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The Return of the Death Instinct

Review of 'Natural causes: An epidemic of wellness, the certainty of dying, and killing ourselves to live longer' by Barbara Ehrenreich

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(excluding references)

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“The older I get, the more everyone can kiss my ass.” – folk humor

“I gradually came to realize that I was *old enough to die*.” – B. Ehrenreich, p. 2
(*italics hers*)

Barbara Ehrenreich’s 23rd book, *Natural Causes*, is about death and dying, but it is not another treatise on the horrors of disease and decease and how to deny them, but an attempt to reshape our entire frame of perception. A superficial reading of her book might give the impression that Ehrenreich simply conveys the obvious: ‘Death is certain! Deal with it!’ But this impression would be false. Ehrenreich reaches deep into cultural history and social assumptions, the science of cell biology, and her own lived experience to resurrect a paradigm long thought dead: vitalism (Bechtel & Williamson, 1998). She calls for nothing less than a reconsideration of our most fundamental concepts, such as life, death, agency and free will, the self, and the universe. Perhaps it’s a bit much for 200 sparsely lettered pages, but then again, *Natural Causes* is not an academic treatise, but a polemic or *Streitschrift*, designed to provoke and to stimulate thought and perceptual experimentation. In this sense, *Natural Causes* is itself a psychological event. It is not a mere platform for the presentation of material to be processed, but rather, it subverts the nature of that processing itself.

Three Lines of Attack

What makes this book powerful is that it comes at the educated reader at three levels. The first level is a set of critiques of familiar fads, fashions, abuses, and idiocies. Audience consent is expected and likely received. Movements and cults surrounding diets, exercise, yoga, positive psychology, alternative medicine have

been already been roundly criticized for not working better than science-based routines and interventions or better than placebos. Still, Ehrenreich gives a fresh perspective by tracing their popularity to cultural patterns ingrained in Post-Reformation Western individualism. For all the rhetoric of harmony, goodness, and holism, there lies a destructive narcissism at the core. The price for the illusion of control over one's own physical (and psychological) destiny is a life-style of toil and self-denial, culminating in a confession of guilt when the effort fails. And it will fail.

The second level is a critique of the hegemonic medical culture. Diet, exercise, and positive psychology flourish in part because science-based medicine is not all it is cracked up to be. The scientific-academic narrative of medical practice obscures its many catastrophes, which comprise not only failures to heal but also the infliction of harm. Although many educated people know that many invasive surgeries are unnecessary and may cause prolonged suffering (Gigerenzer, 2014), most have adopted a stance of obedience to the system. Ehrenreich portrays encounters between doctor and patient as rituals of domination and submission. A 'good' patient confesses his or her sins, be they martinis or Marlboros, and feels appropriately apprehensive when ignoring doctor's 'orders.' Ehrenreich hints that she did not return lightly to a policy of seeing a doctor only when she does not feel well. After all, the well-socialized Western individualist is found guilty if she misses her decennial colonoscopy only to find blood in her stool during the eleventh year. Being ritualized, the practice of medicine, and preventive medicine in particular, moralizes all behavior associated with life and death, with sickness and health, and that is a lot of behavior.

The third level is a critique of science as we know it. Here, Ehrenreich might be over-reaching, but this is difficult to demonstrate. As a PhD immunologist, Ehrenreich brings expertise to the task. The protagonist in the drama she describes is the macrophage. Macrophages, or “big eaters,” are the immune system’s shock troops. They track down invaders and literally eat them up. The conventional narrative ends here where Ehrenreich’s tale begins. The military metaphor by which we are taught to represent how the immune system works is, if not false, seriously incomplete. Macrophages enjoy a great deal of independence. They do not always perform functions for the system, but they can also turn on it. The most disturbing discovery is that macrophages can actively facilitate cancer and its metastases. This discovery cannot be dismissed as an anomaly of nature, but is rather a reflection of nature’s very nature. Ehrenreich concedes that this lesson is a tough pill to swallow, as it were, but some of the scientific pioneers, such as the *Urvater* of modern medicine Rudolf Virchow (Virchow, 1860) anticipated it. He and others wrote about intra-body struggles and competition, an insight that subverts the holistic (see Ehrenreich’s second level of attack) fantasy of whole, harmonious, and well-ordered systems.

If death is not merely a matter of the body tiring over the decades until it succumbs to the stress of life, how might one explain life’s participation in its own destruction? Ehrenreich makes the reasonable Darwinian point that evolution requires a turnover of generations. If old generations are not replaced, there is no space for new generations to see if their genes pass the fitness test. A darker view,

adumbrated in the title of this review, is that Ehrenreich has effectively breathed new life into *thanatos*, the old Freudian death instinct. But *thanatos* is a metaphor at best.

The notion of intra-body warfare undercuts the idea that someone or somebody is in charge. Ehrenreich quickly dismisses the soul, trusting that the majority of her left-leaning, atheist or agnostic readership scoffs at this Platonic idea anyway. The 'self' is a tougher customer, but Ehrenreich eventually gets to its dethronement. In her discussion of life at the cellular level, the lesson is that the body cannot even be viewed as an efficiently self-organizing system. The macrophages, like amoebae, 'behave' in a way that we can only describe as *agentic*. They act in ways that are neither causally determined nor stochastically random. They have their own logic but they are not predictable. This is Ehrenreich's big argument. The macrophages – and much else in the universe – have agency; electrons, fungi, and who knows what else generate behavior out of what appears to be nothing. They seem to have, for lack of a better term, free will.

The target of this claim is "necrophiliac science" (p. 201), that is, the Newtonian and Laplacian paradigm, which since the Enlightenment has labored to demystify terrestrial nature and the rest of the cosmos and thereby kill it. The mission of this sort of science, as Ehrenreich sees it, is to reduce all events to the operation of causes, which may be perturbed by random noise, but are otherwise deterministic. In such a world, nobody does anything. It's just one damn thing after another, and there's no life in it. Besides the macrophages, the other big player carrying the burden of making Ehrenreich's case is the fruit fly. In a German lab, fruit flies were strapped into a 'pure,' destimulated environment (Maye, Hsieh, Sugihara,

& Brembs, 2007). The poor flies 'wanted' to escape, and went into frantic motion. The finding was that there was no finding in the conventional sense. The investigators were unable to model the flies' behavior in terms of rules or randomness. Some sequences of behavior may be modeled with chaos mathematical equations, which are deterministic once set in motion but unpredictable in outcome. Here, unpredictability arises from tiny differences in initial settings, an idea popularized by the example of the butterfly effect (Lorenz, 1963). However, chaos theory does not explain how these tiny differences among initial settings themselves arise. This blind spot returns us to the question of whether these crucial differences are determined by some unknown cause or whether they represent truly random perturbations in the system.

The Poor Self

Ehrenreich's dismantling of the organism as a united assembly of parts with a common interest in living is accompanied by a dismantling of the organism's psychological aspect, the self. The modern self-concept is an invention wrought during the Renaissance from the destruction of the soul. Alas, the self with its consciousness, its esteem, and its control is underdetermined. A search for the self itself leads into a hall of mirrors (Krueger, Evans, & Athenstaedt, 2017). When it is unknowable who is doing what to whom, there is a big epistemological problem. Folk psychology – and some professional psychology – is undeterred, treating the self as the seat of agency, intentionality, and (free) will. To Ehrenreich, this is a big illusion,

although a potentially adaptive one for our day-to-day business of living. Deeper truths are revealed by the ingestion of psilocybin, the prolonged practice of meditation, or the proximity of death. She closes the book with Brecht's last poem, which hints at an egoless state in the late-stages of self-consciousness.

If the self is rendered chimerical, agency is not. Ehrenreich sees it everywhere. The universe vibrates with it, from the macrophages and fruit flies to subatomic particles. If the definition of agency is the generation of motion that is neither physically determined nor predictable or random, consciousness and human free will are no longer required for it. Ehrenreich neglects to notice that it makes little sense to reject the idea of the human self as an autonomous agent and at the same time use human free will as a metaphor to describe unpredictable behavior in earthworms. That is trying to have it both ways, and it is a confession of ignorance as to the nature of agency.

Ehrenreich's call for the return of life to a world declared dead by necrophiliac science fits, I believe, the definition of vitalism (Mayr, 1996). Vitalism regards life as irreducible to physical processes. The explanatory gap is filled with *élan vital*, *Lebenskraft*, or, as in this case, *agency*. Ehrenreich does not mention vitalism, and she will likely reject this characterization of her position. According to her, agency is found in many parts of the universe, large and small, and is hence not unique to what we call life. She rejects, for example, the notion that Terra (or *Gaia*) is a unified living system, and she has no patience for the idea that the universe is conscious. Yet, the expanded ascription and application of agency makes its conceptual status even more problematic than the status of *Lebenskraft*. For what is the unifying

characteristic of agency other than unpredictable uncaused nonrandomness? When no explanation can be found, the use of anthropocentric metaphors is seductive. In the 18th Century, Pierre-Louis Maupertuis, the Comte de Buffon, attributed intelligence and memory to small living particles (Bechtel & Williamson, 1998). *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.

Good Living

If Ehrenreich goes a bit overboard at the epistemological fringes of her story, her meditation on life and death is rich and deeply humane. Many significant thinkers, from Marcus Aurelius to Michel de Montaigne, have wondered how life can be lived fully in the knowledge of one's mortality. Ehrenreich warns that any obsession with either life or death corrodes the enjoyment of today's lived experience. Developmental psychologists have elaborated the idea of 'successful aging' (Freund & Riediger, 2003), and Ehrenreich devotes a chapter to the topic. The very phrase 'successful aging' is loaded in that 'successful' implies the notion of goal-directed effort and work, which Ehrenreich tries to deflate. 'Aging' implies old age, and when does that begin? The broader question is how we might live fully at any age once we become aware of our own finiteness.

Ehrenreich notes that what most people fear is not death itself, but prolonged debilitating disease and suffering, conditions that are in principle avoidable, if only by drastic means such as drugs or suicide. There is also the neglected notion of the heroic death. In a reinterpretation of the Oedipus legend, I suggested the possibility that King Laios wanted to be killed by his own son in order to assure dynastic succession on the throne of Thebes (Krueger, 2014). He did so in the fullness of his

time. He was old. When young men and women die for their country, however, their deaths are more tragic than heroic. To suggest otherwise is propaganda. Finally, in a reinterpretation of the legend of Abraham's death, I sketched a simple mathematical model for the development of desire for life's pleasures (Krueger, 2018). Given simple assumptions about marginal utility increments and the probabilities of those increments to occur, it can be shown that anticipated pleasure, or "zest" (Russell, 1930) will slide towards zero with aging. At the age of 170, Abraham too realized he was old enough to die. There was simply nothing left to do.

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