

Reconceptualizing Mental Illness in the Viral Age

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Souls in the Machine

By

Elliott B. Martin, Jr.

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



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This book first published 2024

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-0364-0503-6

ISBN (13): 978-1-0364-0503-8

For Joe, Millie, Sam, and Dora...

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PREFACE

GREAT AWAKENINGS

Arthur woke up and instantly regretted it.

—Douglas Adams, *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, 1980

What is a Great Awakening?

The term, ‘Great Awakening’, is usually associated with American history.

Most historians agree that there have been (at least) three discreet epochs of such ‘awakening’ in American history, typically in the context of religious revivalism—most often led, or inspired, by charismatic Protestant clergy. These have all occurred since the founding of the British colonies, the Colonies, all of which have had lasting socio-political influence—and thereby, presumably, some psychological influence—on the population at the time. What is of interest to us—those of us who would think more critically about the history and progress of medicine and in particular psychiatry—about these revival periods is that, although very recently they have come to be associated with fundamentalist Christian thinking and evangelicalism, historically the ‘true believers’ behind the movements were motivated, inspired (?), by what today would be considered a ‘progressive’, or psychologically ‘right’ (i.e. inarguable) agenda.

The first Great Awakening, by scholarly consensus, began in the US South in the 1730s. The Southern colonies, to be sure, and especially, were founded and maintained not under any religious banner, but under strictly economic motives. There was no pretense even of a search for ‘religious freedom’ or escape from ‘religious persecution’ that, say, the founders of New England would later (perhaps hypocritically) cry. Arguably this is what allowed for a policy of slavery to take hold in the first place. For here was a (relatively) newly founded society, an agrarian way of life, established and promulgated purposely without moral compass, so to speak. In a godless world, a ‘new’ world, a great world ‘do-over’, it becomes much easier to accept egregious violations of human dignity as simply a matter of ‘the way of (that new) world’. Not unlike the slave-based societies, amid shifting and chaotic alliances and governments, of Ancient Greece and

Rome. ('We maintain a policy of slavery because we can, because we must.')

¹

But American history did not occur in a vacuum.

The American Revolution was in fact the culmination of Western European 'Enlightenment' ideas. Ideas that had been insidiously eroding traditional monarchical values across the continent since the mid-seventeenth century. Slavery, for example, was in fact a deeply contentious issue among the 'enlightened' from the seventeenth century on. Both from a religious standpoint and from an atheistic/deistic 'human rights' perspective, there grew the socio-political will to gradually ban the practice. (Interestingly, the Dutch, long considered the most 'progressive' and most 'tolerant' European country of the time, by which is typically meant that they were the first state to allow for unfettered capitalism and corporatism, were the first to capitalize from the slave trade, and the last to, grudgingly, ban the practice [not until 1863].)

But we are getting slightly ahead of ourselves.

Before the Revolution proper, with the Colonies seen as the great experimental petri dish of Enlightenment ideas, slavery became a leading concern, a thorn in the paw of the intellectual elite. How *could* such a progressive, resourceful, and burgeoning nation allow for such an outdated and barbaric practice? Slavery was indeed a massive wrench in the entire Enlightenment works, and the European intelligentsia especially could not reconcile this disparity.

This was the context of the first Great Awakening, led primarily by inspired British ministers, newly arrived to the colonies, the Southern colonies in particular, who were shocked most of all by the lack of religious cohesion in the New World. Lack of real faith was seen as the root cause of

¹ To be sure, the rest of the world, and world history to that point, (and arguably continues as such) was premised on slavery and/or caste/feudal systems. But, and here is the greater hypocrisy of all Awakenings, this first Great Awakening took place during the rise of the so-called Age of Enlightenment, the breakaway period in history when the West 'awoke' and realized it was superior to the rest of the world. This superiority included, perhaps even especially so, moral superiority, and continues today. For example, slavery, castes, extreme poverty were indeed 'the way of the world' in the 1730s, and when viewed from on high, continue to be so here in the 2020s. Yet the 'enlightened' reaction to such, from, say, the typical 'open-minded' working upper-middle class 'target consumer' soccer mom, would undoubtedly be one of ghastly, if hypocritical, horror. The colonial South was really the precursor to the post-historical globalized village. The soccer moms of the time likewise simply turned their heads away, covered their faces with their fans, from the gruesome pillars of their economy, all the while enjoying the fruits of such (forced) labor.

injustices such as slavery. The Spanish and the French at least nominally made it part of their mission in the New World to proselytize, to convert, to spread the Word of God, and to save souls. The British and the Dutch, their Enlightenment destinies inextricably woven together following the Glorious Revolution of 1688,² did not. These early ‘awakenings’ were grass-roots efforts, and though historically relegated to about ten years or so, the more lasting effect of this first great revival was less any lasting impact on the ruling classes of the time than that it led to the more widespread Christianization and subsequent cohesion of the slave population.

The second Great Awakening, and really *the* Great Awakening to many historians who disagree with the contention that there have been more than one such epoch, took place *after* the Revolution—the American revolution—into the early nineteenth century. Explained away as a reactionary/resistance movement to the adoption of the Constitution, to the perceived banning of God and religion from government practice,³ the movement was much more than that. It was really America’s first great ‘social movement’, the first time a ‘moral’ agenda was put forth and passionately advocated for by the will of the people. By ‘moral agenda’ I do not mean issues such as religious intolerance, gun control, gender dispersion, or abortion rights, but rather the burning issues of the day, such as abolition, temperance, and women’s rights. These became the foundation

² Following the deposition of the Catholic British monarch King James II and takeover of the throne by his Protestant daughter, Mary II and her Protestant Dutch husband, and James’ nephew, and stadholder-king of the Netherlands, William III of Orange, the ruling couple more popularly known as ‘William and Mary’. British and Dutch interests were now the same. They had little interest in saving souls, and great interest in capitalizing from the vast, seemingly infinite, resources, of the New World.

³ Jefferson very carefully chose his words in the Declaration of Independence, with a likely assist from Benjamin Franklin, when he declares: “...to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.” He also refers to “the Creator” and to “Divine Providence”. He never once says “God” without qualifier, nor is there any other Biblical reference. Jefferson was a deist, a materialist, a follower of Spinoza and Locke. He believed in Reason, even if Reason dictates a ‘First Cause’, or ‘Prime Mover’. He believed in ‘natural’ laws and explanations for everything. He certainly did not want the new nation founded on any particular ‘religious’ principles. “Nature’s God” was his compromise to those who did. Despite the lessons of history, however, he did not expect the revivalist backlash. (The Reformation and subsequent Counter-Reformation, already major historical events by Jefferson’s time, come to mind.)

of the 'progressive', or the then Republican, platform as the Constitution went into effect, leading to the development of political parties, of political divisions, and among 'the people', a moral revival. That is, the issues now spread from the founders to the people, 'the people' who grew increasingly comfortable, in this mostly lawless new nation, spouting off their own opinions, however ill-informed.

'Viral' is not really the right word here, as the Enlightenment itself was really the first-time ideas 'went viral'. What marked the second Great Awakening was the mass motivation and inspiration, the 'Swarm'-ization of the masses, the cohering of the actual socio-political will 'to do something about it'. This wasn't just a few hyper-educated people exchanging barbs in the journals of the day. This was the mass of *un*-Enlightened latching passionately on to a simple idea or two and running with it.

Certainly, the seeds were planted here—as Jefferson himself rightly predicted—for a 'civil war' over 'our peculiar institution' (slavery).

The third Great Awakening is where things become more hazy, more amorphous, more morally ambivalent, with dates ranging from the 1850's up until the early 1900's. This became the era of social reform, of the so-called Social Gospel, in which many social issues, problems, evils, were addressed for the first time, issues such as the environment, overcrowding in urban areas, sanitation, healthcare access, labor, child labor, education, and so forth. But most significantly, and at last, the top three issues for the 'socially conscious' revivalist crowd—slavery, women's rights, and temperance—all culminated, eventually, with major political 'victories' during this period.

The fourth Great Awakening, from the 1960's through the 1980's, was less a backlash against the counter-culture movement of the time and more of a parallel development, at least initially. On the heels of the Second Vatican Council, it was more about the democratization of Christianity amid the civil rights and anti-academia movements. Free love, sexual promiscuity, drugs, rock-and-roll music, disagreement (for disagreement's sake) with country and parent, unfettered protestation and/or advocacy, profound condescension and intellectual elitism, for any and all issues, and most importantly, eventually, massive wealth accumulation, all became permissible, acceptable, even encouraged, as long as one retained a superficial modicum of faith, a 'spiritual-ness', a superficial modicum of family, a superficial modicum of humanity.

With the end of the manufacturing culture, however, in 1979, and the rise of technological, financial, and service cultures, and the staggering

new wealth created thereby, the ‘awakening’, through the 1980s, took on more overtly politically conservative tones.

There was no longer a crisis of faith in the West.

Not even when history came to an abrupt end in 1989.

In 1989 the Berlin Wall fell, the Soviet Union collapsed, Prozac was first marketed, the ‘World Wide Web’ was created, both *Seinfeld* and *The Simpsons* first aired, and Taylor Swift was born.

Most significantly, and the marker of the end of history as previously understood, was the fact that liberal democracy won the day outright. Karl Marx’ inexorable ‘march of history’ was not only halted in its tracks but crushed ‘with extreme prejudice’. There was suddenly no longer any struggle whatsoever between labor and owner, between the ‘working’ class and the ‘bourgeoisie’. There was now a burgeoning, and exponentially expanding neuro-labor, psycho-labor, all in the service of an increasingly ethereal corporate elite, in a gaping abyssal milieu of 24/7 marketing, of 24/7 ‘connection’, of 24/7 consuming.

And now, here in the post-historical era, we are in the midst of the next, the fifth, I suppose (based on my own chronology thus far), Great Awakening. I have previously referred to this epoch as the Digital Age, the era of both arrogant and placid liberal democracy, of unfettered and unregulated capitalism, of ‘social’ media, of ‘mass’ media, of concise communication with ‘memes’ and ‘emojis’. This is the era that has seen the rise of the ether, of Cyberia, of virtual existence and artificial intelligence, of telemedicine and telepsychiatry, of the Swarm. In other words, the digital era is the era of limitless markets, of infinite profits, of unimaginable pornography and snuff. To accommodate any moral qualm in this questionable milieu, there has been a corresponding demonization of Christianity and Western intellectual history, along with an appropriately reactionary fetishization of Eastern religion and cultures without any intellectual tradition. Little wonder that this is also the era of suicide, of homicide, of isolation, of loneliness, of despair. Little wonder that there is an epidemic of autism, of depression, of narcissism, of psychopathy. All pathologies rooted in the ‘self’. And with the new digital ‘self’ most conveniently conceptualized as a single point of datum among billions, these become less pathologies than simply the new digital way of being.

The new digital hell.

The current Awakening is also an era of dissolution, of dehumanization, of the rise of the ‘too-big-to-fail’ digito-corporatocracy. Digital faith, at its core, is a faith in, and appeal to, the moral rectitude of corporate governance, to the governors’ (perceived, perhaps even faith-driven) ability, most of all, to control the digital behemoth beneath which

we all live in mortal terror. The creation of the cybersphere and artificial intelligence has itself created a new proselytism, a solutionism, a futurism, a faith in a boundless ether that is simultaneously awe-inspiring and gut-wrenchingly terrifying. It is a yawning maw, an utter absence of metaphors, Kierkegaard's abyss made real, a black hole, an event horizon. And the neo-revivalists, the New Oligarchs, the celebrities, the influencers, all heartily urge their 'followers' to sing a mindless tune, ear buds in, eyes down on their latest 'device', while taking less a leap of faith, than a stumbling 'oops!', right into the abyss.

Over and over and over.

Dear Diary, my teen angst bullshit now has a body count.

—Veronica Sawyer, *Heathers*, 1989

The term 'woke' has been, ironically, resurrected in these end times as a quasi-metaphor for enlightenment, for neo-religious conversion. ('Born again' was the metaphor of the third and fourth Great Awakenings.) But the description is hardly unique to the current era. I frequently compare the latest Great Awakening to the previous Age of Enlightenment, or Second Age of Reason (the First being the so-called 'Golden Age' of Ancient Greece). The Enlightenment was the great, and profoundly influential, intellectual movement begun really with the radically disruptive ideas of seventeenth century thinker Baruch Spinoza. (Some seeds were planted by the earlier French polymath René Descartes and British political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, but Spinoza tweaked and fixed their logical errors, and had much greater influence on subsequent generations.) Logic and reason became the core drivers of intellectual inquiry and endeavor, with the Christian God eventually displaced. Faith in humanity replaced faith in religion. Dismissive of any need to answer to the Church, the 'Enlightenment' paved the way for spectacular advances in science, in exploration, in economic growth, all the while allowing for the 'scientific' justification, and even peroration, of exploitation, warfare, and slavery.

The American and French Revolutions were the apotheoses of the era, of the power of ideas themselves.

The American example was arguably a success; the French 'experiment' was arguably an abject failure.

(Of course, as alluded to, this newer focus on introspection and internalization of one's own aggressive tendencies led to a spectacular rise in depression and angst. The psychiatric hospital, the first specialty hospital of any kind, was established out of necessity, with a focus on 'moral'

treatment. For others, these intolerable thoughts could only be managed by externalizing, and thus began the age of conquest and colonization, eventually the age of revolutions, and finally the rise of capitalism-exploitation and the world wars.)

It was the later Enlightenment German philosopher Immanuel Kant, in his attempts to reconcile reason with morality, who first hinted at the term ‘woke’ in its current metaphorical sense. (Images of sleep were considered too intimate at the time. Although, interestingly enough, it does call to mind Jefferson’s previously mentioned reluctance to use the word ‘slavery’ in his writing and correspondence, in polite society.) In describing his own moment of inspiration, of conversion, of ‘seeing the light’, of the lightbulb clicking, of his fingers snapping ‘a-ha!’ Kant writes, not of being ‘woken’ from, but rather of being ‘interrupted’ from his ‘dogmatic slumber’. (His ‘interrupter’, by the way, was British philosopher and historian David Hume, who, while dismissing religious faith, could not reconcile logic and reason as anything more than unprovable, unrelated series of observations that eventually led down, and back around, circular ‘illogical’ paths. Hume did not believe in morality except as expedient to one’s desires. He also struggled with debilitating bouts of depression for most of his life.) Kant, however, and despite Hume’s warning about the impossibility of inductive reasoning, tried his best to force morality into a logical scheme.

Kant’s scheme became the standard—ironically its own ‘dogma’—across the continent and the pond, as a ‘scientific’ rationale for morality. It allowed science and faith to exist side-by-side. (Much like Descartes’ separation of the mind from the body had allowed for the introduction of ‘reason’ into the philosophic debates at a time [early seventeenth century] when one could still lose one’s head for writing the ‘wrong’ thing about Church dogma.)

(Are we starting to notice a pattern here?)

Alas, there was a (perhaps inevitable, and another) backlash, a ‘reaction’.

Several, really:

The nineteenth century Romantics argued for the primacy of feeling, of emotion, of art and literature, over logic and reason, at least in describing the human condition. Kierkegaard, the grandfather of existentialism, argued that religion, specifically Christianity, is the only means of reconciling reason and unreason. Schopenhauer first introduced Eastern religion and quasi-mysticism into the argument against the primacy of reason. And Freud and his disciples put forth the clinical case that humanity at its core, its ‘psyche’, is quite unreasonable. In the twentieth century psychology became a field on par with philosophy, used to great

advantage by fascist governments and the burgeoning mass media/advertising industry alike.

Here in the twenty-first century, the digital era, the age of neuro-exhaustion and moral malaise, the age of boredom, of distraction, of despair, of self-loathing, both reason and feeling have merely been worked into the algorithms. There are in fact now quantitative ‘suicide screening scales’. There are ‘depression scales’, ‘anxiety scales’, and ‘OCD scales’. And all of these provide very concrete and crunchable numbers. They provide data. In aggregate they provide Big Data. Big Data in turn fuels the corporatocracies. And the corporatocracies provide solutions, for everything. A fragile, if spectacularly vast, new world, light and illusory as the ether itself, and Atlas has finally caught a break. But in such an insubstantial world, such a ‘virtual’ world, the human condition is reduced to, and is reducible to, a spreadsheet of data points. Hegel’s previously magnificent ‘world soul’ reduced to a screenshot, a screensaver.

Psychologically, within a digital milieu, we, humanity, have regressed, from a general hysterical-neurotic personality—the overall ‘type’ associated with the Enlightenment through the Marxist-Freudian era—to the autistic-borderline-dependent-narcissistic personality of the Digital Age. ‘#MeToo’ really is the perfect 6-character summation of the broader cultural, if superficial, techno-psychopathology of the ‘social contagion’ age. (Hysteria and neuroses are psychopathology terms from a previous era, both of which have been ‘canceled’ from the post-historical diagnostic manuals. The currently accepted conceptualization of so-called personality disorders is that of ‘clusters’. There are ten acknowledged such disorders, each placed in one of three clusters, colorfully named Cluster A, Cluster B, and Cluster C. These are not mutually exclusive. Autistic traits would fall under Cluster A [in medical school these are euphemistically referred to as the ‘weird’ personalities]. Borderline and narcissistic traits would fall under Cluster B [the ‘wild’ personalities]. And dependency would fall under Cluster C [the ‘wimpy’ personalities]. Where two clusters overlap in a patient we use the term ‘mixed personality disorder’. Where all three clusters overlap? That is the dreaded, but increasingly common, ‘clusterf*ck’.)

Now, by all accounts, Professor Kant was a creature of strict habit, and others in the university town of Königsberg would mark time by his schedule. He went to bed at the same time every night, woke up at the same time every morning, went for his daily walk at the same time. His sleep hygiene was probably pretty good. But here in the digital era, in the era of 24/7 connection, our dogmatic slumbers tend not to be. They are artificial, restless, dreamless, fueled by sleeping pills and intoxicants. Those who would ‘wake’ us, who want us to see—who *need* us to see—just how right

they are, are just as dogmatic. Our ‘thought leaders’ now do not come from a place of wisdom, of knowledge, of hard-earned experience, of thoughtfulness, of strength of character, but rather, they are sound byte manipulators and celebrities, viral influencers, talking, shouting, heads, all of them two-dimensional screen characters. And we are saturated with their verbal, their emotional, incontinence. We are saturated to the point of *chronic* intoxication by social media and mass media both. We are so saturated that even our waking hours are half-asleep. The Oligarchs themselves, no longer content to pull the strings and wallow in their victims’ misery, eager to turn the spotlight on themselves now, also want in on ‘the whole victim thing’. #MeToo (Cluster B and C mixed personality disorder), and we are spoon-fed our digital medicine, our ‘soma’,⁴ by the larger-than-life corporate psychopath (Cluster A and B) ‘them-selves’ (also Cluster B).⁵

As we have noted, the digital era (to which I also refer as the post-historical era) is defined by the total victory of liberal democracy, by the end of exploration, by the transition from a real to a digital economy, from a real to a digital existence, by the dispersion of personality itself into the ether. The age is increasingly defined, as we ‘progress’, as we ‘evolve’, by a reliance on, and merging with, artificial intelligence, with virtual reality, with neuro-labor, with psycho-labor, with a labor force defined by techno-psycho-pathology. It is the age of ‘users’ and ‘followers’, of ‘likes’ and ‘dislikes’, of ‘thumbs ups’, ‘thumbs downs’, and ‘claps’, of smiley faces, sad faces, and grumpy faces.

Big Data is shallow data, but this is the extent of discourse in the digital era.

Little wonder the appeal of dogmatic slumber.

⁴ Soma was the Hindu equivalent of the Greek Dionysius, the Roman Bacchus; that is, the god of wine, of intoxicants. It is also the unabashedly shameless brand name of the prescription quasi-opioid, carisoprodol, one third of the potentially deadly so-called ‘Houston cocktail’: oxycodone, Xanax, and Soma. Kind of like developing a new prescription stimulant and calling it ‘Crack’.

⁵ ‘Psychopathy’ is not in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Text Revision*, or *DSM-5-TR*, the very latest iteration of the ‘Bible of Psychiatry’. ‘Psychopathy’ was apparently too offensive to psychopaths, and so the condition is more ‘correctly’ (?) called ‘antisocial personality disorder’. As for those who cannot ‘decide’ on a gender, or a pronoun, this represents a core deficit of ‘self’-hood, a fragmented, unintegrated personality, the very definition of the ‘borderline personality disorder’. Both antisocial and borderline personality disorders fall under Cluster B, i.e. they are related.

As British rock-and-roll band The Who once sang, “Meet the new boss, same as the old boss.”⁶

Indeed, there is a ‘new dawn’, a hangover from the sleeping pills, alcohol, and cannabis, and welcome to the next Great Awakening, the digital morning after...

⁶ They, the band, were almost certainly referring to George Orwell’s second most famous, if first published, in 1945, dystopian vision of the post-historical age, *Animal Farm*: ‘The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again, but already it was impossible to say which was which.’

Overheard just prior to the end of history:

You shithead! I'm glad I tortured you!
—Leila, *Repo Man*, 1984

PROLOGUE

AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF AMORALITY

Are you going to change yet again, shift your position according to the questions that are put to you, and say that the objections are not really directed at the place from which you are speaking? Are you going to declare yet again that you have never been what you have been reproached with being? Are you already preparing the way out that will enable you ...to spring up somewhere else and declare as you're now doing...?

—Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 1969

This book is a sequel, of sorts.

(Although I suppose all books, in a way, are sequels.)

I did not know what to expect following the publication of my first book, *Reconceptualizing Mental Illness in the Digital Age: Ghosts in the Machine*, in 2021. I had spent years drafting and re-drafting the piece. It was an ambitious work, after all, perhaps too ambitious, arguing the need for a whole new way of approaching mental illness here in the Digital Age. The title said as much. It was to be my own ‘grand narrative’, old-fashioned, in a way (if subsequently released upon a sound byte academic culture).

So, if so ‘grand’, why the need for a sequel?

Because, despite its attempt at comprehensiveness, what is (unfortunately only) hinted at, but not made explicit (enough) in that work, is that if we are to reconceptualize our approach to mental illness, then by extension, we need to do the same for medical illness, and ‘health’-‘care’ in general. The subtitle, perhaps, suggested as much: ‘Ghosts in the Machine’. The ‘Machine’ is a ‘meta-phor’ for the ‘meta-verse’, for the post-historical digital way of being that is the ‘now’, the impossible, ever-fleeting moment that is the mid-twenty-first century milieu; at the same time, it is an anti-metaphor, for the post-historical impossibility of a non-digital way of being.

Most importantly, stripped to its core, what I do, or try to do, in *this* volume is posit a growing number of digital psycho-pathologies, of techno-pathologies unique to the age, and more explicitly so, an explosion of digital socio-medico-pathologies. (The bigger takeaway, as we move, as we ‘transition’, into the current piece, is that the two, both digito-psychiatric pathologies and digito-medical pathologies, are inextricable. Less a

philosophic problem of mind-body dualism, and more a recognition that most physical symptoms are psychogenic in nature.)

Alas, that first go at it was published into a raging meta-sea of New Academia, into a vast new Digital Enlightenment, into the impossible rigidity of the latest ‘Great Awakening’. And make no mistake, we are firmly in the grip of the latest rendition of such. To be sure, as discussed in the preface, prior episodes of Great Awakenings were marked especially by neo-religious fervor, by unwavering claims to moral high ground, almost always led by Protestant zealots. The last Great Awakening, prior to our current chapter, was (arguably) the so-called ‘Jesus Movement’ of the 1960’s and 1970’s, a tangent, ironically (really, as noted, reactionary, as all Great Awakenings are), to the ‘counter’-culture offerings of the time, a movement even more ironically associated with free love, with acceptance of drugs and sexual variation, and inevitably, inexorably really, with the charismatic, very Jesus-like figure, of Charles Manson himself.

Manson, for all his nonsensical rantings, for all his prison posing and bluster, for all his unwaveringly murderous ravings, has indeed become a myth, a legend, a transcendent figure across the divide of history into post-history. He has become more than purely a symbol; his ‘family’, his ‘Family’, has come to epitomize less the psychopath’s magnetic ability to charm, to hypnotize, to ‘brainwash’, than the profound and pathetic passiveness and dependency at the heart of the counter-culture movements of the time (not unlike the profound passiveness that marked the Great Awakenings of Manson’s similarly morally rigid predecessors⁷). That is, a passiveness, yes, but a passiveness loaded with latent desire, a desire so intense that it became its own craving—sexually loaded (or not)—to believe, to *believe*, to believe in something, in some *thing*, in anything, in any *thing*. As long as that ‘some *thing*’ came packaged in a superficially palatable, or perhaps better said, fleetingly pleasurable, form.

And Manson was the perfectly charismatic, martyr-by-incarceration, leader of a New Awakening during a time of massive social upheaval. Jesus

⁷ Consider carefully that Manson himself, now dead several years, has yet to be ‘canceled’. The crimes of mass murder, torture, and rape aside, what has been overlooked most among his now digital hagiologists is the fact that he was unswervingly and outspokenly racist in his ideology. He in fact repeatedly and adamantly confessed that his, and his ‘family’s’ actions, were essentially motivated by hatred and fear of African-Americans. The Tate and Labianca murders were not random. They were carefully planned, and, taking advantage of the guilt-ridden Great Awakening at the time, meant to appear to be the start of a great Black uprising. In other words, they were meant to start a racial war.

Christ repackaged, 2.0, as rebel, as revolutionary, in explicitly sexual, in explicitly sensual—that is, hyper-violent—form.

And more, he, Manson, has survived well into the Digital Age. The age of the Swarm, the digital Ministry of Love, a bureaucratic dispenser of justice even a faded free-loving, dope-dealing hippie can love, the age that ‘cancels’, that ‘un-persons’, people for a single off-color comment or joke, for a casual, drunken accusation or implication thrown their way, for criticizing a union nurse, for simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time, has allowed Manson and his Family not only to survive, but arguably to thrive here in the cybersphere. The Age of the Victim, and who represents salvation to the would-be Mary Magdalenes of the world more than the would-be Savior Himself?⁸

Despite Manson’s death in 2017, his digital persona carries on. There is no arguing that torture and murder are second-tier crimes in the Digital Age, but what is most amazing about Manson’s survival, as noted above, is that he is given a pass for the swastika carved into his forehead, for his blitheringly anti-Black tirades and plots to massacre the entire race, and more so for his utter condescension and dismissiveness toward all women.⁹

Unassailable in his gruesomeness, he is truly, in his way, a most Christ-like figure.

⁸ We have seen a similar charisma from Donald Trump. He persists with his great middle finger aimed squarely at the status quo, and for it he will remain a symbol, a martyr, a hero, a saint. Like Manson, Trump’s political leanings are otherwise of little consequence. Even here in post-history, the keepers of the status quo are the ones truly responsible for the rise of the murderous cult of personality. Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Mao, Pol Pot, Duvalier, all the others emerged from the ashes of that same status quo, from the bureaucracies designed to make daily life as miserable as possible, from beaten-down masses pushed a little too far. None of these leaders were particularly brilliant, but they understood the rage, the fury, the hatred of the id, the Swarm. They understood most of all that a baseball bat to the head will silence even the most vocal academic critic.

⁹ Manson’s attitudes toward women have given the revisionists fits. He did, after all, ‘empower’ them. He empowered them to torture and murder, to be the ‘aggressors’, to be the brutally amoral ‘matriarchal’ element within the ‘Family’. For it, they, too, have yet to be canceled despite their horrific crimes. (Think names such as Susan Atkins, Patricia Krenwinkel, Leslie Van Houton, Squeaky Fromme, and Linda Kasabian. ‘Are they not also victims?’ the non-argument goes. ‘Are they not also #MeToo?’)

I, on the other hand, am not.

I do not have a swastika carved into my head. I have not publicly denounced any races in their entirety. I have not seduced an army of women to do my hateful, murderous bidding.

But I *have* criticized the status quo.

And I guess what surprised me most in the immediate post-publication period of *Ghosts in the Machine*, especially given the lack of widespread readership, was the outsized nuclear academic response. Perhaps ironically, perhaps more fittingly, I have never had much of an online footprint, of a social media presence. Yet, as I followed up, respectfully and cordially, with previously friendly outlets, I found myself simply ignored, my emails unanswered. I persisted for a while. I dutifully submitted brand new, vanilla-bland essays to formerly receptive editors, and for it, I received no response whatsoever. Not even form letter rejections. Not even a ‘please, do not contact us ever again’. I do not believe there was any malice in my writing. To be sure, the book was critical of the state of psychiatry currently, but there were no personal attacks, no names or outlets mentioned, and the overall point, upon tearing down the edifice, was to propose a foundation for moving forward in a more meaningful way. And so, the ‘cold shoulder’, the ‘ghosting’, if you will, that followed, and from professional organizations, surprised me. After all, this was not a project that had ‘come out of the blue’. I had always written somewhat, if not controversial, then at least challenging, pieces, consistently critical of the state of healthcare, consistently critical especially of mental health care.

And I do have the chops to do so.

I am, frankly, knee-deep, and more, in this ‘mental health crisis’-morass. Everyday. I am a physician, a psychiatrist, triple-board certified in general psychiatry, child and adolescent psychiatry, and addiction medicine. I direct a psychiatry service line in a general medical hospital responsible for the psychiatric consultations to the emergency department and to the medical and surgical floors. In other words, I am responsible for managing, with my incredible team, all the psychiatric emergencies and urgencies in the hospital.

But I am not just a doctor. Medicine has been a second career for me, and so I was not raised within the corporate healthcare machinery. In other words, I was not raised to be an obsequious cog in a healthcare corporatocracy. No. I am also a scholar and a teacher, by training, a former specialist in Ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean languages and cultures, who has continued to publish work on the history and philosophy

of medicine and psychiatry.¹⁰ With that all said, although I have been known to paint occasionally in vanilla, I have never been one for marshmallow ‘fluff’ pieces, for applauding the status quo, or worse, for applauding the now all-too-common tendency toward regression.

But obviously a whole book was too much, especially a book premised on the urgent need to dispense with the status quo. I suppose, as I think about it, the whole project was premised, *is* premised, perhaps, on the need to do away with those very outlets who continue to applaud and perpetuate the status quo.

Biting the hand that fed me?

Maybe.¹¹

¹⁰ My most recent work in this regard is a book-length treatment on moral inquiry from a medical perspective, Martin, EB. 2023. *The Virtuous Physician: A Brief Medical History of Moral Inquiry from Hippocrates to COVID-19*. Cambridge: Ethics International Press.

¹¹ Even at work I felt the response. I included a lengthy appendix in that first book, detailing my personal experience as a ‘front-line’ worker during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially at the start of the whole thing, especially as the pandemic, unfortunately, by hastening our digital dive into the void proved much of my contention in the book itself. But I had included what seemed to me a(n) (unrelated) throwaway line at one point critical of the psychiatric nursing staff in the hospital, a staff that at the time, once widespread COVID testing was available, rather than utilize that information to keep patients, and staff, safe while treating their co-morbid psychiatric issues, simply refused to accept any COVID-positive patients. It was what it was, and although I was deeply critical of physicians and administration as well, the nurses have a union. (It was so bad, in fact, that when senior administration finally came down on the nurses, forcing them to take COVID patients, the nurses organized their own ‘silent’ strike. That is, they scheduled callouts among themselves, in rotating fashion, bullying the newer staff into playing along, such that the units remained constantly understaffed and unable to accept new patients.) They got wind of the book, and the comment, and they have continued, in spiteful fashion, to try to make my life hell. Initially they filed complaint after complaint with administration, and then, when that went nowhere, with the state nurses’ union, demanding, of an outside agency, that I be fired for the comment itself. The interim chair of my department at the time even threatened to ‘leave me to their (the nurses’) mercy’ if I did not publicly apologize and take my shaming. (I refused to.) And when the nurses were finally told there was no more that could be done, they rallied their colleagues (again in more devious fashion). I don’t know how many ‘safety reports’, how many complaints to the ‘professionalism committee’, have since been filed against me and my team by a thankfully thinning mass of grudge-holding nurses. So many, in fact, that these reports, meant as a protective mechanism for patient safety, have been rendered meaningless. Still, I remain on ‘double secret probation’, and I have to go to the principal’s office every third month or so for my quarterly whooping. This being a corporatocracy I am not allowed to defend myself. I simply

The *lack* of irony in the response, *ironically*, is what, in the end, has most impressed me. The sheer *lack* of imagination is what, now *past* ‘the end’, has inspired *this* work, this continuation of the project. Great Awakenings, after all, at their heart, are rallying cries *for* the status quo, for stasis, or worse, for regression. For a ‘return to simpler times’, for moving, as they used to say not too long ago, ‘bassackwards’. In my particular situation, it has been difficult to tease out exactly what the goal is for the Keepers of the Status Quo, the middle managers of the Oligarchs, especially as the buzz from the cyber-Swarm has grown frenzied, near deafening, in fact, especially with regard to mental illness, to mental wellness, to ‘Wellness’ in general, for that matter, with a capital ‘W’. The case put forth in that first book, in which I refer frequently to cyberspace as the breeding ground, the hunting ground, the abattoir, for the ‘Swarm’—that great and powerful cyber-superego, our new moral compass here in the digital milieu—was that digitization has changed everything. For better or for worse, the cyber-sphere has taken over as the new digital neuro-psycho-morality, as our new garbage-in-garbage-out Super-Consciousness and Super-Conscience combined. The id—Freud’s id—the great unspeakable maelstrom of fantasy, desire, love, hate, violence, pornography, has become our cyber-reality and, increasingly so, our frank reality. And the ego, that last remaining human part of us that must negotiate our lives along the ever-narrowing path between the neuro-psycho-superego-Scylla and the neuro-psycho-id-Charybdis, here in the era of Big Data, has been shrunk down to a simple, single point of datum, an irrelevant speck of dust between clashing boulders, irrelevant except in astronomical numbers. A cyber-nano-speck necessary only for its ability to ‘view’, to ‘like’, to ‘thumbs up’, to ‘clap’, to ‘friend’, to ‘follow’; that is, a cyber-nano-speck necessary to collect more Data.

‘Viral’ really is the perfect metaphor for the occasional infectious speck of dust.

hear the latest accusations, apologize to the rotating cast of senior administrators for taking up their time, and the machine rumbles on. The only things that have saved me thus far are the facts that I am a good doctor, that I have a small band of staunch supporters, and that my team repeatedly wins the annual teaching awards as voted on by medical students. Nurses, on the other hand, continue to enjoy an elevated status, with an immunity not granted to those who otherwise must continually prove their value. In other words, they are free to continue heaping on emotional abuse, to be the aggressor, to be the bully; that is, to play the post-historical ‘victim’ card. “You have dared traumatize *me*!” they cry as they land blow after blow, punch after punch, kick after kick, extracting two pounds of flesh for every one they lose. @MeToo, and again, when all is said and done, they have only proven my contention.

With this work, however, I wish to move beyond that.

I argue here, now, that this desperate propping up of the status quo, this most recent Great Awakening, is like, yet unlike, any of its predecessors. Like previous Great Awakenings there is a claim to the moral high ground, but this is now a 'high' ground propped up by digital morality. Not by any true sense of right and wrong, but by sheer aggregate Data. In this context this Great Awakening represents more a shunning of, a dismissal of, a savage destruction of inconvenient alternatives, of inconvenient truths even. In other words, this is an Awakening unlike any other, led by corporate oligarchy, among an investment in the status quo that has grown 'too large to fail'. 'Science', or more appropriately, the language of science, 'statistics', has become its own faith, its own cyber-fabric, now inextricably enmeshed within its co-opted corporate and media partners such that all research has become so stultifyingly formulaic and unwaveringly dogmatic that it, like the self-possessed claims from the pulpits over the past two hundred years and more, can now, like then, at least by reasonable human beings, only be taken with a grain of salt.

A speck of dust...

The 'ghosting', the 'cancelation', however minor in the 'grand digital scheme of things', I personally came to experience as a result of my assertions and critical views of the current state of mental illness, of mental wellness, here in the first half of the twenty-first century, have been disheartening, have been disappointing. Especially from those who purportedly work in, and advocate for, the field of psychiatry. For this is a specialty unique in medicine. We, psychiatrists, have no biological markers of disease. We have no proven treatment algorithms. We in fact have very few proven treatments. We have a few 'interventions', if not exactly procedures, and we are more at the mercy of Big Insura than our colleagues in other fields. Granted, there are some of us who do suffer from the delusion that we are more 'scientific' than we really are. (And again, this most often comes down to the language one speaks. A 'statistical' case, for example, can be made for almost anything.) Some believe there really are true biologic and genetic markers out there, that depression and anxiety and psychosis are essentially neurologic 'diseases' which etiologies, or even partial etiologies, have simply, and persistently, eluded the billions upon billions of dollars, the thousands upon thousands of hours of brain power, thus far devoted to their discovery. And not surprisingly, with such powerful

corporate and legislative sponsorship, these delusions have been propped up to the point of quasi-foundational mythology.

A post-historical quest for the Holy Grail.

I have argued, to the contrary, that mental illness remains a primarily social disease, inextricably linked to one's environment, to one's milieu, to one's 'way of being in the world'. As a social disease, and perhaps more so than physiological disease, mental illness is quite contagious, especially here in the Digital Age, the 'social' media age, the 'meme' age. *Symptoms* can surely be helped with certain treatments, but there can be no 'cure', at least not without dramatic change in one's environment, one's milieu, one's 'way of being in the world'.

There are two sides to this coin, of course. The first is that psychiatry allows for more interpretation, more artfulness, more thoughtfulness than the rest of medicine. The second is that there remains a staunch inferiority complex among many of the 'thought leaders' in this field. Rather than appreciate that psychiatry is different, and cannot be modeled on the rest of medicine, these (influential) few insist on squeezing the square peg into the round hole. And now, especially in the Digital Age, if it doesn't work, there are a host of socio-political excuses as to why not. This makes for excellent mass and social media filler and fodder, and there have been dozens of journalistic pieces at least, and countless social media posts, since the start of COVID-19 on the horrific state of mental health in the West, the 'mental health crisis'.

And the result?

Much bluster in certain legislative circles, but no meaningful change.

None whatsoever.

In fact, not one mental health specialist, or even mental health advocate, or more even mental health enthusiast, was appointed to the then newly elected Joe Biden's twelve-member COVID advisory committee.

Not one mental health specialist was consulted when the decisions were made earlier to place the country in 'lockdown', essentially sacrificing a generation of children and a generation of the elderly, essentially flaming and cementing socio-political hatred.

Not one addiction specialist was consulted when the decisions were made to declare liquor stores and cannabis dispensaries 'essential' businesses, when the decision was made to allow for not only widespread, but ubiquitous, cyber-gambling.

Even now, as the oddly sexually named 'long-COVID' wends its way through legal circles in its quest for disability dollars, there has been no research devoted to possible (and almost certainly) psychiatric etiology.

(Antidepressants have been the only affective treatment thus far.) In fact, there has been significant care taken to avoid any ‘dismissal’ of the ‘disease’ as ‘all in your head’.¹²

Old habits really do die hard, and there has been a proliferation of psychosomatic illness since the pandemic that no one dares say may lean more toward the ‘psycho-’ rather than the ‘-somatic’. ‘We respect the fact that mental illness is real, so long as it does not interfere with our new mast cell activation clinic, or our fibromyalgia clinic, or our POTS clinic, or our long COVID clinic, or our Ehlers-Danlos clinic, or our chronic fatigue clinic, or our ASD clinic.’ Hell, even the vast majority of the new pop-up, strip mall depression clinics, those that offer ketamine and other hallucinogens on demand, are not run by, or even staffed by, or even affiliated with any psychiatric specialists. And they use such as an advertising point! ‘Depression is not a psychiatric illness, but a neurochemical imbalance. We can fix that.’ (In fact, roughly 80% of psychotropic medications in the US are *not* prescribed by psychiatrists.¹³)

I called them out, in a way, the professional journals, the professional social media sites, the professional middle managers of the status quo. I called them out on this, and I suppose I should not be surprised that I practically ‘disappeared’ soon after, at least from the sight of previously readily available, mainstream publishing outlets and select colleagues with whom I had, pre-publication, enjoyed at least superficially collegial relationships. And given the lack of popular readership of my work, this blanketing fire, this effort to ‘snuff me out’ by the invisible ray guns seemed far out of proportion. Like aiming the nuclear missiles at Lichtenstein, or some other roaring mouse.

Granted, I wrote unsparingly about digital era topics and illnesses, attempting less to validate the status quo, than to make a case for the need to re-think the current standards for assessing and managing mental illness.

How did I do this?

¹² This, too, has been a double-bind for psychiatry, and medicine, in the Digital Age. The supposed battle to remove ‘stigma’ from ‘mental health’, yet the need to negotiate the social media outcry if one were to propose that certain new or otherwise inexplicable ‘diseases’ are primarily psychiatric.

¹³ Mark TL, et. al. 2009. “Datapoints: Psychotropic Drug Prescriptions by Medical Specialty”, *Psychiatr Serv* 60:9, 1167-1167.

<https://doi.org/10.1176/ps.2009.60.9.1167>. Especially now that ‘physician extenders’—nurse practitioners, physician assistants, and in some states psychologists—have jumped on the prescribing bandwagon, this number is probably closer to 90%, but such inconvenient data has ceased being collected since 2009.

From ancient sources, through the antique and Middle Ages, through the Renaissance and early modern periods, from the age of revolution through modernism and post-modernism, I traced the historical roots of mental illness. From the Near Eastern and Egyptian roots of medical thinking, through the Hippocratic and Galenic schools, from Platonism to scholasticism to humanism, from the Enlightenment to existentialism to nihilism, and back round again to post-modernism and post-structuralism, I did my best to connect the philosophical and psychological approaches to mental illness, and tangentially, to the conceptualization of *all* illness. (One of my contentions is, and continues to be, that prior to what I call ‘the age of cures’—that is, the advent of germ theory in the late nineteenth century leading first to the development of vaccines and eventually antibiotics—every physician was essentially a psychiatrist.)

Rather than try to arrive at an over-simplified ‘checklist’ manifesto for mental illness, however, and rather than rehash the irritating party line tag at the end of every research paper, that ‘this study indicates that more research is needed’, and rather than fly high on the positivist bandwagon that we remain on the cusp (a cusp that has stretched out into decades at this point) of discovering the bio-molecular-genetic bases of *all* mental illness (add several exclamation points here), I instead argued not just for a whole new approach to both the question of and the problem of mental illness, but for the urgent *need* for a whole new approach with the coming of the Digital Age. As ‘they’ say here frequently in the pandemic age, the diagnostic manuals are a ‘lagging indicator’ of mental illness, and they in no way account for the techno-pathologies now running rampant and unaddressed in the digital era.

And even if they did? Then what?

No one is shrieking histrionically that *these* curves are in urgent need of flattening.

Pointing out that despite the more recent massive investment into the biological, molecular, and genetic research on mental illness, despite the massive progress in de-stigmatization, despite the increasing availability of mental health ‘providers’, and the corresponding increase in people receiving such provision, the numbers of psychiatric casualties only continue to go up, and up, and up. Most tellingly of all, pre-pandemic, suicide rates and attempts had been increasing near-exponentially since the start of the digital era, and now, post-pandemic, the numbers are in fact approaching, at an even greater pace, true exponential.¹⁴ (The ‘promise’ of telepsychiatry as an

¹⁴ It has been well-documented that the number of deaths reported as suicides in the US actually held steady for much of 2020, although the number of deaths from drug overdose increased significantly, as did homicides. The suicide pace then picked up

effective means of easing mental illness, the ‘promise’ of ‘wellness’ apps, the ‘promise’ of fast and easy antidepressants [lumped in with birth control pills and medications for erectile dysfunction] online, has become, not surprisingly, a false promise.) Cutting through literally tens of thousands of pages now of worthless research, I sought more to arrive at root causes, often questioning whether certain illnesses should even be considered as such, and whether the research and resource dollars pouring into them might not be better spent elsewhere. I put much of the onus for the creation and perpetuation of techno-pathologies on mass and social media, decrying ‘victimhood’ as the major psychopathology of our time. I was, am, critical of the victim-personality as too easy a way of being here in the Digital Age, too easy a way of living a ‘mentally ill lifestyle’, too easy a way of digitizing oneself comfortably into the cyber-bosom of the harshly maternalistic Swarm. In this regard, I am critical of those who have taken over the mental health system, of those who have usurped ‘mental illness’ as their own particular and personal brand of ‘broken’, of those who have selfishly come to monopolize these resources in the post-historical era. (Including diagnoses. Recent studies indicating ‘under-reporting’ of major mental illness unreliably rely on the poor diagnostic skills of current ‘providers’. Today’s post-postmodern ‘victim’ invariably carries diagnoses of ‘autism spectrum disorder’, ‘schizophrenia’, ‘bipolar disorder’, ‘complex PTSD’, some type of eating or ‘feeding’ disorder, and so on and so forth, and often many others. Really a gruesome 1-2-3-4-5-punch, by any standard. What I frequently describe in my own notes as ‘laundry lists’ of historical diagnoses. The ‘list’ itself is diagnostic, indicating not a dozen different

considerably again in 2021. (This is in the US. Globally, suicides skyrocketed, notably in Japan, where suicide deaths soon outpaced COVID deaths.) How to interpret this? Several ways. First, many suicide deaths went unreported in the early days of the pandemic as the emergency medical system and hospitals were overwhelmed with COVID cases. Suicides that were co-morbid with COVID infection, as happened with many other co-morbidities at the time, were most often reported as ‘COVID-deaths’. But perhaps most of all, it needs to be remembered that suicide in the US most often requires a stage. It requires the attention of others, a final theatrical bow out. A final kiss, a final hug, a final farewell, often a final middle finger, a final slap in the face. A final opportunity to have the hate-object[s] to whom the ‘murder’ is directed beg ‘Stay!’. With everyone’s attention consumed by the early pandemic, the essential drama necessary for the American suicide was negated. As the pandemic novelty wore off, the pace once again picked up, especially with the rise of the ‘social justice’ movements and the correspondingly spectacular increase in homicide and other violent crimes. In fact, 2022 had seen the highest number of suicides in American history (49,000), until the 2023 data came in at over 50,000.