Deracinating Delusion and Malice: The Existential-Psychoanalytic Work of Walter A. Davis[*]
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Inwardness and Existence: Psychoanalysis vs the Kantian A Priori
Walter Davis (1989) starts off his chapter on "Existentialism: The Once and Future Philosophy" with two important quotes. The first is a famous one from Plato's *Symposium*: "For herein is the evil of ignorance; that he who is neither good nor wise is nevertheless pleased with himself." That should be a stark warning to readers. It's all too easy and seductive to imagine that one understands the world and sees it as it is; that what one sees is all there is; that there's nothing that eludes your grasp because your assessment reflects reality; that your perception, knowledge, and understanding are sufficient. For Plato and Davis, these are themselves the epitome of ignorance. The only way to be complacent, self-satisfied, and smug is if you are so ludicrously ignorant that you entirely lack any awareness of how dizzyingly complex reality is, and how fallible our own minds are. To put it another way, egoism is the antithesis of self-awareness, as it impels unwarranted fantasies of superior knowledge and impedes the capacity to perceive how little one knows, or that one even needs to learn more. So Davis is quoting Plato as a warning not to fall into the narcissistic trap of thinking you really understand things. For that to happen, you need to put aside those narcissistic fantasies, and you need to engage in another kind of existential process that is agonizingly painful.

And that is why he follows the Plato quote with Heidegger: "Along with the sober anxiety which brings us face to face with our individualized potentiality-for-being, there goes an unshakable joy in this possibility" (107). Davis interpolates this quote not because Heidegger is the bastion of existential wisdom, but because he would detach us from agonizing existential engagement and throw us into risible abstraction and abstruseness to actually *obscure* what causes us the most horrific dread. Davis sees Heidegger as spinning obscure abstractions so we can *avoid* immersing ourselves in the agonizing truths and causes of our pain, and escape the strife of struggling through them. What Davis is calling for is an existential Hell that isn't calmed by incomprehensible abstractions and trite cavalier cliches.

In contrast Davis is concerned with experiences and choices that "determine our very being" (107). Existential reflection is not some detached, dispassionate "Kantian or Cartesian process with fixed a priori guidelines and rational limits, but an opening up of holes in one's being." That detached focus on formulae and a priori techniques is a sham. It keeps the existential at bay. It stays within the economy and control of the rational ego

in order to remain within ego-defensive rationalization and excuses for not getting into the wounds of the psyche. You may feel intelligent and rational to comprehend yourselves, and this fantasy may stroke your ego with the conceited pleasure that you are intelligent enough to comprehend everything, but from Davis' perspective, that's a comical fantasy designed to fool yourself. Your ego is playing tricks on you, and of course it feels good. You feel superior and intellectually masterful, but the illusion (or even delusion) is imagining that you really are master of your domain. This fantasy is a desperate self-deceptive delusory flight from self-understanding. Not the Kantian a priori, not detached intellectual mastery, but Shakespearean tragedy and Dostoevskyan laceration open the gates to existential reality.

The term "laceration" here alludes to the Russian word "nadryv," which Dostoevsky uses throughout his works to suggest an excruciating experience so wounding that it tears the soul or rips one apart. I introduce this here to argue with Davis that pure rationality is the ego defense that gets you *away* from those wounds, and that existential reflection must get you "into the dark" and make things *more* unstable – if you want to understand rather than master and disguise them (cf. Corrigan & Gordon, 1995; Khan, 1971; Ogden, 1989; Winnicott, 1949, 1989). This means you have to tolerate the anxiety of letting down ego boundaries, of being vulnerable, weak, frail, injured, confused, irrational, a helpless wounded mess. It doesn't mean seeking this masochistically. It means being willing to tolerate that destruction of ego control to get into your own Hell and underworld (cf. Hillman, 1979; Miller, 1989).

But if we talk about the descent into Hell and the process of becoming, we are reimagining existential reflection, and as Davis says this is, the "untapped legacy of existential thought" (109). "Possibility bites into the very being of subject" because acting in the world becomes a struggle against the ego, its defenses, its projections, its avoidances, its compulsions and needs, its self-deceptions and manipulations of others. "Possibility strips subject bare of guarantees," Davis writes (110). In other words, living into the future and engaging reality and human relationships means being vulnerable, open to anguish and despair, without metaphysical beliefs that ensure your safety and protection. The self wants security, freedom from pain, freedom from fear and anguish, those horrors that haunt experience. But you can't guarantee that unless you delude yourself and close off your emotions to actually living in any feeling way. That's the very existential death Beauvoir (1948) talks about, the death in life so many existential writers allude to. But that rational detachment and mastery are precisely this way of pretending one is in control and closing off experience and openness to life. So Davis reminds us that actually living and experiencing life (without fantasies of understanding and mastery) means opening up to that frightening and unpredictable unknown.

And you won't understand yourself at all, if you retreat into that detached rationalism, since you are again giving in to the ego's need for control, excuses, self-esteem, for its very need to escape vulnerability, foolishness, shame, humiliation, and weakness. That's why Davis can say that our experiences can be revelatory of

inwardness, if we pay attention. Engagement with one's inner self and wounds cannot be satisfied with an analytic or phenomenological description of existence (111).

Now this statement is fascinating and crucial. In one sentence Davis demolishes phenomenology. Now let's be clear. Phenomenology *can* be a way into the psyche, and there are scholars and therapists who use phenomenological approaches to get a complicated picture of perception and experience (e.g., Thompson, 2016, 2023). But Davis is warning us to be wary of the kind of detachment that makes examination some merely external meditation on a clock or cake, as though one were merely looking at things detachedly from a variety of external angles to witness the various surfaces, crevices, reflections, crannies, angles, parallaxes, and so on (Zahavi, 2018). That may give us a comprehensive examination of a cake, and in human terms may flesh out the way people see and experience things. It can be immensely useful when we get a comprehensive understanding of the way people perceive the world. But if it stays on the rational surface, we'll never understand anything, least of all ourselves, which means we won't even understand why we perceive and misperceive, why and how we project, why we find ourselves in excruciating despair or rage, why we find agony and loathing instead of love. You've got to turn the soul inside out and do a living autopsy to understand the soul, not stay on the surfaces of the ego's sense (or defensive fantasy) of itself. "The self of pure thought is empty," Davis writes (114).

The Primacy of Passion, Fallenness, and Fragility
Davis wants you thus to understand the primacy of passion (113), and he wants you to see that this is a profoundly ethical self-relationship because it *underlies all the positions and attitudes one adopts toward the world.* To do this Davis wants to get beneath the very concerns that have preoccupied existential thought for over a century. He wants you to tease apart the primordial experience from which subjectivity derives. But doing that also means getting beyond the trite abstractions and cliches about anxiety, which have again become the way to dwell upon something to avoid actually getting into it. For Davis, anxiety has become a term (and experience) "subjected to an almost total loss of meaning" (114).

And for Davis, "fallenness" is primordial. If you want to understand his ideas, this nuance is critical. It's not as though there was some primordial experience of oneness that ruptures, makes us "fallen," riddles us with anxiety and despair, and then drives us to seek out the comforts of the "they." Rather, birth itself is fallenness, the pain of being a naked, helpless, fragile, thing ejected from Eden into cold individuality unless the other cocoons or enwombs you. And in this raw nakedness and vulnerability, one screams for succor, satisfaction, and warmth. Vulnerable to the other, being is constituted by one's need for the other, one's need to be cradled and loved, and by that person's own reactions, responses, and their own needs, yearnings, wounds, defenses, and pathologies.

Hence Davis can write that the other is "the before and about of anxiety" (114) and that "Our relationship to the other is a fundamental determination of our being because the other is already present in the initial constitution of inwardness" (115). Our

inwardness consists of our needs and reactions to the other, and what they instill in us through their own capacities or incapacities for love: their way of loving, comforting, smothering, rejecting, castigating, withholding, ignoring, berating, confusing, terrorizing, and traumatizing the child. The other's inner wounds, trauma, conflicts, obsessions, and lunacies are inflicted on, and injected into the vulnerable child. Thus Davis can write that "individuality is a fallacy of misplaced concreteness" (115). Others are sovereign authors of our being, and the traditional humanist attempt to conceive this process along rational lines is painfully inadequate at understanding and explaining the formation of the child's psyche and the "struggle which identity and liberation entail" (115).

Following this, Davis avers that "Existential integrity isn't a starting point, but an achievement dependent on reversing processes long since begun" and that "everything I do—even when most alone—is relational…. Even the most private moods are conversations…. Even suicide has the character of a dialogue…" (115-6). As he continues, "The other is a primary force structuring consciousness because being with others is both a flight from existential anxiety and its primary cause" (116). Consider what this means. The primary other is a cause of both existential comfort and existential destructiveness, and it is their invasive, sometimes demanding, wounding, traumatizing presence that also induces that intense terror and need for comforting that sends us rushing into the arms of the other, at first the mother or primary caregiver, and then the others, who become surrogate (idealized, fantasized) mothers who nurture our need for comfort, approval, security, and stability. We throw ourselves into the "they" precisely because our aloneness in infancy was so terrifying and painful, but also, because the other has so inculcated and implanted us with anxiety and the terror of rejection, alienation, rage, and abandonment, has so wrought havoc with our psyches, that most of us run screaming into those maternal surrogates that provide the fantasy of acceptance and comfort. They also provide sundry personal, social, political, religious, and other metaphysical comforts as fantasy (or delusional) antidotes to that horrific aloneness, despair, need, terror, and agony….

And thus Davis argues that "Otherness is not something we can strip away to regain a pristine or ideal identity, but something we must take up and surmount in order to become subjects in the first place" (116). Here Davis starts to move us away from previous existential thought.

Radical Psychoanalytic Existentialism
Claiming that otherness is not something we can strip away to regain authentic identity, but something we must overcome to become subjects, is a radical contrast to those who speak of shedding the effects of the other to reveal the real self (as if there were one). Rather, the existential task is an agon with the self in order to become a subject; in order to relinquish the "they," the ideas and internalizations, the inner wormlike workings wriggling at one's core (comprising that core), in order to make that separation and make moral choices that aren't those parasites wriggling your own thoughts and actions as if they were actually some "you" in control with its own personality.

To use a more modern metaphor, Davis is imagining the self the way *The Nightmare Before Christmas* imagines the "Boogey Man." Once the threads are unraveled, the self isn't revealed as a "real" essence beneath the outward trappings. The threads unraveled reveal that the self is *all* undulating wriggling worms that scatter when denuded. There's nothing left *but* the worms. So the existential task is to become a subject in the first place. In Buddhist terms, to allow oneself to become nothing to become something—and not an ego fantasizing its permanence and mastery, but a willing being capable of making autonomous choices not derived overtly or secretly from the they (cf. Leifer, 1997).

In writing this Davis admonishes us against the usual comforts and cliches. Elsewhere (2006), Davis strongly criticizes what Lifton (1961) called "thought-terminating cliches." Such inanities are cheap euphemisms that reassure us, and ensure that we won't have to get deeply into anything. We can ridicule ideas as "reading too much into things" and brush it off as unscientific nonsense or various other trite insults that ease anxiety and provide the illusion (or delusion) that one's understanding is sufficient as it is. As Davis writes, "assured that it will never be arrested or challenged by anything" (117), one flees self-knowledge, uncertainty, confusion, woundedness, and despair into non-thought masquerading as thought and understanding. This is Zen master Bankei's warning not to make your pathology into a philosophy (or what passes for a philosophy, when it lacks any actual thought and devotes itself to skirting the surfaces with trite euphemisms that actually kill thought or existential engagement with what really drives you (Cleary, 1986).

Hence Davis can write of exorcism: The ways we expel and disgorge or banish anything that threatens the upsurgence of any real engagement with one's wounds. We target evils and dangers in the outer world as displacements of anxiety in the inner world. What better way to escape your own wounds and weaknesses than proclaim contemptible injustices and threats outside yourself. That fear how projected and mapped upon others can bind people in blissful fantasies of danger. Blissful because, again, in reifying that evil in the outer world, one can breathe a sigh of relief and never see what is really plaguing the self—whether that fear fantasy is of wicked communists, socialists, libtards, terrorists, Muslims, Mexicans, Asians, homosexuals, transvestites, or some other delirious monstrosity as real as that boogey man that would disintegrate into wriggling bugs if the threads are pulled loose, or more accurately, one's own writhing inner parasites projected onto the despised other.

Just to be clear, that doesn't mean there aren't actual evils and dangers in the world. But it does mean, ironically, that your projections will get in the way of seeing what they really are, which also means, you won't see when those evils are coming from yourself. Hence Davis can write that "In comprehending fear and the structures of everyday life as flights from anxiety, we grasp not what fear knows about itself but what it doesn't know about itself" (118).

But here's where Davis gets really radical: He writes that "The source of its power is the desire to be relieved of existence." THIS is the very dread of life, living, thought, awareness, and autonomous choice that have become so dreadful through both infantile helplessness and the violent incursions of the other that we crave unconsciousness, nonthought, cessation, sleep, oblivion, and death. This is the Freudian (1920) death drive when divested of its biologism, Beauvoir's (1948) stark accusation in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that people surreptitiously (and sometimes blatantly) seek out groups, ideologies, fraternities, creeds, isms, and even seemingly revolutionary or enlightened (or woke) mirages to abolish individual thought and choice, to lobotomize the self and render one insensate, insapient, and mind-obliteratingly unaware of one's inner wounds and pain. These mirages and delusions provide relief from that awareness and thought. They relieve you of having to exist as a separate being who thinks, even though those hurling themselves into self-righteousness and certainty are the most shrilly convinced of their enlightenment and uniqueness. As Nietzsche (1888) writes, "der Glaube macht selig: f o l g l i c h lugt er" (*Antichrist*, 51). Faith makes blessedness or bliss. Therefore it lies. (This faith can be religious, but it doesn't have to be. Or rather, even when secular and scientific, it can still be ultimate concern so intense, sacred, inviolable, sanctimonious, dogmatic, and hostile that it becomes inquisitorial punishment, fanaticism, and fascism, regardless of the euphemisms it uses to proclaim its liberalism, victimhood, or concern for the freedom of others.)

One question for each of us, then, is how much we seek to be relieved of existence, and one may perceive this in the way we throw ourselves into those thought-terminating cliches, avoid real moral choices, submerge ourselves in various popular or fashionable they-isms, ideologies, dogmas, and cognitive-conceptual ossifications deemed so sacredly (or even scientifically) true that one need not doubt or challenge them (and is indeed admonished not to). How much does one hurl oneself into any idea or belief or mode of being?

The Destructiveness of Inauthenticity
This is the danger and pathology of inauthenticity. It's not that one is merely being false or untrue to the self, as if this were the crucial thing. "To thine own self be true" is uttered by Polonius, one of the glibbest, most oleaginous, vacuous people in Shakespeare's (1601) *Hamlet*. The destructiveness of inauthenticity is what it does to the existential self. On a moral level it means abiding by the "they" no matter how despicable and destructive the ideology. One has submerged and deluded oneself about the moral justice and injustice, is incapable of perceiving its destructiveness, and has made the moral choice to submerge one's conscious awareness, often at the tragic expense of others' lives. This is Arendt's (1963) banality of evil, and even Minchin's (2016) evil of banality, the catastrophic consequences of being a person who chooses blithe mindlessness even in the midst of genocide. Those are the reprehensible rewards of inauthenticity, and its affects are ubiquitous in our country today.

But inauthenticity has another destructive and pathologizing component that again isn't just about being false. It's what it does to *one's own* psyche to betray the self, its

awareness, realizations, and needs. This has several pathologizing, damaging effects on the psyche. It inculcates self-abasement, genuflection, cowardly acquiescence, a self-infantilism that arrests the conscious and moral self in a state of childish dependency that thwarts the ability or inclination to grow up, mature, become autonomous, and capable of using one's mind. One has given oneself over to the other, to the "they," in a state of stunted self-infantilism in which one has chosen safety, security, and acceptance at the expense of one's awareness and capacity for thought. It is again self-stupefying. It's why Weston La Barre (1980) calls every fundamentalism an intellectual lobotomy and a state of hallucinosis.

But it's even more destructive than that. Betraying the self and one's emotional, existential needs, and the realities one observes, often entails deep inner humiliation, which leads to rage. No one has researched this clinically more than Gruen (1987), whose work *The Insanity of Normality* details how this can be a form of normative psychosis. When the self perceives that it has given in to the other in order to receive love or protection, or to avoid rejection and violence, it often feels deeply humiliated and resentful. It's the self-loathing and shame one feels when sucking up to the bully, when groveling prostrate at his feet, feeling that rage and hatred for the one that one needs but fears. And one feels like a coward, and secretly despises both the other who terrorizes and threatens you, or the one you need some desperately, and, yourself for giving in. And what happens to these feelings of humiliation, shame, anger, rage, hostility, and vengefulness? One can rarely evacuate them on the one he needs or fears so desperately. So one inflicts that rage and vengefulness and self-hatred on oneself. Or … one seeks out others to punish, to displace and inflict that rage, to inflict on them those hated feelings of fear, weakness, emasculation, and rage. One would prove to them and to the self that one isn't a sycophantic weakling who castrated and prostrated the self meekly before the hated other, but is instead strong, powerful, proud, admirable, heroic.

Those who have chosen inauthenticity often despise themselves with enraged intensity, and need to inflict all that humiliation and hate upon others to proclaim to themselves and the universe that they aren't puny, fearful, weakly geldings cowering pathetically before others. And in doing so, they often come to identify with, and idealize, that very coercive, humiliating, brutalizing ideology that caused them so much misery. They do this to become strong avatars and moral exemplars, to proudly champion and enforce that morality rather than being a humiliated victim of it, to avoid seeing their brutalizers for whom they truly are, or the self for what it's become. Identification with the aggressor makes one a stolid, heroic, and unimpeachable pinnacle of morality, virtue, strength, fortitude, and rightness rather than a cowardly, besmirched, helpless, contemptible victim despised by those who should have loved and protected you.

And the irony here is that you don't have to be a Nazi, proud boy, QAnonymous, or other revolutionary / very fine person to suffer this pathology. If Davis and Gruen are right, this process happens to every single one of us on some level, since as infants we've succumbed and sucked up to those we needed for love, protection, and approval. That need, weakness, dependence, self-abnegation, and humiliation still breed resentment and

anger. The question is, then, how much shame, rage, and malice have been instilled and awakened by this. And that depends on how much your caregivers demanded acquiescence and Borglike compliance, how much they tyrannized and wounded you, how much they terrorized and battered you emotionally, filling you with persecutory dread and Boogeyman worms and wounds, or, how much they accepted and encouraged you, how much they nourished your freedom and foolishness, and thus, how free you felt in your own skin or how much you so desperately craved love, validation, and safety that you'd sooner castrate and lobotomize yourself than risk rejection of independence.

Hence for Davis, we cannot underestimate the intensity and permutations of this desire to be relieved of existence, to be delivered of terror and anxiety, to be loved, to avoid alienation and condemnation. For Davis, inauthenticity is again not just a matter of being false, as if that were just metaphysically or morally objectionable in and of itself. Inauthenticity is violence to the self, and ineluctably, violence to others. As Davis writes, "The tyrannies we inflict on one another in enforcing conformity to this process make it truly vertiginous. We mature, fleeing existence, among others engaged in like pursuit" (119).

Love, Wounds, and Ghosts
Davis takes this even further when writing of authenticity, destructiveness, and existential engagement as they relate to love. If existential philosophers sometimes speak of love in its romantic or religious manifestations, they don't delve into the capacity to love or the abortion of the ability to love as a fundamental aspect of existential ontology or being. Davis wants us to see how these existential trauma and humiliations early in life become our being, and disrupt the capacity for intimacy. The ways we love, or the ways we struggle with love, and inflict our own shame, despair, fear, abandonment, and agony on others, embody that existential woundedness and disrupted being. As Davis writes, "To comprehend as philosopher, the laws and dynamics of subjectivity one must plumb the tortured dialectics of human loving" (120). Love is dangerous, opens us to anguish and misery, with the power to wound and kill. As Davis writes, "we often die in our being before the physical fact" (120). And further, "the entire history of our previous relationships and conflicts is revived whenever through love we open and extend our being toward another. 'Hell is other people' not because I am threatened from without but because I am haunted from within" (121).

What Davis is saying here is radical and profound. When you love (or attempt to love) you are being haunted by the ghosts of those who humiliated and wounded you. You experience yourself as they wounded you, and you may be compelled to perceive and experience them through the wounded perceptions. Your perceptions of the other, your needs for the other, what you demand from them, what you would lay upon them, what injuries you would revisit upon them, are echoes of this past. In effect, Davis is saying that love is a transference, a hallucinatory process, a compulsive recreation of the past whereby you unknowingly are condemned to repeat anguished scenarios in order to revisit the trauma and pain, relive them, master, avenge, undo, transform them. And that means that you are not free, open, and in the present when loving, but gripped by these

past phantoms, who possess you malevolently, and demand that the ones you love also acquiesce or suffer these repetitions and revenants. In essence, every love relationship is necrophilia, intercourse with the dead.

Does that mean that all of you are so wounded and traumatized that every love relationship is cemetery sex or a ménage à corpse? NO. Davis isn't saying that all of you must be unfortunate, pathological, perverse victims replaying your child abuse. What he is saying is that being human means being vulnerable to immense anguish and injury, that the crucible of childhood is invariably disruptive to varying degrees, and that it's naïve and unrealistic to maintain that we just get over it or escape all this childhood wounding and subjugation. And indeed, perhaps you were fortunate enough to have loving, supportive parents who celebrated you in every creative game, invention, and fall. The fact is many parents do love and nurture their children. But Davis' argument is that childhood is inherently terrifying and vulnerable, that parents cannot magically protect you from all that vulnerability and anguish, and that ineluctably, childhood will involve frailties, fears, losses, and interactions with those who demand acquiescence, who threaten, admonish, terrify, inculcate, instill, and possess your being. The question is to what degree, in what way, with what traumatic severity, with what consequences in terms of your ability to genuinely open up to the other in love and intimacy, or your unknowing, *utterly unconscious* possession by the wounds and salacious, bloodthirsty desires for vengeance that inflict themselves on the other. How much is one really able to give oneself over without fear, resentment, inhibition? How much does one revisit past abandonments, humiliations, rejections, and punishments? How much do they haunt and possess you? For Davis, the way you love is the way to understand your being, and if you want to understand someone's existential being, examine the ways one loves (or cannot).

As Davis writes, "Love challenges us to root out everything false in our being. It also asks us to reopen all our basic wounds and unresolved conflicts" (121). And Davis does believe in authentic rather than ghosted love, a love of mere echoes and repetitions. Hence he can write that "When authentic, loving is an irreversible self-determination. It delivers us over to ourselves as subjects" (122). It is the quintessential existential act of taking up that personal history and surpassing our previous limits (123). As Davis writes, "to reverse the past we must discover the cause of our previous failure in ourselves and make that (strenuously resisted) self-knowledge the basis of the effort to project ourselves anew" (123). But this is immensely difficult, and not just something we can intelligently scoff about just because we don't see it. Cavalier denials aren't a replacement for the labor of self-understanding. As Davis writes, "most of us conduct our business in this matter self-protectively or as Proustians engaged in the endless, and progressively more pathetic repetition of some infantile needs" (123).

And here you can ask yourselves these questions: How much of the past do you revisit on your present relationships? How much do you need your partner to make up for some painful loss or rejection, to be the antidote to the person who victimized or humiliated you, to force them into those roles, to be someone else, to nurture you the way you weren't, even to humiliate and reject you again, to wallow in that rejection, to convince yourself that others are untrustworthy, to rationalize your refusal to give

yourself over, to acquit yourself of feelings of blame or feelings of being unlovable, and so on? That is up to you to deracinate.

Deracination As Ethical Imperative
For Davis, the existential and moral imperative is that deracination, so that you don't re-inflict this wounding on others, so that you are capable of resisting this compulsive repetition, so that you can live forward, without violence and resentment. If you do not work through all this, you are left with nothing but "the seeds of future defeat: the experience of oneself as victim, jealous monster, desperate child, core of indifference" (123), all inflicted on those who are accused of wronging you, for themselves being insufficient and evil, never acknowledging that you are inflicting this misery, hallucinating your own ghosts upon them, and making them suffer for it. Loving reveals the truth about one's character. So again, the deracinating love is imperative for self-understanding, for growth as a human being, and morally, so as not to be a manipulator or soul murderer while slaking this unconscious need to recreate and avenge the past.

How is this deracination possible, you will no doubt ask (if you aren't consoling or reassuring yourselves, or scoffing at the notion that things are hardly this complex or dire). For Davis, we have to resist trite consolations and formulae. There is no existential a priori. The key to anxiety "cannot be understood formulistically" (132). Anxiety delivers us over to something that cannot be transcended (132). As Davis writes, "One's anxiety becomes one's own." It cannot be relieved by facile formulae. And nor should it. "When one vows to take that reality upon oneself, authentic anxiety isn't resolved, it is deepened" (133). Davis isn't offering you a way out. He's offering you a way in. A way into that caliginous underworld, that Hell that is purely your own, that subterranean ugliness and horror. You can't become a subject without it.

Now Davis makes an extremely curious epistemic move here, and leaps from the experience of the anguished and wounded person to something more abstract that he defines as "the original source of anxiety" (134). "We will find it in death," he says, "the mother of beauty and prime agent of that unique order of inwardness that defines the existential subject" (134). For Davis, "death us the reason why there is consciousness in the first place" (134). This needs to be elucidated.

For Davis, death is not simply an event at the end of life, a specific concrete referent that we understand. Death is the end of childhood. It is the mythic awakening of consciousness as it emerges from infantile dependence to that emerging experience of being whereby children realize (with horror, anguish, panic, and rage) that they are helpless beings who cannot bask in the interminable warmth of the mother's protective embrace. Ejection from paradise *is* Hell. Consciousness and awakening come from the "abrupt termination of all romanticisms of unfettered desire" (134). As Brown (1959) writes, death awakens with childhood separation, the traumatic horror of being that helpless being who can't endlessly clutch the mother's breast. That separation and helplessness evoke the terror of annihilation. The question then becomes, how does an infant respond to this dread of helplessness and annihilation?

As we've seen already, children can hurl themselves into obsequious being, into the beliefs, values, and sycophantic postures that ensure they'll never be loved and abandoned. They can submerge oneself in the Heideggerian "they," though this isn't an adult choice but an infantile one. They can also become hostile, act out, lash out, destroy, demand, scream in rage for succor and salvation, withdraw into themselves, into timorous avoidance or unconsciousness. Again, while nurturance and love play a *crucial role* in determining just how much a child is riddled by fear, trauma, or joy, it would be an illusion to think that parents have the magical ability to simply stop infants from being afraid or wounded.

Davis alludes to Hamlet here. Consciousness makes cowards of us all. (Just FYI, when Shakespeare says that conscience makes cowards of us, he doesn't just mean moral conscience but consciousness itself.) And Davis then speaks of passionately affirming the act of existing in the face of death. But this, then, is the existential agony, the struggle, as we have been suffering pre-categorical, formless dread since infancy, and have made our desperate, compulsive choices to throw ourselves into different forms of palliation, unconsciousness, dependence, neurosis, aggression, ego-defense, and acquiescence since before we emerged from childhood. Consciousness develops not as awakening to the world, but as unconsciousness in response to that awakening. Consciousness *is* unconsciousness, false consciousness, distorted consciousness, erasure and mutilation of awareness of one's wounds and darkest fears, fantasies and delusions about ourselves and what is true, meaningful, important, valuable, real, and sacred in the world.

For Davis, the dread of death threatens the utter cessation of consciousness itself. He writes "Death blows a cold wind through our desperate attempts to exalt the petty world of our concerns, concerns which, in turn, conceal and reveal its presence. The denial of death is the deepest subtext at work in the anesthetization that structures everyday life. It is … a primary cause of our pettiness, our mendacity, and our greed. Death measures most of us because it makes us small, perpetual infants, huddled together, denying the dark by hoarding money…. being is anguish over its eventual nonbeing" (135).

And yet as intimated above, death can only be understood not as an abstract physical event or even as a universal dread. Why? Because the idea and imagination of death varies tremendously between cultures and psyches. One person may imagine death as horrific injury or disease, while another imagines it as sleep or old age, and another dreads it as loss of identity and accomplishment, while yet another experiences the threat of annihilation and death in aloneness or orgasm (cf. Barratt, 2009; Lifton, 1970, 1973, 1979; Piven, 2004a,b; Walsh, 1996).

This is why Critchley (2004) can say that death is not the *noema* of a *noesis* because it's "ungraspable and exceeds the correlative structures of phenomenology." It resists the order of representation, and "representations of death are misrepresentations, or rather representations of an absence.... The representation of death

is always a mask" (31). It's a floating signifier, an empty referent. What has to be understood is that while death is the icy wind that blows through all we do, it's also imperative to realize that the nature and form of that fear are gestated by the formative experiences of childhood. The manifestations of that fear are gestated in the particular anguish and trauma, the ways others have intervened or supervened, the ways people have aroused catastrophic anxiety or appeased it, the ways they've threatened, coerced, punished, and terrified us. Those fears are dissipated and distilled from the ways people have mollified, loved, nurtured, and buoyed us, the way people have been neglected and left horrifically alone and vulnerable, the way they've been systematically ravaged and emotionally destroyed, the way their souls have been murdered, or the ways they've been healed and soothed. The forms of our fears emerge from the solutions that were offered to us, the beliefs that palliated the horror of death, the neurotic techniques they invented to manage anxiety and terror, the violent strategies of feeling powerful by bullying others, the narcissistic overcompensations and inflations that counteracted feelings of inferiority, stupidity, and helplessness. And the imagination and reaction to death are further formed from the models with whom we can identify for strength and security, the ideals and illusions we can adopt to feel we've mastered the world. To understand just what kind of annihilation and horrors individuals conceive and suffer, we have to acknowledge the death imprints of socialization and lifelong experience, and scrutinize the infinite individual strategies of fleeing, soothing, and magically abolishing death anxiety (Lifton, 1967, 1982, 2005; Piven, 2004b; Walsh, 1996).

For Davis, death anxiety in all its intricacies and permutations becomes the manifestation of existential being, of pathological strategies to distort and remold the world, of one's character and ways of responding to fear and trauma, of one's life goals, ambitions, cravings, yearnings, repetitions, and relations. Death organizes one's worldview and determination of what is moral and immoral.

Consequently, there is an ethical imperative to deracinate death here as well. For if we don't, we will inflict ourselves on others, again, in love, or in our social relations, or the policies we support, the politicians we elect, the ideologies we adopt and endorse, the warfare and death we release upon the world. For Davis, the most catastrophic, horrific events in history are impelled and desired because they exorcise, evacuate, project, and eradicate mortal terror. It is the horror of annihilation and death that impel the fantasy of godlike destruction of evil. It is that horror and perception (or delusion) of evil that impel acts of war and terroristic violence. It is that dread and fear of the other—whether that means Beauvoir's (1949) fear of a woman's decaying carrion or Warren's (2018) equation of blackness with annihilation of white being—that impels their moral dehumanization and condemnation. It is horrific dread that gives rise to the delusion that others are evil and deserving of death, that their annihilation annihilates death itself and brings order back into the world. That's why Davis can say that the specter of Hiroshima haunts us (or should). We've exorcised death through mass murder, and delude ourselves into believing they deserved it, that we are morally righteous, and that this actually brings peace and safety back into the world. That's why this deracination is imperative. Such atrocities happen all the time, from the racist murder that plagues our country to our

endless wars, expulsions, exploitations, victimizations, and malignant inhumanity we inflict.

Are there other motivations for all this? Of course there are. Davis isn't revealing the one true sacred answer or giving us a grand unification theory of destruction. What he is saying is that if we examine the rhetoric, language, ideology, rationale, moral justification, and utopian imaginations that arise from fantasies of justified death and destruction, we will find that there's something else besides misinformation, economic concerns, and other cliched explanations. We need to engage the subtleties and language of death, purification, exorcism, and evil to get more deeply into all this ideological passion, desire for vengeance, purgation, and annihilation if we are to understand it. And we had better understand it if we have any interest in ceasing that predilection to continue inflicting it.

And this is where Davis calls for a war against existential abstraction, against the refusal to get into those nauseating and horrifying depths of our being. The more abstract, abstruse, detached, and linguistically impenetrable, the more it's a surreptitious flight from being, self-understanding, and responsibility. That's why Davis declares war against Heidegger, whom he sees as emblematic of this process of utterly denying the existential engagement with death through impenetrable abstraction, whose logofetishistic abstraction enables him to talk on and on about death and nonbeing while never entering into the horror and pain that possess him, and thus enable him to never deracinate it, so that he can, indeed, become a very part of that inflicting of fear and vengeance with sundry occlusions and rationalizations.

And this deracination is not just a descent into nausea or anguish, but a relentless effort to change the scope of one's being and self-relation. Davis quotes Nietzsche as saying that "Spirit is the life that cuts back into life; with its suffering it increases self-knowledge" (156). The key here is "unremitting self-criticism"—NOT masochistic guilt and self-recrimination (which have their own gratifications and strategies of avoiding self-knowledge)—but a willingness to discover all one doesn't want to know about oneself (160). Doing this means a willingness to see the grotesque in oneself (but again, not a masochistic pleasure in self-punishment). One has to recognize that this is a matter of existential passion, not detachment and philosophic logic or abstraction, which again get one further away from this. One has to get away from existential or metaphysical principles, formulae, comforts, abstractions, supports. One has to get into that personal history and see what deranged and wounded your own being, a history you cannot escape even if you can become unconscious or make endless excuses or struggle to deny through myriad ideological postures (168). As Davis writes, anxiety is mastered not when it is fled or successfully defended against, but when "it is made the basis of actions that take what anxiety reveals about existence upon themselves" (170). We must pour our being into this task passionately, totally, engaged with life, and our history, and our crippled mode of being, to renew that life of being. It cannot be renewed without this process, but only reinflicts it unconsciously without it.

And there are no utopian solutions here. But one will be less impelled to inflict that violence, or justify it with ingeniously self-deceptive rationalizations, and continue that cycle of misery and unloving. That self-dissection may even enable the self to take moral responsibility, or even (though this may seem impossible to imagine) become freed up to experience life and joy amid the pain. For these revenants will dwindle and possession diminish as you open up that crypt to the self, but possess and consume you more ravenously if you keep those raging ghosts hidden and seeking vengeance.

Death's Dream Kingdom
This leads us to another of Davis' (2006) important works, *Death's Dream Kingdom*. The title is borrowed from a line in T.S. Eliot's (1922) poem *The Wasteland*, and Davis wants to offer us a bleak, uncomfortable, upsetting, disturbing look at the wasteland we have created. What wasteland? Look around. We're destroying the planet with toxic sludge, waste, garbage, and undegradable plastics that fill the oceans and bellies of marine creatures. We suck out the planet's lifeblood and render the sea, land, and air a veritable apocalyptic minefield. We declare people of different ethnicities, religions, and beliefs despicable, inhumane rapists, murderers, terrorists, anarchists, and evildoers who deserve to be deported, imprisoned, or destroyed. Every day we read headlines people brutalized, victimized, or murdered. We wage war after war, murder hundreds of thousands, torture civilians, cage children, all sanctioned and sanctified as morally necessary, patriotic duties to protect humanity, freedom, democracy, liberty, and life.

From Davis' perspective, we've made the world a bloody, festering wasteland. But because we couch so many of these actions in a deceptive language of moral necessity, patriotism, and freedom, we don't see or acknowledge how vicious it is, and how we allow it to happen. Worse, from Davis' perspective many of us want it to happen. We rejoice in death. We slake our thirst for blood and dehumanization. But our fantasies of righteous punishment and purgation of evil blind us to ourselves and the atrocities we enjoy or inflict.

How is that possible??? Clearly most of us don't want to harm, brutalize, destroy, or kill. We don't want to destroy the planet. Most of us just want to get along and lead happy lives. We want to hang out with our families and friends, watch movies, gab about our fun pleasures like *Star Trek: Lower Decks* and *The Boys* (new season in creation – woo hoo!!!). We aren't sadistic marauders looking to inject the earth's crust with a Lysol-explosive or conquer the earth like Dr. Strangelove or Dr. Evil or my cat Pumicles. (Seriously that cat has mental problems.)

But here's the thing. Davis is making the argument that many of us aren't passive victims here. Yes of course most of us are not the perpetrators, most of us are not salacious sinister villains twirling our mustaches, and most of us are horrified by the pain and anguish we see in the world. But at the same time, maybe it's not just those "evil people out there" who are making these things happen. As Ernest Becker (1975) once wrote in his book *Escape From Evil*, it's not just the Hitlerian despots and extremists who make the world such a miserable place. It's the normal, jolly people who are also so

capable of destroying others, and doing it gladly when sucked into an ideology seducing them into believing that others are evil and deserving of the violence inflicted on them. From Becker and Davis' perspective, it's not just the "others," but we who run rampant and are so willing to destroy because we think we are destroying evil. From their perspective, most of the evil on this planet comes from the urge to destroy evil.

But again, aren't most of us just trying to get along? Aren't most of us basically living lives of quiet desperation and struggling just to afford cat food and computers, or maybe an Xbox or iPad or something? Yes of course. But let's look at Davis' weird argument. Davis takes a few disparate and seemingly disconnected examples to illustrate how much we are really far more involved in all this than we think. The examples really seem unrelated. He talks about the war in Iraq, the torture in Abu Ghraib, capitalism, and Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. But though they seem unconnected, there's a thread that connects them, and it's pretty sinister.

From Davis' perspective, each of these examples offers us a glimpse into the ways we secretly thrive on ways of escaping our fear and pain by inflicting them on others. From his perspective, we are afraid. We fear our own vulnerability, our own aloneness, our weakness. We fear others, and other ideas and cultures that make us feel threatened. And we defeat that threat by dominating, dehumanizing, and destroying others, again, with a kind of rhetoric that makes it seem really important, good, necessary, and patriotic, to preserve freedom and protect others.

Davis is making the bizarre claim that the very *purpose* of ideology is some kind of infliction of cruelty. Does that make sense? Ideologies aren't all cruel. And he doesn't think they are. But he does think that many ideologies are specifically invented in order to inflict that fear, pain, and cruelty while disguising them, which means validating them, again, with various moral disguises.

Ideologies That Mask Malice
Let me make an analogy. Bear with me here. Since we are in pumpkin season, imagine ideology as if it were a Halloween costume. Maybe you dress like Captain Kirk, Captain America, or Catwoman. It doesn't matter. You romp around on Halloween having fun, seeking candy and laughs. But let's say that underneath that costume you're some vicious predator. Maybe you want to suck out all the peanut butter from everyone's peanut butter cups, or hoard all the evil Kit Kats in town. (I say they are evil because, as you know, they are owned by Nestle, the Thanos or Dr. Strangelove of the corporate universe.) But it's not just that you might be some kind of evil predator hiding beneath your Halloween costume. For Davis, the costume doesn't just fool other people. It enables you to imagine that you possess that identity of the person you are impersonating. It enables you to imagine that you are some kind of Marvel hero, or patriot, saint, or stable genius. That's the desired goal: To actually cloak your own real self inside a costume, do all sorts of strange, forbidden, or wicked things as if that artificial costume demands and justifies them, and then really believe that you are the person you're pretending to be. This is what Davis thinks ideology does.

So take capitalism, for starters. Sure, capitalism may be a system of exchanges and financial transactions. But for Davis, there's a sinister thread running through this. Per Haraway (2016), there are unseen threads and filaments subtly connecting things in so many of our endeavors. For Davis the thread of capitalism is a secret (and sometimes not so secret) desire to hoard, conquer, and demolish, to prey upon others, to put them out of business, to engage in hostile take-overs, to be wolves in sheep's clothing, to be carnivores who consume, regardless of who else suffers. And the cloak here is the ideology that allows people to say "this is a very normal, healthy, legal way to do business. It's part of the American way. What are you, some sort of communist?"

From Davis' perspective, capitalism contains a thread of predatory selfishness and rapacity that can be excused because it's normal and legal. But this rapacity and cut-throat cruelty isn't all that concealed. Yet somehow we take it for granted, and pretend it's all just ok. Watch the film *The Big Short*, that came out a few years ago. Director Adam McKay is offering us a glimpse of what he calls a secret national pathology, or illness. Here we have all these brokers selling homes they know people can't afford. They know people are being suckered, and they know people will suffer. But because it's legal, they pretend like it's perfectly alright. This is what Arendt (1963) means by the banality of evil. People will do what is socially acceptable and believe it's morally ok because it's legal and seems normal. But perhaps there is still a really selfish, callous, cruelty lurking underneath. And Davis wants us to see how "normal'" or "normatized" this has become. We've seen all sorts of corporations plunder other people and societies, extract water and nutrients from the land, and hoard for profit regardless of whom they destroy in the process. It's part of the system. It's legal (sometimes). Davis is saying that this mode of disguise has become so normatized that we don't see how atrocious it is, and how all this predatory stuff is built right in. It's not just the corporations, but the structure of the system itself which builds a Darwinistic violence into it, and makes it seem entirely ordinary. And for Davis, it's not just that we don't realize it. For Davis, a part of us also thrives on it. That's pretty radical.

Let's turn to his other examples. It might seem really strange that Davis writes about Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* and then compares it to the torture in Abu Ghraib. Here are those seemingly unconnected filaments again. For Davis, this is not just a film about the life and death of Jesus. It's 2.5 hours of bludgeoning torture. It's about immense suffering and cruelty. That's why Davis calls it "the longest piece of snuff porn on record" (25). But what was the audience reaction? Churchgoers went *en masse*, in organized trips, to see this film over and over. Was it Christian love that they found so inspiring and thrilling? Compassion? Charity? Kindness? The love of humanity and message that we must all accept one another in humility and open arms? No. Because there were no such messages. It was constant, unrelenting brutality. So Davis is telling us that THIS is what provided the inspiration and euphoria.

People may claim that it's the Christian message of love and faith that inspires them, but if there is no such message in a film saturated with unrelenting brutality, the

crux of the argument fails. The film simply isn't a testament to love and compassion. Once again, we are in the realm of a Halloween costume gone awry. For Davis what was inspiring could only be that unrelenting spectacle of the film itself: It's sadism and victimization. The ideology may pretend to be about love and compassion and cloak itself in that costume, but Davis is showing us what really inspires some people. What he's saying is that such sadistic cruelty isn't just lurking among some believers, or some unusual minority, but that cruelty disguised as piety may be built into the ideology itself and be its most seductive, thrilling, attractive, compulsive, orgiastic satisfaction. Indeed it *gives* people an excuse to express their deepest, most sadistic fantasies while *pretending* that it's about love and compassion and faith. But the proof is in the pudding. In this case, it's the thrill over sadism masquerading as piety and love when there's no love. Again, the ideology is the mask that allows such cruelty to wear a Halloween costume of piety.

Finally, Davis turns to Abu Ghraib, the prison camp in Iraq. Over 10,000 civilians—not terrorists or insurgents but civilians—were cordoned and captured, then tortured there. They were waterboarded, forced to position their bodies in naked pyramids, held in crucifixion positions, and worse. Muslim men were stripped naked and made to masturbate in front of female guards, which would be especially humiliating given their religious beliefs. Meanwhile, guards like Lynndie England would pose in front of their victims, thumbs up in happy support, while photographic evidence also shows images of the guards themselves having a good time, even having sex, interspersed with images of torture.

Now the Bush administration would tell us that this was "just a few bad apples," but massive amounts of evidence tell us that this extended far beyond those few (Danner, 2004). This camp required the knowledge and participation of thousands, from ordinary soldiers to commissioned officers to generals to politicians. Davis' point here is that it wasn't just a few apples, but a machinery of sadistic torture. And it could be supported because, in his view, despite the Halloween costume of patriotism and democracy, this camp enacted that desire to transform fear and rage into humiliation and victimization. It manifested the American need to lash out after 9/11, the need to hold people accountable and devastate them, to humiliate them in proportion to the way we were terrorized, shocked, and felt emotionally vulnerable and wounded. This is the very dynamic responsible for the support for the Iraqi war. In reality, Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein were mortal enemies. Iraq had nothing whatsoever to do with 9/11, but after these attacks G.W. Bush used a rhetoric of innocent victimization and self-righteous, holy justice to induce our populace to destroy the perpetrators. They weren't the actual perpetrators, but Bush talked about taking scalps for what they did to us, and said God wanted him to invade Iraq, and thus cloaked our need for revenge into sacred defense of freedom and righteous vengeance. Meanwhile, this Halloween costume of democratic freedom murdered hundreds of thousands of innocents and tortured over tens of thousands, and used depleted nuclear shells, to inflict sadistic vengeance on those who had nothing to do with 9/11 (cf. Piven, 2007).

That's why Davis calls the war in Iraq an exorcism. It exorcized a horrible, evil spirit. It ritually evacuated our own inner terror and anger—and inflicted them on others, who were unwillingly also cloaked in the Halloween costume of evil terrorists so that we could play these Halloween games and pretend that it was all real and morally just. In sum, Davis wants us to see how easy it is for us to be possessed by our own fear, dread, and rage, how easy it is for us to need scapegoats to punish and kill in response to our inner terror and anger, and how easy it is for us to fool ourselves into believing that these costumes are real, and that our enemies (who we've forced to wear those evil costumes) really are evil and deserve to die.

And that's how we've made the world a wasteland, and how we can see these costumes being work in all sorts of ideologies. Whether we wear them to prey upon others financially while cloaking our callous cruelty as normal economics, whether we can find bludgeoning cruelty and victimization orgasmically inspirational by cloaking it as religious piety, or whether we can cloak our own terror and rage in the argot of holy or patriotic vengeance, Davis wants us to see how much ideology can become that way of deceiving ourselves about our own unseen dread, malice, and madness. And the world remains death's dream kingdom as long as we continue to exorcise all that instead of recognizing what we ourselves are allowing and enjoying.

Apathy, Anger, and Existential Engagement
One last thing. Some people may note that Davis' writing is hyperbolic, animated, exaggerated, even angry. He isn't adopting that expected tone of academic neutrality or objectivity. But of course he isn't. Davis wants to get you upset. He wants to break you out of your comfort zone, and out of your apathy. From his perspective, these atrocities should be upsetting. They should make you angry, outraged, and emotional. From his perspective, calmness and apathy are totally inappropriate responses to what's going on in the world today. The only moral and emotional response to atrocity should be outrage and indignation. How can one not be upset and enraged in response to the world's horrors? From his perspective there's something wrong if we *don't* feel (or allow ourselves to feel) horror and despair. So of course he uses a language that isn't neutral or calm. Apathy in response to such horrors is the symptom, not outrage.

So the moral and existential question he wants to force upon you is whether you want to submerge yourself in avoidance of the world's injustices, to use excuses and rationalizations, to pretend it isn't happening, to pretend it's always someone else's fault, or whether you are willing to break yourself out of those excuses, see the pain and terror possibly driving your own activities, and really make moral choices acting in the world.

That's up to you of course. Davis isn't just a philosopher. His frame of reference is Shakespeare. And as per *Hamlet*, the play is the thing to catch the conscience of the king. He wants to catch your conscience, and break us out of our moral shells, to see what may be really lurking under these Halloween costumes…. Or you can continue to wear them and pretend evil is everyone and everywhere else.

Right now we are in the midst of some divisive, epic cultural crises. We may find that Davis' incisive critique is *especially* pertinent now. What do these current crises say about us, culturally and individually? What do they say about the ideological costumes we wear, and what may be lurking beneath the Halloween masks and garb? What is going on beneath the surface, existentially and psychologically? What drives our cultural concerns, convictions, wounds, and fantasies? We can read Davis against our culture, and ourselves, right now. We can use his templates to think about what is being acted out through our ideologies.

We are trying to understand aspects of those crises that are unexpected, counterintuitive, perplexing, and outside our realm of expectations. How do we understand the beliefs, attitudes, dogmas, and passions of our fellow citizens today? How do we understand the anger, rage, bigotry, prejudice, hatred, sanctimony, and fervor of so many citizens today, many of whom are armed with military weapons, not only ready to take up arms against the specters of socialism and tyranny, but enraged with a sense of injustice, fueled by notions of conspiratorial malfeasance, sanctified by the belief that God himself justifies the kidnapping of politicians and overthrow of satanic forces of evil?

We can blame it on misinformation, ignorance, and all sorts of other explanations. But that doesn't really explain the fervor, intensity, and anger. It doesn't explain the willingness to kill, the conviction that people are evil enemies of Satan, the abject hatred for various people of color or religion, the frenetic terror driving those who imagine some kind of conspiratorial web of godless corruption, sexual perversion, communist government overthrow, and so on. We're not just talking about mistaken ideas, but intense hatred, fear, anger, and the demonization of people deemed supernatural agents of iniquity deserving of death.

How do we understand this? Permit me approach this from an unexpected angle, just to pique your interest. Or as Monty Python would say, and now for something completely different. In 1995, an apocalyptic cult in Japan released toxic sarin gas into the Tokyo subways, killing 12 and injuring some 5000 others. Led by cult leader Shoko Asahara, Aum combined elements of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity to follow a leader who claimed to be Jesus, Buddha, and Krishna rolled into one divine figure, and their plan was to save the world by destroying it, which would inaugurate an apocalyptic rebirth. After their attack on the Tokyo subway, police quickly located and imprisoned Asahara, as well as his more militant followers. But the group reformed, apparently in a less apocalyptic capacity. (We hope.) There are reasons this event is being described here.

First, it's important to note that members of Aum weren't uneducated yokels who didn't know any better. Many of them were educated scientists and other professionals. They didn't follow Asahara or believe his theological claims or apocalyptic vision of rebirth because they were just poor, uneducated, ignorant people. Something else is going on when you believe that you can purify and resurrect the entire planet by killing

everyone. Something else is going on when you believe that putting a colander on your head with wires leading to the brain of your savior will impart his divine thoughts. Something else is going on when you believe that you have the right to sodomize people to death with a spear and that this will magically bring that person into a higher existence (Lifton, 1999). Again, we need some deeper explanation than ignorance and poverty, the usual cliches that don't really answer anything.

Second, just recently the new leader of the reformed Aum cult was quoted as saying that Trump supporters reminded him of cult followers. Think about this for a minute. Jou Yuu had experience in an actual apocalyptic cult where people worshipped a paranoid, messianic, narcissistically deluded, homicidal fanatic. He had experience with people who believed the most abject inanity and paranoid fantasies, who were absolutely immune to scientific evidence or any reality that impinged on their absurd delusions, who worshipped an unstable, deranged, demented, megalomaniacal, genocidal mental patient. And after almost four years of witnessing our own politics, speeches, and lunacy, said that *our own American citizens* reminded him of an apocalyptic cult.

Whether you agree with him isn't the issue. He might be totally wrong, or indeed, ensconced within his own fantasies and self-deceptions. If philosophy teaches us anything, it's that we all need to question our own perceptions and convictions, even when we are absolutely sure that we see things accurately. Indeed, it's the people who are most sure, most convinced, most dogmatic, most sanctimonious who need to question their certainties.

What is at issue here is that people's beliefs, dogmas, and certainties aren't necessarily (or at all) based on actual realities or events. Davis is trying to show us how much ordinary, educated people are not nearly as rational as we'd like to believe, and if we want to *understand* what's going on today, we have to examine what deep emotional, existential issues are being acted out.

Remember, Davis thinks that these deeper issues are being expressed in a language that disguises and masks people's real motivations. They are wearing those Halloween costumes that camouflage their deeper desires and issues as heroism, patriotism, morality, concern for freedom, and so on. We won't understand them if we accept the costume as the reality.

Fundamentalisms and the Weaponization of Wounds
Hence Davis starts his chapter on fundamentalism by describing the features endemic to this form of life. It's not a criticism of all forms of Christianity or all religion, though Davis does still believe these tend to be fantasy systems. But what defines fundamentalism is the conviction of biblical inerrancy or literalism. What does this mean? It means the belief that the bible is always correct and must be taken literally. We need to understand literalism. It means that things mean exactly what they say, and can't be metaphoric. A literalist doesn't see the eucharist as symbolic. He doesn't see allegory, or mythology, but history. In the Christian ritual, the bread is supposed to be the body of

Christ. *Hoc est corpus meium*. The wine is supposed to be his blood. The literalist sees the ritual as literally transforming bread and wine into flesh and blood. It's a magical ritual. Someone capable of seeing the metaphoric elements may understand the ritual as spiritually transformative rather than magically enabling people to drink Jesus' blood in an act of divine vampirism or cannibalism. The mythologist Joseph Campbell (1988) once wrote that taking religious ideas literally was like mistaking a menu for the meal and eating it (67), or (1951) like talking about Jesus ascent to heaven as if he was literally "rising from the earth, to pass beyond the bounds of our solar system" (125). At the speed of the space shuttle he might still be in our galaxy. You miss a hell of a lot of wisdom if you refuse the symbolism or allegory.

But fundamentalism is about literal, unerring, historical fact that cannot be doubted or interpreted differently. And Davis believes that believing literally is a symptom of a psychological disorder: A need to make everything absolute, to answer existential questions about life and death in absolute, unerring ways that completely eradicate anxiety, terror, and doubt, in ways that enable one *to destroy thought itself*. Because thought can lead to other possibilities, to doubts, to questions, which can lead to anxiety, if not abject terror, when you consider the possibility that your ideas may not be absolutely true. Fundamentalist beliefs fulfill deep psychological needs. They aren't just about misinformation or ignorance.

Hence Davis could say that religion is desire displacing itself into dogmas to assure the flock that what they desire is writ into the nature of things. In other words, their needs and fantasies become an absolute, inviolable, unquestionable truth mapped onto the universe. And what a comfort it is that they are so absolute that there is no doubt, no anxiety that it may be false, that there may be other gods, that they may not know everything, that it may be a fantasy charade. Unless of course, people do have other religious ideas or doubts, in which case they will be labeled heretics and burned at the stake, ostracized, alienated, or even in the 21st century, considered demonic deviants, perverts, and socialists despised by God.

Davis also wants us to recognize the difference between those cult leaders or grand inquisitors and their flocks. Read Dostoevsky's (1880) *Brothers Karamazov*, or the Grand Inquisitor chapter, to get a sense of the kinds of sadistic and horribly inhumane things leaders can do while actually imagining that they are faithfully ministering to the needs of their flocks, or humanity. This applies to religious and political inquisitors, and to what is going on right now.

But also, Davis wants us to recognize that the hapless, passive sheep may not be nearly so passive. People also have their deep emotional, existential needs and desires. Instead of just claiming that leaders impose ideas on people and bamboozle them, Davis is claiming that people also elect, idealize, and worship leaders who represent their own desires (stated or secret), that when they believe leaders, it's not just because of some godlike charisma or magical spell, but because people resonate with certain ideas, are given permission to believe or act them out, and can now behave in all sorts of racist,

bigoted, violent ways with impunity because all that is now justified and given approval by their leader. We're back to Arendt's (1963) banality of evil, the Milgram (1974) experiments, and all the work on group psychology that shows us how much people are sometimes indeed influenced, but also, that they are seeking leaders who will validate their own secret desires, who will give them permission to behave in reprehensible ways, make those disgustingly immoral acts seem noble and moral, give them the feeling that they are actually patriotic heroes acting courageously to defend democracy against evildoers instead of pathetic losers being defeated by smarter, more competent people.

So again, Davis can say that religions (as well as other ideologies) are invaluable because they offer the deepest insight into the nature of the psyche and its needs. And again, some of those deepest needs are to redeem human beings from their deepest fears, to give them solace in the face of death, to make them feel like they are good, important people instead of helpless, insignificant losers. And of course, to demonize and destroy those who question this fantasy, label them as heretics or evil enemies that deserve to be humiliated and punished for all those ideas that don't conform to what one needs to believe.

As Davis writes, literalism is the first line of defense of a mind that wants to put itself to sleep. Because again, being awake and aware means seeing other possibilities. It means having questions, seeing cracks in one's ideological fortress. Intelligence means having the capacity to see alternatives, consider complexities, doubt one's own truths, accept actual facts. That threatens the eternal truth of one's fantasies and dogmas. So intelligence must be put to sleep. Here Davis is echoing thinkers like Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, and Beauvoir, who talk about the way people delusionally remold reality, close their minds off, live in fantasies, and reject realities that are too painful. Again, in anthropologist Weston La Barre's (1980) words, every fundamentalism is an intellectual lobotomy—a deliberate, self-imposed one.

But as Davis writes when offering the vignette of the young girl "saved" at the age of three, this child is so firm in every article of her faith that she knows everything and doesn't need instruction from parents or teachers. And in response to the question "what happens to those who don't believe?" she immediately answers, "they go to hell." That is the chilling response: Absolute certainty with the absence of doubt or pity.

It's not just that one lobotomizes oneself. It's that this absolute certainty involves the absolute rejection of doubt, thought, or pity for other human beings. It involves "the need to *impose* that hatred upon the world in a totalizing way" (128). The hatred again comes from any inking of thought or doubt that might puncture the absolute truth of one's mirages. Unbelievers must be abolished, as Nietzsche says (1888b, 173). What's at issue here is that some people—clearly not all among religious folks—immerse themselves in these dogmas because they have a desperate need for absolutes, and that desperate need for absolutes results not only in self-infantilizing, self-lobotomizing totalistic dogmas, but also an abject hatred for anything that threatens the absolute truth

of those salvation fantasies. And again, part of that absolute dogma is the moral justification to demonize and destroy those who doubt and disagree.

That's what's so scary. Those now despised are deemed inherently, innately evil and deserving of pain and death. The righteous are justified by God (or in secular contexts, some rhetoric of patriotism and freedom) to arrest, imprison, torture, or destroy anyone violating their sanctimonious ideology. As Davis writes, such dogmatism reflects the fear and hatred of the contingencies that constitute being in the world. In other words, the hatred of all realities that threaten the eternal truths that make one feel safe, protected, and important in the face of death and insignificance.

Further, fundamentalisms are in love with a common story, that the subject finds oneself in a world of sin, prey to all the evils of the world. The inner world is a foul and pestilent congregation of sin and sinfulness. This is an allusion to *Hamlet*, of course, and it refers to that experience of the world as envelopingly evil. But the thing is, delivering oneself over to that religion, political cause, or ideology does something really significant psychologically. It delivers the psyche *from itself*. The old self is extinguished and one is delivered from one's own inner pain, conflict, misery, and despair, as well as one's own feelings of being inferior, defective, guilty, sinful, evil, loathsome, inept, stupid, and insignificant.

All of this inner flotsam is now projected outward upon one's enemies. One is redeemed by entry into that religion, that ideology, that sacred or patriotic group or sanctum, whereby one is now a proud, noble, elite, sanctimonious agent of truth, power, and righteousness. That inner eucharist, that inner transformation, redemption, and deliverance not only rescues oneself from that inner hatred and misery, but by projecting it on others, allows people to despise it in them instead of oneself. It's all projected on the evil other, who is now justifiably destroyed as an unconscious substitute for the detested, weak, repugnant, inferior, inner self. That is the deepest need, to exorcise all that from the self and project it on the other, who is now self-righteously, nobly, divinely, patriotically labeled some kind of wicked threat and enemy to all goodness and freedom. That's why Davis can say that Thanatos has created a psyche dedicated to soul murder—to the murder of one's own soul (and the souls of others, who must be bludgeoned into obedience or liquidated as substitutes for the hated self that must be condemned and demolished in sublime self-redemption.)

Reality dies a horrible death as people are condemned, vilified, and slaughtered in the midst of this hallucinatory exorcism. And the thing is, this ritual exorcism is psychologically necessary for some people, and it takes a variety of forms. Davis focuses here on Christian fundamentalists and terrorists. But it can assume a variety of guises. It can be fundamentalists of all denominations. It can be self-righteous people of all political parties, from Bernie supporters to college students demanding the punishment and condemnation of those they consider evil heretics. Because this is psychological process, and it can again be cloaked in that Halloween costume. If enough people resonate with it, and it is made into a political cause, that cloak makes it seem more real

and moral, and hides what may be going on psychologically. Unless of course you are attuned to the way this happens.

And if you are, you might be able to see it in action. How? For starters, we have to resist the urge to answer all these questions with the usual trite formulae. Yes people are affected by all sorts of things, from education to material conditions to social media. But they only really explain everything when they give us tidy answers, which means when we ask questions about the intricacies and variables that closure goes away. When we want to examine why someone could deny evolution or climate change despite mountains of evidence, or why someone could say grossly misogynistic, grotesquely bigoted things for decades while people somehow see him as the epitome of Christian messianic destiny and deliverance, when people can believe that there's a pandemic conspiracy of pedophilic politicians in a national trafficking ring (despite being empirically debunked), we might search for more nuanced explanations that illuminate that dogma, rage, absoluteness, certainty, and intolerance for science, evidence, or doubt. If you want to see how this applies to any person or ideology, ask questions. See how rigid and indubitable the answers are. See how upset people become. Do they talk with you or shout you down? Do they genuinely consider your ideas or declare you a heretic (or communist, socialist, infidel, fascist, or whatever)? Do they meditate on your ideas or categorically label you some witless echochamber of the fake news? Do they ever change their opinions? Are they receptive to evidence? Are you? Per this entire essay, this is not just something that reads other people, but potentially ourselves.

Conclusions

Davis is giving us another lens to examine the way dogma works, the way fundamentalisms operate, and why. He's giving us the model of a psychological exorcism to illustrate the way people can close off their perceptions of reality, solidify them, make them absolute, and immune to reason and evidence. He's teaching us about self-deception and the motives we have to become so ideologically sanctimonious, how we do this to evacuate all our life's inner failings and fears by projecting them onto others while cloaking them in the Halloween costumes of patriotism or any other enlightened truth that grants permission to excoriate and vilify others. This can help us understand terrorism across the sea, fundamentalism at home, some of our own peers, and maybe, ourselves if we catch ourselves in self-righteous, dogmatic, supercilious moral judgments. If nothing else, it should impel us to doubt our certainties, and wonder how people arrive at their moral judgments. It may not be all that rational. And sometimes, it may be delusional, no matter how real people claim it is.

But this is where Davis also wants you to take moral responsibility, and engage in that painful philosophical labor or knowing yourself. Consider the psychological translation algorithm he offers. One person says "I was a lustful man and worshipped the Devil," while another says "I was a man who feared and thus hated women and used sex to injure them psychologically, but couldn't admit my weakness or cowardice, so I had to blame it all on something else." Or take other examples: As per Beauvoir (1948), one could declare "those evil people are inferior, lazy predators out to steal what I have and

ruin this country" or one can say "those people who are different scare me, intimidate me, threaten me intellectually and sexually. They may be smarter or more capable than I. And I can't tolerate feeling this insecure and potentially inferior, so I find ways to belittle and dehumanize them." Or "these socialists are trying to overthrow the government with corruption. They want to create a big government like Russia where we have no freedom or power," as opposed to "I feel so utterly helpless and inferior that I have to project my own anger and hostility on them and accuse them of all my own desires and failings. That's the only way to redeem myself from misery and self-loathing."

Of course these are simple binaries for the purpose of showing you how inner knowledge must be disavowed and transformed. As Davis says, everything bad is now located outside the self. That's the exorcistic process. One involves projection, displacing moral responsibility, locating evil in devils. It could be Muslims, Mexicans, socialists or whomever. Evil is outside the self. Moral behavior and realistic moral assessment means admitting one's weaknesses to oneself, admitting one feels fear, resentment, envy, or insecurity instead of demonizing others. That may never happen to all the fundamentalists, terrorists, and supremacists around this country, but now that you have an intimation how these things happen, you may see the necessity of understanding yourself. To put it another way, you won't be capable of making realistic or justifiable moral judgments until you do this.

What Davis provides here is a dialogue with psychoanalysis and existential philosophy to create a psychological epistemology for the self. The Socratic maxim may be to "know thyself," and philosophers have offered innumerable forceful imperatives to reject metaphysical comforts and examine our beliefs. Psychoanalysis has also offered the most complex models of psychodynamics, unconscious cognition, fantasy, defense, and transformation. But how we actually engage in the process of self-dissection and deracination (outside the clinical encounter) is far more complicated, arduous, and elusive than we might suspect even for those who live and breathe these ideas. Davis is arguing that we have to perceive our deepest wounds and weaknesses in the ways we believe, in our certainties, in our sacred truths, in the places we feel most secure, in the ways we perceive and judge others, and in the ways we love (or fail at love). Our own wounds hemorrhage into the world. We may be unaccustomed to seeing our own (seemingly enlightened or rational) convictions as self-escapes, or our ways of deriving erotic pleasure and intimacy as necrophilia or necromancy. Davis is warning us that there's far more to uproot in all our perceptions and ecstasies than we want to know; even more than our philosophical or clinical training might prepare us for, since our exorcistic and self-unknowing impulses are unrelenting and ever beguiling us *especially* when the ego thinks it sees clearly. It's worth taking seriously before (defensively) rejecting or reassuring ourselves that we know enough....

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