

CILIPS COVID-19 Book Reviews – The Worm at the Core

Reviewer name: Scott Main

Book title: The Worm at the Core

Author name: Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg and Tom Pyszczynski

Genre: Psychology

Overall Rating: Excellent

Brief summary: Psychology professors Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg and Tom Pyszczynski offer this look at how the knowledge of mortality drives human culture. The authors' contention is that fear of death has been a primary driving force of human creativity. They began working together on the elaboration of what they now call "Terror Management Theory" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terror_management_theory) in the 1970s when they were doctoral candidates in experimental social psychology. Although other species (e.g. elephants) appear to mourn their dead, only humans seem fully conscious of their mortality and are unsettled by this knowledge. By concocting a supernatural world, they have been able to gain a sense of control over the randomness and futility of life. In the authors' view, it was the practice of religious rituals associated with these beliefs that spurred the development of social organization and technology, as well as leading on to medical advances.

'The Worm at the Core' is the product of 25 years of research. Drawing from innovative experiments conducted around the globe, Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski show that the fear of death and the desire to transcend it inspire us to buy expensive cars (don't laugh!), crave fame, disguise our animal nature and even put our health at risk. They show that the fear of death will lead judges to dole out harsher punishments, will make children react negatively to strange people, and will inflame intolerance and violence. Some of it surprising, some not, but the evidence is convincing. One to read before extinction?

What you liked: A thrilling thesis concerning human motivation, mortality and culture.

Anything you didn't like:

Who should read this book?:

Any additional comments?: The following titles all make for fascinating reading in this area:

- Becker, Ernest - The Denial of Death (1974) (https://www.amazon.co.uk/Denial-Death-Ernest-Becker/dp/0029021502/ref=tmm_hrd_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=1483222549&sr=1-1)
- Rosenberg, Jay F. - Thinking Clearly about Death (1998) (https://www.amazon.co.uk/Thinking-Clearly-About-Death-Rosenberg/dp/0872204278/ref=tmm_hrd_title_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=1483224316&sr=1-1)
- Dollimore, Jonathan - Death, Desire and Loss in Human Culture (1998) (https://www.amazon.co.uk/Death-Desire-Loss-Western-Culture/dp/0713991259/ref=tmm_hrd_title_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=1483222685&sr=1-1)
- Cave, Stephen - Immortality: The Quest to Live Forever and How it Drives Civilisation (2012) (<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Immortality-Quest-Forever-Drives->

[Civilisation/dp/1849541361/ref=tmm_hrd_title_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=1483222836&sr=1-1\)](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Civilisation/dp/1849541361/ref=tmm_hrd_title_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=1483222836&sr=1-1)

- Scheffler, Samuel - Death and the Afterlife (2013) (https://www.amazon.co.uk/Death-Afterlife-Berkeley-Tanner-Lectures/dp/0199982503/ref=sr_1_5?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1483225316&sr=1-5&keywords=scheffler+samuel)
- Harari, Yuval Noah - Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind (2015) (https://www.amazon.co.uk/Sapiens-History-Humankind-Harari-2015-02-10/dp/B01NH0PCNP/ref=tmm_hrd_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=)

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