# Beyond The Spirituality-Industrial Complex

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## 1. Introduction

In his 1910 essay, "The Moral Equivalent of War," William James argued that the transition from a deadly, disastrous, and morally scandalous local and global human condition of *perpetual nationalistic militarism and war*, to a diametrically opposed and inherently better local and global human condition, that Immanuel Kant had called *perpetual peace* (Kant, 1795/1996), could be managed by humankind *only if* core moral virtues of military life and military practices were detached from essentially false and wrong militarist thinking and warfare, and applied instead to creating and sustaining radically better social institutions:

> I will now confess my own utopia. I devoutly believe in the reign of peace and in the gradual advent of some sort of socialistic equilibrium. The fatalistic view of the war function is to me nonsense, for I know that war-making is due to definite motives and subject to prudential checks and reasonable criticisms, just like any other form of enterprise. And when whole nations are the armies, and the science of destruction vies in intellectual refinement with the science of production, I see that war becomes absurd and impossible from its own monstrosity. Extravagant ambitions will have to be replaced by reasonable claims, and nations must make common cause against them. I see no reason

why all this should not apply to [all civilized] … countries, and I look forward to a future when acts of war shall be formally outlawed as between civilized peoples.

All these beliefs of mine put me firmly into the anti-military party. But I do not believe that peace either ought to be or will be permanent on this globe, unless the states, pacifically organized, preserve some of the old elements of army-discipline. A permanently successful peace-economy cannot be a simple pleasure-economy. In the more or less socialistic future toward which mankind seems drifting we must still subject ourselves collectively to those severities which answer to our real position upon this only partly hospitable globe. We must make new energies and hardihoods continue the manliness to which the military mind so faithfully clings. Martial virtues must be the enduring cement; intrepidity, contempt of softness, surrender of private interest, obedience to command, must still remain the rock upon which states are built. (James, 1910/2015)

In this essay, I don't want to analyze, criticize, or defend James's argument about morality and *war*, but instead only to use the core strategy of his argument as a conceptual springboard for presenting an essentially analogous argument about morality and *religion* in a contemporary context.

More precisely, I'm going to argue that the transition from a deadly, disastrous, and morally scandalous contemporary local and global human condition I call *The New Apocalypse*, to a diametrically opposed and inherently better local and global human condition, can be managed by humankind *only if* core moral virtues of personal religious life and personal religious practices, whether inside or outside organized religion—aka "spirituality"—are fully detached from essentially false and wrong advanced or late capitalist thinking and what I call *the military-industrial-digital complex*,[1] and applied

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[1] This of course riffs on a famous phrase in US President Dwight D. Eisenhower's "Farewell Address" in 1961:

> [The] conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence—economic, political, even spiritual—is felt in every city, every statehouse, every office of the federal government. We recognize the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. Our toil, resources and livelihood are all involved; so is the very structure of our society. In the councils of government, <u>we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military–industrial complex</u>. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists, and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals so that security and liberty may prosper together. (See, e.g., Wikipedia, 2023a, underlining added)

instead to creating and sustaining radically better social institutions, by means of what I call *realistically optimist dignitarian humanism*.

## 2. Religion and Morality

By "religion," I mean any set of human feelings, beliefs, individual acts, social practices, or social institutions directly concerned with God (or gods, or the divine or holy more generally) and faith in God (or gods, or the divine or holy more generally). We can distinguish here between (i) on the one hand, organized religions and organized religious practices, and (ii) on the other, personal religious life and personal religious practices (aka "spirituality") insofar as it can occur either inside or outside organized religion and its practices Hence *either* organized religion and its practices, *or* spirituality inside or outside organized religion and its practices, will count as *bona fide* "religion" for the purposes of our discussion. The critical question I then want to raise is:

> Should morality obtain independently of religion, or not?

To make that question more precise, let's call the cluster of claims which say either (i) that morality should be kept entirely distinct from religion and fully protected from the influence of religion, or (ii) that religion should eradicated altogether in order to make morality really possible, or, at the very least, (iii) that morality should fully control and restrict the scope of religion, because otherwise, religion is actually or potentially highly harmful to morality, *Hard Secularism*. Let's call the directly opposing and contrary claim to Hard Secularism, which says that religion should fully control and determine morality, *Fundamentalism*. By a double contrast, let's call the intermediate claim between Hard Secularism and Fundamentalism, which says that although morality and religion are distinct sorts of enterprises, nevertheless not only are they mutually compatible, but they're also necessarily complementary and mutually supportive, *Moderate Secularism.* And by another—now triple—contrast to Hard Secularism, Fundamentalism, and Moderate Secularism alike, let's call the weakest claim of all in this connection, which says that morality and religion are distinct sorts of enterprises, and they're mutually compatible only in the sense that they can co-exist in their separate spheres, *Soft Secularism*. So the precisified version of the question I want to raise is,

> Which, if any, is correct: Hard Secularism, Fundamentalism, Moderate Secularism, or Soft Secularism?

In what follows, I'm going to defend a version of Moderate Secularism, as applied to spirituality.

## 3. The New Apocalypse, The Spirituality-Industrial Complex, The Highest Good, and Morality

By *The New Apocalypse* I mean the fourfold contemporary and global impacts of (i) global technocratic corporate *capitalism*, aka "advanced" or "late" capitalism, (ii) political *neoliberalism*, especially *neofascist neoliberalism*, (iii) the *digitalization* of world culture via digital technology, including what I call *the myth of artificial intelligence* (Hanna, 2023a), continuous surveillance, social media, and (iv) an all-encompassing scientistic, technocratic, materialist or physicalist, ecologically-devastating, philosophical conception of non-human nature and human nature alike: *formal and natural mechanism* (see, e.g., Hanna and Paans, 2020; Torday, Miller Jr, and Hanna, 2020). As a foursome, these are what I'll call *The Four Horsemen of The New Apocalypse*. Correspondingly, not only since at least the 1960s and 70s, but especially during The New Apocalypse, unfortunately, the term, concept, and human activity of "spirituality" has been much debased by its exploitative and essentially instrumental use in our neoliberal advanced or late capitalist world. See, for example, the emergence of "divinity consultants" who "are designing sacred rituals for corporations and their spiritually depleted employees" (Bowles, 2020), and more generally, "the business of spirituality":

> [T]he business of spirituality is a lucrative industry that has experienced significant growth in recent years. This growth has been fueled by a range of factors, including the increasing demand for alternative healing methods, the rise of the wellness industry, and the influence of social media on spirituality. One of the most profitable spiritual services is psychic readings, which can provide guidance and insight into a person's life. (Ross, 2023)

And of course there's the eternal recurrence of *the Christmas-industrial complex*, a perfect example of what Marx called "commodity fetishism" (Wikipedia, 2023b), aptly parodied by the greeting card pictured at the top of this essay (Motski, 2023). Correspondingly, I'll call all the various kinds of debasement of spirituality under advanced or late capitalism, collectively, *the spirituality-industrial complex*.

Nevertheless, at the same time, there's a genuine fact or phenomenon that grounds people's correct and profound (if not always self-conscious, or at least not always fully self-conscious) awareness that something fundamental is missing from their lives, particularly during the roll-out and fall-out of the COVID-19 pandemic from early 2020 to early 2023, when traditional certainties and hegemonic ideologies about advanced or late capitalism, the State, human nature, society, etc., were being profoundly challenged, or even exploding. And this genuine fact or phenomenon is what we can call, as per Kant's moral philosophy, *the highest good*. Sometimes Kant identifies the highest good

with *a good will*, i.e., freely choosing and acting for the sake of the Categorical Imperative, aka the Moral Law (Kant, 1785/1996: pp. 49-50, Ak 4: 393-394); sometimes he identifies the highest good with *dignity*, i.e., the absolute, non-denumerably infinite, intrinsic, obective moral worth or value of all persons, whether human, non-human, or divine (Kant, 1785: p. 84, Ak 4: 434-435); and sometimes he identifies the highest good with what philosophers of religion call *a 3-O God*, i.e., a necessary being that's omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, and more specifically has the power to arrange for the proportioning of happiness to moral virtue in an endless afterlife of humanity  (Kant, 1788/1996: pp. 228-236, Ak 5: 110-119). In this connection, it's crucial to note that Kant's moral philosophy expressly does *not* claim to prove the *noumenal existence* or *noumenal reality* of the highest good—where "noumenal" means *non-spatiotemporal, non-apparent or non-phenomenal, and essentially independently existing*—but instead remains *radically agnostic* about its noumenal existence or noumenal reality, in the sense that we know a priori that, as rational but also finite and "human, all-too-human" animals, we can't either know the highest good's noumenal essence, or prove its noumenal existence or non-existence, and instead must only *acknowledge* and *presuppose* the highest good, as the condition of the real possibility of "human, all-too-human" morality (Hanna, 2014).

In my opinion, however, if we focus specifically on the highest good construed as *human dignity*, then we *can* in fact prove its *phenomenal* existence or *manifest* reality. (Hanna, 2023b). Construed as human dignity, the highest good is the absolute (i.e., universal, unconditional, and necessary), non-denumerably infinite, intrinsic, objective value or worth of humanity as an end-in-itself, which means that it exceeds any finite or even denumerably infinite value, especially including all instrumental and economic values. Roughly speaking: The Beatles musically asserted *Can't buy me love!* and the very same thing is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of the highest good as human dignity. Somewhat more precisely speaking, the value or worth of the highest good as human dignity has the same "cardinality" (counting-number-osity) as Georg Cantor's non-denumerably infinite or transfinite numbers, and this specific mathematical character of the highest good can then be proved by methods similar or logically equivalent to Cantor's diagonal method for establishing the mathematical existence of transfinite numbers (Cantor, 1891, 2019). You create or discover a method for writing down every possible instrumental and economic value in a denumerably infinite vertical list, then you either construct a diagonal across the list or you construct the power set (i.e., the set of all subsets) of the set of all such values. Therefore, some phenomenally existing or manifestly real worth or value exceeds all possible instrumental and economic values: *Can't buy me the highest good!*

Be that as it may, roughly but not inaccurately, to say that we acknowledge and presuppose the highest good, is to say that human and non-human life, the universe, and everything, *has inherent meaning or purpose*. In turn, people's recognition of *their*

*fundamental need for the highest good*, and their *experiential representation of the highest good*, is what—for lack of a better term—I'll call *real spirituality*, i.e., our authentic and non-commodified personal religious lives and personal religious practices, whether inside or outside organized religion. If the highest good were to have phenomenal existence or manifest reality, then it wouldn't exclusively or identically be be a Judaeo-Christian-Islamic God, or any sort of culturally familiar divinity, although it would *include* these, but instead it would simply be the fact or phenomenon such that the world contains a single supreme value, or a single supreme system of values, and that human life has inherent meaning and purpose precisely to the extent that we can directly connect our own lives, and our own sense of what's really important, to this supreme value or supreme system of values. This is a version of axiological realism, i.e. *value realism*, that postulates the phenomenal existence or manifest reality of this supreme value or supreme system of values, and therefore it's a robust or strong theory. Nevertheless, this value realism is also significantly mitigated by radical agnosticism about the highest good's purported noumenal reality and noumenal existence or non-existence. Moreover, assuming the phenomenal existence or manifest reality of a single supreme value or supreme system of values that's the highest good, nevertheless it's also expicitly assumed or conceded that this value or value system can and will be specifically conceived and represented by humanity in many, many different ways. Hence there's naturally *a plurality of different conceptions of the highest good*, even assuming the phenomenal existence or manifest reality of one and only one highest good.

In this way, Kant's moral philosophy, and indeed every other actual or possible moral or ethical system or theory, necessarily *acknowledges, presupposes*, and *uses* the highest good, in that *every* such system or theory can be spelled out as containing a specific representation of the highest good—say, as goodness of character, or virtue; or as maximizing private or public utility; or as willing according to the Categorical Imperative; or as choosing and acting with honor; or whatever—and then asserting that what we ought to do is always choose and act in such a way as to promote or realize that highest good. But this means that, since it is already acknowledged, presupposed, and used in order to generate any moral or ethical theory or system, *the highest good cannot be explained or justified within that moral or ethical system or theory itself*. This in turn is a specific case of what I've called *the supercharged axiocentric predicament*:

> [I]n order to evaluate, explain, or justify any kind of normativity, the highest good must be presupposed and used; so, due to that inherent circularity, apparently or *prima facie*, the highest good itself is unevaluable, inexplicable, and unjustifiable. (Hanna, 2024: p. 225)

Hence we must secure our conceptions of the highest good *independently of morality or ethics as such*, an enterprise which, again, is what I'm calling "real spirituality."

## 4. There's Always a Constructive, Enabling Alternative To Every Social-Institutional Structure That's Destructive and Deforming, Even If That Social Institution Seems To Be Eternal or Written-in-Stone

In our 2019 book, *The Mind-Body Politic*, Michelle Maiese and I argued as follows:

> Human minds are necessarily and completely embodied (*the essential embodiment thesis*). Essentially embodied minds are *neither* merely brains *nor* over-extended "extended minds," yet all social institutions saliently constrain, frame, and partially determine the social-dynamic patterns of our essentially embodied consciousness, self-consciousness, affect (including feelings, desires, and emotions), cognition, and agency—that is, they *literally shape* our essentially embodied minds, and thereby fundamentally affect our lives, for worse or better, mostly without our self-conscious awareness (*the mind-shaping thesis*).

> *Many* social institutions in contemporary neoliberal nation-states literally shape our essentially embodied minds, and thereby our lives, in such a way as to alienate us, mentally enslave us, or even undermine our mental health, to a greater or lesser degree (*the destructive Gemeinschaft/collective sociopathy thesis*).

> Nevertheless, *some* social institutions, working against the grain of standard, dystopian social institutions in contemporary neoliberal nation-states, can make it really possible for us to self-realize, connect with others in a mutually aiding way, liberate ourselves, and be mentally healthy, authentic, and deeply happy (*the constructive Gemeinschaft/collective wisdom thesis*).

> It should be noticed that the kind of destructive, deforming mind-shaping described in … [the destructive Gemeinschaft/collective sociopathy thesis]  inherently admits of degrees—greater or lesser—whereas, by sharp contrast, the kind of constructive, enabling social mind-shaping described in … [the constructive Gemeinschaft/collective wisdom thesis] is categorically different from the kind of mind-shaping that occurs in standard, dystopian neoliberal social institutions. Hence the existence, creation, and development of constructive, enabling social institutions represents an absolute, radical break with the social-institutional *status quo* in contemporary neoliberal societies.

> So understood, the conjunction of our four basic theses yields what we call *the enactive-transformative principle:*
> > Enacting salient or even radical changes in the structure and complex dynamics of a social institution produces corresponding salient or even radical changes in the structure and complex dynamics of the essentially embodied minds of the people

belonging to, participating in, or falling under the jurisdiction of, that institution, thereby fundamentally affecting their lives, for worse or better.

In short, we can significantly change our own and other people's essentially embodied minds, and in turn, their lives, whether for worse or better, *by means of* changing the social institutions we and they belong to.

The enactive-transformative principle, in turn, motivates a philosophico-political *clarion call* whose simple, yet world-transforming message is that we can freely, systematically, and even radically change existing destructive, deforming social institutions in contemporary neoliberal nation-states into new constructive, enabling social institutions; and this, in turn, can allow us to transform our own and other people's essentially embodied minds and lives *for the better*. (Maiese and Hanna, 2019: pp. 8-10)

Against that theoretical backdrop, it's a mere truism that all of us find ourselves, in our daily lives, belonging to a great many different social institutions, including educational institutions, economic institutions, families, States, the Internet, and so-on. And a basic social institution for almost all of us, once we've graduated from school, is work, and correspondingly, our careers. But at the same time, a great many of us also discover that our work and our careers not only are *not* making us happy, but also they're actually making us intensely *unhappy*, because they're either bullshit (Graeber, 2013, 2020), or they're boring us, or they're dangerous, or they're annoying us, or they're making us anxious, or they're downright depressing us, etc., etc., or even shaping us in ways that make us mentally ill and existentially messed-up, i.e., literally crazy or insane. In a word, they're oppressing us. The hegemonic ideological structures of such oppressive social institutions, however, are such that we almost inevitably blame *ourselves* for this dysfunction, suffering, and unhappiness, instead of the social institutions themselves. And yet it's arguably true, as Maiese and I indeed argued in *The Mind-Body Politic*, that it's the social institutions themselves that are mentally ill and existentially messed-up, i.e., literally crazy or insane: namely, what we call *destructive, deforming social institutions* (Maiese and Hanna, 2019: chs. 3 and 5).

Supposing that's right, then what we need to recognize is that (i) since almost all people nowadays aren't chattel slaves—even if they're still wage slaves—then *they can exit these social institutions*, and (ii) since at some point in human history people *put up* these institutions, then (iii) *they can take them down too*, and above all (iv) they *can* create and sustain new, constructive enabling social institutions to replace the destructive, deforming ones. But unfortunately, the ideological hegemony of these inherently bad social institutions is such that, if you're fully embedded inside one, even if you self-consciously despise it, then it can be extremely difficult even to *imagine* real alternatives, much less to exit and take down that existing inherently bad social institution, or to create

and sustain an alternative inherently better social institution (see also Fisher, 2009). Moreover, the very recognition that a certain destructive, deforming social institution *isn't* eternal or written in stone, and *can* be taken down by us and replaced by something inherently better, is surrounded by a taboo that causes great individual and collective anxiety. For example, suppose that the police and the military simply disappeared tomorrow—what would happen? Most of us instantly feel the intensely anxious, gnawing worry that society would utterly collapse and that we'd regress to anarchy in the nihilistic sense, "the state of nature" as per Thomas Hobbes's "war of all against all" in the *Leviathan* (Hobbes, 1651/1968; see also Macpherson, 1968). But is this *really* the case? Or is it in fact nothing but what The Masters of the Social-Institutional Universe who control and/or immensely profit from the perpetuation of these destructive, deforming social institutions *want us to think* and *tell us to think*, while at the same time figuratively or literally shaking their fists at us?

Sharply to the contrary, see for example, Rebecca Solnit's *A Paradise Built in Hell* (Solnit, 2009), which shows, by using historical case-studies, that in fact a great many natural or social crises and disasters actually bring out the *best* in people, not the *worst*. And the same point is made, again using historical case-studies, in Rutger Bregman's *Humankind* (Bregman, 2020; Hanna, 2020). Therefore, *since it actually happens in real-world crises and disasters*, people not only *can* but *do* create alternative constructive, enabling institutions, some of which can be sustained long term. A real-world example is *Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières* (DWB/MSF, 2023). Therefore, since the actual entails the really possible, then constructive, enabling social institutions *are really possible*.

Keeping that in mind, and now going back to real spirituality, here's our basic problem:

> How can we, here and now, in the the belly of the massive leviathan/whale that's The New Apocalypse, exit and take down our destructive, deforming institutions—for example, the job that's bullshit, boring us, dangerous, annoying, anxiety-producing, depressing, or literally making us insane—and then connect our lives directly to the highest good by creating and sustaining alternative constructive, enabling institutions?

To be sure, the prospect of exiting and taking down a certain destructive, deforming social institution in order to create and sustain something radically different and inherently better is *really scary*, in view of the serious question, how will you actually live while you're trying to do or create something radically different and inherently better, and not become homeless and/or starve? Not to mention the complete loss of conventional social power and social status?, which is exceptionally painful. And what if

you fail miserably, and fall into the social-institutional void? Or what if it's the social institution of the police and the criminal justice system that you're exiting and trying to take down, and they imprison you or kill you? Feeling all that in the pit of your stomach, then you might try a "mixed" strategy, for example, putting up with a shit job for five or six days a week, and then pursuing an inherently meaningful and better life in your spare time, as it were. But for various reasons—for example, "the double life problem," which consists in the psychological and practical tension between externally living inside one social institution full-time but also being full-time internally in revolt against it, as well as the obvious fact that working five or six days a week, and then being on Zoom, Google Meet, Teams, or e-mailing or texting about your work basically 24-7, tires the hell out of you—that's *not* an inherently good or sustainable strategy. Sooner or later, you'll burn out or explode. So that returns us to the basic problem whose solution we're urgently looking for, namely, how to connect our own lives directly to the highest good, which we recognize and experientially represent via real spirituality, by exiting and taking down destructive, deforming social institutions, and then creating and sustaining constructive, enabling social institutions?

## 5. Realistically Optimist Dignitarian Humanism as The Moral Equivalent of The Spirituality-Industrial Complex

What I'll call *unrealistic optimism* about human life, the universe, and everything, is roughly speaking *Leibnizian*: this actual world is the best of all possible worlds, God created it this way (otherwise God would be basically an underachiever), and all is really for the best, no matter how terrible it might seem. But unrealistic optimism has of course been thoroughly and brilliantly satirized in Voltaire's *Candide*, via the ludicrous character of Dr Pangloss, and a similarly motivated criticism, although infinitely more edgy, can also be found in Ivan Karamazov's response to the problem of evil in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*: if a supposedly 3-O God permits all the holocausts and daily horrors we see around us, including the rape, torture, and murder of innocent children, then in absolute revolt and revulsion, we must simply "return [our] ticket of admission" on the Leibnizian cruise ship and instead jump into the vast grey ocean of being-in-a-world-in-which-God-Is-Dead (Dostoevsky, 1879-1880/1958: vol. 1, p. 287).

As Karamazov's rebellious "return your ticket of admission and jump off the Leibnizian cruise ship!" strategy suggests, the dialectical opposite to unrealistic optimism is what I'll call *cynicism-&-pessimism*, and this is a highly influential classical view going back to medieval Christianity, and especially to Hobbes's *Leviathan*, roughly at the time of the English Civil War, but also an extremely widespread *contemporary* attitude, that's closely bound up with the mechanistic worldview: if everything really and truly operates

according to mindless algorithms and/or the deterministic or indeterministic laws of nature, then everything in the "human, all-too-human" world really and truly is egoistic, meaningless, and shitty, God Is Dead, only The Mega-Machine Lives, and therefore "everything is permitted," as the pathetic murderer Smerdyakov in *The Brothers Karamazov*—himself the acolyte of Ivan Karamazov—so aptly puts it:

> "Take that money away with you, sir," Smerdyakov said with a sigh.
> "Of course, I'll take it! But why are you giving it to me if you committed a murder to get it?" Ivan asked, looking at him with intense surprise.
> "I don't want it at all," Smerdyakov said in a shaking voice, with a wave of the hand.
> "I did have an idea of starting a new life in Moscow, but that was just a dream, sir, and mostly because 'everything is permitted'. This you did teach me, sir, for you talked to me a lot about such things: for if there's no everlasting God, there's no such thing as virtue, and there's no need of it at all. Yes, sir, you were right about that. That's the way I reasoned." (Dostoevsky, 1879-1880/1958: vol. 2, p. 743)

More specifically, if you can't help feeling and acting like nothing more than a "survival machine" driven from below by your genes and other robotic biomechanisms (Dawkins, 2006), then it's kill-or-be-killed, everyone for themselves, and everyone relentlessly playing games inside destructive, deforming institutions, and, if they're clever, ruthless, and strong enough, then winning those games, stepping on other people's heads as they climb the greasy pole, advancing their careers, etc. etc., and, collecting lots and lots of $$, property, adult toys, and coercive social power and status, thereby becoming and being a Really Big Winner, perhaps even a Billionaire (soon: Trillionaire). Otherwise, you're nothing but a pathetic loser and deserve to die. But this is literally hell on earth, a monstrous way to live and die, and horribly bad for everyone: it's just *Trumpism* writ large, and in acceding to it, conforming to it, pursuing it, and promoting it, you become nothing more than a miniature Jabba The Trump, or, only slightly better, nothing more than yet another one of Santa-Marx's commodity fetishist elves slaving away inside the military-industrial-digital complex.

On the face of it, there might seem to be no genuine alternatives to (i) Leibnizian unrealistic optimism on the one hand, and (ii) Hobbesian cynicism-&-pessimism on the other: between Dr Pangloss on the one hand, and Jabba The Trump or Santa-Marx's-commodity-fetishist-elves on the other. Yet *there's at least one* genuine alternative. This genuine alternative flows directly and naturally from the larger historico-philosophical and sociopolitical tradition of *radical enlightenment* (Hanna, 2016; Gare, 2023), and runs from Kant's 1793 *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (Kant, 1793/1996) and William Godwin's 1793 *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, to Peter Kropotkin's 1892 *Conquest of Bread* and 1902 *Mutual Aid*, via Oscar Wilde's 1891 "The Soul of Man Under

Socialism," and Emma Goldman's writings of the 1910s and 20s, through Bertrand Russell's practical and political writings from the end of the First World War and into the 1960s, Paulo Freire's 1968/1970 *Pedgogy of the Oppressed*, Murray Bookchin's writings from the 1960s to the 1990s, and more recent works like Solnit's 2009 *A Paradise Built in Hell*, James C. Scott's 1998 *Seeing Like a State*, his 2012 *Two Cheers for Anarchism*, and his 2017 *Against the Grain*, and Bregman's 2014 *Utopia for Realists* and his 2020 *Humankind*.

Just to give it a name, I'll call this genuine alternative *realistically optimist dignitarian humanism,* aka RODH. The full label is a bit of a mouthful, it's too wordy to fit on a bumpersticker or a lawnsign for the purposes of bumpersticker- or lawnsign-liberalism, and the acronym isn't too zippy: but it's accurate. RODH fully rejects coercive authoritarianism of all kinds, on the basis of sufficient respect for human dignity, and it fully affirms the real possibility and actuality of human free agency, authentic human creativity, and non-egoistically-motivated, non-instrumental social cooperation and solidarity (Hanna, 2018a, 2018b, 2023c) while also fully realistically recognizing that at the same time we're always and everywhere only "human, all-too-human," and "crooked timbers," that is: we're inescapably finite, fallible, and thoroughly normatively imperfect in every way.

More precisely, RODH says four things. **First**, rational human animals are *essentially capable* of good actions and virtuous character, cooperation, and altruism, but also (sadly, tragically) *equally essentially capable* of bad actions and vicious character, antagonism, and egoism. So we are *neither* fundamentally-bad *nor* fundamentally-good, but instead, complementarily and inherently *partially-good-and-partially-bad.* We are, indeed, crooked timbers: never perfectly straight, but also necessarily such that there is some genuinely good wood in us too. **Second**, it's *only* coercive authoritarian social institutions that *inevitably* corrupt us, and are *inherently deforming and destructive* for us, *especially* including the State, but also any other State-like institution (Hanna, 2018b). **Third**, directly contrary to and mutually exclusive of those inherently deforming and destructive coercive authoritarian social institutions, whether States or other State-like social institutions, there are at least *some* social institutions (and in fact, *surprisingly more of them* than you might initially think) that are *neither* coercive *nor* authoritarian, hence they are neither inherently destructive nor inherently deforming, but on the contrary *they can effectively prime and shape our capacities for good, cooperation, and altruism*, in ways that are *inherently constructive and enabling* for us. Following Kant's lead in *Religion* (Kant, 1793/1996), let's call these constructive, enabling social institutions *ethical communities*. And again, a real-world example is *Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières* (DWB/MSF, 2023), so that we can demonstrate real possibility by means of pointing at actuality. **Fourth** and finally, therefore, all of these non-coercive, non-authoritarian, inherently constructive and enabling social institutions—ethical communities—are *not*

States or State-like social institutions, since *all* States and State-like social institutions are inherently coercive and authoritarian; or if ethical communities do happen to arise and exist temporarily inside the State or other State-like social institutions, then they are explicitly or at least implicitly *in opposition* to the State and those other State-like institutions (Hanna, 2018b).

And now we're at the bottom line and also at the punch line of this essay. What I'm proposing is that we can solve the fundamental problem we're struggling with—i.e., "how can we connect our own lives directly to the highest good, which we recognize and experientially represent via real spirituality, by exiting and taking down destructive and deforming social institutions like the military-industrial-digital complex, and then creating and sustaining constructive, enabling social institutions?"—by means of believing in, organizing our lives around, and wholeheartedly acting for the sake of, realistically optimist dignitarian humanism. RODH is a fundamental form of *commitment*. So, for example, if one *believed in* the existence of human dignity, but were faced with overwhelming evidence—say, from the Russia/Ukraine War, or the Gaza War, or from the worldwide problem of guns and gunviolence, especially daily gun violence in the USA (Hanna, 2023d, 2023e, 2023f)—that people everywhere are in fact constantly treating each other like mere means or mere things, so that the preponderance of empirical evidence is massively in favor of being *unable* justifiably to *believe that* human dignity exists, then this form of commitment would still enable one *to soldier on*—a Jamesian elective affinity—existentially, morally, and politically. That's *real spirituality in action*. In this way, using the core strategy of James's moral-equivalent-of-war argument, RODH is *the moral equivalent of the spirituality-industrial complex*.

## 6. Conclusion

Assuming that what I've argued is sound, then I strongly recommend that everyone buy tickets for the RODH soul train as soon as it's humanly possible—*people get ready*—and then courageously ride that train out beyond the badlands and wastelands of The New Apocalypse where The Four Horseman lurk and plunder, especially including the military-industrial-digital complex in general and the spirituality-industrial complex in particular, and *into the future*, wholeheartedly hoping for the better by believing in the best, namely, the highest good.[2]

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