Absolutism in Society and the Individual (*)
Karl Figlio

Absolute States of Mind

By absolutism, I refer to a state of mind that, in social terms, one would call fundamentalism. Typically one thinks of religious fundamentalism, and attributes a fanaticism to it; but it is broader than religion and more subtle than fanaticism. We should include at least, not only al-Qaeda and the Christian Moral Majority, but also fascism, the animal rights movement and advocacy of intelligent design. And while Right Wing groups threaten secular, liberal society today, the absolutism that characterises them equally characterises Left Wing groups. I intend my analysis to apply to them as well.

Fundamentalisms present a particular problem. They are rational and politically strategic. At the same time, they seem simply to express a resentment of Western secular society for its immorality, and to present themselves as exemplars of righteousness by comparison with it. Neither account is adequate without reference to the other. They call for comprehension in both sociological and religious, or in both sociological and psychological terms. To approach such a complex topic, we need to define a core theme and we need the input of different disciplines. For me, absolutism and fundamentalism go together, and I will approach them by specifying a state of mind that we find in both society and the individual. I call it an ‘absolute state of mind’.

By absolute state of mind, I mean a state of idealization of self merged with an idealized object as an ego-ideal, withdrawn from external reality and from its constraints, such as time, space, difference, frustration, work, the otherness of objects: all the ways in which we empirically inhabit the world. I will concentrate on three features. Firstly, in absolutist social movements, individual egos dissolve into each other and into their idealized leader. In a condition of spiritualized purity, outside dimension and the material reality of everyday life, they instantaneously eject ordinary reality and live in a world of cosmic significance. Secondly, in order to maintain their purity, absolutist groups must separate themselves from all others, particularly ‘others’ that must emerge inside themselves, as happens in the fragmentation into sects, which shades into conflict between neighbours, as in Palestine (Falk, 2004) and the former Yugoslavia (Blok, 1998, who gives several examples). Thirdly, idealization is stalked by desolation at cosmic failure.

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I want to emphasize that these processes are basically psychotic, not necessarily in florid behaviour, but in their replacing ego-based reality-testing with an ego-ideal-based confusion of idealization and reality; in their expulsion of thinking; in their
possessing the ‘other’ by projective identification – whether it be nature or an other’s belief – which triggers a dread of pollution by others. They are essentially violent, in that ordinary reality must be exterminated along with the otherness that always emerges around them and from within them.

In exploring a state of mind, I hope to draw out a common social theme that is amenable to psychoanalytic investigation. Such an approach crosses disciplinary boundaries between psychoanalysis and sociology, but I think such a move is justified. Firstly, it speaks to the need, in any social explanation, to understand the intentions of social actors and the nature of the social cohesiveness that makes a collection of individuals into a social group (Sayer, 2000). Secondly, once psychoanalytic thinking and methods become familiar to the sociologist, new areas of evidence from the clinic, as well as new types of theory, become available. Thirdly, fundamentalist behaviour, in particular, calls out for a psychoanalytic account.

On this last point, I draw on the work of two distinguished scholars, who argue that it is possible to distil the essential features of fundamentalist movements, and I approach their conclusions from the angle of idealization and the desolation that stalks it. Steven Bruce (2000), in his book, *Fundamentalism*, and Robert Paxton (2004), in *The Anatomy of Fascism*, single out key features that they hold to be definitive, without which fundamentalism or fascism would be a more general state of oppression, terror or tyranny, but would not be fundamentalism or fascism. These features are emotional and experiential – beliefs, behaviour, states of mind, group attitudes – and they are common across the spectrum of movements covered by the two books.

Bruce speaks of the ‘charismatic intensity’ (p. 14) of fundamentalist movements; of their drive to purify themselves (p. 97); of the ‘elision of enemies’ (pp. 51, 52), by which a diversity of different groups are condensed into one; of the continuous tendency to fragment under the pressure to create new, purer groups; of the suspiciousness with which motive is imputed to events that otherwise would seem to be contingent (pp. 91, 110). Paxton emphasizes the ‘“mobilizing passions” that shape fascist action’, which is more important than ‘a consistent and fully articulated philosophy’ (p. 41). Among these passions are ‘the primacy of the group’, which needs the ‘closer integration of a purer community’; which dreads a ‘decline under the corrosive effects of liberalism, class conflict, and alien influences’, which, as a victim, ‘justifies any action, without legal or moral limits, against its enemies, both internal and external’ (pp. 41, 218–9). Both authors single out an emotional attitude, stance, frame of mind, which distinguishes the absolutism of these groups. Paramount among these features of absolutism is a dread of internal corruption and loss of cohesion, matched by a quest for purity – each feeding the other. The aggression – including violence – becomes extreme because it is directed, not really against outsiders, but against outside representatives of the causes to which they impute their dreaded internal decay.

These ‘mobilizing passions’ are like forces, detachable from any particular objective. They bind people into groups, independently of the conscious aims of the groups, becoming a force that can drive any action. Ostow (1996) reports on a project aimed at discovering psychodynamic constants in anti-Semitism. His group found only a correlation with overall aggression, with ‘no single diagnostic entity [or] specific
defence or organising fantasy’ (p. 16), nor any ‘prevailing mythic theme’ (p. 21).
There is a force that presses relentlessly for purity, for a homogeneous group that is
merged with its leader (p. 25; also, see Loewenberg, 1971, pp. 1498–1501, concerning
research from the 1930s by Theodore Abel, further analysed by Peter Merkl, into the
autobiographies of Nazi party members, showing that they thought party enemies were
immoral, unclean, subhuman and treasonous).

I see an absolute state of mind as mental organization that acts as such a powerful
force. It is always present – normal – but not always dominant. Circumstances
precipitate it. Paxton analyses in detail the conditions that led to a successful fascism
in Germany, but not in France, Belgium, Holland, Ireland and Britain (pp. 68–75).
Bruce sees a common theme in fundamentalism, in the response of traditional,
religious culture to the threat of modernization, but argues that it is only one response.
‘Why some people respond by becoming fundamentalists while others do not is a
matter for the particulars of each circumstance’ (p. 118).

I will concentrate on the organized state of mind itself, rather than on what is
particular. Extremist movements are single-minded and simple in their perception of
moral and emotional dilemmas; in their sense of conviction, underwritten by moral
purpose and in their unflinching persistence. They foreclose on complexity and
symbolic thinking. They do not suffer ambiguity and uncertainty, and disparage the
toleration of difference, debate and compromise, in which they see moral torpor,
degeneration and corruption. They promote consensus and move to action in support
of it, unhindered by doubt or by conflict of beliefs.

These movements will go to any length to establish a new moral order or to recover a
lost moral order. They adhere to a saviouristic austerity in the service of purity of
mind and purpose, and to a belief that they know the truth, including the meaning of
sacred texts, held to be inerrant. Absolutists purify the world by eliminating the
laxness, which is evidence of decadence, and present themselves as guardians or
priests of rebirth. Their drive to unite with the ideal makes everyday life into an
enactment in a cosmological/mythical dimension, disconnected from external reality
(Ostow, 1996). Their quest for purity and unification with the ideal is sustained by an
intense projective force into an object and an unlimited aggression against this
projected object, which carries the dreaded impurity.  

The pressing question is how to develop a methodology for studying absolute states of
mind. These states are ‘normal’. Even in the case of extremism, to call them fanatical
is to adopt a posture that maintains a moral distance from them. As soon as they are
distanced, the connection with ourselves as researchers is broken, and the only means
by which their nature can be revealed is lost. Here is a fundamental problem in social
science methodology: we need to eliminate the moral distance between researcher and
object, in order to plumb the depths of this phenomenon as a state of mind. Absolute
states of mind have an aim, which no description from the outside can convey. We
have, therefore, to allow their aims and their attitudes towards the world to be our
aims and attitudes, in order to animate their content with an emotional force of
absolutism that arises from ourselves.
Such an analytical approach is quintessentially psychoanalytic. It imbues the subjective turn in sociological theory with methodological rigour. It gives meaning to ‘empathy’ (Dilthey and Weber) as a research tool, and to the lived social reality of the ‘life world’ of Simmel. In place of empathy, we have the detailed analysis of transference and counter-transference. In place of the life world, we have the internal world, which, projected into the external world, animates this described world with emotional, symbolic, fantastic thoughts and feelings. The process of internalising the descriptive world, mixing it with one’s own internal world, and projecting it as an emotion- and phantasy-animated world, is part of the systematic research of psychoanalytic technique (Money-Kyrle, 1956; Brenman-Pick, 1985). And although the systematic analysis of transference and counter-transference is best achieved in the clinical setting, that restriction does not preclude our making use of the same way of thinking, and its findings, in social analysis.

The authors I have cited seem to agree on general features of fundamentalist thinking: the conviction of rightness; the quest for purity, linked with extensive projection of the impure; the homogenization and polarization of insider and outsider groups; the merger with an ideal, including indubitable access to the meaning of sacred texts. Yet, as Bruce concludes, fundamentalist thinking is rational and normal. The convergence of a wide range of disciplines reinforces the view that, in fundamentalism, the nexus of thinking, affect and action come to a sharp focus, and that exploring this mentality in the transference-countertransference relationship, as well as using its findings, adds an essential dimension to understanding it.

In taking up these features, I focus psychoanalytically on the garnering of goodness and therefore on the role of the ego-ideal and of idealization and its consequences. Fundamentalists seem less driven by hate, than enthralled by their righteous goodness. They are not always fanatical, but more in a state of ‘serene madness’ (Lifton, 1999, p. 122). To succeed in their aim is to hasten God’s work. But to fail is to be abandoned by God, to lose their goodness to their enemies and to be left in desolation. Beneath their idealized self-estimation, one can discern narcissism and hate-filled splitting and projection of denigrated internal objects. It behoves us psychoanalytically to characterize the delusion in the apparent rationality of their aims and strategy, including idealization as a defence against desolation (Melanie Klein’s depressive anxiety) and internal instability. We can then understand the consequences of idealization dynamically, not just descriptively.

The Confusion of Knowing and Believing

This idealization is delusional, but not floridly irrational. It calls for an analysis of the relationship between feeling and thinking, between the emotional and the cognitive aspects of the psyche. The force of the ‘mobilizing passion’, of which Paxton speaks, informs the sense of knowing, and, in my view, we can discern an anti-reality, delusional current in it. The fundamentalist knows he or she is right, whether from authorities on sacred texts (more common in Islam), or from individual interpretation (more common in Protestant fundamentalism), or from the cohesive, consistent conviction of the group, which identifies itself with its beliefs and/or its leader (more common in secular, such as fascist, groups). There is an epistemology of fundamentalism (Bruce, p. 34).
An absolute state of mind confuses believing and knowing. One ‘knows’, as if it were knowledge of the sort that science has of nature or mathematics has of proofs. Western philosophy has maintained a bulwark against such confusion, by holding that mental state and knowledge are separate (Honderich, 1995, pp. 224 – 5). Wittgenstein traces the confusion in thinking into language. He distinguishes between belief or conviction and knowledge, between feelings or states of mind and truth, holding that knowledge is independent of conviction. To assert ‘I know …’ is misleading, because it risks confusing certainty and knowing, both having the aim of security in the face of doubt. But to be certain is to be in a state of mind that is quite different from knowing. To know is to be informed by the outside world, overcoming doubt without removing it. It occurs only inside a ‘language-game’, that is, inside a way of thinking and referring to the world, which is adopted with trust and with a base in accepted parameters (1969, pars 150, 508, 509). It is inductive, in that there must be a position outside one’s current experience, against which one could be mistaken and from which one could learn. Unlike belief, it involves being more sure after there is evidence than before (par. 245). By contrast, the assertion, ‘I know …’, is an expression of certainty that lies outside such a language-game, and in which one cannot accept doubt. ‘Knowledge and certainty belong to different categories’ (par. 308). They are two, different, ways of exempting oneself from doubt (pars. 88, 160 – 2, 337, 375).

Nonetheless, perhaps an emotional force does accompany a logical, empirical or practical thinking process. Indeed, emotion might use thinking to represent it, so that a feeling or state of mind attains the force of knowledge, with knowledge driven by passion. Wittgenstein gives us a clue for exploring, psychoanalytically, whether knowing might also be an emotion.

‘I know’ has a primitive meaning similar to and related to ‘I see’ (‘wissen’, ‘videre’) … ‘I know’ is supposed to express a relation, not between me and the sense of a proposition (like ‘I believe’) but between me and a fact. So that the fact is taken into my consciousness…This would give us a picture of knowing as the perception of an outer event through visual rays which project it as it is into the eye and the consciousness. Only then the question arises whether one can be certain of this projection. And this picture does indeed show how our imagination presents knowledge, but not what lies at the bottom of this presentation. (1969, par. 90)

What lies at the bottom is an empirical matter, or a theoretical supposition that can be tied to an empirical inquiry. There are two components to it: 1) facts; that is, things that can be discovered, so that one is, in Wittgenstein’s terms, more sure after the evidence than before; 2) mental representations – the way things come to us – which take the form of responsiveness to the external or internal worlds. It is more than a matter of representation, in the sense of a picture of nature in the mind: it is an attitude or approach to the world. It is also an attitude or approach to thinking. There is an ignored relationship between ‘me’ and ‘I believe’. Both Wittgenstein and psychoanalysis invite us to bring that relationship into consciousness, and as soon as we do, we recognize that ‘I’ exist in relationships – of trust, doubt, belief, omnipotent control, openness – with the world. Thinking is a relationship, as in an internal
dialogue. To be open to the world and to be open to thinking go together. (see Britton, 1998, pp. 41–58).

From a Kleinian perspective, what essentially grounds a representation is (unconscious) phantasy, in that knowing the object means approaching it with a disposition towards it, and the disposition is carried and realised as a modulation of a phantasy.

The analysis of very young children has taught me that there is no instinctual urge, no anxiety situation, no mental process [my emphasis] which does not involve objects, external or internal; in other words, object-relations are at the centre of emotional life. Furthermore, love and hatred, phantasies, anxieties, and defences are also operative from the beginning and are ab initio indivisibly linked with object-relations. (Klein, 1952, p. 53)

Rather than distorting an otherwise pure cognition, emotion informs it intrinsically. So, in the oral stage, the body-ego of the baby gets to know the object by eating it, quietly or savagely; swallowing it or dismembering it; sparing the source or emptying it; confidently holding it in an inside cavity or losing it. Because the baby assimilates the object as it eats, merging with the food-object, it knows the object as it knows itself. Even the possibility of cognizing the external world as external, as objective, depends on mitigating these pre-genital phantasies of oral incorporation and identification (also phantasies of anal and phallic mastery, omnipotent creation and destruction).

Learning how to live securely in the world; learning the rules by which we record patterns of regularity; formulating these experiences as ‘I believe…’, or ‘I am convinced…’, or ‘I know…’ – all these cognitive achievements are carried on waves of phantasy-emotion work, which move between two poles, the one pre-genital and omnipotent; the other genital and open to nurturing what is provided by the beneficence of the world. The latter is akin to Wittgenstein’s saying that knowing is ‘by the grace of nature’ and that it is built on trust (1969, pars. 150, 505, 508, 509; Meltzer distinguishes between the pre-genital, omnipotent creation of children, and the genital, nurturing of children; 1973, pp. 62–73, 83–5; I have explored, psychoanalytically, the gaining of objectivity in Figlio, 2000).

The emotion of knowing, in the sense of discovery, and the feeling of certainty share the aim of removing doubt, yet they are different. Wittgenstein argues that we gain our sense of certainty from not pursuing the extent to which we aim to make assertions that stand outside doubt or empirical testing. He asks whether such an assertion may ‘simply be isolated from doubt, though not according to any explicit rule? It simply gets assumed as a truism, never called into question, perhaps not even ever formulated’ (1969, par. 87).

The feeling of certainty puts us beyond doubt and establishes an ersatz security based on extinguishing doubt. It is based on superiority. It is an affect, an expression of libidinal energy and urgency in the absence of thinking, whether in relation to another person or to a mathematical formulation. Psychoanalytically, the feeling of certainty is driven by the need to get to the root of the object in order to secure itself against
loss – against depressive anxiety (Klein, 1935). In this situation of imminent loss, it is a way of libidinally seizing the object to eliminate doubt.

Knowing, in contrast with certainty, builds on confidence in the reliability of a relationship, and conveys an intimation of objectivity. Wittgenstein distinguishes between the assurance of objectivity (Sicherheit) and the feeling of certainty (Gewissheit) (pars. 58, 401, 403, 415). Assurance expresses a trust in the object, with an aim to get to know it better (Larsson, 2005, speaks of ‘knowledging’), along with an imminent recognition of the frailty of the object and the need to maintain and restore it (Klein, 1937). Although knowing is couched in a language-game in which at least some aspects are accepted as beyond doubt, it begins in confidence, not in superiority. Even of mathematics, Wittgenstein says that, although we take mathematical, logical and scientific propositions to have a special status of certainty, in fact we become sure of them as part of language-games, in the way we learn about anything else (1969, pars 650 – 7). I would group together knowing, discovery, evidence and confidence: literally keeping faith with someone. Wittgenstein says knowing is ‘always by favour of nature’ (1969, par. 505; Bernstein, 1992).

So there are two forms of security, both based on exemption from doubt: one through certainty and the other through knowing. In psychoanalytic terms, certainty replaces the good object with oneself, that is, through narcissism. The feeling of certainty makes either blood brothers or outcasts of others, because they are either included, as identical to the self, within the narcissism by which the self is raised beyond doubt, or denigrated into valuelessness by the superiority of narcissism. Knowing, by contrast, refers to trust in an internal, good object, by whose grace we are secure as a self. The emotion associated with truth, discovery and confidence induces similar feelings in others, because, in their presence, one identifies with the good internal object and is graceful to others.

Remaining thoughtful is like a passion of knowing, to be put along with a passion of loving or of hating. Bion called it K, and aligned it with L(ove) and H(ate), as abstractions of these three passionate links. In loving one exalts the object on the model of a primal and lost perfection; in hating, one debases the object in order to remain ideal to oneself; in knowing, one surmounts love and hate in contemplating the object without moulding into a primal form. Knowing requires a tolerance of loving and hating as libidinal relationships to the object. I think Wittgenstein was trying to distinguish what Bion called K from L and H: knowing from conviction and certainty or, more generally, from emotional attitudes. In Bion’s terms, certainty would be a form of arrogance, probably a form of ‘H’, while an empirical attitude would be a form of K.

Bion speaks of knowledge in ‘O’, which is objective; that is, knowing the nature of things without the distortion of subjectivity, even though it seems to be based utterly on subjectivity. The subjectivity of the individual vanishes as the relationship with the object becomes immediate and as it surmounts the passion of libido. Such a relationship of pure objectivity carries with it a sense of security, not borne of libidinal passion, where libidinal passion could takes the form either of love, with its idealization of the object; or hate, with its idealization of the ego. For Bion such a
state can only be achieved if the subject can bear frustration, since the object is always absent or late with respect to libidinal needs (1970, p. 30).

The Delusional Roots of the Absolute State of Mind

It seems clear that the retreat from the emotion of knowing into certainty is paranoid-schizoid in character. Since paranoid-schizoid processes defend against depressive anxiety, we can see the move to certainty as a retreat from depressive anxiety, the anxiety of having damaged and lost one’s good internal object. In the paranoid-schizoid position, in which the object is the object of phantasy, not of perception, the depressive anxiety of loss of object is replaced by the persecutory anxiety of loss of self, perhaps organized as a manic defence (Klein, 1935). The grandiosity of certainty, which then secures the self, persecutes, denigrates and discards the external world.

But even more: it is a delusional state, out of touch with reality. To understand this process, we need to make fuller use of the concept of the ego-ideal. Absolutist groups share a dynamic feature: they all require an ‘other’ to them, which is impure and which secures their own sense of superiority. The promotion of self, along with the denigration of the other, is driven by idealization. In idealization, external reality is not perceived immediately, but through the ego-ideal. One either idealizes oneself by identifying with the ego-ideal, or idealizes external reality by identifying it with the ego-ideal (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1985a, pp. 76–93). Whatever is not idealized – whatever is identified with doubt, uncertainty, time, thinking itself – is projected and must, as an imperfection, be as absolutely annihilated as the idealized is treasured as perfection.

For Freud, the ego-ideal is heir to primary narcissism, and, therefore, a reservoir of a perfection that pre-exists the object world and its strictures (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1985a). To identify with it is to detach oneself from reality, through the perception of oneself as perfect and one’s object world as denigrated and worthless. It is to lapse into psychosis. The rules are different here. Phantasy is unchecked by perception; indeed perception becomes a vehicle for phantasy. One ‘sees’ clearly and accurately the hidden thoughts and motives of others. One ‘knows’ through conviction rather than through evidence. The slow, straightening lessons that the external world forces upon the reality-orientated ego, do not impinge upon the ego that is identified with the ego-ideal.

In such a state, there is a ‘collusion of reality’, in which events in the external world seem so pressing or so reasonable, that they conceal the phantasy that drives them. The way various groups mix phantasy into external reality varies. For example, al-Qaeda may have an intelligible political strategy. The animal rights movement may have the admirable goal of awakening a moral sense, in which risk and suffering should not be imposed on anyone without consent, and in which animals are, in effect, people who cannot consent. But apart from their vicious attacks, their fundamentalist disposition would remain, and no matter how rational their strategy, the fusion of ego and ego-ideal draws it into a cosmic process with its own driving force.
Various psychoanalytic authors have characterized such a superior state of mind. Béla Grunberger (1989) speaks of the drive for purity, based on a hatred of the oedipal body. Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel (1985b), along with Grunberger, refers to the faecalized universe, literally a world in which everything is turned upside down, and shit is idealized as a perversion of the genital world of the father and mother. The replacement and degradation of the object, the triumph, the internally generated certainty and the preoccupation with inner states all suggest the narcissistic character of this state. Herbert Rosenfeld (1987) brings together the perversity and narcissism of this state in his concept of ‘narcissistic omnipotent object relations’ or ‘destructive narcissism’, in which the breast is enviously displaced, and arrogant contempt perversely mocks its nourishing function.

This state of mind defends against loss by denying the existence of the object, delusionally replacing the object with itself. For Freud, the very recognition of the object is experienced as a loss (Freud, 1905, p. 222). For Klein, it brings together the loving and hating dispositions that previously were separated and directed towards part-objects, which were not actual perceptions, but phantasies of forms of attachment and of attack (1935). From now on, the perceived object will, in its good qualities, also be attacked, so the good internal object will be in danger of annihilation and loss. This state of ‘depressive anxiety’ at the first loss of an object is the template for all further loss; as such it is a most powerful stimulus either for psychic growth or defence. The ego will always be unfulfilled by any actual object, whether by frustration, inconstancy, frailty, or unappeasable anxiety. The psyche reacts to this state of perturbance either with thinking and internal dialogue or with action and narcissistic idealization.

The secularism of liberal society mixes values that are espoused by one sector but reviled by another sector. From the point of view of any one sector, it mixes good and bad. It therefore endangers the good object, which the fundamentalist rescues in a manic state. In Freud’s account of the totem meal, the group eats and incorporates the sacrificed totem animal, representing the father, in order to attain his ideal qualities by identifying with him (Freud, 1912–13, pp. 138, 141–2, 145, 147, 148). It forms the basis of Freud’s definition of the manic state as a merger between the ego and the ego-ideal (Freud, 1921, pp. 131–2; Klein, 1935, p. 287). For Klein, the ego tries to secure the good object manically, by omnipotently incorporating and identifying with the object. The other side of manic completion is denigration of the object and magical control over it: the power to kill it and resuscitate it, and to maintain the object’s total dependence on the ego-ideal. The manic state is therefore plagued by the anxiety of re-incorporating a destroyed (bad) object (Klein, 1935).

Since there is no state of complete goodness, there is always a compulsive drive for an unattainable completion. The ego remains always inferior, always subjected to, and striving for an acceptance by, the ego-ideal: a fusion in perfection that can never occur. Anything less leaves the ego abject and the ego-ideal sullied by contact with the world of the ego. The ego, relentlessly and compulsively seeking to identify with the ego-ideal, drives itself out of the bonds of relating to the external world. Ordinary activities become enactments and signs of cosmic processes, in a conviction of inward familiarity with the cosmos that can only be sustained in the presence of an ‘other’ who is abject and sullied.
Fundamentalist leaders have to induce their believers to see failure as a need for further idealisation rather than despair. The projection of denigrated, desolate internal objects is intensified in order to maintain the self-idealization. Shōkō Asahara, guru of Aum Shinrikyō, the fanatical Japanese cult that released sarin gas in the Tokyo underground, pushed his followers to experience merger with him as their perfect leader, so that they aspired to merger, and berated themselves for their failure to achieve it. They felt ‘a sense of pride or omnipotence in sharing the guru’s power, accompanied by an equally strong sense of incompleteness because, whatever one’s spiritual progress, there was always an elusive pinnacle one could not reach. That sense of incompleteness in the face of the guru’s imagined perfection left [one, typical, interviewee] vulnerable to endless self-condemnation, to shame and guilt …’ (Lifton, 1999, p. 100).

This form of omnipotent submissiveness is a general feature of religious fundamentalism. The enclosed spiralling in the relationship between ego and ego-ideal forecloses on an internal dialogue in which doubt, as opposed to self-condemnation, could develop. Markers of external reality, including time, are excluded. The mythic past, the present and the perfect future merge (cf. Almond et al., 2003, pp. 69, 73; Bartov, 1998, p. 814). Ultimately, thought, belief and action also merge. The act – saran poisoning in this case – is an action that is already part of the cosmic order, in the service of the ideal of purifying the world through bringing its corrupt state to an end (Lifton, pp. 59–88). It hastens God’s pace, ‘forcing an end’, an idea that Asahara borrowed from Jewish sources (p. 65). The delusion is more powerful because it is ‘normal’ for the group, and appeals to reason and the perception of reality. It is not a state of fanaticism, but of what Lifton called ‘serene madness’ (1999, p. 122).

The merger of ego and ego-ideal, promoted by an enclosed environment, spirals relentlessly into a fusion in which the ego experiences an epiphany, in the annihilation of its objects – whether in a terrorist attack or in phantasy – in an absolute state of mind. It is an explosive identification. It homogenizes the external world into one enemy (what Bruce calls the ‘elision of the enemies’; pp. 51, 52). This ‘other’ shows itself to be as powerful as the absolutist, and to be an object of envy. It becomes the mirror of the absolutist, on the verge of possessing the good object (Almond et al. speak of an absolutist ‘mimesis’ of an envied enemy, pp. 19–20, 73–4). In attacking the other – modern society, the infidel, the West, the dominant religion, the existing regime – on behalf of the absolute, the absolutist claims the good object from it, leaving it bereft and desolate. The absolutist interprets fortune as triumph, because, along with the horrendous physical attack, fundamentalists projects into the other, by projective identification, the dread of losing the good object. But any misfortune brings it back home. Religious fundamentalists experience defeat or lack of success as abandonment by God.

Attacking the other also spares the leader of the absolutist sect its aggression, and supports its cohesiveness. This sort of group is homogenized and formed by the dynamics described by Freud for artificial groups (1921, pp. 105–16). The members hold one leader in common – a person, a text, an idea – as an ego-ideal, and, as a result, identify with each other in their egos. If we read Group Psychology and the
Analysis of the Ego together with Totem and Taboo, we are led to idea that the stability of a group depends on raising someone, who stands in for a group member, to the position of leader, idealizing then sacrificing him, in order to internalize the ideal (Girard, 1988, argues that sacrifice spares the group from internal, violent disintegration). In order not actually to kill and eat the chosen leader, an outside group, which holds the same good object, is attacked. The monotheistic and Abrahamic religions – Christianity, Judaism and Islam – share the same, single God, and are fertile ground for fundamentalism (Bruce, p. 97). Such a process is likely in terrorist attacks.

The Fundamentalist Mind: Clinical Contributions

We can get a sense of this process in Freud’s explanation of the cohesive force of groups. Individuals who take the same person as their leader deposit their ego ideals in that person, and identify in their ego’s, become as one, massified ego. It is as if the group becomes a large psyche, with an ego-ideal and an ego, as the differences between individuals collapse into homogeneity (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1985a, p. 85; Volkan, 1997, refers to a large group identity, only partly based on the relationship with the leader, however, as an ‘ethnic tent’, pp. 27–8). The ego-ideal holds the idealization conferred on it by the individual egos (Freud, 1921, pp.105–16). One might say that the idealization embodied in the group ego ideal is multiplied by the number of ego’s that idealize it, and that the egos are in the same measure impoverished.

In Freud’s account of melancholia, the excoriating, denigrating complaints levelled at him- or herself, were really levelled against the object (1917). In a prototype of projective identification, the ego identified with the object, not in a way that enriched the ego and released libido to invest in other objects, but in a way that jailed the object in the ego, keeping it confined, under observation and control. The ego gloried in its superiority, while the object suffered confinement and humiliation.

Abraham (1919) described patients who spoke continuously, but in a pre-arranged way; who seemed to show ‘an extraordinarily eager, never-wearying readiness to be psycho-analysed’ (p. 304), which covered ‘an unusual degree of defiance’ (p. 305). They easily felt humiliated and on guard. They presented dreams, but stuck with the manifest content. Driven by envy, they were vigilant, in order to begrudge the analyst any success, and to put themselves in the analyst’s place. In effect, they presented themselves to themselves as ideal patients to an ideal analyst, and lived in a state of certainty, which had continually to be re-asserted, because it was riven with insecurity.

Klein filled in the mechanics of the process by which the ego seizes the good object of the mother, perhaps through her reproductive organs, leaving the ‘other’ robbed of its good object and associated ego. As a mechanics of the anal stage, this seizure of the mother involved a faecal attack and an appropriation of the mother’s good capacities, which established, on the model of the body, a good internalized object and an expelled, faecalized object; the former good and pure, the latter degraded and expelled; the former now endowed with what was good in the invaded object, the latter now filled with what was bad in the invading object. This primitive, body-
based phantasy locks people together, as if they were parts of a greater body (Klein, 1946).

Ahumada (1982/2001) refers to a delusion of goodness, in which an ‘omnipotent, envious part of the self engulfs the need-fulfilling good internal object’ (p. 67), assimilating its goodness to an idealized self that cares for neediness in the form of a ‘partenaire’ (p. 76) into which need is projected. This – delusional – state of idealized goodness requires projective identification to establish, outside itself, though still itself, the neediness that would erode the delusion of goodness. Such a delusional state, which is out of touch with external reality, reinforces the feeling of certainty.

I would say that certainty is a state akin to Meltzer’s understanding of tyranny (1973, 143–50; also, see Jaques, 1955; Menzies-Lyth, 1959). Tyranny offers protection from depressive anxiety. In Kleinian terms, reparative capacity has been compromised by the denigration of good internal and external objects that, like good parents, would have restored the world after attack. The consequent anxiety at the destruction of good objects is avoided by a retreat to a paranoid mentality in which these mutilated, dead, and therefore dangerous, objects are projected. In the absence of good objects that can instil confidence in the capacity to repair a mutilated world, an illusory safety is provided by identification with a destructive, omniscient, and omnipotent object. Such an object will not fall victim to helplessness, uncertainty, or insecurity; and it gains its illusory strength through attacking just these aspects of the self. Indeed, this omnipotent, idealized self is maintained only – and therefore compulsively – through continuously attacking its denigrated objects, fearing them and attacking them again.

The tyrant, basking in certainty, promises safety from attack by pushing uncertainty into outside groups and inviting an alliance in destroying them. The tyrant's apparent omniscience and omnipotence seduce potential followers into an addictive dependence on a protection racket. The goodness of the breast can be cynically replaced by arrogance; generosity and reliability can be replaced by a guarantee to exterminate uneasiness. In all these systems, dependency on a good object is caricatured and traduced (as are religious texts by fundamentalists).

The reliability of the good object, the grateful experience of nourishment, the anxiety of loss and the hope for regeneration, are all overcome by an absolute security in joining a tight-knit band that promises superiority over uncertainty. The leader against depressive anxiety not only promises to eliminate it, but also offers a delusion of goodness in caring for the people (Ahumada, 1982/2001). This delusion of goodness suggests the ‘serene madness’ and ‘ecstatic science’, to which Lifton refers: the righteous belief in hastening God’s work. Although it is sustained by envy and destructive narcissism (Rosenfeld, 1987), the emphasis is on goodness.

Such a defensive process, driving to avoid depressive anxiety and to expand the sense of goodness, does not work. The enemy is filled with projected aggression, and also with projected need, envy and depressive anxiety, as the enemy also becomes the partenaire, in Ahumada’s language (Falk, 2004, attributes the persistence of Israeli-Palestinian conflict to an inability to mourn). These projections induce counter-projections, and the mutual projection system makes it so difficult for enemies to overcome their animosity.
The defensive process is undermined from another side. Since ‘good parts of the self’ are projected along with the bad (Klein, 1946, pp. 8–9), so the enemy is experienced as stealing goodness at the same time as projection aims to fill it with mutilated objects. Thus the very existence of the enemy undermines the whole projective project.

But this form of paranoid-schizoid thinking gets locked in because it is easier than bearing depressive anxiety, which offers no promise of escape from the return of mutilated objects, no escape from need and envy, no escape from guilt and no support for grandiose goodness. Instead, it depletes the experience of certainty, and offers only the slow process of reparation. Neither side is confident of its relationship to the good object; each claims to know the object with certainty because each is the good object.

In the clinical situation, one has the leisure to study these subtle moves from uncertainty and sadness to certainty and omnipotent self-satisfaction. Uncertainty and sadness invite the listener into a collaboration in which truth does not provoke a dispute; by contrast, certainty and omnipotent self-estimation assert the truth of whatever is said, and evoke a feeling either of stupidity or of arrogance in the listener. In sectarian conflict, virulent language adds to the pressure to collapse thinking into acting, reinforcing the projective systems in which conflict becomes an epic struggle that aims to relieve the dread of annihilation (Armstrong, 2000 p. xi).

Thinking and Action

You could say that the control of the object by the ego is a phantasy, which exists only in the psyche of the subject, not of the object. But the primitive, body-based process does seem to exert an influence between people, so that one could speak of a force, without reifying it. One can become delusional in a group, and act and feel as if one were nothing next to the leader or next to the group as a whole. One can also identify with the leader or the group, fill with idealization to the point of perfection and righteousness, especially if there is another group that, by projective identification, is rendered nothing by comparison.

These absolute states are connected with concrete thinking, with a consequent predictability, omnipotence of thought, loss of doubt, loss of self reflection, loss of connection between self-reflection and observation. While the sense of truth binds self-reflection and observation together, the sense of certainty collapses them into one. Moss speaks of a ‘sudden, harmonious, unification of affect, idea, impulse, and perception (2003, p. xxviii), in which ‘conflict has been replaced by clarity’, in which ‘the self-certainty of perception’, ‘yoked to impulse’, ‘locates the problem sensorily’, and ‘turns into deed’ (p.xxix). Bearing in mind that, for Bion, thinking and dreaming are similar processes, perhaps Moss is also referring to the reverse use of the perceptual apparatus, in which it ‘is engaged in expelling something and that the dream [of a psychotic patient] is an evacuation from his mind …’ (Bion, 1958, pp. 67, 76, 78). The world now presents itself as a sensory reality, but one akin to a hallucination, instead of an empirical reality and the source of thoughts for thinking about it (Bion, 1962).
An absolute state of mind lacks the intra-subjective equivalent of inter-subjective communication. But when words lose their inferential, interpretive, exploratory quality, the speaker and listener lose a dimension in their thinking. They become concrete things (Freud, 1915, pp. 196–204), unassimilable objects that, in Bion’s notion of Beta elements, can only be expelled as attacks on space itself; that is, they are not inside anything. Concretely, the collapse of meaning, of referent, of implication is the collapse of space and of there being two or more people in a space (Bion, 1962, p. 113). Two-ness, separateness, the external world, delay, frustration, work, are all eliminated. Anything that marks difference stands for the external world and all the miseries that it brings with it. That includes thinking, speaking and discovering, because they involve a subject and an object.

The collapse of dimension puts the speaker beyond dimension, including the space and time that separate a wish from its fulfilment through action in the external world. It is an omnipotent mechanism, probably what Freud meant by the omnipotence of thought, in which a thought is not like, but identical to, an achieved action (1912–13, p. 85; 1914, pp. 75, 98, 100). But there is another aspect to this omnipotence of thought, which reigns over this world without space and time. Freud equates self-regard with the size of the ego, which is narcissistically swollen by the ‘feeling of omnipotence’ (1914, p. 98). The speaker whose thoughts are expulsions that eliminate space has expanded in psychic mass without limit (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1985a, pp. 85–6). Ordinary reference points for judging the importance of an act, which is like comparing the relative sizes of objects, disappear. He or she is in everything as well as outside it, above and below it: these dimensional words mean nothing. Goodness is so good that it is God’s approval. Badness is so bad that it is God’s abandonment.  

But let us move away from the extreme, and take up the fundamentalism in ordinary thinking in relation to external reality, exemplified in the world of science. In its pursuit of absolute abstractions that will express an ultimate truth, scientific abstraction can seem like fundamentalism. It implies the spiritualization of mind, in that ultimate truth would be a universal presence, dispersed through the universe, not a local point of view. In that sense, science could express a conviction of omnipotent control of the object and of possessing the truth: edict rather than a discovery.

But science is an ever uncertain engagement with nature, a humble commitment to endless discovery. In object relations terms, it is always on the edge of losing the good object, always seeking to recover and restore it (Figlio 2000). The organization of science aims to protect this process from a narcissistic encroachment in which success in theory or observation signifies possessing an idealized object and failure is confused with desolation and the loss of goodness.

Fundamentalists caricature science as this latter, narcissistic version. They presume that it claims to possess ultimate truth, and imitate it by claiming, themselves, to possess the truth of the cosmic drama that they see enacted in everyday life. They oppose evolutionary theory, caricatured as a grandiose ultimate truth, with an equally grandiose creationism. They, in effect, appropriate the good object that this caricature of science claims to possess. It is a form of pathological narcissism, which aims to
avoid the depletion of goodness and depressive anxiety by replacing the good object with the narcissistic self.

For example, fundamentalist protestors identify with the animals used for experiments, or with foetuses as the corporal detritus that secular science discards. Having espoused their identification with animals and foetuses as a political activism, they turn the tables on the imputed grandiosity of science, and torture it as they ‘see’ animals tortured. They degrade it, turning it into detritus shed in the purification of themselves, simultaneously projecting the ‘mutilated objects’ (Meltzer, 1973, pp. 143–50) into the other (Figlio and Richards, 2003). Lifton (1999) gives many examples of the melding of science and medicine with grandiosity, and the perversion of their aims: the ‘serene madness’ in the science of the Aum movement (p. 122). The process is the same as the mimicry of Western secularism by Islamic fundamentalism, to which we referred earlier. It is a cosmic drama, and the stakes are high: triumph and grace or desolation.

The Christian fundamentalist response to 9/11 shows how near the surface the sense of desolation lies, and how it is projected by accusing others. The Reverend Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority, was interviewed by the Reverend Pat Robertson, successor to Falwell and founder of the Christian Coalition. Robertson framed the problem by saying, among other things, ‘Well, why it’s happening is that God Almighty is lifting his protection from us …’ Jerry Falwell said, ‘God wanted us to humble ourselves and seek his face … I’ve never sensed a togetherness, a burden, a broken heart as I do in the Church today …’ (Lincoln, pp. 104–5).

The apocalyptic interpretation of the Christian fundamentalists mirrors that of the terrorists themselves. The instructions to the 9/11 connect their action with sacred texts, and with a sacrificial ritual as the first stage in a cosmic religious war (Neria et al., 2005). The bombers were to see themselves entering into an idealised state through the simultaneous slaughter of their victims and immolation of their own bodies. They were not hate their victims, nor see them as objects of aggression, upon whom they were to inflict misery, but as animals/infidels that were to take part in their ritual purification, in a moment of spiritualization, when heaven would triumph. In suicide bombing, the moment of attack is transformed into a moment of epiphany. The bombers and their victims are spiritualized, but now in mutilated pieces, are also the dead objects that must be kept at bay, in order to obstruct an influx of depressive anxiety (Meltzer, 1973, pp. 143–50). The defence against depressive anxiety adds to the triumphalism of the attack and the drive to repeat the attacks.

The Christian fundamentalists, humbled as they felt, quickly found the source of the problem, through which they could equally purify themselves and project impurity. Falwell adds, ‘The ACLU’s got to take a lot of the blame for this … The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked … I believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians … the ACLU, People for the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America. I point the finger in their face and say: “You helped this happen.” ’ (Lincoln, p. 106). They ‘know’ the view of God by identification with their ego ideal. It is a delusional state, which is powerful because it replaces the ego-ideal of whoever listens to them, and it rides in manic triumph above mutilated objects.
One can find the same interpretation, that failure is a sign of God's disfavour, and success is a sign of favour, in Islamic and Jewish fundamentalism. For example, the same 1967 war, for which Arab defeat was evidence of a loss of Islamic ideals, was, in the restoration of Biblical lands, evidence to the Jewish Gush Emunim (the Bloc of the Faithful) that Jehovah had not abandoned his people (Bruce, p. 4; Reuter, p. 30). And misfortune for Muslims, Jews and Christians alike has been attributed to the same moral laxness (Almond et al., pp. 74–5).

Here is a fight to possess the ideal, to be good and to avoid desolation, across the spectrum of fundamentalism, from the apparent invincibility of terrorists who will use suicide as a weapon, to fundamentalist speaking and thinking. Idealization transforms their acts from desperation into a bid for goodness infused with superiority. It calls out a language of counter-goodness-superiority. The drive to project and then to disparage and annihilate uncertainty reveals a delusional need to be good, and it thus betrays an anxiety of badness, filled with Meltzer’s ‘mutilated objects’ and imminent desolation.

**Conclusion**

My aim has been to identify a state of mind – what I have called an ‘absolute state of mind’. The fearful presence of fundamentalist terrorism invades civilian life with an enemy that is nowhere, both in the sense that strategists hide – inside – and could be anywhere, and in the sense that the perpetrators vanish. This kind of enemy creates a regressive pressure towards anxiety over internal badness and, in reaction to it, a need to annihilate it in order not to be annihilated. It also throws into sharp relief the characteristics of fundamentalism in ordinary life.

We are trying to identify in absolute states of mind a common theme in a variety of social and individual phenomena. Many authors have identified a righteousness, single-mindedness, persistence, simplification, religious sense of cosmic mission, sense of certainty, dread of internal impurity and tendency towards violence in fundamentalist groups. I have tried to anchor these observations in psychoanalytic terms, and to supplement existing psychoanalytic understandings. I have suggested that we consider them as features of an absolute state of mind, characterized by a psychotic idealization and its consequences, massive projective identification and a dread, not just of impurity, but of desolation.

Psychotic idealization expands to the point of self immolation or spiritualization into heaven. The ego-ideal, with its roots in primary narcissism, is essential to grasping the supra-dimensional grandiosity of this state, which it induces through detaching the ego from external reality. The loss – or transcendence – of dimensionality is crucial to understanding the loss of ego contact with ordinary reality that takes over the fundamentalist mind: it is not just a better reality, but a transcendence of reality (what Lifton called ‘ecstatic science’, in the perversion of scientific engagement with reality into a vehicle of phantasy; 1999, pp. 115–35). Bion (1962, p. 113) spoke of the annihilation of space by ejected dismembered thoughts (beta elements), when thinking was intolerable. The idealization in the merger of ego and ego-ideal, and the intensive
projective force with which it is paired, are instantaneous and unlimited, compressed into a moment out of space and time.

Projective identification fosters such a mental state of inner certainty by appropriating the good qualities of the other and expelling the subject’s or subject-group’s bad qualities into the other. The body-based power of projective identification endows this process with a force akin to a physical force. The mental state of conviction stands in for empirical reality. Uncertainty, doubt, reflectiveness, compromise, toleration – understanding itself – are experienced as pollution. In religious terms, they are the work of infidels. In psychoanalytic terms, they are bad objects, which are produced by the need manically to control dangerous objects.

The drive to project and then to disparage and annihilate uncertainty reveals a delusional need to be good, and it thus betrays an anxiety of internal impurity and badness, filled with Meltzer’s ‘mutilated objects’. Desolation, expressed cosmically as abandonment by God lies near the surface.

External reality can tap the energy of this psychotic process, acting as a vehicle for it. The apparent rationality, say of political or religious absolutism now suffused with passion, makes it more difficult to understand and stand against. We are not talking about psychotic individuals, but of a common psychotic core, which group formations can accentuate. Building on Simmel, Frosh reminds us of the protection offered by groups against individual psychotic breakdown, even though the group behaviour might then be counted as psychotic, in its detachment from reality (2005, pp. 170–1, 194). The phenomena are nonetheless psychotic, which is why models of the detachment from, and perversion of, reality are needed.

The absolute state of mind attacks the inner value of an internal conversation, slowed down by doubt, patient rather than cynical. Inner value relies on good internal objects. Under the aegis of inner value, individuals or groups do not take good objects for granted, nor try to replace them with themselves, in a bid for certainty. They avoid idealisation, preferring the realism of what can be achieved through work. They think of work as repair rather than drudgery, and find beauty in maturation as well as in innocence, even though maturation erodes innocence.

Absolute states of mind do not just drive extremes such as fundamentalist fanaticism. They infuse ordinary life. It is difficult to discriminate ordinary decisiveness and control, whether in individuals or in groups, from absolute states of mind, but we can identify them through the idealisation, splitting and projection that they require and the counter-reaction that they induce. In the consulting room, their diagnosis depends on detailed counter-transference analysis. In society at large, it can be discerned in distinguishing the kernel of truth that extreme groups, even fanatics, espouse, from the tide of delusional righteousness and contempt that accompanies it.

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1 Religious fundamentalism has been a topic of concern and study for some time, principally in a research project sponsored by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, which produced a five-volume report under the editorship of Martin E. Marty and R. S. Appleby. Conclusions from this study have been published by
Almond et al. (2003). One broad theme in fundamentalism is that it represents a traditionalist reaction to modern, secular, liberal society, with its economic structures and its commitment to pluralism (Armstrong, 2000; Giddens, 1994, pp. 11, 19, 48, 115–17, 129), though one that often makes use of modern thinking and techniques; for example, the Hizbullah mentor, Shaykh Muhammad Hussayn Fadlallah condoned birth control (Almond et al., p. 51).

Although neither author supports a psychoanalytic account of these distinctively fundamentalist/fascist phenomena, they are nonetheless the stuff of psychoanalysis and they invite psychoanalytic investigation. Bruce objects to psychological explanations because they try to explain extreme movements in terms of pathology, particularly that of a leader whose childhood was abnormal. By contrast, he argues that ‘fundamentalists are normal … Fundamentalism is a rational response of traditionally religious peoples to social, political and economic changes that downgrade and constrain the role of religion in the public world’ (pp. 116, 117). Paxton argues that the ‘problem with all psychological explanations is that it is very difficult to prove that the emotional experiences of Italians and Germans [who did establish fascist states] differed decisively from those of, say, the French [who did not]’ (p. 226). But it may be just that – difficult to give a psychological account of the historical specificity of social phenomena; and Paxton does cite an example with some approval (Loewenberg, 1971).

For recent psychoanalytic work in this area, see Britton, 2002; Covington et al. (2002); Frosh, 2005; Stein, 2005; Twemlow, 2005, which is followed by a rejoinder by Friedman and a response by Twemlow.

Barkun rejects the stereotype of the rigid literalism of fundamentalist groups, arguing that they are often uncertain, and move to violence in a complex context of external events. He nonetheless also says that a key feature in their relationship to external events ‘is the presence of an apocalyptic scenario’ (2004, p. 67). But it is that apocalyptic scenario that draws them into the delusion of enacting a cosmic drama, joining the work of God; and it is that delusion that turns them against all others, including the heretics inside the group itself (which Barkun notes, p. 60). That internally directed violence, which drives for purity, seems to characterize fundamentalist groups (see also Volkan, 1997, p. 159).

I agree with Bruce, when he urges us not to impose a frame of reference in which the object of our study is bizarre, pathological or abnormal, next to our normalcy. ‘Bizarre as it may seem to an outsider,’ he says, ‘fundamentalism is perfectly consistent with the logic of the religious tradition from which it grows … In the broad sweep of human history, fundamentalists are normal’ (p. 116). I disagree with his imputing such a frame of reference to psychoanalysis, and missing the wealth of evidence and theory on extreme individual and group behaviour. In its willingness to investigate the extremities of the psyche, psychoanalysis does not hive them off into a separate category of the pathological. The basis of psychoanalytic methodology, in the analysis of transference and counter-transference, is allowing a permeation of one’s own psyche by that of the other. Moss argues that the essence of psychoanalysis
is to allow the full range of identifications with persecutors as well as victims, in
which the object always remains opaque, not transparent to a scrutiny in which it is

5 Bion makes the same point, through the negative instance of a psychotic simulation
of logic, which can be used perversely to destroy emotional linking in thinking. This
state, deprived of an emotional attitude of learning, is similar to Wittgenstein’s
‘certainty’.

These attacks on the linking function of emotion lead to an over prominence in
the psychotic part of the personality of links which appear to be logical, almost
mathematical, but never emotionally reasonable. Consequently the links
surviving are perverse, cruel and sterile. (Bion, 1959, pp. 108 – 9)

6 Certainty is similar to what Bion means by arrogance, whose meaning ‘may be
indicated by supposing that in the personality where life instincts predominate, pride
becomes self-respect, where death instincts predominate, pride becomes arrogance’
(1957, p. 86). He says of Oedipus, that his central crime lay ‘in vowing to lay bare the
truth at no matter what cost’ (1957, p. 86). Feldman (1999), referring to Bion,
distinguishes the pride of self-respect from that driven by the destructiveness of
arrogance. Nussbaum (1986) sees the classical tragic moment in the move from
uncertainty, turmoil and waiting, into certainty and action to settle the issue.
Agamemnon, for example, settled his qualms about unleashing violence to retrieve
Helen of Troy, with the irrevocable decision to sacrifice his daughter, Iphegenia, in
order to secure a victory.

7 Barkun objects to any essential link between fundamentalism and violence, but
nonetheless says that it is more likely, the more a group believes it ‘controls the
dynamics of prophetic fulfilment’ (2004, p. 66). Such a state indicates the merger of
ego and ego-ideal.

8 Each is like the other, because of projective identification; and likeness increases
when they share the same God, territory, history, ethnicity, physiognomy. I say
projective identification, rather than projection, because it accounts for the almost
physical force with which individuals and groups are pushed into position, and for the
loss of reality (on projective force, see Figlio 2004). These situations exaggerate
mutual aggression, because each needs to use the other projectively, yet loses to the
other. Freud (1918) called these small differences, which provoked animosity, the
‘narcissism of minor differences’ (for an analysis of aggression between social groups,
based on this concept, see Blok, 1998; Twemlow, 2005, p. 960; Varvin, 1995, p. 199;

9 Stein (2002, p. 413) argues that the terrorist, typically male (see Reuter 2002, pp.
151, 160, 161, 164, 165 on women suicide bombers), regresses to a homo-erotic
relationship with a tyrannical father, submitting to him in an act of love and merger,
which is also sustained through misogyny. This father assists the killing of infidels.
She rejects Chasseguet-Smirgel’s notion of a regression to mother. Though
Chasseguet-Smirgel does speak of a regression to the womb (1986), her main point
about dictators and the destructive frenzy of groups led by them is that there is a 
regression to the ego-ideal as heir to primary narcissism (1985a, pp. 76–93). That is 
the source of the thralldom of its psychotic invasion of reality. Maternal and paternal 
don’t figure at this primal level, but infill it. Quoting Adorno on the sanctioning of 
unlimited violence by the Nazi system of justice, Moss (2003, p. 331) calls it “the 
superego acting in the service of the id”. There is the superego-father inside the thrall 
of merger with the ego-ideal.

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