a continuing spot within the jazz club of communicative life. The communicative value of this metaphor is that it inspires honest, open communication about the circumstances of human life. This reflective mode of communication allows for the pieces of a fragmented life to be collected through genuine interaction about what is really happening in the world. The jazz funeral does not pretend that death is a wholly happy occasion; however, it unifies both celebration and grief. Both elements are communicated within the ritual of the jazz funeral. The actual funeral, or wake service, as well as the “dirge” portion of the procession, allows for loss and grief to be recognized. The celebratory acts of the latter half of the jazz funeral are an acknowledgment that human life does not last forever and the community should take care of one another and enjoy the time that they have left. This communicative act truly reflects upon the dual nature of the event in which life and death are honored as equals. One can see how all of these fractured solo pieces of human life are gathered in order to recognize life in a way that inspires the ensemble to play with meaning.
Just as the idea of free jazz allows for improvisation while continuing to honor certain foundational rules, *reality* speaks to a theoretical model that encourages communication that is grounded in reality and not fantasy. It allows for the free and improvisational as long as the actual circumstances, or unspoken rules, are respected. The way in which human beings communicate about essential aspects of life can only inspire meaning if reality is taken seriously. This dedication to meaningful reality occurs within the jazz funeral because it is a ritual that focuses upon the standard rules of actual circumstances. The act is grounded in some element of religion, but does not attempt to implant a feeling of comfort and happiness upon the participants as the dead are released to the ground. The focus on reality is that grief is legitimate, yet life goes on and many other members of the community must continue to live, thrive, and work toward their own meeting of the reaper. This communicative dance between possibility and reality does not discount sadness, but defiantly tells the community to return to normality and enjoy every moment of life.

**The Communicative Freedom Found within the Jazz Funeral.** The notion of free jazz is about a freedom that exists while remaining loyal to rules. The category of freedom offers metaphors that contribute to a model of communication that is truly grounded in the acknowledgment of constraint. Any musician would admit that one of the fundamental elements of becoming a skilled performer lies in the amount of control one has over one’s instrument. The sound of an instrument is very much determined by the choices that the musician makes, from how to stand to where to rest one’s fingers. Thus, the metaphor of *control* establishes the importance that humans live in a world with limitations that are unable to be controlled. The idea of control flourishes within the communicative search for meaning as one makes the best choices regarding one’s communication within a specific set of limitations. Freedom is experienced through the control one shows with one’s
communicative decisions in the midst of circumstances that fall outside of one’s control. This speaks to the very nature of the jazz funeral’s message—one has little control over the moment one will meet death, and freedom lies in making the best choices while one is still living. The sound of the instrument is determined by recognizing the power of what one can and cannot control. The song of the community and richness of life is dictated by the lyrical nuances of control.

The amount of control one masters over one’s instrument will directly impact the power of the particular performance. The notion of power presents itself as the next communicative metaphor that has a relationship to freedom. The theory is that genuine freedom lies within the acknowledgment of what one is defenseless against. Therefore, communication about the uncontrollable is fundamental as communication has the power to create and uncover meaning in moments of fear, uncertainty, and even death. The only true power in relation to freedom is how one chooses to communicate about existing structures that cannot be changed. A musician will never become an expert if he or she refuses to admit faults and ignore the fundamentals of musical theory. This is played out within the ritual of the jazz funeral as no person is treated as infallible or saintly, but rather as human beings who played particular functions within society and now must move on in their journey. The admirable aspects of the dead are alluded to, but what takes center stage is the undeniable fact of death as the community is warned against the denial of death. Power occurs in the communicative utterance that death cannot be avoided; yet, life will be enjoyed in spite of the looming shadow of mortality.

Awareness of control issues is only one part of understanding a communicative song that sings toward both freedom and meaning. One must again think about how jazz standards, the classic jazz tunes that everyone knows, are treated within that genre. There is a
dedication to the rules that calls the musicians into musical action or inaction. The idea of responsibility to the original text is present when performing a jazz standard and is easily seen within meaning-centered communication. The burden of humanity is that one must remain responsible to the challenges associated with life through communicative choices, which support the inborn meaning structures. Thus, when one is responsible for what stands before one, one works out of a freedom that uncovers meaning. When responsibility is ignored, one sacrifices one’s own inherent meaning structures. Once again, the jazz funeral is a communicative ritual that speaks to the responsibility of the living. Once the values of the dead are expressed, it is the responsibility of the participants to move those values into their remaining earthly days in order to foster and inspire community. There is a responsibility to the past of the tradition, the present in which the dead is being honored, and the future in which the community must march toward. The attitude of the jazz funeral in regard to the metaphor of responsibility is very similar to the responsibly of the musician. There are multiple goods in which one must attempt, through communicative choices, to remain responsible to.

A major attribute of jazz is the call and response style that is found within the music. This musical action can take place vocally or using instruments; as a melodic statement is made, the other band members mimic and respond. The responsiveness metaphor portrays, like the jazz genre’s call and response, communicative freedom through the idea that communication is always responding to other human beings. This is a tempered notion of communicative freedom in regard to the thought that, because of an ongoing orientation toward others, people are never without obligation. Responsiveness is key to uncovering meaning as one considers that communication is never about an individual, but is continuously tied to others. Just as the call and response found within jazz is attentive and
accountable to multiple responsibilities, the jazz funeral service is not simply to honor the
dead. The ritual is not meant to soothe a grieving family. If enemies of the deceased are
arriving to take part in a second line that is, on the surface, dedicated to the life and death of
someone who was hated, then the only plausible explanation is that there is a call to be
responsive to a tradition and a community that is bigger than individual choice or the
individuals themselves.

In order for the communicative call and answer to be present there must be a certain
amount of improvisational flexibility present. The final metaphor within this category is
creativity, which speaks to the way in which humans become inspired through their ability
to improvise through communicative practices. Creativity opens up possibilities in life and
creative freedom is found within communicative practices. Communicative utterances shape
lives; thus, how one creatively engages particular moments in life creates spaces for meaning.
Creativity is an inherent part of the jazz funeral, from the unorthodox choreography of the
dance to the improvisation of the brass band’s music. This communicative theory is literally
put into motion as a community dances, sings, and plays together beneath the shadow of
sadness brought forth by the reaper. Within these moments of creativity, lives are revitalized
and changed in order to redirect the focus to taking care of a community. As the moment of
death calls to the residents of New Orleans, they respond by following the standard rules of
the jazz funeral while allowing for meaning to spring forth from the creative nature of the
unplanned movements of the day.

**Communicative Focus of Attention of the Jazz Funeral.** The following
metaphors engage the importance of a well-defined communicative focus of attention and
have many natural intersections with the jazz funeral. In jazz music, one may hear a break or
chase. A break is when a soloist plays the ongoing song without assistance from other
musicians in the band. The chase, however, occurs when two soloists take turns, continuously passing the baton of melody back to one another. The idea of a communicative boomerang is helpful for understanding the chases and breaks that take place in everyday communication. This metaphor states that communicative acts are akin to a boomerang in the sense that the target is always the other. When the target is missed, the boomerang returns to the sender of the message and establishes a focus on the self. A focus on the self is never a path toward communicative meaning. The jazz funeral is not a self-centered act in which the target is the sole comfort of the individual person. If one sees the communicative boomerang in the act of the jazz funeral, the target is a constant other, be it the dead or the ongoing narrative of the community. While sadness is experienced, the jazz funeral is not about making one particular individual feel better in that moment. While the break is sometimes enjoyable and useful, extended breaks will ignore the jazz ensemble as a whole unit. The chase is playful and shares meaning with not just the self, but also the other. The chase of the jazz funeral happens as the communicative boomerang keeps the self from becoming the only purpose.

Just as a skilled musician must practice the ability to become attentive to the proper things during a performance, the metaphor of external focus encourages the communicator to mind appropriate aspects of life. The idea behind a focus of attention on an ongoing external focus is that communicative meaning cannot be located within the individual alone. Meaning is found when communicative practices are focused on other human beings, community, and faith structures that connect the individual to a larger narrative. Again, there are inherent connections to the jazz funeral as the individual agent is never the focus. The focus of attention is placed upon the bereavement of the close friends and family members. The focus of attention is on a community that must continue on in spite of the absence of
one of their leaders or friends. The focus of attention is grounded within a religious and cultural tradition that crosses hundreds of years. Many practicing musicians will become focused on individual elements of their performance and, in time, derail their growth as a musician. The focus needs to be outside of oneself and on the sheet music of life that must be interpreted in order to uncover meaning.

The music that is performed by classical musicians must be followed in a faithful manner that does not allow much room for improvisation. Life is found within jazz music through the notion that the music is flexible. Much like classical music, modernity offers no hope of finding meaning within the inflexibility of the notes on the page. Modernity is perhaps the biggest enemy of the external focus, as well as the cause of misdirection for the communicative boomerang. Modern communication structures allow one to believe that they can operate outside of the ties of the community. The primary way to uncover communicative meaning is to place the focus upon others and not upon the self. The jazz funeral is a total affront to those who are dedicated to a modern mindset as it rejects an individualistic focus of attention. It also clearly rejects the modernity-driven presupposition that there is only one way to perform and act toward the end of efficiency. The communicative dance that takes place in the jazz funeral does adhere to certain traditions, traditions that modernity would seek to replace, while leaving room for flexibility. Jazz does not take away the meaning of the piece, but allows an ensemble to find meaning in places that often feel old and outdated.

These traditions that modernity seeks to replace are important for communicative practices that make the nature of the human being. Human beings are comprised of instinct and tradition, two elements that many of the previously mentioned philosophers felt have been culturally rejected. The instinct and traditions of the human being form a sort of
progression in which the chords of existence form harmony and meaning. If the nature of the human being is a combination of tradition and instinct, communication should always be considered with those two elements in mind in order to uncover meaning—this is the communicative stance of the jazz funeral. Grief is an instinctual and natural feeling that human beings feel, and the funeral ritual of New Orleans does not discount that. However, the dualistic nature of this practice inserts the importance of tradition in order to continue a narrative that reminds people how to live. Just as progression seeks harmony, the jazz funeral is focused on a progression that can unify both the nature and nurture aspects of the human mind.

**The Ultimate Communicative Goal of the Jazz Funeral.** This final category aims to view the interplay between specific communicative goals and the actual execution of interactions with others. The first metaphorical goal is focused upon pleasure. In the communicative search to uncover meaning, one may experience both power and pleasure, but the ultimate goal must be for communication alone. If one communicates only for pleasure, then spaces open in which other human beings are used as objects and the focus remains upon the self. A major attribute of the jazz funeral is the enjoyment that is created for those who take part in the moderately somber event. While a large portion of the ritual is pleasurable for the people who drink, dance, and sing, there is an overtone of meaning. The goal of the event is to not make people feel good, but rather toward the transference of meaning. The byproduct is pleasure if the focus is upon communicative meaning. If a jazz musician has great technical skill and experience, he or she is said to have the kind of chops that it takes to be a versatile performer. The skilled communicator earns his or her chops when the goal is not pleasure, but rather to uncover and rediscover meaning.

Much like the artful skills of comedy and theater, attentiveness to timing is extremely
vital to musical performance. One can think of the act of keeping perfect time as a path to communicative meaning discovery, as communication should aim to keep a perfect beat of uncovering and discovering meaning in human lives. All communicative acts are truly about either sharing meaning or finding meaning between individuals. As we see in the discussion of pleasure, the goal of the jazz funeral is toward the end of finding meaning in the meaningless. This communicative act is about meeting death in a way that inspires, creates, and continues a narrative that gives meaningful hope in opposition to often nihilistic normative conventions. The ritual of the jazz funeral is not about the show or the party that is associated with it. The jazz funeral is at its core about giving meaning to life in the midst of death. When a musician is perfectly in time, the old jazz musicians will say that they are “in the pocket.” If one can perfectly time the interactions between life, death, and all human interaction that occurs between those two events, one will find oneself in the pocket of meaning.

One cannot become a skilled jazz musician just by desire alone or by continued unhelpful and destructive practices. The work of Frankl and Becker argue that the structures of meaning have been damaged and this leads to the necessity to rebuild meaning. This metaphor states that one of the ultimate goals of communication is to use words in order to inspire meaning rather than to destroy it. If one agrees that there is no longer understanding about where meaning can be found, the ethical communicator must help the other find meaning. This is yet another connection to the value of the jazz funeral. This ritual is about the continuance of a narrative and a reminder of the values that sustain a community’s health. While some use moments of tragedy and sadness to discuss the meaningless of life, death is refocused in this ritual to explain the beauty that mortality provides to those who are still living. As one is reminded of responsibility and narrative, meaning is rebuilt through
tradition and values that are shared within society. This idea encourages one to return to the
woodshed in order to refine communicative skills that reject destructive practices and focus
upon the reconstruction of meaning.

When one walks into a jazz club in New Orleans, there is no predicting what will be
heard. From any one particular brass or jazz band, one will hear elements of Dixieland,
Funk, Rock, Blues, R&B, Hip Hop, and Zydeco, just to name a few. The idea of genre
bending is inherent not only to the musical DNA of New Orleans, but to the tradition of
jazz itself. The metaphor of human sciences also shows the importance of bending and
interlinking various genres. All of the philosophers utilized in this text were dedicated to
finding meaning in human life through existing structures. While Becker specifically talked
about the need for a unification of disciplines, one understands that there is no universal
method to repair the problems created by the mistakes of the past. As Becker utilized
religion and psychology and Frankl utilized topics such as philosophy, psychology, and
popular culture, the New Orleans jazz funeral does the same. The participants of this ritual
do not find meaning only in the church or in the dance. The only place for meaning lies not
in the dirge that takes the body to the grave or in the songs that the brass bands perform in
response to the moment. The meaning of this event is found in the church and in the streets.
It is found in the conversations that happen amongst onlookers who do not move from the
sidewalk as the second line marches by their homes. Meaning is created as all of these
elements are unified in order to create a cultural gumbo in which you cannot place your
finger upon the ultimate meaning giving aspect. Meaning comes from the constant
recognition of the genres of life, death, and community. The jazz inherent to life in New
Orleans recognizes that all genres of meaning and emotion can and will link together.

In this section, the harmonic connections that exist between communicative theories
that focus on meaning and the jazz funeral have been explored. The ongoing march of this project has argued that the New Orleans jazz funeral does in fact communicate otherwise than the denial of death and provides communicative spaces in which meaning is created for participants, viewers, and the community. The conversation could easily end at this point and one would be able to hear the call to return to our academic woodsheds in order to gain our communicative chops toward finding meaning. However, this work has not given close enough attention to a natural leader in the war to reconstruct meaning, Viktor Frankl. As Frankl steps toward meaning, the discipline of communication, too, shall step in tune in order to understand the something extra that is given through the masterpiece of his work, *Man’s Search for Meaning*.

**Lagniappe: Frankl and the Jazz Funeral**

“Lagniappe” is a term used in New Orleans to describe what it means to give “a little something extra” (Smith 31). The idea of lagniappe is something that is not exclusive to New Orleans. However, if one spends enough time in the Crescent City, the spirit of giving more than you are required is found around every dining room table, inside of each dilapidated tavern within which music flows. Lagniappe is present in all traditions that are taken seriously. This section is lagniappe and trusts Frankl to lead the communicative dance toward meaning upon the streets of wisdom provided by *Man’s Search for Meaning*. This work, in concert with the tradition of the jazz funeral, will allow one to hear the final communicative song of a theory walked into a practice that communicates toward life in the shadow of the reaper.

Throughout this project, Viktor Frankl has been a central, guiding companion toward finding meaning in the seemingly meaningless. It is within this final section that Frankl, like the grand marshal of the jazz funeral, sets the final pace in which this project will
conclude. Frankl wears a sash that says “meaning” and carries a parasol with the embroidered word “suffering” as he demonstrates the transitory nature of life through his slow, sculpted steps. As Frankl sets the tempo of this dance, those who follow will be able to mimic his dance as the communicative second line attempts to uncover meaning. The grand marshal of the jazz funeral will lead the dance through the streets and neighborhoods of New Orleans. In this role, Frankl leads the dance through the actual conditions of human life as he shows those who follow the steps of meaning that are crucial to life.

**Suffering, Transitoriness, and the Arrival of Meaning.** Frankl’s masterpiece, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, is divided into two major sections and a postscript. The first section serves as Frankl’s autobiographical sketch of his time in the Nazi-controlled concentration camp, Auschwitz (9). The experiences within the walls of Auschwitz in union with the terror inherent to Nazism added inflection to Frankl’s theoretical standpoint. The communicative dance that Frankl learns during World War II is toward the constant recovery of meaning for human lives. One understands how Frankl’s work formed the legacy that he left throughout the various texts that have been described in this particular dissertation project thus far. However, the second section of Frankl’s work reveals more concrete areas in which communicative theory can be discussed prior to reintroducing the communicative practice of the jazz funeral.

This second section of *Man’s Search for Meaning* was composed due to the fact that many of Frankl’s readers began to request a more clearly outlined description of his “therapeutic doctrine” (97). While many of these philosophical notes have been discussed already, Frankl brings forth topics that seem fundamental. The first metaphor of significance found within this text is that of **suffering**. Jazz musicians often attempt to get into the “groove,” a musical space in which the rhythm of the piece is perfect. The metaphor of
suffering recognizes that there is a journey of failure and mediocrity that often stands between a person and his or her “groove.” Frankl states that it is always possible to find meaning in a “hopeless situation,” and what becomes important during this moment is to “bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best,” which is to convert a catastrophe into a victory (112). Frankl does not believe that one can engage in existential demand and alter the conditions of life, but he does feel that the individual has certain responsibilities during moments of suffering. His goal is to help people change their “attitudes” in order to illuminate a pathway toward the discovery of meaning in one’s suffering (Frankl 113). Thus, one finds meaning both inside and outside of the groove. While being in the groove would be perfection, the practice in order to reach the groove is inherently meaningful on its own.

Frankl does not see suffering as essential for the search for meaning, but he does find it important for people to understand the notion. He believes that while not everyone will suffer greatly in life, one must realize that “meaning is possible even in spite of suffering” (Frankl 113). To “suffer bravely” is to experience meaning until the last breath of life; life’s meaning goes beyond conditions and can be found in the center of every potential scenario (Frankl 114). Frankl’s theory of suffering is that it does not discount meaning as meaning is inherent to all situations of life, no matter how tragic or joyous. This goes against some popular, nihilistic utterances that suffering is of no meaning, and, at the same time, creates a communicative theory that states that communication should not be used in order to remove suffering, but to remind one of the importance of that suffering. To communicate the meaning that is inherent in spite of the suffering is perhaps a complex idea, but it moves toward the goal of assisting individuals in finding meaning in grief and death. The metaphor of suffering speaks against the young musician who tosses his or her trumpet aside because they are not instantly as good as Louis Armstrong. The metaphor of suffering offers a way
to find the meaning and value in the frustration that is experienced outside of the groove, as one works their way into the groove.

The next vital metaphor of this text is life’s transitoriness as Frankl discusses the transient nature of human existence. Frankl takes up the idea of past, present, and future and begins by stating that the only real moments of life that are “transitory” are the potential moment. Once potential moments, or possibilities, become “actualized” they become reality in the moment of the present while simultaneously becoming a fact of the past. These actualized possibilities become locked into both the present and past and “nothing is irretrievably lost but everything is irrevocably stored” (Frankl 120). Therefore, how an individual chooses to engage a possibility provides a lens in which others will view the legacy in the future. The communicative importance of this metaphor is that all choices and decisions are solidified into one’s legacy and one must engage communicative acts in a way that realizes that utterances and moments have inherent meaning. As Frankl states, “At any moment, man must decide, for better or worse, what will be the monument of his existence” (121). In jazz there are three major tempos of music: ups, mediums, and ballads. The idea behind the transitoriness of life allows one to understand that a certain audience requires a particular tempo. Communication is to be taken seriously as one understands that when one chooses a tempo, that opportunity for communication will contribute to the monument of one’s existence.

A lover of music will often ponder over how words and lyrics hang together in order to create something special. Furthermore, music performers are reflective about the interplay between each note within a composition. The lover of meaning and communication should be interested in how life’s moments hang together in order for one to find oneself at the arrival at meaning. The first way to find meaning in life is through “works” and “deeds,”
while the second involves “experiencing something or encountering someone” (Frankl 145). The third way to arrive at meaning is considered the peak of significance for Frankl. He states, “even the helpless victim of a hopeless situation, facing a fate he cannot change, may rise above himself, may grow beyond himself, and by so doing change himself” (Frankl 146). Again, he restates the importance of suffering in this meaning triad in which meaning comes from what one contributes to a community, what one gets from life and other people, and how one reacts during moments of pain, suffering, and inhumane circumstances.

This meaning triad is littered with communicative implications, as one must begin by understanding that meaning can be created through every conversation, correspondence, and utterance. One must also understand that meaning comes from engagements with other human beings and situations in life. Lastly, and most importantly for Frankl, meaning is created through how one chooses to communicate in times of tragic suffering, in which one must meet the unavoidable. How one communicates about the things that cannot be changed truly matters if the search for meaning is to be taken seriously. When a jazz musician creates meaning through a chord of three notes, it is referred to as a triad. Just as this triadic harmony is distinct to the music born in New Orleans, Frankl’s meaning-centered triad can be experienced in everyday life. To play the three notes of Frankl simultaneously is to play a chord of meaning.

Engaging Suffering, Transitoriness, and the Arrival of Meaning through the Lens of the Jazz Funeral. The practice of the jazz funeral has been discussed at length and now one must consider how these final three metaphors pulled from Frankl relate to this long-practiced tradition of New Orleans. The first metaphor of suffering offers an understanding of communication that does not aim to be overly and undeservedly positive about given situations with the goal of the removal of pain. To give legitimacy to suffering is
a communicative attempt to assist individuals in finding meaning within their pain. The jazz funeral can be seen as the movement of this theoretical standpoint into reality as the event is not held to solely promote joyous celebration, but to allow the community to take part in suffering even if they do not know the deceased. Suffering is important because as one realizes the finitude of his or her own existence, responsibility is revealed. While most funeral rituals are semi-private, the New Orleans jazz funeral brings the suffering to the public streets in order to communicate the meaning behind the curtain of pain. The discomfort will subside and individual lives do not go on forever, but the community continues, in part, because of traditions like this. Getting into the musical groove of happiness is not the primary focus of the jazz funeral, but rather a recognition of the practice, toil, and pain that one experiences on their path toward the possibility of finding the groove.

The second metaphor, life’s transitoriness, brings into question the legacy that is left behind through communicative choices. All communication has inherent meaning and the sum of one’s choices create “the monument of existence” that Frankl discussed. The entire notion of the jazz funeral is about leaving a monument of existence and capitalizing upon the possibilities of life that have become solidified and locked in. As the jazz funeral is a communicative act that reminds the community of the values of the deceased that are important for the ongoing narrative of those left behind, it is simultaneously a reminder of the possibilities that that person engaged in life which led to the monument of existence that, in tangible form, takes the shape of a horse-drawn carriage and a crowd of people who have gathered to honor the dead. At the same time, this ritual is a communicative reminder to the participants and onlookers of how to live a good life and to promote community. The
ritual is a reminder to choose a communicative tempo wisely, and that one should have the
courage to communicate “up” during moments when others only communicate with ballads.

The final metaphor of **arrival at meaning** serves as a powerful example of how
every aspect of human communication creates and uncovers meaning in life. The meaning
triad outlined by Frankl shows meaning comes from what one contributes to life, what one
is given in life, and how one meets the suffering-fueled inevitable moments of life. Thus,
how one chooses to communicate about nearly every aspect and scenario of life matters;
meaning is always found within individual choices, relationships to other people, and choices
that are made in moments of tragedy. This meaning triad is played out in the jazz funeral, as
it is about considering individual stake in the community, and, at the same time, is about the
ritual itself communicating toward the betterment of individuals. As Frankl found the most
important element to be the stand against what one has no control to change, the jazz
funeral’s most important aspect is that it communicates in respect and defiance. It is a ritual
that communicates otherwise than death by taking a moment of suffering and using is as a
vigorous opportunity to inspire meaning in the hearts of the grieving individuals as well as
the community. The triadic harmony of the jazz funeral does not only create meaning for a
community, but conceptualizes the notion of suffering for a society that largely understands
death to have no value.

Frankl’s metaphors for the discovery of meaning have many ongoing connections to
the structures of the jazz funeral. As the grand marshal of the second line parade that plays a
song of meaning, Frankl’s steps are grounded in tradition. As the march toward
understanding meaning will continue throughout every communicative moment, Frankl
offers a way to uncover the simultaneous meaning of both life and death that does not bend
to the individualistic nature of a modern society. Frankl’s contribution to the good of
communication ethics is rich in understanding one’s own meaning as well as the meaning of traditions such as the New Orleans jazz funeral.

**Life is Bigger Than Death.** This project has lead a metaphorical second line through philosophical perspectives of death, attempting to organize them in order to uncover meaning in some of the hardest moments in life for humans to communicate about. The thematic march of this project was to find spaces in which human beings can begin to communicate about death in a manner that takes the moment seriously, but also recognizes that meaning is not lost alongside a given life. The music of this project was not meant to be a dark, morose dirge. It has been noted in communication research that communication ethics has an unbreakable tie to particular goods that are protected and promoted within ongoing communicative structures (Arnett, Fritz, and Bell 6). The march that has been demonstrated and described within this work has focused upon the uncovering of the particular goods that assist in providing meaning in both life and death.

Actor and musician Hugh Laurie once said in regard to the city of New Orleans that it is a city that is not afraid of death and has “looked death in the eye” (“Hugh Laurie: Let Them Talk”). Laurie continued to speak of New Orleans’s music, stating that though there is a fixation on death, “Death is the minor key. Life is the major key.” (“Hugh Laurie: Let Them Talk”). This is the ultimate message of this particular project and the rationale behind the utilization of the jazz funeral as a major artifact. The overall subject of this project is more about life than death. To find meaning and properly honor death creates spaces in which communication can be used as a way to show the meaning and honor inherent to life. Life and death are forever connected. Communication and the search for meaning are forever connected. It is for this reason that this project is of importance for the study of communication ethics today. If one is to take for granted that the study of communication
ethics is about protecting and promoting particular goods of human life, it is the argument of this project that there is nothing worth protecting and promoting more than the meaning found in life and in death. Life is the beginning of a beautiful song that must end in death. The notes, lyrics, and chorus of meaning are found within the experience that happens between those two necessary and inevitable events.
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