Culture, Ideology, Morality and Religion:  
Death Changes Everything  
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The human quest for immortality must be as old as the human awareness of mortality. Throughout ages, human beings have striven to transcend the inevitable fate that awaits them and achieve immortality, be it through myth and religion, through science and medicine, or through family and work. The prospect of death and ultimate annihilation strikes a chill into even the stoutest of hearts. Hence, the human desire for denying death and seeking immortality seems understandable and perhaps even natural. But let us stop for a moment and consider a deathless world: What if there was no death? What if immortality was not a fanciful dream but a mundane fact of life? What if life were not “a narrow vale between the cold and barren peaks of two eternities” (Ingersoll, 1885, p. 67), but eternity itself? Many people who engage in this thought experiment agree that an eternal, interminable life would be more a punishment than a gift. Although thoughts of the inevitability of death at times lead people to wonder, “what it’s all for;” the absence of death would probably render that question more acute and more frustrating. Death might be the end to all meaning, but in a very real way, it is what gives life meaning, depth, and intensity.

In this chapter, we consider how the reality of death changes the way human psychological motives operate. Relying on terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991), we argue that humanly constructed meaning systems, such as culture, ideology, morality, and religion serve important death-denying functions. These systems undoubtedly also fulfill the function of solving practical problems. Clearly, understanding how the world works provides clues as to how to behave to get what one needs and wants. Yet TMT posits that the human awareness of
death added urgency to the way humans hold on to these sources of meaning, and changed the sorts of meanings that people sought to attain. We start with a brief overview of TMT and a discussion of how culture, ideology, morality, and religion are affected by awareness of mortality. The second part of the chapter addresses accounts that have been proposed as alternatives to TMT and argue that the problem of death is a specific case of a more general threat. We explain why we view awareness of death as a unique force for the human psyche that is responsible for changing the pursuit of meaning, value, and security in ways that affected the functioning of culture, ideology, and religion.

The Meaning-Making Animal Faces its Mortality

Although ants, bees, and chimpanzees are all social animals, only human beings are cultural animals (Solomon, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, 2004). Only human beings are meaning-making animals that live their lives embedded in a universe of symbols, ideas, and values created by other humans. TMT was developed, in part, to explain the psychological functions served by these cultural conceptions of reality and the values they specify for appropriate human conduct. From the perspective of TMT, people use the meaning systems they learn from their cultures, referred to as cultural worldviews, to shield themselves from the potential for anxiety that results from the uniquely human awareness of the inevitability of death. To get this protection, people must believe they are living up to the standards of value espoused by their culture, thus acquiring self-esteem in the short term, and literal or symbolic immortality in the long term. For one’s worldview and self-esteem to provide an effective shield from anxiety, people must maintain faith in these conceptions. Because worldviews and self-concepts are flimsy, humanly created ideas that often bear little relation to observable aspects of nature, they can only be maintained if
other people share them. Those who share one’s worldview increase confidence in it, and those who do not undermine confidence.

A large and growing body of research has provided converging support for diverse variations and combinations of a set of logically distinct hypotheses derived from TMT. Specifically, research has shown that: 1) bolstering people’s worldviews, self-esteem, or attachments makes them less prone to anxiety in response to threats, even when they are unrelated to the particular threat; 2) threatening people’s worldviews, self-esteem, or attachments increases the accessibility of death-related thoughts, whereas bolstering any of these structures reduces this accessibility; 3) reminding people of their mortality (mortality salience; MS) increases their need for faith in their worldviews, self-esteem, and attachments and therefore increases their striving for and defense of these entities, whereas bolstering any of these structures reduces or eliminates the effect of MS on such behavior. Although large bodies of evidence support all three of these lines of reasoning, the MS hypothesis is by far the most widely researched derivation from TMT. Indeed, a recent meta-analysis by Burke, Martens, and Faucher (2008) concluded that it would take 4,239 null findings to negate the support provided by the existing literature for the MS hypothesis. For recent and comprehensive reviews of the TMT literature, see Greenberg (this volume), Greenberg, Solomon, & Arndt, 2008; Hayes, Schimel, Arndt, & Faucher (2010), Kesebir & Pyszczynski (in press), Pyszczynski, Solomon, Greenberg, Arndt, & Schimel (2004).

Cultural worldviews are shared meaning systems that provide a theory of existence that gives meaning to life and standards of value that are guides for appropriate behavior and yardsticks against which people’s value can be assessed. Maintaining faith in one’s worldview and living up to its standards manages anxiety by imbuing life with meaning and oneself with
value, thus opening the door to the literal immortality promised by the religious aspects of the worldview and/or the symbolic immortality that results from being a valuable part of an eternal entity greater than oneself. The term ideology is often used interchangeably with the term worldview. For our purposes here, ideologies refer to the aspects of cultural worldviews that provide a moral and rational basis for social, political, or economic systems and prescribe how members of that system should behave (see also, Jost, Fitzsimmons, & Kay, 2004). For most people, ideologies are the most sacred aspects of cultural worldviews. That is, they usually contain the most important core religious and/or secular elements of the belief system, that are revered and often viewed as “sacred truths” that are beyond debate. This is especially true when the ideology is believed to come directly from an omniscient and omnipotent deity. Conversely, especially revered secular elements of worldviews are often given sacred status (e.g., the U.S. Constitution, the Communist Manifesto) and the leaders responsible for these elements are often treated with god-like reverence (e.g., the American founding fathers, Karl Marx & Vladimir Lenin in the former Soviet Union). This link between ideology and the supernatural dimension is one of the central themes of this chapter.

Most popular contemporary theories of ideology, morality, and religion are primarily social in nature. They emphasize the role these cultural institutions play in promoting the smooth functioning of groups. Both system justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994) and social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), for example, conceive of ideology as a motivated, system-serving belief system that serves to legitimize and maintain the status quo. Haidt (2007) posits that moral intuitions evolved to facilitate intra-group harmony, inhibit intra-group conflict, and bind groups together against rival groups. Many recent theories similarly view religious belief in supernatural agents as functioning to bring people together and encourage intra-group
cooperation (e.g., Bloom, 2005; Boyer, 2001; Wilson, 2002). Although we acknowledge the role of ideology, morality, and religion in promoting social cohesion, TMT suggests an additional function of these cultural institutions that dramatically changes the way people relate to them.

Going back to the thought experiment at the beginning of our chapter, we contend that in a deathless world, perhaps there would still be ideology, morality, and religion, but they would most likely be dramatically different from what they currently are and people would not cling to them with such extraordinary force. It is conceivable that people would still desire meaning, security, and value, in an attempt to avoid pain and other unpleasantries, and to reach their goals. They might create deities too, who can facilitate group harmony, help them get their basic needs met, and perhaps even find personal fulfillment. But would people still hold on to their gods with a fervor that far exceeds the bounds of rationality? Would they work so hard to maintain their beliefs in spite of the lack of observable proof for them and even when they seem to be disconfirmed, as with prayers that are not answered or when tragedy befalls the innocent and virtuous? We doubt it. In a world where one’s existence cannot be irreversibly annihilated any minute, where time is never-ending and hopes and dreams can always have a future, deities would have a very different role and might not even exist. Below we expand on these thoughts.

The Birth of Ideology, Morality, and Religion

The first cultural worldviews were probably attempts to answer basic practical questions about how the world works that people could use to meet their needs and navigate their ways through life – dealing with things like how to find food, stay warm, and relate to other people. Meaning systems are, by definition, social in that they are ways of sharing information among people. So, relationships between and among people were no doubt an important topic covered by the earliest meaning systems. Even before this, primitive moral intuitions were evolving that,
as Haidt (2007) suggests, helped maintain social cohesion and minimize conflict. With the gradual emergence of more sophisticated intellectual capacities and language, these moral intuitions became verbalized and later codified into cultural norms and values, and eventually into comprehensive meaning systems that provided explanations for these norms and values.

The emergence of the uniquely human awareness of death was presumably a seismic event. Our ancestors needed to manage the potential for terror that resulted from this dawning awareness of the harsh reality of nature – that life is finite and all things must eventually die. From this point on, meaning systems had to accomplish more than simply guiding action and maintaining social cohesion – they became part of the emerging human terror management system. The explanations of the workings of the world were thus expanded to imbue reality with supernatural powers. Deities were invented that were not subject to the limits of death and finitude. Importantly, they were designed to control nature and grant immortality to otherwise mortal humans. The emergence of gods and religions thus changed the dynamics of the moral intuitions and norms used to control behavior.

Probably because of the human tendency to anthropomorphize and imagine that the gods thought much like they themselves did (Guthrie, 1993), most cultures created deities that granted immortality only to people who believed in them, lived in accordance with their commandments, and did all they could to stay in their good graces. Again, because of the tendency to rely on their own experiences to imagine what the gods wanted, and perhaps because of the wishful presumption that the gods cared about people and what they did, deities were assumed to want what was best for their people. People imputed their own moral intuitions to the gods, who were assumed to use them as standards against which to judge who was worthy of immortality. Thus the regulation of moral behavior, which had previously been accomplished solely through innate
intuitions that were enforced by one’s conspecifics, was turned over to all-powerful deities that
granted immortality only to those who behaved in a moral manner. In this way, moral thought
and behavior took on the added function of managing the potential for anxiety that resulted from
awareness of human vulnerability and mortality. The fear of negative social consequences that
our pre-human ancestors experienced when they behaved (and perhaps anticipated behaving) in
ways that violated their moral intuitions was given further power by the newfound anxiety
regarding the loss of protection and immortality from the supernatural beings who controlled
their destinies after death.

Because moral behavior became the major criterion for admittance to the afterlife by the
deity, moral value took on added value and became the pre-eminent value for most cultures.
This would explain why moral values are so highly emphasized by most parents and other
important socializing agents of the culture. Consequently, they are most people’s primary basis
of both self-esteem for oneself and evaluations of others (for a discussion of how the anxiety-
buffering functions of worldview and self-esteem emerge out of the security provided by early
attachments and later socialization, see Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, 1997). In line with
this view, Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis (2005) provide a broad range of evidence supporting the
special status of moral beliefs in affecting social judgments.

Consistent with the death-denying function of moral emotions and judgments posited by
TMT, research has shown that terror management processes affect reactions to violations of all
five of Haidt and Graham’s (2007) moral foundations (for a review, see Kesebir & Pyszczynski,
2011). Many studies have shown that death reminders lead people to rate moral transgressions
based on the harm/care foundation (e.g., a doctor who mixes up the records of two patients and
amputates the leg of the wrong patient) as more severe and to recommend harsher punishment
for the transgressors (Florian & Mikulincer, 1997). Other studies have shown that mortality salience intensifies reactions to violations of the fairness dimension, for example, by increasing derogation of the victim of a random tragedy (Landau et al., 2004); conversely, learning about severely injured innocent victims elicits more death-related cognitions than learning about victims responsible for their condition (Hirschberger, 2006). In a related vein, when justice concerns are salient, mortality salience increases support for violence even when the expected utility from violence is low, increases the belief that justice will be served by military actions, and increases the tendency to seek justice, which mediates the link between death thoughts and increased support for military action (Hirschberger, Pyszczynski, Kesebir, & Ein-Dor, 2011). A multitude of TMT studies show that mortality salience increases attitudes and behaviors relevant to the ingroup/loyalty foundation—death reminders increase both ingroup favoritism and outgroup hostility. Research has also shown that death reminders increase support for charismatic leaders who proclaim the unique value of the ingroup (Cohen, Solomon, Maxfield, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2004). Terror management concerns have also been shown to be at play in various aspects of the purity/sanctity dimension. Death thoughts increase the intensity of reactions to various disgusting stimuli (Goldenberg et al., 2001), and viewing pictures of bodily waste increases the accessibility of death-related thoughts (Cox, Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, & Weise, 2007). The very first demonstration of the mortality salience effect, showing that reminders of death lead to higher bond recommendations for a woman arrested for prostitution (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989) can also be viewed as an instance of thoughts of death increasing punitive impulses toward a violator of the purity/sanctity foundation. Research demonstrating that mortality salience increases belief in an afterlife, increases death thought accessibility when one’s religious beliefs are challenged, and increases
distress when using a crucifix in a disrespectful way provide additional converging evidence of the role of death concerns in the purity/sanctity dimension (for a review, see Vail et al., 2010).

**Keeping Faith in an Invisible World**

Because terror management (i.e., immortality) resided in an imagined invisible world that could not be experienced through normal sensory channels, the anxiety-buffering power of worldviews, and the deities and moral principles they contained, became even more dependent on their acceptance by other people. It takes a village to maintain faith in things that cannot be directly experienced. Thus the emergence of immortality-granting gods increased the need for group solidarity and consensual beliefs. Although there are certainly other reasons people are motivated to maintain cohesive groups, from the perspective of TMT, the human creation of death-denying immortality systems greatly increased the urgency of these motives. Consistent with this view, research has shown that when interviewed in front of a funeral home, people exaggerate the extent of social consensus for their attitudes, especially when they hold unpopular opinions on the issues (Pyszczynski et al., 1996). Indeed, archeologists have found evidence of large-scale human settlements replete with religious temples and images at Göbekli Tepe in Turkey, dating back 11,500 years, well before any evidence of the agriculture or the domestication of animals (Symmes, 2010). This suggests that the widely shared view that civilization resulted from the invention of agriculture might have it backwards. The motivation to please the gods who provided access to immortality may have brought people together into larger scale settlements, and the need to feed these larger groups may have accelerated the emergence of other aspects of culture, such as agriculture and domesticated animals (for a more thorough discussion, see Solomon, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Schimel, & Arndt, 2004)
The invention of deities probably also increased the power of those who were believed best able to communicate with this invisible world and persuade the spirits to look kindly on their followers. Priests and shamans were able to wield great power within their groups because of their alleged connections to the guardians of immortality and because of the “practical knowledge” regarding how to please the gods they offered to the masses. These religious leaders either assumed great power over the group or were closely aligned with secular leaders, who were believed to be chosen by the gods for their leadership roles. In many cases, the leaders were believed to be gods themselves, as in the case of the Egyptian pharaohs and Japanese emperors. This merger of church and state provided a ready explanation and justification for the power wielded by the elite. Thus the death-inspired invention of gods and consolidation of supernatural and political power provided a powerful incentive for system-justifying behavior: doubting the righteousness of the system put one’s literal immortality in jeopardy. A similar, though perhaps weaker, dynamic is likely in play when one questions the secular aspects of one’s culture, which puts one’s symbolic immortality in jeopardy.

**Death Does Not Necessarily Bring Out the Worst in People**

Our analysis, however, does not imply that existential threat inevitably leads people to shift their attitudes toward justifying the status quo as some have argued (e.g., Jost, Fitzsimons, & Kay, 2004). From the TMT perspective, system-justifying behavior is motivated by the terror management function that some but not all political systems serve – for some but not all people. This suggests that an important determinant of whether or not people are motivated to justify the systems under which they live may be the extent to which it meets their terror management needs. People would be expected to justify systems only to the extent that those systems are effectively providing them with the meaning, value, and hope of immortality needed to manage
their existential fears. When a system is unable to do this, the motivation to defend it is eliminated and when a system is believed to deny one of these resources, the motivation to overthrow it grows. Of course other factors, such as some hope that such rebellions will be successful are also needed for the motivation for change to lead to concrete action. This may be happening in the many Middle Eastern countries that are currently experiencing rebellions against corrupt leaders, such as Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Bahrain, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia.

We argue that the fear of death leads people to seek protection wherever they can most readily obtain it. TMT posits that people construct their own worldview by combining elements of the diverse ideas, values, and experiences to which they have been exposed over the course of their lives; of course the extent to which this involves wholesale introjection of the ideas and values of powerful others or a thoughtful process of self-creation varies from person to person (for a discussion, see Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Goldenberg, 2003). The raw materials from which individualized worldviews are constructed reflect thousands of years of human thought, experience, hopes, and dreams, distilled through the major socializing forces of each individual’s life. Worldviews are likely to be especially complex, multi-faceted, and conflicted in modern multi-cultural societies with heavy exposure to the diversity of human thought and experience.

Research across diverse areas of social psychology suggests that one important determinant of which aspect of one’s worldview a person will lean on for protection when existential threat is heightened is what is most accessible at the time (Higgins, 1996). Highly valued or central aspects of a person’s worldview are likely to be chronically high in accessibility (Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1984) and thus especially likely to guide responses to mortality salience. A host of studies showing that individual differences in political orientation predict the direction of responses to death reminders supports this proposition. For example,
Pyszczynski and colleagues (2006) found that death reminders increased politically conservative but not politically liberal Americans’ support for the use of extreme military tactics to fight terrorism, and Hirschberger and Ein-Dor (2006) found similar patterns among conservative and liberal Israelis regarding their belief that the use of military force in the Palestinian conflict was justified. Recent “priming” experiences are likely to temporarily increase the accessibility of worldview elements too, thus affecting the specific way a person responds to existential threat. Consistent with this idea, research has shown that priming the value of tolerance (Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Chatel, 1994), compassion (Rothschild, Abdollahi, & Pyszczynski, 2009), and secure attachments (Weise et al., 2008) all influence the nature of responses to mortality salience, sometimes reversing the direction of effects that are found in the absence of such priming.

It also seems likely that some elements of people’s worldviews are more associated with safety and security than others. Most likely, elements of worldview and self that are most associated with security and most effective in managing anxiety are held with more importance and conviction. It also seems likely that worldview elements that are closely tied to literal immortality, such as those involving gods, morality, the afterlife, and being part of an eternal entity that provides symbolic immortality are especially likely to be leaned on when the need for protection is elevated. This suggests that people may be most likely to engage in system-justifying thought and behavior when they view a system as sacred. Consistent with this view, Rothschild et al. (2009) found that priming the value of compassion led fundamentalist Christians and Muslims to decrease their support for hostilities against each other only when these values were presented as part of their sacred religious texts. When these same values were presented without connection to the Bible or Koran, they had no effect on people’s attitudes.
toward the use of violence against each other. Recent research has also shown that construing natural things (e.g., water) as sacred reduces the increase in worldview defense that mortality salience would otherwise produce (Kesebir, Chiu, & Pyszczynski, 2011). Research also shows that persons high in right wing authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism, who tend to conceive of the existing social order and their own ontological beliefs as sacred and inviolate, are especially likely to respond to reminders of death with increased hostility toward those who challenge their beliefs and values (Motyl & Pyszczynski, in press).

In sum, the research available to date strongly refutes claims that existential threat inevitably leads to a shift in a conservative or system-justifying direction (for a review, see Anson, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2009). Worldviews are too complex, and people acquire security in too many diverse ways for a simple unidirectional response to threat to be useful to them. Rather, the picture emerging is one of a highly flexible system in which both chronic and momentary salience of worldview elements, along with the security value of each, determines where people seek protection from existential threat.

The Utility of Illusion

The dawning awareness of death, and the invention of a supernatural dimension to make death less frightening, also changed other aspects of the way people understood their world. As the social cognitive theories of the 1970s and 1980s assumed, an accurate understanding of reality is usually the best guide for efficacious behavior that gets one’s needs met. In a world without fear, people might indeed approximate Heider’s (1958) ideal of the naïve scientist, dispassionately gathering information to be objectively processed to arrive at the most accurate understanding possible of the reality in which one lives. However, in a world where one of the few certainties is that one will die someday, with uncertainty regarding when, how, and what it
would be like, beliefs that fit closely with observable reality about death are often too painful to be accepted as true. This may have been a major impetus for the emergence of self-deceptive tendencies in human thought.

Of course there are many reasons for people to shield themselves from the truth. Self-deception to maintain self-esteem, cognitive consistency, belief in a just world, feelings of relational security, and faith in one’s worldview are all well-known in the social psychological literature. Interestingly, these are all motives that research has shown to be affected by terror management concerns (Greenberg et al., 2008). If effective attainment of what is needed for survival and reproduction were all that mattered, there would be little motivational impetus for distorting one’s perceptions of oneself or one’s environment, because this would far more often than not undermine one’s chances of meeting one’s needs. One might argue that self-deception is functional because it increases confidence in oneself and therefore encourages people to take risks that are not justified by an accurate assessment of their skills and the challenges of the situation they are facing. But such distortions would seem to more often lead to negative outcomes, and if negative outcomes are indeed more potent than positive ones (Baumeister, 2001; Lewin, 1935), such deviations from accurate judgments would be discouraged. However, if there are powerful functional advantages to high self-esteem, cognitive consistency, and these other psychological motives beyond the pragmatics of achieving concrete goals in the current situation, then deceiving oneself to achieve these psychological states would become adaptive. TMT suggests that the role these psychological motives play in managing existential terror provides just that incentive. Although an accurate understanding of reality is likely to be most useful when there is something that can be done to alter that reality to produce a more favorable outcome, despite the distress such honesty sometimes entails, when there is nothing that can be
done to alter one’s fate, the benefits of fanciful illusions are much less in situations in which outcomes can be controlled by accurately assessing one’s situation.

*Summary*

People need meaning, morality, religion, and social connections for many reasons. Thinking is for doing. An accurate understanding of the workings of the world greatly increases one’s chances of getting what one needs and wants. Moral behavior helps maintain social harmony, inhibits intra-group conflict, and binds people together to fend off enemies. And people need people to accomplish most of the important tasks of living; survival and reproduction cannot be accomplished by people acting on their own. The central point of TMT is that awareness of death changes the way these and many other motives operate. In addition to their original function of solving practical problems, human systems of meaning, morality, and religion took on death-denying functions that added urgency to these motives and changed the endstates toward which they drove behavior. Social connections and coalitions with those who share one’s meaning system are needed to maintain certainty and faith in these protective meanings.

*Alternative Conceptions of Existential Motivation*

Over the past decade, a variety of alternatives to TMT have been proposed that seem to take the problem of death out of the existential equation. These alternative theories argue that the reason thoughts of death produce the effects they do has little or nothing to do with the problem of death, per se. Rather, it is argued that people are primarily motivated to seek meaning (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006), certainty (McGregor, Zanna, Holmes, & Spencer, 2001; van den Bos & Miedema, 2000), or social coalitions (Kirkpatrick & Navarrete, 2006), and that thoughts of death are upsetting because they threaten these other motives. These alternative conceptualizations
pose a “chicken or egg” sort of question: Do people seek meaning to protect themselves from their fear of death, or is death frightening because it threatens meaning? Do people seek certainty because certainty regarding one’s protective beliefs is needed for their effective functioning, or is death threatening because it threatens certainty? Do people seek belonging and social coalitions because of the protection from the fear of death that these things provide, or is death threatening because it undermines belonging and social connections?

Although these alternative accounts emphasize different aspects of the human experience as primary, they converge on the view that the problem of death is simply a specific instance of a threat to a more basic human need. This fits well with the longstanding tradition in psychology, and science in general, of explaining diverse phenomena with abstract constructs that encompass many specific instances of those phenomena. All theories, including TMT, do this. The TMT approach is different from these others in that rather than trying to reduce the pursuit of meaning, certainty, or social connections to a specific instance of death denial, TMT posits that the fear of death affects the way these other psychological needs function and the types of outcomes that will satisfy them. We now briefly consider some of the most influential of these alternatives and explain why they are problematic.

*Death undermines meaning.* From the perspective of the meaning maintenance model (MMM; Heine et al., 2006), “meaning is the expected relationships or associations that human beings construct and impose on their worlds … meaning is what connects things to other things in expected ways—anything and any way that things can be connected” (p. 90). The MMM posits that “Humans find it problematic to be correspondingly robbed of meaning, or otherwise confronted with meaninglessness, and therefore seek to reconstruct a sense of meaning whenever their meaning frameworks are disrupted” (p. 90). This basic emphasis on meaning making
recapitulates ideas that have been central to virtually all psychological theories of human thought and reasoning, from Bruner (Bruner & Taiguri, 1954) to Heider (1958) and to Kruglanski (1989). To this widely held assumption, the authors add “a fluid compensation model (cf., McGregor, Zanna, Holmes, & Spencer, 2001; Steele, 1988) whereby people whose meaning frameworks have been disrupted react by bolstering or reaffirming other meaning frameworks that remain intact” (p. 90).

From the perspective of the MMM, the reason thoughts of death motivate people to cling to their cultural worldviews, self-esteem, and close attachments is that death undermines meaning. Heine et al. (2006) argue that, “people primarily have anxieties about death because death renders life meaningless by severing individuals from their external environment, and in a sense, from themselves” (p. 98). Accordingly, although the problem of death may be especially disturbing, it is not viewed as fundamentally different from any other threat to meaning. This is perhaps best illustrated in a study by Proulx and Heine (2008), in which they compared the effect of death reminders with that of subtly replacing an experimenter with another person in a way that their participants did not notice. Intriguingly, these two inductions produced similar effects on moral-belief affirmation, measured by asking participants to set a bond for a prostitute as if they were a judge reviewing the case. This and other findings of meaning-related threats producing effects similar to mortality salience were interpreted as supporting their claim that the problem of death is simply a specific instance of threats to meaning.

The most basic problem we see with the MMM analysis of why awareness of death is motivating is that knowing that one will die is, itself, a meaning. Consistent with Heine et al.’s definition of meaning, it is an “expected relationship ... (that) connects things to other things in expected ways” (2006, p. 90). If meanings entail “anything and any way that things can be
connected” (p. 90), is the fact that life will end someday not a meaning? Indeed, the idea that death entails complete and total annihilation of the self, the meaning of death that TMT posits is most troublesome, is also a meaningful relation between things in the world. Clearly, it is not a very pleasant meaning, but it fits the MMM definition of meaning, and therefore should not be troublesome from that perspective.

Heine et al. (2006) also argue, following Baumeister (1991), that death threatens meaning because: “(a) death undermines the predictability and controllability of one’s existence, (b) death eliminates all potential that one has for earning meaning in the future, (c) death reminds people that their existence and the meaning framework that they have constructed will likely be forgotten, and (d) death nullifies the value of one’s life’s achievements.” But if what is important for meaning is how an event fits in with the relationship between ideas and events that one uses to understand the world, physical death would not pose any of the above problems for people who believe in an afterlife, especially the more popular kinds in which life after death far outshines anything one could experience or even imagine during one’s physical existence. The ideas about literal immortality that are part of virtually all religions provide clear ways of predicting and controlling one’s existence after death, they imbue one’s future with great cosmic significance and meaning, they enshrine people’s meaning systems and selves in perpetuity, and they provide a crowning achievement of one’s life – the attainment of immortality. To the extent that death is threatening because it challenges people’s existing meaning systems, it should not be troubling, for example, to the approximately 75% of today’s Americans who believe in life after death (Pew Research Center, 2010). Elsewhere, Heine et al. (2006) argue that, “people primarily have anxieties about death because death renders life meaningless by severing individuals from their external environment, and in a sense, from themselves” (p. 98). But if one
believes in an afterlife, death simply entails a move to a new, presumably vastly improved environment, and no disconnect from one’s self.

To sum up our position, we find the MMM view that conceives of the problem of death as an instance of meaninglessness problematic, because death in itself constitutes a meaning. We are in complete agreement with the MMM view that meaning is a crucially desired entity, the absence of which puts in motion a host of behaviors aimed at restoring it. Yet the TMT perspective diverges from MMM in viewing death as a unique threat that changes the quality and intensity of the pursuit of meaning. Death has both epistemic and existential functions. In a deathless world, people would most likely still seek meaning and comprehensibility for purely pragmatic reasons, as a basis for controlling and manipulating their environment. But illusory meanings that deviated from observable reality and that were frequently disconfirmed would soon lose their appeal. The practical utility of meaning (the need for accuracy or fear of invalidity) would be much more potent and the protective, soothing role of meaning would lose much of its power without the ultimate threat of death.

*Death undermines certainty.* In a related vein, uncertainty management theory (UMT; van den Bos, Poortvliet, Maas, Miedema, & van den Ham, 2005; see also McGregor et al., 2001) argues that death is motivating, at least some of the time, because of the uncertainties it entails: when and how it will happen and what happens afterwards. More recently, van den Bos (2009, p. 198) distinguished between *informational uncertainty,* which is the type of uncertainty studied by decision theorists, which “involves having less information available than one ideally would like to have in order to be able to confidently form a given social judgment,” and *personal uncertainty,* which he defines as “a subjective sense of doubt or instability in self-views, worldviews, or the interrelation between the two” which “involves the implicit and explicit
feelings and other subjective reactions people experience as a result of being uncertain about themselves.” UMT views this latter personal form of uncertainty as most relevant to worldview defense and existential meaning.

Given this shift from a relatively undifferentiated concept uncertainty in early presentations of these ideas (van den Bos & Miedema, 2000) to the focus on uncertainty about one self-view or worldview in more recent presentations (van den Bos, 2009), UMT seems to be arguing that threats to the psychological structures that TMT views as protecting people from death-related fear promote defense of these structures. And like the MMM, UMT posits fluid compensation whereby people can cope with threats to one aspect of worldview or self by bolstering unrelated aspects. This seems to imply that these various meanings or certainties regarding self and world are serving a shared function of some sort, a view shared with TMT. But UMT and the MMM, unlike TMT, argue that meaning and certainty about self and world are sought for their own sake and that death is problematic because it undermines these meanings and certainties.

McGregor, Nash, Mann, and Phils (2010) recently advanced the similar concept of anxious uncertainty, which like van den Bos’ concept of personal uncertainty, is distinguished from “merely informational uncertainty that does not threaten personal goals or cause anxious or ideological reactions in the threat and defense literature.” Anxious uncertainty arises from simultaneously active approach and avoidance impulses and activates reactive approach motivation (RAM). From this perspective, tenacious absorption in an alternative approach goal distracts from the anxiety produced by the initial approach-avoidance conflict and thereby reduces the distress of anxious uncertainty. Presumably, virtually any goal or ideal can relieve anxious uncertainty as long as it is sufficiently compelling – thus people pursue these alternative
approach goals with intense zeal. McGregor et al. propose the RAM model as a more parsimonious account of a variety of phenomena involving meaning seeking, ideology, and worldview defense than the extant explanations for these phenomena in the literature. Unlike the MMM and UMT, this approach does not posit a common psychological resource that is both undermined by the threat and restored by the defense; in particular, they laud the potential of this framework to dispense with the need for “convoluted links to the concept of symbolic immortality” (p. 142).

One major problem we find with McGregor and colleagues’ RAM approach is that the definition of anxious uncertainty is circular: it’s not very useful to distinguish anxious uncertainty from informational uncertainty by saying that the former is the type that leads to emotional reactions of anxious uncertainty and ideological reactions. It’s also not clear in what way the fear of death involves a simultaneously active approach and avoidance tendency; as far as we can tell, the fear of death is all about avoidance. The RAM model also leaves out the many findings of death reminders increasing avoidance motivation, such as physical distancing from foreigners (Ochsmann & Mathy, 1994), increased anxiety when handling cultural icons in a disrespectful manner (Greenberg, Simon, Porteus, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1995), or distancing from one’s ethnic group when it is associated with negative qualities (Arndt, Greenberg, Schimel, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2002). Indeed, one of the most widely replicated general effects of MS is more negative evaluations of outgroup members and those who criticize the worldview; this certainly seems to entail avoidance reactions. Under certain theoretically specified conditions, MS has been show to even lead to avoidance of things that are normally extremely appealing, such as the physical aspects of sex and other pleasurable physical sensations (for a review, see Goldenberg, 2005). The fact that most behaviors, including any that
involve a choice, can be construed as either approaching one choice or avoiding the other might be used to explain away this problem but doing so makes it impossible to make precise predictions from this theory: Is derogating an outgroup member approaching one’s own group or avoiding another? Does exercise approach health or avoid illness? It’s also not clear why zealous engagement in an avoidance goal would not provide a similar relief from the anxious uncertainty created by an approach-avoidance conflict.

Again, we agree with UMT that people often crave a sense of certainty. Although we also agree that certainty serves other functions, such as increasing the likelihood that one will take action to pursue one’s goals, we argue that certainty also fulfills an important terror management function. One’s worldview, self-esteem, and attachments are only effective in providing protection from existential fears when people hold them with confidence and certainty.

In our view, one of the major problems with all existing alternatives to TMT is that their proponents seem to focus on only the mortality salience hypothesis, rather than the TMT literature in its totality or the real world behavioral phenomena that TMT aims to explain. TMT was not developed to explain why mortality salience produces diverse effects in laboratory studies; rather it was designed to explain why people need self-esteem, faith (or certainty) in their worldviews, and the role that other people play in maintaining these two psychological entities. It was also designed with the hope of shedding light on the role that human awareness of the inevitability of death plays in diverse forms of human behavior, an issue that with very few exceptions, was ignored in previous psychological theorizing. The mortality salience hypothesis is one of several distinct hypotheses deduced from the theory to guide empirical research on it. A viable alternative to TMT would need to address the questions that TMT tries to answer as well as explain the findings across the diverse hypotheses and applications that have been used to
test it. We have never argued that understanding the death-denying aspects of self-esteem, culture, attachment, interpersonal relations, morality, or religion is all that needs to be known about these topics. Rather, we argue that it is impossible to fully understand these issues without a consideration of the role they play in shielding people from the potential for existential terror that results from their awareness of the inevitability of death.

Concluding Remarks

We opened our chapter with an admittedly fanciful thought experiment and tried to imagine what life would look like when there was no death. The point of this thought experiment, and the guiding theme of our chapter, was that death changes everything. Specifically, we have argued that the dawning awareness of mortality had a unique impact on human psychology that changed why and how humans relate to meaning systems such as ideology, morality, and religion. We have argued that the zeal and dedication with which people hold on to these aspects of their culture is more than that can be explained by rational, pragmatic reasons alone, and emphasized the urgency that death anxiety adds to any human psychological motive. Despite abiding perceptions about death anxiety bringing out the worst in people, recent TMT research has made it increasingly clear that this is not true. We believe that further research on how people can use their awareness of death as source of meaning and growth instead of a source of paralyzing dread and ultimately harmful defenses is needed, and hope to see future TMT research move in that direction.

References


Footnotes

1 There is some evidence that chimpanzees and perhaps a few other species have the most basic rudiments of culture, in that they are able to teach each other novel ways of doing things that are passed down across generations (e.g., Kawai, 1965). Mithen (1996 refers to this as a pre-cultural stage of development because it does not include a shared linguistic meaning system that is used to regulate individual behavior.

2 Morality is the most common basis for immortality, especially in modern religions, but not the only basis that has existed or exists today. In some cultures, immortality was reserved for people of noble birth, for only certain races or ethnic groups, or for those preselected on some other basis. This suggests that people often used their religious tenets as a way of maintaining or justifying the power they held, and that, as moral foundations theory suggests, ingroup and hierarchy concerns play a role in religious conceptions of morality. Over time, these types of rules for access to the afterlife have been largely replaced by the requirement that one believe in the deity and live up to his rules. This suggests that a social control function of religious morality may have been especially adaptive. Whether that is true today is an open question.