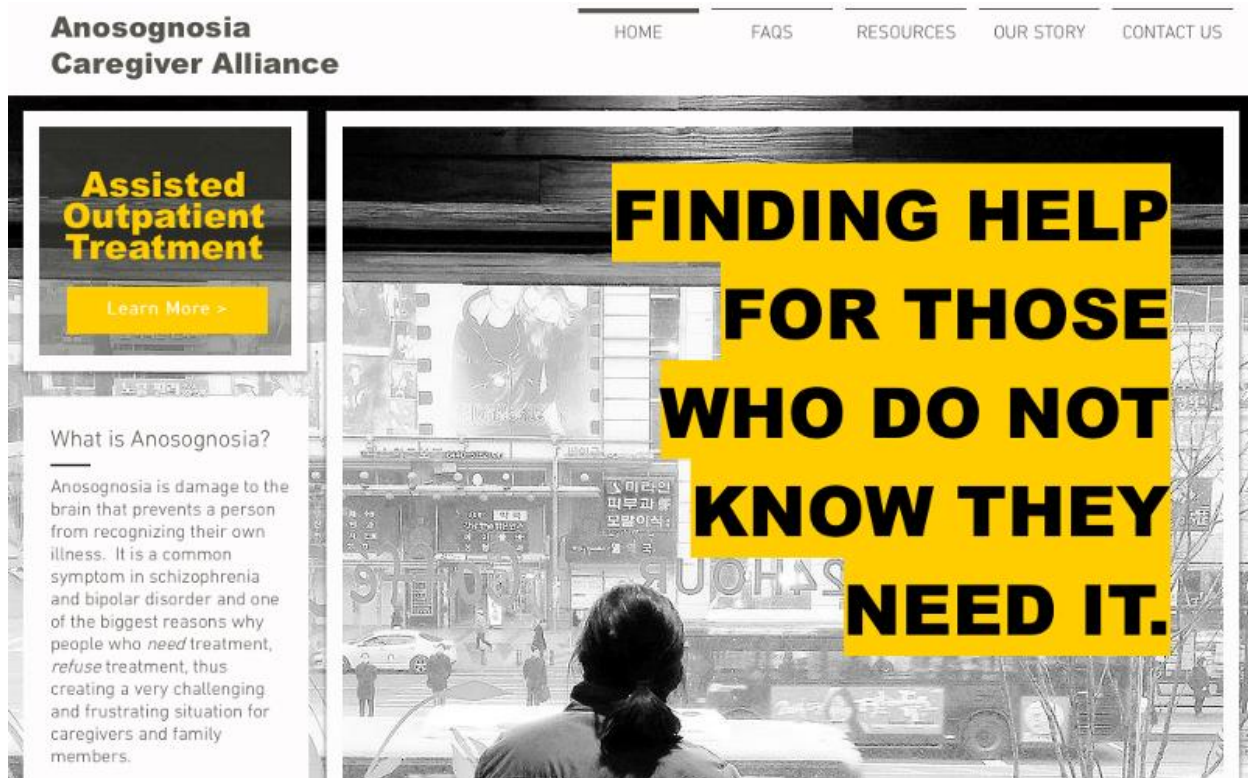


American Exceptionalism as Collective Anosognosia

Robert Hanna



(ACA, 2024)

In my opinion, one of the biggest problems in the world today is the collective refusal of the people of the United States of America to recognize that *it, itself* is one of the biggest problems in the world today. Of course, I'm not the only one who holds the opinion that the USA is one of the biggest problems in the world today. Most of the world outside the USA holds it; and also, inside the USA, a few courageous, critical, iconoclastic thinkers like Noam Chomsky have consistently made this point publicly and even written books about it — see, for example, (Chomsky, 2017).

Now if most of the world outside the USA, Chomsky, and I are all correct about the USA's being one of the biggest problems in the world today, and if I'm also correct that the American refusal to recognize that it, itself is so very problematic is one of the biggest problems in the world today, then we need to understand the nature of this mega-problem, so that we can take steps towards addressing it and solving it. In my opinion, the mega-problem is the result of three combined factors: **first**, the myth of *American exceptionalism*; **second**, five morally and politically tragic national failures of the USA; and

third, a collective manifestation of the cognitive deficit known as “anosognosia.” Let me explain.

First, this is what “American exceptionalism” means:

American exceptionalism is the belief that the United States is either distinctive, unique, or exemplary compared to other nations. Proponents argue that the values, political system, and historical development of the U.S. are unique in human history, often with the implication that it is both destined and entitled to play a distinct and positive role on the world stage.

Seymour Martin Lipset, a widely cited political scientist and sociologist, argues that the United States is exceptional in that it started from a revolutionary event. He therefore traces the origins of American exceptionalism to the American Revolution, from which the U.S. emerged as “the first new nation” with a distinct ideology, and having a unique mission to transform the world. This ideology, which Lipset called “Americanism,” but is often also referred to as “American exceptionalism,” is based on liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, republicanism, democracy, meritocracy, and laissez-faire economics....

As a term in social science, American exceptionalism refers to the United States’ status as a global outlier. Critics of the concept claim that the idea of American exceptionalism suggests that the US is better than other countries, has a superior culture, or has a unique mission to transform the planet and its inhabitants. (Wikipedia, 2024)

Now, I think it’s self-evidently true that the USA is no better than most other nation-States, and considerably worse than some. So American exceptionalism is false. Therefore, the *myth* of American exceptionalism is the self-evident fact that most Americans *falsely believe* that American exceptionalism is *true*.

Second, here are the five morally and politically tragic national failures of the USA: (i) the original national sin of slavery and its historical consequences, *enduring, operative racism, as a structural element of the economy and the legal justice system*, (ii) the original sin of the individual right to own, carry, or use a gun, encoded in the Second Amendment to the US Constitution, and its historical consequences, *daily and endlessly escalating gun violence* (Hanna, 2023), (iii) unbridled corporate capitalism, and its historical consequences, *massive class-based income disparities between the richest and the poorest inside the USA, and widespread economic oppression*, (iv) unbridled corporate capitalism in the particular domain of healthcare, and its historical consequences, *an exceptionally expensive, unfair, and oppressive system of healthcare treatment*, and (v) above all, since World War II, but especially since the end of the Cold War, constant American imperialist military intervention, international political manipulation—for example, its support for Israeli

oppression of the Palestinians and for the Gaza War—long term international economic manipulation and the creation and control of client states, alongside natural-environmental damage, and their historical consequences, and as a consequence, the imminent threats of catastrophic climate change and worldwide nuclear apocalypse.

And **third**, this is what “anosognosia” means:

When someone rejects a diagnosis of mental illness, it’s tempting to say that he’s “in denial.” But someone with acute mental illness may not be thinking clearly enough to consciously choose denial. They may instead be experiencing “lack of insight” or “lack of awareness.” The formal medical term for this medical condition is anosognosia, from the Greek meaning “to not know a disease.”

When we talk about anosognosia in mental illness, we mean that someone is unaware of their own mental health condition or that they can’t perceive their condition accurately. Anosognosia is a common symptom of certain mental illnesses, perhaps the most difficult to understand for those who have never experienced it.

Anosognosia is relative. Self-awareness can vary over time, allowing a person to acknowledge their illness at times and making such knowledge impossible at other times. When insight shifts back and forth over time, we might think people are denying their condition out of fear or stubbornness, but variations in awareness are typical of anosognosia. (NAMI, 2024)

In other words, the mental health illness of anosognosia is someone’s systematically self-deceiving denial that they have a serious mental illness.

Granting all this, then my core claim is that the myth of American exceptionalism operates as an anosognosic cognitive blinder that systematically self-deceives most Americans about the existence and persistence of the five morally and politically tragic national failures of the USA. If this is correct, then, most of the time, merely *telling* most Americans *either* that the USA is one of the biggest problems in the world today *or* that their refusal to recognize that it, itself is one of the biggest problems in the world today, is one of the biggest problems in the world today, is not going to help. This is because their problem is actually a collective mental illness, caused by the five morally and politically tragic failures of the USA. Moreover, their collective mental illness is effectively enabled by truth-hating, logic-hating, demagogues and sophists like former US President Donald Trump (Hanna, 2024), who systematically mess with people’s minds and deflect their attention from the ultimate causes of their problems, to Trump’s own daily attacks on rationality and clear thinking.

So the response of most Americans to merely telling them the truth, will almost inevitably be that they simply reject the truth about themselves, flip back to the myth of American exceptionalism, and then allow their attention to be deflected towards mass-media-driven, big-splash issues that are merely *symptoms* of the mega-problem, and *not* its ultimate causal source.

Does this mean that all attempts to address and solve the mega-problem are hopeless? No. Looking back now at the gloss on anosognosia that I quoted earlier, I think that this passage is extremely important: “Anosognosia is relative. Self-awareness can vary over time, allowing a person to acknowledge their illness at times” (NAMI, 2024). This directly implies that self-acknowledgment of the illness, as a necessary step towards to adequate treatment of the illness, is *sometimes* possible.

Therefore, since the anosognosic cognitive blinder that most Americans use in order to hide their national illness from themselves is the myth of American exceptionalism, and since their basic strategy for avoidance is the deflection of their collective attention to mass-media-driven, big-splash, yet merely symptomatic issues, we need to keep patiently working, working, working away at (i) exposing the myth *as* a myth and (ii) exposing the merely symptomatic issues *as* merely symptomatic. In turn, a necessary condition of doing this is identifying, criticizing, and rejecting what I’ve called *Logical Trumpism* (Hanna, 2024). Then perhaps, *just perhaps*, in a cathartic, epiphanal, transformative moment, many or even most Americans will finally face up to their collective mental illness, begin healing themselves, and at the same time undertake the project of helping the rest of humankind *make a better world*, instead of being one of its biggest problems.

REFERENCES

(ACA, 2024). *Anosognosia Caregiver Alliance*. Available online at URL = <https://www.anosognosiacare.org/>.

(Chomsky, 2017). Chomsky, N. *Who Rules the World?* London: Picador.

(Hanna, 2023). Hanna, R. "Gun Crazy: A Moral Argument For Gun Abolitionism." Unpublished MS. Available online at URL = https://www.academia.edu/61516955/Gun_Crazy_A_Moral_Argument_For_Gun_Abolitionism_January_2023_version >.

(Hanna, 2024). Hanna, R. "Trump, Truth, and Logic." Unpublished MS. Available online at URL = https://www.academia.edu/123816347/Trump_Truth_and_Logic_September_2024_version >.

(NAMI, 2024). National Alliance on Mental Illness. "Anosognosia." Available online at URL = <https://www.nami.org/about-mental-illness/common-with-mental-illness/anosognosia/>.

(Wikipedia, 2024). Wikipedia. "American Exceptionalism." Available online at URL = https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_exceptionalism.