

Free Associations: Psychoanalysis and Culture, Media, Groups, Politics

Number 92, Autumn 2024^[1]_{SEP} ISSN: 2047-0622

URL: <http://www.freeassociations.org.uk/>



The Future of Death Denial (or, The Fantasy That We No Longer Fear Death)

Jerry Piven

Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death...

- Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, pp. 123-4

... in an age if individuality and mass isolation ... one fears death more than ever before, precisely as one is being advised from all directions to forget it.

- Bamyeh, *Of Death and Dominion*, pp. 84-5

... efforts to manage existential terror affect virtually all human affairs.

- Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, *The Worm at the Core*, p. 14

Do people fear death? Do they still fear death? Isn't that a thing of the past, when people were haunted by plagues and archaic terrors of demons, changelings, hexes, witches, succubae, and soap? Or an adolescent fetishistic gothic self-indulgence? Or the result of horrific trauma? To many philosophers, psychologists, poets, and scholars of religion the fear of death has always afflicted us, driven us to despair, obsession, violence, and fantastical visions of immortality. Millenia ago, Lucretius (1st c. B.C.E.) observed in *The Nature of the Universe*:

I must throw out the fear of Acheron head over heels – that fear which blasts the life of man from its very foundations, sullyng everything with the blackness of death and leaving no pleasure pure and alloyed.... The heavier their afflictions, the more devoutly they turn to their superstition.... These running sores of life are fed in no small measure by the fear of death.... they heap carnage on carnage. With heartless glee they welcome a brother's tragic death.... Often from fear of death mortals are gripped by such a hate of living and looking on the light that with anguished hearts they do themselves to death. (III. 37-82)

Plato (c. 360 B.C.E.) called philosophy a preparation for death. Hobbes (1651) and Hume (1779) saw the dread of death as the inspiration for God and salvation, and Schopenhauer (1844) contended that there would be hardly any philosophizing without death. Beauvoir (1948) wrote that at every moment being a conscious being means grasping the non-temporal truth of our existence. We deny death, seek immortality, or even consider life an illusion. "Each one has the incomparable taste in his mouth of his own life, and yet each feels himself more insignificant than an insect" (p. 9). Horrified by existence, some seek oblivion, forgetfulness, stupefaction, the peace of the tomb, and even seek refuge in blood and fanaticism to avenge the reality of death and negate themselves (pp. 43-45).

This isn't just the musing of philosophers and poets. Considerable research demonstrates that the dread of death floods us beyond conscious awareness, affects our perceptions and determines our sense of reality, permeates our lives, and infects the entirety of our being. "The fact that we are mortal constantly whirs beneath the membrane of life and influences our experiences, our actions, and our coping abilities. Our unavoidable mortality is a primordial source of anxiety and, as such, is the primary fount of our psychopathology" (Orbach, 2007: 285; cf. Firestone & Catlett, 2009; Lifton, 1979; Piven, 2004; Routledge & Vess, 2019; Solomon, et al., 2015; Yalom, 1980).

But this also seems archaic and irrational to so many of us, who see any preoccupation with death as a morbid symptom of something gone horribly awry. If one is a rational, healthy human being in the 21st century, one is not consumed by thoughts or fears of death. The idea that death plays an important role in our ordinary lives and spurs our beliefs, conflicts, avoidances, and pathologies is still rejected by much of psychoanalysis, which treats death as a foreign body, irrelevant, passé, immaterial, something that can't afflict us unconsciously because the unconscious cannot know or process death (Lifton, 1979; Piven, 2004).¹ Some of the most prominent philosophers and scholars of the 21st century have argued that evolved minds don't fear death, and that any mature rational examination will reveal that the fear of death is irrational and can be abolished through the exercise of reason (Bjarnason, 2003; Fischer, 1993; Kagan, 2012; Nussbaum, 1989).

Death is a nonissue for many people. We have developed revolutionary technologies and medical treatments that have extended the human lifespan and delivered us from countless agonies of sickness and aging. We've awoken and evolved from the superstitions and religious follies that imprisoned us in fears of demons, devils, and evil spirits. We embraced scientific methods and discoveries that enable us to dismantle problems with detachment and logic instead of hocus pocus and pseudoscience. We've evolved past alchemy, divination, demonology, numerology, necromancy, haruspicy, and astrology. We solve problems with tested technology, scientific instruments, empirical evidence, and deductive reasoning instead of prayer, palmistry, voodoo, and religious delusion. God is dead, we no longer need him, and a mature examination of all our fears will demonstrate that there is nothing to fear in death. If millions of people do still believe

¹ A plethora of analysts still follow Freud's notion that the unconscious doesn't know death, and that therefore death can't be repressed or be the source of unconscious conflict, motivation, or psychopathology. Freud's theorizations on death are immensely complicated, inconsistent, and in many ways argue against this very formulation he's known for. (See Piven, 2004, for a book-length treatment of Freud's ideas about death.) In addition, the assertion that there can be no unconscious death anxiety has been rigorously disproved again and again (Routledge & Vess, 2019; Solomon, et al, 2015).

in such delusional hokum, they lack the courage or training to hone the scientific and philosophical logic that would enable them to forsake their ignorance and embrace reality.²

Nevertheless, there's reason to suggest that methodological and epistemic progress do not eliminate our existential yearning for metaphysical consolations, myths, illusions, and mirages. Scientific techniques and discoveries may not eradicate the need for God, the hunger for pacifying answers to the painful questions and sufferings of life, or the craving for security and certainty in an anguished and perplexing existence. Even with training in science and logic, human beings still suffer these existential yearnings, the dread of death, and susceptibility to irrational answers and palliating fictions. We cannot will our existential terror and despair out of existence "even with our rigorous positivistic tools" (Winquist, 1995: 12). Worse, as Lasch (1975) writes, "The collapse of religious illusions has only prepared the way for more insidious illusions" (p. xvi).

Fantasies of Progress and Existential Evolution

Hume (1779) observed that nature embitters every living thing with terror and anxiety (p. 257), that death "presents only the dread of endless and innumerable woes" (p. 258), and that "death lies between the eye and the prospect of futurity" (p. 289).

Were a stranger to drop, on a sudden, into this world, I would show him, as a specimen of its ills, a hospital full of diseases, a prison crowded with malefactors and debtors, a field of battle strewn with carcasses, a fleet foundering in the ocean, a nation languishing under tyranny, famine, or pestilence. (p. 259)

And thus their consciousness of their own feebleness, misery, wretchedness, and terror would continue to inspire fantastical religious explanations (pp. 255ff). Schopenhauer (1844) recognized that "wickedness, evil, and death ... intensify philosophical astonishment" (p. 172), and that human beings need metaphysical consolations in the face of death (p. 160ff). Indeed, "Before the people truth cannot appear naked" (p. 166). Even when claiming that God is dead, Nietzsche (1873, 1882, 1883, 1885) was under no illusion that religion was a thing of the past. He knew that people were unable to tolerate reality, that "truth kills," and that untruth was a condition of life.³

In *The Future of An Illusion*, Freud (1927) Freud asked whether human beings would ever be capable of living without illusions, without gods and fantasies that deny

² Dawkins (2006), Hitchens (2007), Harris (2004), and Coyne (2015) are the proverbial four horsemen of the "New Atheist Apocalypse," who deem religion a destructive delusion and derangement, and faith "what credulity becomes when it finally achieves escape velocity from the constraints of terrestrial discourse" (Harris, 2004, p. 65). Kagan (2012) is a prominent philosopher elegantly transuming and amplifying millennia of arguments about the irrationality of death and the rational capacity to transcend irrational fear.

³ Nietzsche states that "truth kills" in "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" (1873) while limning the death of God in *The Gay Science* (1882) and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-5). He says that untruth is a condition of life in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1885).

death. Freud wrote of the human terror of mortality and our immense narcissistic woundedness before mother nature, whose remorseless cruelty lashes us with the sense of our utter insignificance and mortal frailty. Freud ascribed our belief in god to the dire need for a protective father in the universe, the need to be loved and important children, and the need to deny the permanence of our annihilation.

At the dawn of the 21st century some 90% of America's population claim to believe in a higher power (Pew Research Center, 2018), 81% believe in some sort of God (Jones, 2022),⁴ 90% believe that God loves them personally (Bloom, 1992: 30, 257), 90% of American Christians believe in the Virgin Birth of Jesus (Hillman, 2004: 184), 77% think that God or a higher power has protected them and 67% claim the Almighty has rewarded them (Pew, 2018), 67-73% believe in Heaven (Brenan, 2022; Nortey, 2021),⁵ 69-70% of adults believe in succoring angels (Brenan, 2023: 59; NORC, 2023),⁶ 72% believe in the power of prayer (NORC, 2023), 59% believe in Hell, 60% are convinced that the apocalypse and resurrection described in Revelation are going to come true (McAlister, 2003: 33), 56-58% believe in the devil (Brenan, 2023; NORC, 2023), 50% believe that the spirits of the dead can interact with the living (NORC, 2023), 34% believe in reincarnation (NORC, 2023), 55% believe that Jesus "will return to earth someday," and 39% believe "we are living in the end times" right now (Alpert, 2022).⁷ In sum, we still disproportionately engage in the denial of the permanence of death.⁸ As Bloom (1992) writes, "No Western nation is as religion-soaked as ours" (p. 30).

Others are still inspired by the occult, astrology, and any number of fantasies that help them evade the misery and terror of death, uncontrolled chaos, and insignificance. 44% of New surveyed Jerseyans believe that ghosts are "somewhat" or "very" likely real (Roman, 2023). New religions and cults arise daily, reactions to the fragmentation and disarray of a complex society where truth is elusive and people search for fantastical solutions to their dread (Bamyeh, 2007; La Barre, 1970, 1980, Solomon, 2015). It would

⁴ Armstrong (1993) claims that 99% of Americans believe in God, though Gallup polls indicate that "Between 1944 and 2011, more than 90% of Americans believed in God" (Jones, 2022), and Gallup polls in the 1950s and 60s indicated the figure was 98% (Saad & Hrynowski, 2022)

⁵ Compare to Panati (1996) who (though this was years ago) claims that 77% or more believe in some sort of afterlife (p. 446).

⁶ Cf. Faber (2004), p. 138, who also notes that 76% of our teenagers believe in angels.

⁷ Cf. Bloom (1996), who writes that "more than 100 million American adults expect a Second Coming of Jesus" (p. 219).

⁸ All of these authors draw these statistics from polls and surveys, though they don't always specify which. Faber refers to a 1992 Gallup Youth poll. Roman draws on a Farleigh Dickinson University poll. Note that fewer than 4% believe that Hell is a state of mind (Panati, p. 456), and a Gallup survey from 1980 indicated that 40% of the American public considers the bible the "actual word of God ... to be taken literally" (Ruthven, 2004, p. 59), while 14.2% of self-identified Jews considered the Bible to be the "actual word of God" (Hillman, p. 184). Recent Gallup polls indicate that the percentage of Americans who believe this has now dropped in half (Newport, 2022).

seem that most of us cannot tolerate the reality of irrevocable death, despite our proud advances elsewhere.

As Gray (2004) writes, “For many the promises of religion lack credibility; but the fear that inspires them has not gone away ... secular societies believe they have left religion behind, when all they have done is substitute one set of myths for another” (pp. 23, 47, cited in Solomon, 2020: 407). Or again, perhaps the substitute myths can be even more panicked and vengeful, as replacements for that ripped away. Per Chasseguet-Smirgel (1975), “the need for illusion remained, at which point thus unsatisfied need has swept reason aside in much more violent fashion than religion ever did” (p. 216).

While human beings do make progress, the notion that we are the evolved vanguard of life, reason, and consciousness is a fantasy. It’s an ancient theme that destabilizes a realistic assessment of how we progress, languish, stagnate, or even regress. Clearly we have made revolutionary progress in science and medicine, so there will be no derision here toward so many human accomplishments that have improved life for countless many. But we’ve also parasitically glutted ourselves on the world, consuming, siphoning, despoiling, poisoning, and raping it to death. We’re still in many ways childish, myopic, egotistic, histrionic, homicidal creatures capable of abject imbecility, delusion, and bloodlust. We’re so evolved that we’re sanctimoniously making the planet uninhabitable and screech like ischemic chimpanzees when asked to wear medical masks or hear words like “socialism.” So one may draw attention to the *fantastical* aspect of progress that may actually interfere with genuine progress because the narcissistic gratification of the illusion impedes and resists the humiliating realistic recognition of our problems and responsibilities.

Numerous thinkers have envisioned a grand scheme for the spiritual and mental evolution of our species. In the West, at least as far back as pre-Socratics like Anaximander (610-547 BCE) and Empedocles (c. 492-432 BCE), philosophers have postulated disparate forms of evolution, the former speculating that humanity derived from thorny fish, the latter seeing love (*philia*) as that which binds and strife (*neikos*) as that which separates; the universal processes of creation and destruction. Beyond observation of improvement, progress, or synthesis, these philosophies were often imbued with the conviction that primitive inferior forms could be transcended. They were often permeated with theological fantasies, as Aristotle (384-322 BCE), for example, imagined God as the source of all motion and change, while much later even Leibniz (1646-1716) speculated an evolutionary theology. Influenced by Neoplatonism, Christian eschatology also envisioned a teleological progress.

Schemas of progressive transcendence of inferior forms pervade the philosophies of Vico (1668-1744), who conceived evolving epochs of gods, heroes, and humans, and Comte (1798-1857), who imagined traversing stages of theology, metaphysics, and positivistic enlightenment or knowledge. Voltaire (1694-1778) “has frequently been hailed as the philosopher of progress” what heralded the enlightenment wisdom that would

mitigate, emancipate, and perfect humankind (Gullace, 1967: 167). The golden age had “surpassed all previous centuries in terms of the various discoveries and institutions it had helped foster in the sciences and the arts. These, unlike political matters, would stand the test of time and forever attest to the capacities of human reason” (Borowski & Beeley, 2016), as Voltaire proclaimed that the human mind had made the greatest progress than any age preceding it.⁹

And Condorcet’s (1743-1794) “Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind” (1794) endorsed a view of evolutionary development, envisioning progress in human reason, philosophy, the arts, sciences, technologies, metaphysics, politics, ethics, moral and political science, civilization, the social order, industry, freedom, liberty, justice, prosperity, and happiness: “the progress of reason will have matched that of the sciences and the arts ... the ridiculous prejudices of superstition will have ceased to infuse morality with a severity that corrupts and degrades it rather than purifying and elevating it” (p. 74). Progress in reason and medicine will “extinguish transmissible and contagious illnesses” (p. 80), while progress in perpetual peace will accelerate the progress brotherhood between nations and eliminate the “monstrous atrocities” of war (p. 77).

This reached its apex in the idealism of Hegel (1770-1831), whose *Phenomenology of Mind* (1807) adumbrated the epistrophic spiraling evolution of *Geist* (“ghost,” spirit, mind) that would culminate as the end of history fulfilled in transcendent Absolute consciousness attuned to God. From abject ignorance to the dialectic agon between slave and master, absolute consciousness itself would emerge in the struggle to attain power and knowledge, intelligence as well as the means of production, and finally the highest being would conclude history. In this case Hegel imagined Napoleon was that transcendent figure, which is why our idealistic philosopher had to revise his opinion in later years (the diminutive revolutionary not turning out to be the supreme being endowed with most sublime God consciousness, nor history ending). As Solomon (2020) writes:

...Enlightenment thinkers were confident that the stunning advances of knowledge produced by the Scientific Revolution and resultant technological innovations of the Industrial Revolution would inevitably persist on an inexorable path of progress culminating in conditions on earth comparable to those purported to exist in heaven.

Unbridled faith in the inevitability of progress through reason and science continued in the twentieth century, either in the form of Marx’s revolutionary socialism promising to eliminate poverty by disposing of private property and class conflicts, or global capitalism’s mission to parlay the “invisible hand” of the marketplace into a rising tide of shared prosperity culminating in “The End of

⁹ Note that Gullace (1967) makes a rigorous and persuasive case that only the early Voltaire was so ebullient about the idea of progress, whereas the later Voltaire relinquished and refuted the idea of progress as contrary to natural law and human nature. Sometimes barbarism even reappears, while “faith in human progress is absurd” (p. 172ff).

History” with western democracy as the ultimate and final form of government for all nations. (p. 408)

This précis of evolutionary thought again does not deny the *possibility* of progress as much as suggest the influence of evolutionary fantasies on our *imagination* of progress. It is not merely that we envision progress from simpler to more complex forms, or social and scientific improvements, but that we often assume (imagine, fantasize) that this makes us inherently more evolved and enlightened in every way. I’d tentatively propose that this is not just naïveté or error, but often a narcissistic fantasy, a kind of arrogant ego inflation in direct response to the fear of being as witless and insignificant as the animals and ignorati before us, the mindless creatures ravenously rutting, masticating, and being haplessly ensnared, gobbled, and churned into offal, the savages walking nakedly in dark ignorance, possessing nothing, sleeping in the dirt, with long nails, matted hair, and leathered skin,¹⁰ the pathetic losers clinging to ridiculously disproved myths and fairy tales, curing diseases with butcher knives, leeches, and dark medievalism, solving problems with stone knives and bearskins, comprehending absolutely nothing before croaking abjectly.¹¹ It implies the desperate wish to be “something” in the face of death, since those who have died have been rendered inconsequential and worthless. It suggests a kind of panicked flight from the dread of being sucked into insignificance.¹² It suggests the anxious need to transcend those anonymous multitudes who died ignominiously and powerlessly, whose existence means nothing because their stupid putrid corpses decompose helplessly in the ground. Our narcissistic fantasy of being the most enlightened, of surpassing their primitive ignorance, gratifies the yearning for death-transcending importance.¹³

¹⁰ From Voltaire’s (1736) poem “Mondain” (The Worldling).

¹¹ These are a few phrases from science fiction. In *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home*, the crew travels back in time, and our beloved (but always walloped) Chekov falls on his head. He’s taken to a hospital, and Doctor McCoy pleads “Jim, you’ve got to let me go in there! Don’t leave him in the hands of twentieth century medicine.” In the hospital McCoy encounters a piteous old woman in a wheelchair, miserable from her kidney dialysis. McCoy then mutters incredulously “My God, what is this, the Dark Ages?” Soon after, he boards an elevator where doctors are talking about chemotherapy vs image therapy, and McCoy sarcastically opines “It sounds like the Spanish Inquisition.” Finally, McCoy enters the operating room and starts arguing with the surgeon about to drill into Chekov’s skull. When McCoy hears that the surgeon is about to do Fundoscopic examination, our 23rd century physic says “My God, man, drilling holes in his head’s not the answer. The artery must be repaired. Now put away your butcher knives and let me save this patient before it’s too late!... We’re dealing with medievalism here!” The reference to “Stone knives and bearskins” is a line from the *Star Trek* episode “The City on the Edge of Forever,” where Kirk and Spock travel to the 20th century and have to make use of the primitive indigenous resources to repair their futuristic technology.

¹² As Firestone and Catlett (2009) write, vanity and inflated views of the self are narcissistic overcompensations for “underlying feelings of inferiority, worthlessness, and self-hatred. On an unconscious level vanity functions as a survival mechanism in that being special renders one impervious to death, unlike other, less fortunate, ordinary people” (p. 173).

¹³ Solomon (2020) similarly writes that “political philosopher John Gray proposed that Enlightenment-based faith in the power of rationality and technological progress inexorably leading

Narcissism and Destiny

Such postures are rigid defenses against the fears, flaws, and vulnerabilities in the self, and can even become manic delusions of superiority and destiny. The amplitude and intensity of that narcissistic inflation reflect the virulence of death fears ravaging within. Where some may feel anxious and uncomfortable and thus shut themselves off from existential needs, vulnerabilities, and fears, others would superciliously pretend to transcend them, while others plagued and consumed by the horror of nothingness and death might envision delusional fantasies of their own divine destiny, or the holy right to exterminate others.

Such narcissistic delusions of grandeur seem to have flourished among our forebears. The Puritans emigrating from Europe were not merely escaping religious persecution, but embarking on a mission to establish a utopian City of God on earth. They deemed themselves God's elected representatives, "a chosen company of saints, carrying a commission from God to cleanse the churches of Christ throughout the world" and erect a new Israel (Erikson, 1966: v). They were chosen by God to "represent Him on earth and to join him in Heaven" (pp. 48ff, 68, 156). Their fantasy of divine mandate entailed restoration and revival of the "purity and simplicity" of the days of the Apostles, and if they planted "the pleasant gardens of Christ" it would herald their destined future kingdom of God (pp. 140, 189). This narcissistic grandiosity and fanaticism also entailed viciously persecuting the ubiquitous evil and sin around them. Themselves secretly tormented by guilt, shame, and dread, a profound sense of their own iniquity, saw the Fiery flying serpents and Drovers of Devil in their path, and they inflicted their compensatory rage and judgmentalism on hapless victims while proclaiming their own sanctimonious and saintly righteousness (p. 141). These chosen representatives of God ultimately (imagined they) rooted out evil in the Salem witch trials some six decades after founding their utopia.

Lest we fool ourselves into believing we have transcended the dread of death, this vision of Puritan utopia might be a noteworthy parable on the self-deceptiveness of narcissistic fantasies. The Puritans were hardly the first or last congregation who declared themselves chosen by God, and gradations of such narcissistic grandiosity are epitomized by innumerable contemporary designations, religious groups, cults, and political coterie shepherded by self-proclaimed or elected messiahs. Their fantasies of superiority often fuse with the delusion that they are obeying the will of God, justifying the extermination of those considered impure, impious, and evil.

Such delusions of divine superiority and sanction reappear over and over in response to the horror of death, and thus emerge as fantasy antidotes in response to

to unlimited growth and prosperity is a widespread death-denying delusion" (p. 404, also p. 408). Solomon further cites terror management studies demonstrating that death reminders increased strong disagreement with the idea that human progress was illusory, and that reading material declaring that progress was illusory "increased susceptibility of implicit death thoughts" (p. 408; Rutjens, van der Pligt, & van Harreveld, 2009).

catastrophe, devastation, and persecution. Or rather, whenever individuals and groups embrace notions of destiny, divine mandate, missions from God, teleological permission to suspend and abolish ethical boundaries to fulfill the will of the almighty, these are grandiosely narcissistic nostrum to consuming inner mortal wounding.¹⁴ They are manic responses that transform ignominy and insignificance into holy importance and imperative to purify and transmogrify the world. Here God becomes a masked substitute for the insignificant self, the rapine homunculus cloaking itself within the amplified fantasy projection. “Narcissism sees its own face in the mirror of an opaque universe” (La Barre, 1970: 367). Their own grandiose and vengeful desires are preached as God’s, and justify their own crusades, jihads, martyrdoms, divine kingdoms on earth, inquisitions, pogroms, lynchings, and genocides. In the words of Cohn (1970), “the Saints knew that it was their task to wipe that foul black host off the face of the earth, for only an earth which had been so purified would be fit to carry the New Jerusalem, the shining Kingdom of the Saints” (p. 87).¹⁵

Hitler also believed that his master race were a privileged people destined to vanquish non-Germans (Avalos, 2005: 293). This inflation appears among the most pious theologians and saints from the Old Testament through medieval Christianity, as well as more contemporaneous Nazis, terrorists, white supremacists, and American politicians, who each claim that they are some kind of chosen people whose merciful God justifies war and slaughter (pp. 159, 223ff).¹⁶

We may not be genocidal crusaders or suffer from delusions of grandeur or destiny. These extremes were to offer a glimpse of the ways in which the terror of death and

¹⁴ The allusion to *The Blues Brothers* alongside Kierkegaard’s (1843) teleological suspension of the ethical isn’t just a joke. The Blues Brothers are fanatical (if not unwitting and delusional) domestic terrorists who should have seriously questioned their ostensibly divine revelations and the morality of their ongoing trail of pious pandemonium. James Brown may be the godfather of soul, but as Kant (1793) would argue, Jake and Elwood cannot have apodictic knowledge that they have seen the light of any actual god and (even with the sadistic screeching and flagellation of floating nuns) cannot know they are thereby granted holy permission to leave a swathe of holy bedlam behind them. When people believe they are on a mission from God, they may like Abraham be willing to kill their own child, foment crusades, pogroms, and inquisitions, immolate accused witches and heretics, drive cars through spacious malls and cause incalculable destruction, or splatter themselves into human Pollock paintings and Gallagerian watermelons while taking countless innocents with them.

¹⁵ One has to read Cohn’s marvelous book to get a sense of how often grandiose fantasies of destiny and chosenness erupt, especially in response to social strife upheaval (cf. pp. 19-25, 64-66, 87-88, 89, 109, 116, 118-123, 154-5, 173, 255, 261-7, 271, 274, and *passim*).

¹⁶ Avalos (2005) cites numerous passages from Deuteronomy and other texts about the Israelites being chosen people and God’s explicit mandates to slaughter other populations. Hence Avalos can write that “Nazi ideology simply had a better technology to do what biblical authors had said they would do to their enemies” (p. 319). See also Anselm (1098), Beisel (2003), Glücklich (2009), La Barre (1970), Patterson (1998), Piven (2017a,b), Ross (2023), Stein (2010), Victoria (1997).

nothingness propel a spectrum of grandiose fantasies and mirages of superiority and transcendence. Thankfully most of us seem like relatively sane, loving folk who would rather watch *Game of Thrones* or read Murakami novels than declare ourselves saviors and blow up evildoers. But again, every time we console and reassure ourselves that we're not genocidal murderers, we can also observe the ways that our excruciating individual and cultural anxieties spill over and hemorrhage into the world, revealing all those obliterating distractions and manic stratagems of denying our fears of nothingness and death. A fleeting jaunt through the insane asylum of American culture suggests that we haven't transcended much.¹⁷

The Intransigence of Death & Our Existential-Narcissistic Responses

Again, we cannot just will our existential terror and despair into oblivion. This is the absurdity death imposes on us. Everybody dies. Everything decays, dies, and goes the way of all flesh.¹⁸ The skull will still grin at the banquet.¹⁹ Death shatters our sense of being, our achievements, and our meanings. We defy nothingness with narcissistic performances and protests, with absolute dogmas and claims of apodictic knowledge, with projected mirages of eternities, deities, divine symmetries, and ordained purposes for our purposeless lives, with smug certainty about our rationality and enlightenment. But all that is projected over an abyss. There is no stability to that ground of concrete being, truth, meaning, and permanence, and it always threatens to collapse beneath our feet or dissolve before our eyes (Nietzsche, 1873: 85; Nishitani, 1980). Ineluctable modality of the visible (Joyce, 1922).²⁰

¹⁷ Per Nietzsche's comments in *The Anti-Christ*, section 51.

¹⁸ Allusion to *House*, season 8, episode 22, and I Kings 2:2.

¹⁹ Per Shakespeare (1595) and William James (1902):

For within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps Death his court, and there the antic sits
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
To monarchize, be feared and kill with looks,
Infusing him with self and vain conceit
As if this flesh which walls about our life
Were brass impregnable.... (*Richard II*, 3.2.162-168)

Let sanguine healthy-mindedness do its best with its strange power of living in the moment and ignoring and forgetting, still the evil background is really there to be thought of, and the skull will grin in at the banquet. (*The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 132)

²⁰ This passage from third episode of *Ulysses* (sometimes called the "Proteus" chapter) is often interpreted as Joyce's Aristotelian meditation on perception and Berkeleyan notion that the world is only ideas that don't exist outside of perception and the mind.

If there were formerly stable realities that encompassed our lives and deaths, modernity and postmodernity are defined by the progressive catastrophic disintegration of such stable worlds. Not only haven't we transcended our fear of death, we've lost the encompassing worldviews that once cocooned and ensconced us in stable truths about life and death. Our exposure to a kaleidoscope of worlds, scientific discovery and disenchantment, and our ensuing alienation, individualism, isolation, and anomie have *amplified* the fear of death, and the panicked desperation for alternate modes of dread-absorbing illusion and oblivion (Bamyeh, 2007: 84; Bauman, 1992: 94; Becker, 1973: 190; Davis, 2006: 50ff; Firestone, 2009; Moscovici, 1988: 107; Winqvist, 1995: 6-7).²¹

Thus while modern America may have made drastic improvements in medicine, may have progressed palpably in its care for the dying, in making their last moments more comfortable, in articulating compassionate ways of caring emotionally for those in the twilight of their lives, and invented creative technologies to inflict organ-bursting death on our enemies, nevertheless the notion that we are now comfortable with death and deal with it rationally may well be a fantasy. Just because we make technological improvements and discover all sorts of amazing things through all the assorted sciences does not mean we are philosophically, psychologically, emotionally, or spiritually more advanced.

A casual survey of the childish insults, inanities, and clichés comprising the discourse of contemporary culture, especially our nation's elected politicians, tells us how stunted and regressed we've become. The sheer oracular atrocity, grammatical genocide, and thuggish vulgarity passing for political debate are (literally) unfathomable. The cringeworthy conceptual confusion and egregious ignorance, the wanton racism, sexism, authoritarianism, xenophobia, resurgent antisemitism, and state of contemporary exchange of ideas is hardly progress beyond kindergarten, much less the impassioned eloquence of orators during the Civil Rights Movement. (One thinks of the reaction of the astute journalist Helen in *Anchorman* when observing the schoolyard puerility of the newscasters: "Children, GROW UP.")

We're in an era where shocking numbers of conservative politicians actually see higher education as harmful (Hollingsworth, 2023), who thereby champion a lack of education as somehow virtuous and sufficient to understand the world, and make decisions about human welfare.²² Sagan (1996) similarly lamented the "dumbing down" of America: "The plain lesson is that study and learning – not just of science, but of anything – are avoidable, even undesirable" (pp. 25-6). We're living in an age where, as Frank Zappa said,

²¹ Note that Bauman (1992) writes that meaning was simply not an issue for people of past eras. But it wasn't an issue because their worldview was simply reality. There was no concept of meaning or a need to find one (p. 92).

²² According to Pew Research Center Polling, "the share of Republicans and independent-leaning Republicans who said higher education was having a negative effect on the country" was 59% in 2019 (Hollingsworth, 2023).

“Modern Americans behave as if intelligence were some sort of hideous deformity.” Or as Asimov (1980) avowed, “Anti-intellectualism has been a constant thread winding its way through our political and cultural life, nurtured by the false notion that democracy means that *'my ignorance is just as good as your knowledge'*” (p. 19).²³

The roots of American anti-intellectualism date back centuries, however. Hofstadter (1962) traces this all the way back to the Puritans and their suspicion of Satan's willful intellect and influence. As the noted ethicist Jeffrey Stephenson summarizes, intelligence was equated with the nefarious ability to outsmart pious and pure minds (even God). As Hofstadter says about emerging evangelicalism in America: “The case against intellect is founded upon a set of fictional and wholly abstract antagonisms. Intellect is ... pitted against character, because it is widely believed that intellect stands for mere cleverness, which transmutes easily into the sly or the diabolical” (pp. 45-6). He continues in a footnote:

“We always preferred an ignorant bad man to a talented one,” wrote B. R. Hall of early Indiana society, “and hence attempts were usually made to ruin the moral character of a smart candidate; since unhappily smartness and wickedness were supposed to be generally coupled, and incompetence and goodness....” This occurred even among the Puritans, for all their rationalism and intellectualism. Cf. John Cotton: “The more learned and witty you bee, the more fit to act for Satan will you bee....” (p. 46)²⁴

Despite this laureate history of anti-intellectualism, we seem to have reached new heights of fatuity. Mencken (1956) was prescient when he wrote that “As democracy is perfected, the office of president represents, more and more closely, the inner soul of the people. On some great and glorious day the plain folks of the land will reach their heart's desire at last, and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron” (p. 21). (Not that there was only one, so take your pick: The one who joked on mic that we were about to bomb Russia, said that facts were stupid things, and was surprised that Latin America was all individual countries, the one who asked “Is our children learning” and lamented how too many OBGYNs couldn't practice their love with women, or the one who claimed that windmills caused cancer and suggested nuking hurricanes. We don't want to underestimate them, nor all their adjuvant minions impersonating Bellevue escapees babbling incontinently about Jewish space lasers, peach tree dishes, the gazpacho police, UFO coverups, democratic-pedophilic-pizza conspiracies, transvestic groomers, gay

²³ To quote Sagan again, “Baloney, bamboozles, careless thinking, flimflam, and wishes disguised as facts are not restricted to parlor magic and ambiguous advice on matters of the heart. Unfortunately, they ripple through mainstream political, social, religious and economic issues in every nation” (p. 244).

²⁴ See also pp. 57, 97, 364, and *passim*.

exorcisms, legitimate and godsanctioned rape, postnatal abortions, or the pedagogical usefulness of slavery.)²⁵

These are our elected representatives, policy makers, and orators, many of whom are functionally illiterate waddling anacolutha who literally cannot complete a coherent sentence.²⁶ And “The people of the United States prefer by far the almost unspeakable prose of its leaders” (Hillman, 2004: 173). Per Mencken’s line about the “inner soul of the people,” we live in a society that has achieved incredible things, but is also in so many ways regressed, decompensated, stunted, and juvenile. Again, the bigotry and pugnacity of ordinary behavior and discourse aren’t evolved. In many ways we’ve not only *not* evolved past our ancestors, but would be an embarrassment to them. Culturally a great number of us would need decades more education to approach the sophistication and nuance of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, much less the writers of *The Federalist Papers* (despite the glaring moral lacune and atrocities of that era), and would need another few millennia to *catch up to* the wisdom of Hindu sages several millennia past. Our cultural narcissism, self-preoccupation (or self-obsession), arrogance, ignorance, jingoism, militance, and entitlement make us look like petulant infants, not the pinnacle of evolutionary progress and enlightenment.

The Intransigence of Our Existential Needs & Vulnerabilities

That point of that satirical screed was that we haven’t really become all that much more rational, and that our deepest terrors and needs haven’t disappeared. If Hume, Nietzsche, and Freud (and Zappa and Mencken) were cynical about human beings ever evolving to a state of mature rationalism it was because scientific progress may never be an adequate answer to our gravest existential cravings and fears, or a substitute for the palliative comforts of religious fantasies, or the modes of illusion that enable us to escape the horror of death.

Freud (1908, 1915, 1921, 1930) was also cynical because he saw civilization as a veneer: beneath the façade of civility lurked seething malicious desires that would erupt given the opportunity, should a leader sanctify bloodshed, if an illicit opportunity allowed violence to flourish. Further, when threatened and terrified, civilized advances would disintegrate psychologically. Rational civility would dissipate. Thought itself would regress and de-evolve, and the quintessentially brutal and savage aspect of ourselves would reveal itself as our ineradicable nature. Beyond nature, civilization itself could be seen as

²⁵ Of course even Obama committed the unforgivable mistake of confusing *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, and said he visited fifty-seven states. For just a sample of other gaffes, see <https://www.liveabout.com/stupid-presidential-quotes-4078413> and also <https://www.gq.com/story/craziest-politicians>.

²⁶ Anacolutha are sentences of logical incoherence, interruption, and discontinuity. The idea of the “walking anacoluthon” is taken from Santayana (1962, p. 141), quoted in Piven (2018) in reference to Trump’s famous ~~speech~~ expulsive dysentery on nuclear technology.

an excruciating and insidious form of crushing, dementing, inhibiting, shaming, and mutilating the human organism.

The price of “civilized” morality is a neurotic animal, not only a hypocrite who appears peaceful while concealing the desire for bloodshed, but a psychosexually crippled organism, a profoundly stupefied person who nevertheless participates in the socialized violence that perpetuates this mutilating process on everyone else in society in the name of irreproachable morality, justice, and altruism. To invoke Nietzsche (1882, 1887, 1888), civilization makes people into moral hemiplegics while enacting the most sublimated but sickening cruelty.²⁷ Scientific and social progress notwithstanding, human nature retains its thirst for blood, while civilization breeds psychological deformation. Or worse, those forces of guilt and inhibition have metastasized human torment that civilization irrevocably erupts with atrocious violence, even if it appears moral, beneficial, or beatific to those sanctimoniously perpetrating it. Societies imagine themselves cultivated and morally benign while inflicting even genocidal evil in the most banal fashion, as Arendt (1963) and Minchin (2017) explore in such disturbing detail.

Nietzsche and Freud invert the notion that progress is inherently progressive or enlightening. In crucial ways what appears to be progress may be psychologically and socially injurious, even sadistic or pathological, though misperceived or misrepresented to appear benign and advanced. But for Nietzsche and Freud, certain aspects of civilization were so deleterious (despite our illusions and denials) that progress was merely a king going a progress through the guts of a beggar.²⁸

This imagination of civilized sadism and madness does not preclude authentic individual and cultural achievement, nor does it accuse progress of being purely destructive, miserable, cruel, or pernicious. According to this view some of us may be genuinely fortunate to live in a world of unprecedented discoveries, technologies, and freedoms. The thinkers cited above are not advocating anarchy, abolition of society, or unrestrained impulse. Rather they draw attention to the pain and dysfunction that accompany the manifold modernizations and improvements of society: the emotional injuries deriving from ordinary and civilized cruelties, the daily alienation and wounding, the palpable shame, insult, disparagement, and guilt that inhibit joy, love, and thought.

Freud (1921) also draws attention to the ease with which people succumb to the seductions of violence, fall prey to malice in times of terror and crisis, disintegrate psychologically, and regress to infantile dependence on leaders who promise safety and

²⁷ Nietzsche writes about the spiritualization of malice and sublimation of cruelty in *The Gay Science* (1882) and *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887). He uses the phrase “hemiplegia of virtue” several times in *The Will to Power* (1888), pp. 222-224.

²⁸ Hamlet’s line on how the arrogant king believing in his own resplendent royalty will still die and become food for maggots (1601, 4.3.28-29). So here the implication is that progress can sometimes be a similarly arrogant death-escaping fantasy since that progress churns society into offal.

salvation no matter how unrealistic or destructive these leaders might be. Biological and social evolution have not rendered human beings immune to the horrific ecstasies of violence that erupt from terror, that send us hurtling into childhood dreams of being protected by parents and prosthetic gods who promise redemption or utopian salvation. If anything, despite the sinister conviction that human beings are embalmed in death, inflicting it madly and fabricating soothing delusions of gods and afterlives, Freud *underestimated* and *resisted* just how much human beings flee the terror of death (Firestone & Catlett, 2009; Lifton, 1979; Piven, 2004; Solomon, 2015; Yalom, 1980).

Even if we consciously accept death and are brutally honest with ourselves about the inexorable fact that everyone dies and putresces, without consoling ourselves with denial and illusions of afterlives, this does not mean that we have no other defensive palliations or illusions. We may still need psychological consolation, may still tremble in terror even while we *fantasize* how rational and accepting we are of death. The belief that we are rational and realistic and have confronted death calmly may soothe and inflate our egos, but this may be self-deceptive and merely enable us feel that we are in control, realistic, and not at the mercy of unconscious irrationality and fear. Our mode of death denial may well be the fantasy of rational acceptance of death. This is less rationality than abjection, where we jettison and purge whatever induces horror, refusing its relation to the self (Kristeva, 1982).

Obviously many people do realistically acknowledge the fact of death. But as implied, the idea of rationality can make one feel better about oneself, can provide solace, can give one a sense of narcissistic superiority when one says “I am realistic about death and have accepted it.” One can then overlook the possibility that one’s own rationality isn’t the whole story – that all sorts of tremors and terrors lurk underneath. The appearance of rationality can be a narcissistic defense against the shameful idea of being irrational, and a defense against the eruption of powerful unconscious feelings, conflicts, and needs. Narcissism can itself be a defense against death (Becker, 1973; Brown, 1959; Corrigan & Gordon, 1995; Firestone & Catlett, 2009; Perrulli, 2005).

Contemporaneous Narcissistic Coping

Lifton (1987) writes of the reappearance of dogmatic absolutes, a resurgence of fundamentalisms within American culture (p. 22; cf. Bloom, 1996; Harrington, 1983; Strozier, 1994). Such absolutists and fundamentalists too imagine they possess the truth and enlightened awareness, all defense against terror, unknowing, chaos, and death. Our own fantasies of transcendence and evolution may only reveal our ludicrous delusion and denial. Per Bloom (1992), “Fundamentalism ... is an attempt to overcome the fear of death by a crude literalization of the Christian intimation of immortality” (p. 39).

Thus Hillman (2004) can quip that “we are certainly not in an age of enlightenment!” (p. 170). We’ve been called a culture of narcissism (Lasch, 1978). We

worship celebrity, wealth, gluttonous power, comical attention-seeking displays²⁹ devoid of adult thought or awareness of the world's wisdom, other ways of life, what we could be if we read a book or entertained the notion that we could learn from other cultures. Much of American culture is about image, self-absorption, consumerism, avarice, individual success at any cost, social and financial Darwinism, conspicuous consumption and leisure, obliviousness toward the pain and languishment of others, and disdain for those deemed inferior because they have no money, cell phones, Armani suits, Vera Wang dresses, or BMWs. Such narcissistic obsession, oblivion, and thinly veiled sadism are flights from death, insignificance, and awareness. As Davis (2006) writes:

Belief in the self is *the* American ideology. Next to surplus value the self is our most important product: the thing we constantly proclaim and reassure ourselves about in order to cover over the emptiness of that concept and the void it conceals. Nothing is shallower than the inwardness of the average American, a subjectivity composed of little but the incessant mimicking of "signs" of success and affects that through ceaseless happy talk confer no more than a phantom substantiality. Beneath that chatter the truth of its inner condition continues to work on the American psyche: the death of affect, the deepening of psychic numbing, and a collective flight from anything that causes the least anxiety. (p. 72)

Indeed, we are the world's vanguard of self-lobotomizing stupor about our own rapacious consumption and obliteration of the complete globe. As alluded earlier, we've glutted ourselves and smugly spewed so much ordure into it that we're on the brink of murdering the entire planet. As Solomon puts it (2020):

The Anthropocene ... is unprecedented in that human-induced climate instability, rampant population growth and associated resource depletion, sophisticated weapons of mass destruction, political instability amplified by the rapid proliferation of information (and misinformation) technology, and the obligatory interdependence of a globalized economy are such that it is entirely possible that we will have the ignominious distinction of being the first form of life to be directly responsible for our own extinction by rendering the planet unfit for human habitation. (p. 404)

²⁹ Those attention-seeking displays have become virulent pleas for self-esteem and validation, as if the inner selves were such vacuoles of emptiness, loneliness, and pain that the only way to gain any sense of worth at all were to beg desperately for the constant attention of strangers. What's more, the inner self is so impoverished and deadened that the self only feels alive and loved from such external validation rather than actual experience, which becomes valuable only when gaining attention from others. A poignant example of this is the *Black Mirror* episode "Nosedive," which features a woman having all sorts of joyous experiences, but only when her uploaded staged photos get likes from others, whereas she cannot take a scintilla of pleasure from the experiences themselves, and her life nosedives when people start to downvote her uploads. The episode illustrates the feelings of inner death, inability to take pleasure in life, and desperation for love and approval that seem to afflict so many young people today (cf. Eigen, 1996; Lifton, 1979).

You have to be in quasi-psychotic denial (or be psychopathically avaricious) to continue consuming like locusts when the world is in its final death spasms. Our own apices of salacious blindness and tranquilization would stun Kierkegaard and Heidegger like they were shot with moose sedatives. This is why Scranton (2015) advises us to learn how to die in the Anthropocene. And it's why McKay made his absurdist film *Don't Look Up*. Our stupefaction in the wake of our own hoggish suicide is insane.³⁰

Those modes of distraction and tranquilization span our infinite modes of oblivion, dissociation, and hedonism. We can become obsessed with hedonic activities not merely because we are pleasure-seeking creatures or addicted sensuality junkies scurrying across electrified grids like coke-addicted rats to get their fix. Hedonism isn't just the brain's response to dopaminic pleasure, as if we are merely biological systems reflexively seeking endless pleasure because of availability and rewards. That's a non-explanation. It categorically does not explain the pain and panic driving our need for sedation and pleasure, or why some people are driven compulsively toward hedonic obsessiveness while others aren't (even if free and disinhibited). Though biological impulse, pleasure seeking can *also* be a self-soothing, angst-absorbing escape from despair.

And as much as human beings can be insatiable sensualists, we can also be compulsively hedonistic in response to existential pain, panic, misery, hopelessness, helplessness, and despair. Kierkegaard's (1849) observations about the ways people can seek distraction and pleasure as escapes from despair apply to us today, in the infinite ways we become glued to our computer and phone screens, forget ourselves in addictive video games and binge-watching, absorbed and cocooned by endless hours of rapid-fire internet pinwheels and pyrotechnic videos that eradicate the angst induced by awareness of external world, and one's own personal miseries (cf. Firestone & Catlett, 2009: 61-64; Goldberg, 1996: 115).³¹

³⁰ McKay has been heavily influenced by Morton's (2013) theory of hyperobjects: objects and phenomena "so massively distributed in time and space" as to transcend localization (p. 1). In all of its vast impacts and influences, climate change is thus a hyperobject and defies easy comprehension. But McKay is *not* saying that people are thus excusably ignorant and couldn't know how deleterious our own selfishness and pollution have been. He's rather saying that we have a doxastic moral responsibility to grapple with these issues precisely because the consequences of our actions are so comprehensively destructive. But despite the copious signs and warnings (and massive accrual of data) we've been given for literally decades, we continue to be selfish, avaricious, hedonistic, gluttonous, and oblivious as we exterminate our own planet.

³¹ One of my more perspicacious students described her generation as a swathe of addicted children hurling themselves down the daily rabbit hole of nonstop insane thirty-second video segments that completely destroy any capacity for critical thinking, focus, discipline, or patience for anything that doesn't provide instant gratification. From her perspective, this is not merely mind-numbingly lobotomizing, but a deliberate response to existential angst. And as Walter Davis retorts, "Tic Tok tugs out the last vestige of a mind, like a vacuum cleaner" (email message, 3/26/2023).

And as Fromm (1955) mused, imagine if our “movies, radios, television, sports events and newspapers ceased to function.” (We should absolutely add the internet and our cell phones to this list.)

With these main avenues of escape closed, what would be the consequences for people thrown back on their own resources? I have no doubt that thousands of nervous breakdowns would occur, and many more thousands of people would be thrown into a state of acute anxiety.... If the opiate against the socially patterned defect were withdrawn, the manifest illness would make its appearance. (p. 17)

Fromm may have underestimated the magnitude of panic, despair, disintegration, suicidal ideation, and social mayhem this might induce. These are not just modern conveniences, but intensely addictive, obliteratingly opiate, despair and death anxiety-siphoning forms of deliverance.

Compulsive sensuality and sensualization become the panacea against the pain and dread that would fragment or crush the self. Our addictive pleasures can be an eroticizing existential nirvana and soothing in response to agony, disgust, humiliation, ignominy, helplessness, horror, and death. As Kristeva (1982) writes, “The erotization of abjection, and perhaps any abjection to the extent that it is already eroticized, is an attempt at stopping the hemorrhage: a threshold before death” (p. 55). Our cultural obsessions with a fevered pitch of distraction, entertainment, rapture, and ecstatic peak experience suggest that very despair and defensive eroticization of abjection, an anxious response to incipient existential exsanguination.³²

Many also adopt the “protean style” (Lifton, 1987), a continually changing search for identity in a time of fragmentation and anomie, the search for self to ward off death and attain an elusive sense of connectedness and symbolic immortality. Yet this search for many is a quest for narcissistic supplies and external validation in a despairing flight from that miserable aloneness slowly descending into aging, disappearance, and death. It can be an “ever-shifting involvement from one set of stimuli and engagements to the next ... a Protean defense mechanism” (Hillman, 2004: 36). It speaks of the Kierkegaardian immersion in distractions to tranquilize despair. Or as Davis (2006) puts it, the hollowness of our clichés, blather, chatter, and self-obsession that mask the utter void within, and our “collective flight from anything that causes the least anxiety” (pp. 70-72).³³ But as alluded earlier, Lifton (1987, 1993) is all too aware of the “dark side” of proteanism, and the deadness, fundamentalisms, and other modes of imposing control that emerge from the manifold fears of fragmentation.

³² Cf. also Gitlin (1996), p. 66. Other works explicating sexual obsessiveness and eroticization as a defense against despair and death include El Saadawi (1997), Firestone & Catlett (2009, p. 230 and *passim*), McDougall (1995), and Piven (2005).

³³ Hence for Davis there’s nothing protean about us. We’re not adapting to life and its perils or being resilient, but fleeing in terror, making ourselves numb, oblivious, superficial, vacuous, mindless, narcissistic (p. 72).

Far from accepting the reality of death, hordes of us squander precious time and money on formulas to look young, slow the aging process, and surgically remove any signs of vanished youth. We even inject poison into our skin to paralyze facial furrows. As a culture we have become the decrepit protagonist of Mann's "Death in Venice," lurking predatorially and stalking youthful beauty in desperate envy. Our culture idolizes Hollywood façade, that most artificial, cybernetic, surgical beautification and paragon of narcissistically grandiose adoration of skin at the expense of every and all profound and noble qualities. These phony and vacuous masks are the ones appearing on the covers of the magazines we buy, on television and in movies, they are the avatars so many wish desperately to meet and touch. Love for the aesthetic is more than mere joy in beauty, it can become obsession, perversion, a quintessentially pathological divinization of youth and perfection against terror and the contempt for imperfection, aging, decrepitude, decay, and death. It is a flight from the imminence of putrescence, the horror of being a corpse. It's not only superficial, it's arrested.

Maturity consists of living in accord with one's age, not striving fanatically to deny it (Jung, 1934). Senescence is an unfolding process in life itself, where youth and visage of perfection signify being not yet developed. Puerility is pupation, not perfection. Age, lines, the signs of death may connote wisdom, experience, the progress of life, not the fall from grace. When did aging become lapsarian sin, a shameful expulsion from paradise? Is not there beauty in a gray hair, a look of years and depth in the eyes of a lover? One may see a face without lines as lacking wisdom, of being too new to have sentience. There are cultures, such as Japan, whose poets once limned beauty because it faded. In Kyoto, there are temples whose beauty resides not in youth but in the patina that requires centuries. (In Japan too, however, there is an obsession with youth, as barely adolescent schoolgirls are an erotic ideal.)

A conspicuous example of this Hollywood flight from death is the fashionable Kabbalah Centre, where credulous (sometimes former) celebrities such as Madonna, Mick Jagger, Britney Spears, Demi Moore, Courtney Love, Roseanne, and others engage in the war against Satan, architect of cosmic chaos. Three million callow devotees believe that if they merely glance at the 72 Kabbalistic names for God they will be "infused with their healing and invigorating power" (Halevi, 2004: 18). Similar to other perverted forms of ancient wisdom such as Nichiren Shoshu (a form of Buddhism whose American manifestation is chanting for success and riches), these neo-Kabbalists are convinced that the words themselves (understood or not) magically induce divine results. The names of God are tailored to alternately eliminate stress, dispel depression, or produce prosperity, and one can call for "a free ten-minute personal consultation with a highly trained 72-names specialist on how to find the name that best suits your needs" (p. 18). Adherents wear a red thread around the wrist to avert the evil eye, and devotees partake in "speed meditation." The message is to make one's own life better, not to help others: "There's no motivation to be good for its own sake." The goal is mastering the world, and linking into the right name for God gets you the right results, turning God "into our remote-control

panel” (p. 19). Worshipers celebrate Purim with a Megillah reading, combat Satan with quantum impact radiating from their ministrations, and then enjoy the buffet. They believe that nuclear waste is spreading AIDS. They shout “immortality” in several languages and believe that “each person is potentially a messiah” (p. 20). Meditating on the names of God transforms differentiated organ cells into undifferentiated stem cells, which defeats Satan and ultimately death, because he cannot bond with cells in an undifferentiated state. The Centre thus promises rejuvenation of the body and literal immortality. As Halevi appositely concludes regarding the appeal of such fantasies to someone like Madonna: “Has the ‘material girl’ been spiritually transformed, or has she merely graduated to materialist spirituality? For what, after all, is more likely to entice a sex symbol confronting middle age than the promise of eternal youth?” (p. 21). Hollywood is but one nexus of such ludicrous hallucinosis, and beyond Kabbalistic immortality cults we culturally aspire to their death denial in myriad ways.

Cultural Obsession with Death & Violence

One may of course retort that the adoration of Hollywood beauty and youth does not comprise the entire culture, and that despite the pervasiveness of this worship there are also numerous people who not only accept death, but confront it for entertainment. For decades trendy television shows seemed infatuated with death. A few years ago viewers were rapt by shows like *Six Feet Under*, about a funeral parlor where one of the morticians even converses with the mangled ghosts of those who die. This is hardly denial of death, but rather gruesome exhibition of the fact that everyone is doomed to death, if not more revolting extinction. *Family Plots* was a recent reality show about a family undertaking the operation of a funeral parlor. Death saturated the airwaves. *Faces of Death* was a documentary series of explicit death and dismemberment. Shows like *Autopsy* and *Secrets of the Dead* delved right into the corpse. A few generations ago we had *Quincy, M.E.*, whose tenacity enabled him to track down mysterious causes of death, and after that we had *Crossing Jordan*, more technologically modern and savvy tales of a lovely and mysterious medical examiner. But this fascination and fixation don’t prove our comfort in the face of death. All these shows reveal the capricious mystery of death. The arbitrary and indiscriminate menace of death is now given a face. Death is embodied and its causes isolated. Anxious voyeurs can now discern what happened to specific victims. The observer is spared, lives beyond death, is gratified in life while death has a specific source in an observable victim.

Shows like *Dead Like Me*, *Zoey’s Extraordinary Playlist*, *Pushing Daisies*, *13 Reasons Why*, *Upload*, and *The Good Place* (among others) continue to reveal our existential disquiet and cultural preoccupation with death. One might argue that the popularity and ubiquity of these programs suggests that people are comfortable with death and find it rather amusing, comical, droll enough to bandy around with comic absurdities. But humor isn’t the antithesis of dread. It can reflect ceaseless haunting, the ghosts and revenants of loss, terror, and guilt. It often reflects visceral discomfort, like something stirring and squirming darkly within, or a seeping abscess. Humor can express caustic and bitter anguish. These shows variously display our affliction and obsession with death, as

well as the futility, absurdity, meaninglessness, loss, despair, heartbreak, and tears that shadow our brief yet sorrowed lives, rather than our insouciant comfort with all of it.

Other shows like *Law and Order*, *Crime Scene Investigation*, *Luther*, *The Outsider*, *True Detective*, and so many others hunt death in the guise of a murderer. They personify death as a murderer, stalk death, judge and incarcerate death, confine and sequester death from the viewers, making society and viewer momentarily safe. Some shows, like *Dexter*, hunt, paralyze, and dismember death that escapes quotidian legal justice. *Dexter* reveals our own identification with homicidal vengeance, our own secret passengers. These programs are fantasies that define and imprison (and even murder) death to quell our anxiety and dread. That is why these shows are gratifying, and reveal our angst, our obsession for myths that avert death if only transiently.

The repetition signals that obsessiveness. It is a repetition compulsion, a symptom, an addiction for sheer millions. Our culture thrives on grotesquely and graphically violent shows and films where evil is eradicated. Death becomes performative, aestheticized, eroticized in cathartic ecstasy.³⁴ The hero annihilates wickedness, exsanguinates malignance, vaporizes evil, triumphs over death. The viewer identifies with his invulnerability and derives sadistic pleasure in his destruction. As Zilboorg (1943) and Becker (1975) assert, sadism absorbs the fear of death, and our cinematic fantasies reveal our immersion in death, blood, and conquest.

Finally there is the real violence so much of our country supports. Those protesting the bloodshed are legion and yet the last generation has seen numerous violent perpetrations against those deemed enemies, and literally hundreds of thousands of civilians—women and children—across the world have been casualties. Millions of Americans have continued to support violence that includes massive collateral damage, believing our leaders are pious honest saints eliminating evil. Are they merely unaware of the dupery? Are they ignorant of the fact that so many have died? Or do they rationalize it by saying the evildoers deserved to die, or that such carnage couldn't be avoided when combating the enemy?

The same questions can be asked about those who apoplectically rage over gun rights and the victimization of any (unconstitutional) regulation even as school shootings and slaughters put children in the grave nearly every day. To be clear, the focus here *isn't* a debate about constitutional rights, but about the *existential response* to such wanton and horrific mass murder. What does one's reaction to the recurring infanticide reflect? Screaming in eye capillary bursting salivary rage about one's *own* victimization and violated rights, while children are being slaughtered over and over, suggests that one is being convulsed by eviscerating death panic. When the only response to mass infanticide is to erupt with rage about one's *own* persecution and shriek cacophonously for more

³⁴ Hence Hillman (2004) says that the war and violence on television, in movies, and in video games “offers a window into the sublime. These mediated wars provide an aestheticized terror, battle and death as spectacle” (p. 130).

explosive weaponry, that is a *symptom* of hemorrhagic death anxiety, not actually a patriotic moral concern for rights and liberties.³⁵

Our capacity for ignorance notwithstanding, many of us are in true psychological denial, or dissociated awareness of the atrocity, or have rationalized it, or numbed ourselves, or are too narcissistically self-involved to contemplate it. Otherwise death would be suffocating, overwhelming, too shocking and shameful to endure. Our guilt, the horror, and the reality of where the evil truly resided, would be too devastating. Not only have we not confronted death, we have used any number of defenses to obliterate awareness of its gruesome presence, and perhaps, have also enjoyed the vanquishment of our enemies as well.

Death, Decompensation, and Deliverance

Terror Management research has repeatedly demonstrated that mortality awareness influences worldview defense (Solomon, et al., 1998, 2003, 2015).³⁶ Triggering people with subliminal death primes spurs increased aggression toward those perceived as outsiders. It's not just the homicidal or pathological anomalies who fear death and respond with aggression when frightened. These researches demonstrate that the vast majority of people fear death even if they are not consciously aware of it or adamantly deny it. Subjective awareness, incredulity, and disavowal don't affect or disprove our susceptibility to death anxiety. The vast majority respond to death primes by defensively protecting their worldviews and becoming more hostile to perceived enemies. It's crucial to recognize that the fear of death inducing these reactions is unconscious. Beliefs and worldviews absorb

³⁵ Again, this isn't a debate about gun rights. But just to offer a brief moral and legal response: Even if one (hypothetically) determines that gun ownership is a constitutional right, that in no way whatsoever proves that it must be a legal right—since the 2nd Amendment is tautologically an *amendment* to the Constitution. An amendment is by definition a modification and it inherently means that the Constitution can be modified. By definition, it is not an unalterable part of the Constitution. By definition it means the Constitution can be adapted and adjusted when we determine that something does not accord with the human rights, liberties, freedoms, or protections of a democratic republic. It can be altered as society and circumstances evolve, when we realize our errors, and deem corrections necessary. The fact that we have amendments proves that amendments can legally be made, and that the 2nd amendment itself can be modified as well. You cannot coherently claim that amendments can be made but that the Constitution is inviolable. If one is an “originalist” and claims that the Constitution is inviolable, then the 2nd Amendment is itself a violation of the Constitution and is ipso facto invalidated. And if one isn't an “originalist” and does claim that the Constitution can be modified, then the only argument for maintaining the 2nd Amendment in contemporary society would not be an appeal to Constitutional or state's rights, but a sound demonstration that gun ownership should be a right, preserves democratic liberties, and does not pose such a severe threat that ownership laws must be modified. The sheer repetition and quantity of gun murders obliterates any flimsy arguments about inalienable rights to own such weaponry. Any justification for gun rights would have to reside in a sound moral argument, not a Constitutional one, which QED, would be self-contradictory since we do in fact have amendments.

³⁶ The following summary of Terror Management Theory is taken from Piven (2017c).

the terror. So most people are not consciously aware of the dread of death rumbling beneath the surface, and even motivating their desires, perceptions, beliefs, and activities.

This lack of conscious awareness does not stop them from reacting to death primes and becoming more volatile and fervent in their fundamental beliefs. Replicated literally hundreds of times across different cultures, these studies demonstrate how vulnerable we are to the fear of death beyond our conscious perceptions, how such fear can trigger vehement responses, and how we do not realize we've been triggered by fear because we actually (mis)perceive the threat as coming from the seemingly menacing other. Over the course of decades, these studies have demonstrated how inducing the fear of death leads to increased xenophobia, bigotry, religiosity, misogyny, compulsive materialism, greed, gluttony, even support for the “pre-emptive use of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons of mass destruction against countries that pose no direct threat” (Solomon, 2015, 2020: 409-410ff).³⁷

Studies in Terror Management also connect death anxiety with the hunger for powerful leaders. Landau, et al. (2004) write:

TMT [Terror Management Theory] suggests that people avoid a potentially debilitating preoccupation with personal frailty and finitude, in part, by transferring power to and investing faith in a powerful authority – a central locus of control over life and death – that appears to assure indefinite perpetuation by assuming mastery over nature and tragedy and upholding the cultural meaning system that imbues individual lives with transcendent meaning, order, and permanence. (p. 1139)

One such study (Cohen et al., 2004) showed that mortality salience inductions during a mock election scenario increase the charismatic appeal of a leader proclaiming momentous plans that include citizens in crucial roles to achieve this historic vision. In another study (Landau et al., 2004), support for the military actions of G.W. Bush increased after death reminders. What's immensely significant here is not just that conservatives who already supported Bush became more militant, but that even liberals who normally found his policies repugnant became supportive of his military actions against Iraq after being triggered by death anxiety. Cohen et al. (2017a,b) similarly demonstrated that Trump's popularity soared (among Americans) in reaction to death reminders. Such studies have been replicated in a variety of scenarios (Solomon, 2015), and suggest not only the pervasiveness of unconscious death anxiety, but also its profound but unrecognized effects on our own perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and activities. These studies indicate that beyond

³⁷ See also Arndt & Vess (2008) on how awareness of mortality affects all of us. Outside of laboratory experiments, research also shows how social and political traumas induce all sorts of aggression (cf. Beisel, 2003; Farrell, 2011, p. 60ff; Lifton, 1979; Stein, 2010; Volkan, 1988), while clinical research also indicates how much annihilation anxieties and the fear of death “play a significant role in all severe psychopathology” (Hurvich, 2006). See also Hurvich (2003) and Orbach (2007).

our awareness, fear can transform compassion and tolerance into hostility and susceptibility to manipulation by militant oratory that makes people feel powerful, safe, and secure. And these studies further demonstrate that when menaced by death people can become reactive, violent, and supportive of military brutality that would ordinarily be repugnant to them.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, human beings have a proclivity for transference: misperception of others based on earlier experiences and needs that often involves reversion to dependence on those instilled with parental authority. We do this in flight from our frailty, the terrors of reality, conscious awareness, and annihilation (cf. Becker, 1975; Liechty, 2008; Solomon, 2015). Terror makes people vulnerable to manipulation by those we imbue with authority. People yearn for childlike comfort and dependence, to be protected, blanketed by love, and swaddled in mirages that soothe their agitation and fear. They have a longing to be hypnotized, as Becker (1973) wrote. They amplify, falsify, adore, and hallucinate those leaders into deities and luminaries to feel loved, sheltered, exalted, and delivered from their vulnerability and dread of death. They will strive to please those luminaries, show their obedience, and inflict all manner of cruelty if sanctioned or sanctified. People will be seduced and duped by magnates who offer triumph, redemption, and purgation of evil, as the terror of mortality drives their perceptions of external danger and clouds rational thought, as well as accurate perception of their leaders and the fantastical utopian eschatologies they mendaciously espouse. Banal and grotesque atrocities are inflicted out of love for exalted and deified leaders who offer deliverance, love, and dissipation of our mortal dread.

It may seem like the amplification of psychopaths into deities and the delusional worship of mendacious, scheming villains is the stuff of cults and fundamentalists. But history is replete with the baffling adoration of despots and genocidal mass murderers, and we've seen before our very eyes the way mentally incompetent misogynistic criminals can be worshipped and deemed saviors sent by God no matter how much vaggrabbly repugnant violence they do to a culture (or the planet).³⁸ The sheer hallucinosis of that

³⁸ Per Solomon (2020):

Hoffer observed that charismatic leaders are rarely exceptionally intelligent, noble, or original. Rather, the primary qualifications "seem to be: audacity and a joy in defiance; an iron will; a fanatical conviction that he is in possession of the one and only truth; faith in his destiny and luck; a capacity for passionate hatred; contempt for the present; a cunning estimate of human nature; a delight in symbols (spectacles and ceremonials) ... the arrogant gesture, the complete disregard of the opinion of others, the singlehanded defiance of the world ...[and] some deliberate misrepresentation of facts." (p. 410)

Further, Hoffer (1951) astutely observed that such leaders personify the certitude and "grandeur of power," articulate and justify "the resentment dammed up in the souls of the frustrated," and stage

deification and abject refusal to admit the tsunami of evidence about such prevarication and malefaction exemplify the dynamics elucidated here.³⁹ And they suggest the immense existential terror and vulnerability, the worm at the core of our being.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, no intensity of hallucinosis or ivermectin will deworm that dread of death.

Death Symbolism and The Dread Beneath Our Conscious Consolations

To be clear, this doesn't demonstrate that everyone suffers such existential vulnerability and gullibility (or else everyone would be worshipping oleaginous globular criminals and despots). People must have vastly divergent intellectual and existential strengths and weaknesses. They manifest a spectrum of vulnerabilities and malignancies. People may suffer vastly diverse manifestations and intensities of death anxiety. They also suffer disparate *kinds* of death anxiety derived from a span of experiences that *become* existentially and symbolically equated with death. Pace Heidegger (1927), death anxiety is radically misconstrued when imagined as the fear of the biological fact of death, and here we are concerned with the experiential, existential, psychological phenomena that people symbolically associate or equate with death depending on the textures of their lives.

This does *not* mean that everything means death. It does mean that anything *can* mean death depending on our unique experiences and tribulations. People may come to equate not merely sickness, aging, or mortal injury with death, but also sleep, silence, separation, engulfment, suffocation, loss of identity, loss of attention and praise, personal insignificance, social isolation, invisibility, vulnerability, humiliation, emasculation, sexual failure, even success, freedom, love, intimacy, orgasm,⁴¹ self-knowledge, and *inner* persecution, as the ego imagines or *experiences* those phenomena as annihilation.⁴²

“the world of make-believe so indispensable for the realization self-sacrifice and united action” (p. 118).

³⁹ Or as Pavlovitz (2019) astutely observes: “When you believe one man above Science, above our Intelligence agencies, above former CIA directors and retired generals and revered journalists—when you believe that one man above even your own eyes and ears—you are fully indoctrinated” (online).

⁴⁰ As per Becker (1973) and Solomon (2015), taking the expression from William James (1902, p. 132).

⁴¹ Per Barratt (2009): “orgasming dissolves boundaries and takes our sense of reality into an ecstatic process. From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, orgasming is the ‘death’ of whatever our ego structure clings to as its sense of separate and substantial self” (p. 332).

⁴² One hypothetical (paradigmatic) example: An aggressively abrasive, attention-seeking, and suicidal adult patient starts rolling on the floor screeching, howling, and (literally) crying in agony, screaming that people should be forcibly stopped from speaking even when offering scientific evidence, if it threatened his sense of identity. When asked whether why it would be morally justifiable to censor scientific evidence, the patient shrieks “because it would destroy who I am!” His identity and relentlessly hostile treatment of others are a narcissistic denial of his own feelings of worthlessness, and even the mere mention of scientific evidence questioning his belligerent assertions arouses the horror of annihilation and shrieks of anguish. To put it another way, the possibilities of self-knowledge and threats to his personal illusions induce such intense rage and death anxiety that he literally rolls around on the floor, howling in anguish. Again, anything—

Virtually anything in the world or imagination may be equated with annihilation and dreaded with abject horror as the literal or symbolic death of the self, for cultures and individuals.⁴³

Hence, even the most ostensibly rational, educated, scientific, and clearheaded person may have unrecognized existential wounds, vulnerabilities, compulsions, and derangements that affect other aspects of his or her being, perceptions, beliefs, and abilities to love and live. So it would be a foolish mistake to imagine that one is immune to such irrationality, has transcended such ludicrous twaddle, and only *other* people suffer such irrational fears of death and succumb to farcical mirages, derangements, and delusions.⁴⁴ As explained throughout this paper, that's yet another narcissistic, ego-preservative defense and fantasy.

Even the staunchest scientists and logicians can suffer the dread of death and react with rage when faced with ambiguity, lack of certainty, clarity, proof, concreteness, ideas and phenomena that defy literal and concrete interpretation. They may still grasp at the necessity of scientific objectivity as a defense against the terror of the nonconcrete that defies control, and they may righteously reject anything that does not conform to such precision as irrelevant, meaningless, or worthless. “What Heidegger termed technoscientific rationality becomes the measure of what is real” (Davis, 2006: 51). They may also be abjectly irrational elsewhere in their thoughts and lives, subscribing to various unscientific and fatuous (even delusional) political and religious beliefs. They can be obsessive, callous, authoritarian, incapable of love, sympathy, empathy, guilt, remorse, sincere apology, or anything that makes them feel weak, tender, exposed, or vulnerable. They can be racist, sexist, sadistic, narcissistic, schizoid, paranoid, antisocial, viscopobic, metrophobic basket cases. And they can even attach themselves so obstinately to scientific and logical methods of grasping the world because those rigid techniques provide existential solace and reduce death anxiety—which, ironically, has actually been demonstrated scientifically (Farias, 2013). Mathematics and science can (sometimes) be

including our own identities, narratives, fictions, and illusions—can be defenses against disintegration and death, while the loss or disintegration of such constructs and fantasies can be experienced as the threat of annihilation (cf. Hillman, 1979; Segal, 1972). The conscious fear of death may mask infinite symbolic death equivalents, including inner persecutory thoughts, feelings, desires, and “objects,” as will be discussed below (Eigen, 1996; Gaylin, 2003; Klein, 1946; Kressel, 2007; Kristeva, 1982, p. 35; Piven, 2017a,b).

⁴³ The term “symbolic death equivalents” comes from Lifton (1979), but see also Alford (1992, pp. 13-15, 96, 101), Farrell (2011), Piven (2004), Stahl (2018, pp. 11, 13, 192 and *passim*), and Vigilant & Williamson (2003, pp. 174-5). Walsh (1996) also talks about death equivalents and the “precursors of death equivalents” in childhood, the manifold terrifying experiences that create distinct ideas and images of death (pp. 246-8), as well as the “death imprint” induced by trauma (p. 251; cf. Lifton, 1967, 1982).

⁴⁴ It's all too common to observe people basking complacently in the narcissistic satisfaction of feeling intellectually superior to the dunces who worship such criminals and village idiots or hold such inane beliefs, and thus, pride themselves on being superior in their scientism and immune to such existential weakness.

existential death anxiety-reducing compulsions, and *symptoms* of irrational death anxiety rather than rational resolutions to it.⁴⁵

The dread of death and our sheer ontological terror drive far more of our ordinary behaviors and beliefs than we recognize—our perspectives, judgments, certainties, pleasures, cravings, compulsions, aversions, ambitions, sexualities.⁴⁶ They impel more of our normality and pathology than we would like to imagine.⁴⁷ And the terrors of death and annihilation render us susceptible to delusions and malignant bigotries. We need to explore how much we are afflicted by efflorescence of death anxieties, the fluidity of life experiences that animate disparate fears of annihilation. We need to explore the ways these manifestations of fear permeate our being, beliefs, perceptions, and desires, and the intricacies of how we refuse to see the mortal vulnerabilities of our being. Finally, we need to recognize how we equate all manner of experiences and others *beings* with death, and inflict our unseen terrors upon them.

Consider the possibility that intolerance, xenophobia, bigotry, misogyny, and racism aren't only manifestations of ignorance, bias, economic stress, acculturation, or centuries of indoctrination. What if the dread of death induced such ontological agony that other beings—other ethnicities, bodies, appearances, ways of life—could be deemed dangerous, predatory, and evil? What if that ontological terror made every Other a potential harbinger of death who renders one's own existence and significance nugatory and insignificant? What if that ontological insecurity made the Other monstrous and ontically superior, boding the irrelevance and annihilation of one's own being and place in life? Here racist hatred is a response to the dread of annihilation, as Warren (2018) elucidates forcefully.⁴⁸

But the question remains why specific ideas, experiences, or beings are perceived as catastrophically threatening. Women have not *caused* misogynistic hatred, fear, or malice. It isn't their fault, as if they *did* something to generate that revulsion and contempt. Something else that is unseen and unacknowledged *in the self* (not the other) is causing the misogyny. Racist loathing is not *caused* by people of color, as if it were their actual acts or defects that rationally *caused* the detestation. Bigotries are fantasy projections. Those

⁴⁵ Dostoevsky (1864) considers a mathematical response of life both a reduction of chaos and pain, as well as a despotic dehumanization. And Murakami (1985, 1995, 2002, 2010, 2017) demonstrates how much people can occupy their minds with numbers, counting, and precision as ways of reducing anxiety, fear, unpredictability, and chaos.

⁴⁶ E.g., McDougall (1995) who writes about neosexual strategies (formerly perversions and paraphilias) of coping with the dread of death.

⁴⁷ Per Hurvich (2006), Orbach (2007), and Piven (2004, 2023), who write of the diverse ways in which death and annihilation anxieties induce psychopathologies, delusions, homicidal and suicidal ideation, as well as a host of “normal” ways of thinking and being.

⁴⁸ Warren's (2018) *Ontological Terror* explains racism as the dread of annihilation and the compulsion to erase black ~~being~~. This book should be required reading, as should Gordon's (2022) *Fear of Black Consciousness*.

feared and despised aren't causing the malevolence or experience of feeling menaced and threatened. They are not causing the dread of death, so we have to ask why anything or anyone is (mis)perceived as a calamitous threat.

Virtually any belief, desire, compulsion, ambition, and fear can *mask* and *disguise* the things that cause disastrous death anxiety. The metaphysically soothing beliefs, the satiating behaviors, and the things actually feared and loathed, can be displacements of intense death anxiety that occlude what actually inspires the catastrophic horror (Piven, 2004; Kristeva, 1982: 35).

...when the Black Death reached western Europe in 1348 it was at once concluded that some class of people must have introduced into the water-supply a poison concocted of spiders, frogs and lizards - all of them symbols of earth, dirt and the Devil - or else maybe of basilisk-flesh. As the plague continued and people grew more and more bewildered and desperate, suspicion swung now here, now there, lighting successively on the lepers, the poor, the rich, the clergy, before it came finally to rest on the Jews, who thereupon were almost exterminated. (Cohn, 1970: 87)

Or as the contemporary Croat writer Slavenka Drakulic (1993) laments, “someone is always a Jew. Once the concept of ‘otherness’ takes root, the unimaginable becomes possible” (p. 3), and as Gaylin (2003) concurs, “hatred is inevitably a displacement” (p. 184).⁴⁹

So ironically, if one fears something as a lethal threat, that threat may be a displacement of what really causes the terror. And hence, what one fears, dreads, flees, and *despises* in the real world is a psychological scapegoat—a substitute, surrogate, stand-in—that enables us to avoid confronting what actually ravages and terrorizes us inside. And consequently, when we perceive certain things (or people) to be horrifically menacing or evil, we often *hallucinate* that evil onto them as a further way of teleologically unknowing ourselves. And they have to suffer and die for it (Gaylin, 2003; Kressel, 2007: 202ff; Piven, 2017a,b).

Seen this way, phobic and malignant reactions to other people, cultures, and religions aren't just ignorance, programming, or political paranoia, but reactions to the experience of existential ruptures. Racism, sexism, and xenophobic hatred could be understood as the malice in rage erupting from the wounds of piercing envy and the horror of annihilation. Even the sexuality, intellect, consciousness, emancipation, and joy of others could induce fear, loathing, and homicidal vengefulness (Gordon, 2022).

⁴⁹ See Gaylin (2003) and Kressel (2002, p. 13ff, 2007) for exploration of the genesis of hatred and the dynamics of scapegoating, whereby fear, guilt, illicit desire, and other unconscious sources of pain and dread are projected onto others now hated as ontologically evil and menacing. Awareness of such abjection, guilt, sinfulness, forbidden and “perverse” desires, are so annihilating to the self that they must be refused, unacknowledged, jettisoned from one's being, and killed in the other.

In sum, our myriad fears of death and annihilation may so lacerate the core of our being that they embody our ontology and existence, and won't be remedied by science, reason, or philosophical exercises (or protests) alone. Per James (1902) again, the worm at the core will turn us into melancholy metaphysicians. And even if we engage in "positivistic, agnostic, or naturalistic" schemes of philosophy, that skull still grins at the banquet (p. 132). And again with Winkler (1995), the terror of death cannot be abolished or transcended even with the use of our positivistic philosophical and scientific instruments.⁵⁰ Something *else* is required.

There may certainly be ways of transcending or working through the dread of death, but they won't succeed with logic alone, and certainly not if they operate only within the economy of the conscious ego. If there are solutions, they won't be found in denying or glossing over the ways that the threads of death worm their way through our lives, but in exploring how those unrecognized tendrilous threads and incursions embody our lifebeing. One cannot fathom or extricate the permeation of that fear if one denies its existence in the self, so our question needs to be what means of existential agon or engagement (or self-negation) will reveal the depths of our terrors, and release them. Something is required beyond the fantasies that will power, introspection, and logical analysis will accomplish this. Something more arduous and deracinating is necessary, not only beyond the conscious ego but beneath its defenses and intense defiance of that understanding and uprooting.⁵¹

This is why Hillman (1979) implores the necessity of ego death. It's our dread of the ego's death and dissolution that propels the narcissistic grandiosity and voracity that consumes and kills: "refusing the need to die, we attack death itself. Our civilization, with its heroic monuments, tributes to victory over death, ennoble the Herculean ego, who does not know how to behave in the underworld" (p. 110). The underworld here is the wealth of riches in the psyche – the wealth of understanding our own conflicts, weaknesses, fears, horrors, foolishness that propel our delusions, compulsions, ambitions, and cruelties. It's the wealth of everything we've banished and imprisoned, including the fearful empathy and ability to feel for the suffering of others, the most tortured and violated aspects of ourselves, and the wounds that drive our inflation and hatred. That's what needs to be explored by the ego that can descend into itself, willingly experiencing that descent as ego annihilation, belief annihilation, narcissistic annihilation, not as conquest and ego dominance. Our narcissistic ego inflations and obsessions have divinized us into the apotheosis of giant freaks of ourselves (p. 99), and what needs to be deracinated here is the narcissistic ego become so psychopathically self-absorbed that we're ready to trample others, and glut ourselves on the planet, for our own delusions and satisfactions.

⁵⁰ The existential vulnerability and propensity for that fear of death remain, no matter how much brilliant philosophers and scientists try to demonstrate that there is no logical reason for that fear, or that philosophical rigor will enable one not to fear death. See also Piven (2013), for further elucidation of the ways philosophical logic cannot dissipate death anxiety.

⁵¹ See Davis (1989, 2001), for a glimpse.

Conclusions

Though we have made numerous evolutionary and progressive strides, have improved health care and medicine, and flatter ourselves with fantasies of realism in the face of death, we are still in cultural denial and existential refusal of the fact of final mortality. Vast millions believe in a literal God (or gods), afterlives, and an apocalyptic resurrection. Our culture seems obsessed with youth and defiance of aging. Others launch themselves into dogmatic worldviews and ideologies, narcissistic ego inflating fantasies, tranquilizing distractions and obsessions, or become obsessed with violence and death though they may consciously believe in their own intrepid realism. Palpable scientific and technological advancements don't eradicate our susceptibility to the dread of annihilation and death, or pacify our deepest existential terror and yearning. Nor can philosophical logic and discipline abolish ontological or unconscious fears of death. That's magical thinking and a dread-denying fantasy. Studies demonstrate that most of us do not consciously fear death, but that we are immensely vulnerable to stimuli that frighten us with death, induce antipathy, bigotry, and aggression, and even provoke the desire for military violence. Fears of death are far more intricate and pervasive than we imagine. They can embody our fantasies, beliefs, ambitions, erotic experiences, ability to love. Our ontological terror can induce seething malice toward those (mis)perceived as threats to our being. Individuals may have made tangible progress, and some happy few may find ways of unearthing and uprooting their existential agonies. The majority of us are in no danger of evolving beyond the fear of death, and certainly won't if we remain in denial that it even affects us.

Postscript

Just in case the reader is not convinced that the dread of death permeates so much of our lives, or that we desperately seek out ways to deny, displace, and oblivate that terror, consider the American reaction to the pandemic over the last few years. We responded to this plague in radically divergent ways. Some panicked and saw the risk of death everywhere, others followed the news and scientific reports assiduously, answering with caution and care, while some ridiculed the notion that COVID was anything more than a flu or cold. Some others became absorbed in conspiratorial fantasies about the virus being deliberately engineered in a lab and released as a bioweapon, and some became enraged at the government plot to track or emasculate alpha males by placing microchips (or nanochips) and deleterious feminizing unguents in the developing vaccines. And some swathe of these populations believed it was all a hoax perpetrated for sundry nefarious purposes. Still others became so incensed and enraged at those wearing masks that they'd accost pedestrians wearing them, or prevent medical staff from entering hospital buildings.

But here we are, four years into the pandemic, and literally millions of people still believe that the pandemic is really a hoax or governmental scheme. And while new drastically more contagious disease variants evolve and spread, COVID levels are no longer being calculated or reported, as if silence magically consigns disease to nonexistence. And while people are still dying or suffering the excruciating protracted effects of long COVID, the vast majority of people intrepidly act as though the pandemic were simply over. People are frequenting bars, restaurants, shops, and concert events

without masks. Almost no one wears masks in airports or on the planes. On crowded subways in New York City, where the air can be suffocating and people are packed like sardines, hardly anyone wears masks even during rush hour.

When literally millions of people have died horribly in sheer agony, and millions who survived suffer protracted tormenting sequelae, and the most reliable scientific evidence shows that people are still getting sick and dying, but people still refuse to wear masks and protect themselves (or others) in any conceivable way, this suggests either widespread cultural psychopathy (unlikely), widespread ignorance (unlikely at this juncture), or willful obliviousness, disavowal, and denial of the mortal threat. It also suggests a modicum of bitterness and rage, which is supported by the surfeit of assaults on Asians (and others), murders, and traffic fatalities. This pandemic was a noxious experiment in terror management, and we've seen the most mature, rational, compassionate responses, but we're also seeing the most paranoid, hostile, banal (if not quasi-delusional) denial of the reality that this plague brings death, even as millions around the globe continue to die of it. Their mantra seems to be don't look up, or within....

References

- Alford, C.F. (1992). *The psychoanalytic theory of Greek tragedy*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Alper, B. (2022, November 17). How religion intersects with Americans' views on the environment. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from: https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2022/11/PF_2022.11.17_climate-religion_REPORT.pdf.
- Anselm (1098). Why God became man. In *Anselm of Canterbury: The major works* (B. Davies & G. R. Evans, Eds., pp. 260-356). UK: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Arendt, H. (1963). *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil*. NY: Penguin, 1994.
- Armstrong, K. (1993). *A history of God: The 4,000-year quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. NY: Ballantine.
- Arndt, J. & Vess, M. (2008). Tales from the existential oceans: Terror management theory and how the awareness of our mortality affects us all. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 2(2), 909–928.
- Asimov, I. (1980, January 21). A cult of ignorance. *Newsweek*.
- Avalos, H. (2005). *Fighting words: The origins of religious violence*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus.
- Baldwin, J. (1962). *The fire next time*. NY: Dell.
- Bamyeh, M. (2007). *Of death and dominion: The existential foundations of governance*. Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press.
- Barratt, B. (2009). Ganesha's lessons for psychoanalysis: Notes on fathers and sons, sexuality and death. *Psychoanalysis, Culture, & Society*, 14(4), 317-336.

- Beauvoir, S. de (1948). *The ethics of ambiguity*. Secaucus, NJ: Citadel.
- Becker, E. (1973). *The denial of death*. NY: The Free Press.
- (1975). *Escape from evil*. NY: The Free Press.
- Beisel, D. (2003). *The suicidal embrace: Hitler, the Allies, and the origins of the Second World War*. Nyack, NY: Circumstantial Publishing.
- Bjarnason, P.E. (2003). Epicurus' second remedy: "Death is nothing to us." *Akroterion*, 48, 21-44.
- Bloom, H. (1992). *The American religion: The emergence of the post-Christian nation*. NY: Touchstone.
- (1996). *Omens of millennium: The gnosis of angels, dreams, and resurrection*. NY: Riverhead.
- Borowski, A. & Beeley, P. (2016, December). Leibniz: Before and after Pangloss. Voltaire Foundation online. Retrieved from: <https://voltairefoundation.wordpress.com/tag/human-progress/#:~:text=During%20this%20period%2C%20Voltaire%20wrote,enlightened%20and%20comforted%20the%20world.>
- Brenan, M. (2023, July 20). Belief in five spiritual entities edges down to new lows. Retrieved from: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/508886/belief-five-spiritual-entities-edges-down-new-lows.aspx>.
- Cohen, F., Solomon, S., & Kaplin, D. (2017a). You're hired! Mortality salience increases Americans' support for Donald Trump. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 17(1), 339–57.
- , Solomon, S., Maxfield, M., Pyszczynski, T., & Greenberg, J. (2004). Fatal attraction: The effects of mortality salience on evaluations of charismatic, task-oriented, and relationship-oriented leaders. *Psychological Science*, 15(12), 846-51.
- , Thompson, S. Pyszczynski, T., & Solomon, S. (2017b). Death: The Trump card. In M. Fitzduff (Ed.) *Why Irrational politics appeals: Understanding the allure of Trump* (pp. 132-151). Praeger.
- Cohn, N. (1970). *The pursuit of the millennium: Revolutionary millenarians and mystical anarchists of the Middle Ages*. NY: Oxford.
- Condorcet, M. (1794). *Sketch for a historical picture of the progress of the human mind: Tenth epoch*. *Daedalus*, 133(3), 65–82 (2004). Retrieved from: <https://direct.mit.edu/daed/article/133/3/65/26603/Sketch-for-a-Historical-Picture-of-the-Progress-of>.
- Corrigan, E. & Gordon, P.-E. (Eds.). (1995). *The mind object: Precocity and pathology of self-sufficiency*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.
- Coyne, J. (2015). *Faith vs. fact: Why science and religion are incompatible*. NY: Penguin.
- Davis, W. (1989). *Inwardness and existence: Subjectivity in/and Hegel, Heidegger, Marx, and Freud*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- (2001). *Deracination: Historicity, Hiroshima, and the tragic imperative*. Albany: State University of Albany Press.
- (2006). *Death's dream kingdom: The American psyche since 9-11*. Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto.

- Dawkins, R. (2006). *The god delusion*. NY: Houghton Mifflin.
- Dostoevsky, F. (1864). *Notes from underground* (M. Katz, Trans.). NY: Norton.
- Drakulic, S. (1997). *The Balkan express: Fragments from the other side of the war*. NY: Norton.
- Eigen, M. (1996). *Psychic deadness*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.
- El Saadawi, N. (1997). *The Nawal El Saadawi reader*. NY: Zed.
- Erikson, K. (1966). *Wayward puritans: A study in the sociology of deviance*. NY: Wiley.
- Faber, M.D. (2004). *The psychological roots of religious belief: Searching for angels and the parent-god*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus.
- Farias, M., Newheiser, A-K., Kahane, G., & de Toledo, Z. (2013). Scientific faith: Belief in science increases in the face of stress and existential anxiety. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 49, 1210-1213.
- Farrell, K. (2011). *The psychology of abandon: Berserk style in American culture*. NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Firestone, R. & Catlett, J (2009). *Beyond death anxiety*. NY: Springer.
- Fischer, J.M. (1993). *The metaphysics of death*. Stanford University Press.
- Freud, S. (1927). The future of an illusion. *The standard edition of the complete works of Sigmund Freud, volume 21* (pp. 5-56). London: Hogarth.
- Gaylin, W. (2003). *Hatred: The psychological descent into violence*. NY: Public Affairs.
- Gitlin, T. (1996). Some reflections on twentieth-century violence and the soft apocalypse. In C. Strozier & M. Flynn (Eds.). *Trauma and self* (pp. 59-68). Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Glücklich, A. (2009). *Dying for heaven: Holy pleasure and suicide bombers—why the best qualities of religion are also its most dangerous*. NY: HarperOne.
- Gordo, L. (2022). *Fear of black consciousness*. NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Gullace, G. (1967). Voltaire's idea of progress and Candide's conclusion. *The Personalist*, 48(2), 167-186. Retrieved from: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.1468-0114.1967.tb06812.x?saml_referrer.
- Gray, J. (2004). *Heresies: Against progress and other illusions*. London, UK: Granta Books.
- Halevi, Y.K. (2004, May). Like a prayer: Kabbalah goes Hollywood. *New Republic*, 230(4660), 18-22.
- Harrington, M. (1983). *The politics at God's funeral*. NY: Holt.
- Harris, S. (2004). *The end of faith: Religion, terror, and the future of reason*. NY: Norton.
- Heidegger, M. (1927). *Being and time* (J. Stambaugh, Trans.). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Hegel, G.W.F. (1807). *The phenomenology of mind*. NY: Dover, 1993.
- Hillman, J. (1979). *The dream and the underworld*. NY: Harper & Row.
- (2004). *A terrible love of war*. NY: Penguin.
- Hitchens, C. (2007). *God is not great: How religion poisons everything*. NY: Hatchett.
- Hobbes, T. (1651). *Leviathan*. New Haven, CT: Yale.
- Hoffer, E. (1951). *The true believer*. Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1980.

- Hofstadter, R. (1962). *Anti-intellectualism in American life*. NY: Vintage.
- Hollingsworth, H. (2023, January 8). Conservatives take aim at tenure for university professors. Retrieved from: <https://www.yahoo.com/news/conservatives-aim-tenure-university-professors-140043320.html>. Also: <https://thehill.com/homenews/ap/ap-u-s-news/ap-conservatives-take-aim-at-tenure-for-university-professors/>.
- Hume, D. (1779). *Dialogues concerning natural religion*. In A. Flew (Ed.). (1992). *David Hume: Writings on religion* (pp. 183-292). La Salle, Ill: Open Court.
- Hurvich, M. (2003). The place of annihilation anxieties in psychoanalytic theory. *JAPA*, 51(2), pp. 579–616.
- (2006). Psychic trauma, annihilation anxieties and psychodynamic treatment. APA panel: Trauma: Obvious and hidden: Possibilities for treatment. Retrieved from: <https://www.apadivisions.org/division-39/sections/childhood/hurvich.pdf>.
- James, W. (1902). *The varieties of religious experience*. NY: Vintage, 1990.
- Jones, J.M (2022, July 17). Belief in God in U.S. dips to 81%, a new low. Retrieved from: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/393737/belief-god-dips-new-low.aspx>.
- Jung, C.G. (1934). The soul and death. In Feifel, H. (Ed.), *The meaning of death* (pp. 3-15). NY: McGraw-Hill, 1959/1965.
- Kagan, S. (2012). *Death*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Kant, I. (1793). *Religion within the limits of reason alone* (Trans. T. M. Greene & H. H. Hudson). NY: Harper & Row, 1960.
- Kierkegaard, S. (1843). *Fear and trembling*. Princeton University Press.
- Klein, M (1946). Notes on some schizoid mechanisms. In Klein, M., Heimann, P., Isaacs, S., & Riviere, J. (Eds., 1952). *Developments in psychoanalysis* (pp. 292-320). London: Hogarth.
- Kressel, N. (2002). *Mass hate: The global rise of genocide and terror*. Cambridge, MA: Westview.
- (2007). *Bad faith: The danger of religious extremism*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus.
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection*. NY: Columbia University Press.
- La Barre, W. (1970). *The ghost dance: Origins of religion*. NY: Dell, 1972.
- (1980). *Culture in context*. NY: Psyche Press, 1994.
- Landau, M.J., Solomon, S., Greenberg, J., Cohen, F., Pyszczynski, T., Arndt, J., Miller, C.H., & Oglivie, D.M. (2004). Deliver us from evil: The effects of mortality salience and reminders of 9/11 on support for president George W. Bush. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 30(9), 1136-1150.
- Lasch, C. (1978). *The culture of narcissism*. NY: Norton, 1979.
- (1985). Introduction. In Chasseguet-Smirgel, J. (1975). *The Ego-Ideal*. NY: Norton, 1985.
- Liechty, D. (2008). Transference and terror. *Reflective practice: Formation and supervision in ministry*, 28(1), 73-81.
- Lifton, R.J. (1967). *Death in life: Survivors of Hiroshima*. NY: Random House.
- (1979). *The broken connection: On death and the continuity of life*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press.

- (1982). The psychology of the survivor and the death imprint. *Psychiatric Annals*, 12(11): 1011-1020.
- (1987). *The future of immortality and other essays for a nuclear age*. NY: Basic.
- (1993). *The protean self: Human resilience in an age of fragmentation*. NY: Basic.
- Lucretius (c. 99-c. 55B.C.). *The nature of the universe* (R.E. Latham, Trans.). NY: Penguin, 1994.
- McAlister, M. (2003, September 22). Review of *Armageddon*. *The Nation*, 23.
- McDougall, J. (1995). *The many faces of Eros: A psychoanalytic exploration of human sexuality*. NY: Norton.
- Mencken, H.L. (1956). *On politics: A carnival of Buncombe*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Milgram, S. (1974). *Obedience to authority*. NY: Harper & Row, 1975.
- Minchin, E. (2017). *The evil of banality: On the life and death importance of thinking*. NY: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Morton, T. (2013). *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and ecology after the end of the world*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Murakami, H. (1985). *Hard-boiled wonderland and the end of the world*. NY: Vintage, 1991.
- (1995). *The wind-up bird chronicle*. NY: Vintage, 1997.
- (2002). *Kafka on the shore*. NY: Vintage, 2005.
- (2010). *1Q84*. NY: Vintage, 2011.
- (2017). *Killing Commendatore*. NY: Vintage, 2018.
- Newport, F. (2022, July 6). Fewer in U.S. now see bible as literal word of God. Retrieved from: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/394262/fewer-bible-literal-word-god.aspx>.
- Nietzsche, F. (1873). On truth and lies in a nonmoral sense. In Breazeale, D. (Ed. & Trans.), *Philosophy and truth: Selections from Nietzsche's notebooks of the early 1870's* (pp. 79-100). Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1979/1990.
- (1882). *The gay science* (W. Kaufmann, Trans.). NY: Vintage, 1974.
- (1883-1885). *Thus spoke Zarathustra* (A. Del Caro, Trans.). ENG: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- (1885). *Beyond good and evil* (W. Kaufmann, Trans.). NY: Vintage, 1966/1989.
- (1887). *On the genealogy of morals*. In *On the genealogy of morals and ecce homo* (W. Kaufmann, Trans., pp.15-200). NY: Vintage.
- (1888). *The Anti-Christ*. In *The Anti-Christ, ecce homo, twilight of the idols and other writings* (J. Norman, Trans., pp. 1-68). NY: Cambridge.
- NORC (2023, July 29). Belief in angels and heaven is more common than belief in the devil or hell. *National Opinion Research Center for Public Affairs Research*. Retrieved from: <https://apnorc.org/projects/belief-in-angels-and-heaven-is-more-common-than-belief-in-the-devil-or-hell/>.
- Nortey, J. (2021, November 23). Republicans more likely than democrats to believe in heaven, say only their faith leads there. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/11/23/republicans-more-likely-than-democrats-to-believe-in-heaven-say-only-their-faith-leads-there/>.

- Nussbaum, M. (1989). Mortal immortals: Lucretius on death and the voice of nature. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 50(2), 303-351.
- (2013). The damage of death: Incomplete arguments and false consolations. In Taylor, J.S. (Ed.). *Metaphysics and the ethics of death* (pp. 25-43). NY: Oxford
- (2018). *The monarchy of fear: A philosopher looks at our political crisis*. NY: Oxford.
- Orbach, I. (2007). Existentialism and suicide. In Tomer, A., Eliason, G., & Wong, P. (Eds.). (2007). *Existential and spiritual issues in death attitudes* (pp. 281-316). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- Panati, C. (1996). *Sacred origins of profound things*. NY: Penguin.
- Patterson, O. (1998). *Rituals of blood: Consequences of slavery in two American centuries*. Washington, DC: Civitas.
- Pavlovitz, J. (2019, February 4). The death cult of Trump. Retrieved from: <https://johnpavlovitz.com/2019/02/04/when-someone-you-love-joins-a-cult/comment-page-4/>.
- Perrulli, R. (2005). The fear of death and narcissism. *The New School Psychology Bulletin*, 3(1), 43-77.
- Pew Research Center (2018, April 25). When Americans say they believe in God, what do they mean? Retrieved from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2018/04/Beliefs-about-God-FOR-WEB-FULL-REPORT.pdf>.
- Piven, J.S. (2004). *Death and delusion: A Freudian analysis of mortal terror*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.
- (2005). Terror, Paranoia und das Erotische: Amerikanische Reaktionen auf den 11. September (Terror, paranoia, and the erotic: American reactions to September 11). In Seidler, G. & Eckart, W. (Eds.). *Verletzte Seelen: Möglichkeiten und Perspektiven einer historischen Traumaforschung* (pp. 229-258). Giessen, GER: Psychosozial Verlag.
- (2013). What rational philosophy cannot tell us about death in the 21st century. In Staudt C. & Ellens, J. H. (Eds.). *Our changing journey to the end: Reshaping death, dying, and grief in America, Volume I: New paths of engagement* (pp. 101-120). Westport, CT: Praeger.
- (2017a). Terrorist theology, delusion, and apotheosis in death. In Stout, C. (Ed.). *Terrorism, political violence, and extremism: New psychology to understand, face, and defuse the threat* (pp. 43-66). Westport, CT: Praeger.
- (2017b). Psychological, theological, and thanatological aspects of suicide terrorism. In Stout, C. (Ed.). *Terrorism, political violence, and extremism: New psychology to understand, face, and defuse the threat* (pp. 79-102). Westport, CT: Praeger.
- (2017c). Terror, sexual arousal, and torture: The question of obedience or ecstasy among perpetrators. In Stout, C. (Ed.). *Terrorism, political violence, and extremism: New psychology to understand, face, and defuse the threat* (pp. 103-124). Westport, CT: Praeger.
- (2018). Sinister and sublime aspects of spirituality. In Salazar, H. & Nicholls, R. (Eds.). *The philosophy of spirituality* (pp. 59-92). Boston: Brill.
- (2023). The ubiquity of psychopathology and the quandaries this imposes for determining “reality.” *The Psychoanalytic Review*, 110(4), 359-390.

- Plato (c. 360 B.C.E.). *Meno and Phaedo*. NY: Cambridge, 2010.
- Roman, J. (2023, October 27) Is the Jersey Devil real? 1 in 5 N.J. residents say yes, new poll says. *NJ.com*. Retrieved from <https://www.nj.com/news/2023/10/is-the-jersey-devil-real-1-in-6-nj-residents-say-yes-new-poll-says.html>.
- Ross, K. (2023). Zen and the art of divebombing, or, the dark side of the Tao. Retrieved from: <https://www.friesian.com/divebomb.htm>.
- Routledge, C. & Vess, M. (2019). *Handbook of terror management theory*. Cambridge, MA: Academic Press.
- Ruthven, M. (2004). *Fundamentalism: The search for meaning*. NY: Oxford.
- Rutjens, B. T., van der Pligt, J., & van Harreveld, F. (2009). Things will get better: The anxiety-buffering qualities of progressive hope. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, 35(5), 535–43.
- Saad, L. & Hrynowski, Z (2022, June 24). How many Americans believe in God? Retrieved from: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/268205/americans-believe-god.aspx>.
- Sagan, C. (1996). *The demon-haunted world: Science as a candle in the dark*. NY: Ballantine.
- Salazar, H. & Nicholls, R. (Eds.) (2018). *The philosophy of spirituality*. Boston: Brill.
- Santayana, G. (1962). *Reason in religion*. NY: Collier.
- Schopenhauer, A. (1844). *The world as will and representation*. NY: Dover, 1966.
- Scranton, R. (2015). *Learning to die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the end of a civilization*. San Francisco: City Lights.
- Segal, H. (1972). A delusional system as a defence against the re-emergence of a catastrophic situation. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 53, 393-401.
- Shakespeare, W. (1595). *King Richard II*. NY: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- (1601). *Hamlet, prince of Denmark*. NY: Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Solomon, S., Greenberg, J., & Pyszczynski, T. (1998). Tales from the crypt: On the role of death in life. *Zygon: Journal of Religion & Science*, 33(1), 9-44.
- (2003). Fear of death and human destructiveness. *The Psychoanalytic Review*, 90(4), 457-474.
- (2015). *The worm at the core: On the role of death in life*. NY. Random House.
- Solomon, S. (2020). Death denial in the Anthropocene. In Zywert, K. & Quilley, S. (Eds.). *Health in the Anthropocene* (pp. 404-418). University of Toronto Press.
- Stahl, D. (2018). NY: *Trauma, dissociation, and re-enactment in Japanese literature and film*. NY: Routledge.
- Stein, R. (2010). *For love of the father: A psychoanalytic study of religious terrorism*. Stanford University Press.
- Strozier, C. (1994). *Apocalypse: On the psychology of fundamentalism in America*. Boston: Beacon.
- Victoria, B.D. (1997/2006). *Zen at war*. NY: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Vigilant, L. & Williamson, J. (2003). Symbolic immortality and social theory. In Bryant, C. (2003). *Handbook of death and dying, volume one* (pp. 173-182). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Volkan, V. (1988). *The need to have enemies and allies*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.
- Voltaire (1736). Le mondain (The worldling). Retrieved from: <https://mrworldling.com/voltaire-the-worldling-le-mondain/>.
- Warren, C. (2018). *Ontological terror: Blackness, nihilism, and emancipation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Walsh, N. (1996). Life in death. In Strozier, C. & Flynn, M. (Eds.), *Trauma and self* (pp. 245-254). Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Winqvist, C. (1995). *Desiring theology*. University of Chicago Press.
- Yalom, I. (1980). *Existential psychotherapy*. NY: Basic.
- Zilboorg, G. (1943). The fear of death. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 12, 465-474.

Jerry S. Piven, Ph.D. is an assistant professor in the philosophy department of Rutgers University, where his courses focus on philosophy of psychology, existentialism, phenomenology, and ethics. He is the author of *Death and Delusion: A Freudian Analysis of Mortal Terror* (2004), *The Madness and Perversion of Yukio Mishima* (2004), and *Nihon No Kyouki* (Japanese Madness, 2007), and editor of *The Psychology of Death in Fantasy and History* (2004) and *Terrorism, Jihad, and Sacred Vengeance* (2004). He is currently revising *Refusing and Reshaping Reality* and *Slaughtering Death: On the Psychoanalysis of Terror, Religion, and Violence*.