

Garrett Thomson

Spiritual Harm and Enslavement

Abstract: Why is spiritual harm important? What specific contribution might the concept make to our understanding the legacies of colonization and transatlantic enslavement? The paper attempts to explain the term ‘spiritual’ in a way that doesn’t psychologize it or tie it to specific a religious tradition. It does so in terms of an appropriate connection to the divine or sacred or transcendent. By explaining ‘appropriate’, we can show how such a connection pertains to human well-being understood as a multi-dimensional and pluralistic concept. This enables us to characterize spiritual harm in terms of instrumentalizing self-identifications. Through this we can uncover what is distinctive about spiritual harm and its implications for collective healing processes.

Keywords: Dehumanization, Instrumentally valuable, Non-instrumentally valuable, Self-Interest, Self-identification, Spiritual, Well-Being

The term “spiritual harm” carries the implication that it is a very significant type of harm. Physical and other forms of material harm might be greater in quantity and more devastating, but spiritual harm ought to be considered more severe. Quantity is one thing; quality or kind is another. Spiritual harm is serious qualitatively as a kind of harm. Intuitively, we might express this by claiming that it concerns the very core of one’s being.

The first part of this paper unpacks this latter metaphor. This uncovering is delicate because, on the one hand, the notion of the spiritual is usually tied to various metaphysical and religious traditions, which understand it in very different ways. On the other hand, trying to characterize “spiritual” independent

Garrett Thomson is the chief executive officer of the Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace and he teaches philosophy at the College of Wooster, where he holds the Compton Chair. He is the author/co-author/co-editor of 27 books. He has written about peace and well-being: *Happiness, Flourishing and the Good Life* (2020); *Understanding Peace Holistically* (2019); *On the Meaning of Life* (2002) and *Needs* (1987). He also written about politics and economics: *Beyond Instrumentalised Politics* (2024) and *Beyond Instrumentalised Economics* (2025).

Acknowledgements: This article relies in parts on a concept paper written for the Fetzer Institute as part of the UNESCO project on the Transatlantic Enslavement. I am indebted to Prof. Scherto Gill, with whom I co-authored the concept paper. Thank you. I am grateful to Mohammad Mohammad and Sylvester Jones from Fetzer for their support and insights. I am also grateful to Alexandra Asseily, Sharif Horthy and Patrice Brodeur from the Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace.

of any tradition threatens to reduce the concept of spiritual harm to some form of psychological or emotional harm, which would miss the distinctive character and special contribution of the qualifying term “spiritual”. The account that I offer will try to overcome both horns of this dilemma.

There are also many pitfalls to avoid concerning the concept of harm. Contemporary conceptions of harm tend to be based on measurable hedonistic experience or on the satisfaction of ranked preferences. Alternatively, harm is conceived in terms of subjective reports of life satisfaction. These accounts reduce well-being to feeling good or getting what one wants, and harm to deprivation of such well-being. These tendencies drive out the spiritual aspects of harm and well-being. They reduce them to the psychological. First, under these conceptions the concept of harm has no structure; it becomes flat or two-dimensional because it is quantitative. It lacks qualitative dimensions. This makes spiritual harm impossible. Second, with most of these accounts harm becomes something that is felt. So, it cannot be something that one has become numb to or that people do not even notice. This also makes spiritual harm impossible. The second aim of this paper is to provide an outline account of well-being and harm that remedies these and other deficiencies.

Once we have made progress regarding the first two aims, we can finally explore the relevance of the concept of spiritual harm for understanding the ongoing legacies of enslavement and colonization. We can now apply the concept to those legacies and show how it helps to illuminate aspects that might have otherwise remained implicit or not well articulated. This has implications for the nature of collective healing processes and how they should be structured, which is covered in the final sections.

This paper outlines some of the steps needed towards a systematic characterization of spiritual harm and its importance for understanding the kinds of harm resulting from the transatlantic slave trade and from colonialism more generally. This understanding is important for the construction of collective healing processes. It is also important for understanding the nature of resilience. Of more general significance, it enables to understand how these harms are a structural part of our society as presently constituted.

The Concept of the Spiritual

Before we can characterize spiritual harm, we need to outline some points concerning the spiritual.

First, the spiritual is supposed to be something importantly good. Any account of the concept must describe what is desirable about being in a spiritual state or

good about the spiritual aspects of life. Part of this characterization will include the causal benefits of being or living spiritually. For instance, it might be good for one's emotional health or for mental abilities such as concentration. However, to define the concept we also must specify what is directly, primarily and non-instrumentally valuable about being spiritual. This is the challenging part of the investigation.¹

To understand the spiritual it is also not enough to only cite symptoms and correlations. For example, according to many religions there are physical and behavioural signs that someone is a spiritual person. For example, in some traditions spiritual people can transcend the problems of everyday life in ways that appear miraculous. There may also be neurological manifestations, specific brain-states or patterns common to spiritual experiences. However, none of these symptoms or manifestations constitute a person being in a spiritual state. They are effects.

These reflections indicate that to characterize the spiritual we must describe how it is good in itself, not simply for its causal benefits. Such benefits would render the spiritual replaceable because the results might be achieved more efficiently through some other means. Thus, they do not constitute the heart of the concept. In brief, the spiritual must be seen as non-instrumentally valuable, i.e., valuable for what it is and not just for the benefits it brings. In turn, this indicates that the spiritual must be conceived as an aspect of people's lives or as a way of being or living. From this, we may propose a first criterion: the spiritual is an aspect of human living that is non-instrumentally valuable.

Second, we might contrast thin and thick conceptions of spiritual as lying along a continuum. The thinnest conceptions are restricted to psychological ideas such as creativity, self-understanding and the having of certain emotions. Richer conceptions include an appropriate relationship with nature or the universe as a whole, as we shall explain. The richest notions involve a relationship with the universal Spirit, with God, or with the divine or some transcendent reality. In short, thick or rich accounts embrace metaphysical and religious concepts, which the thinner accounts deliberately eschew. We can think of the differences between richer and thinner conceptions as a messy set of distinctions that are not sharp and clear-cut.

Nevertheless, the thicker conceptions of the spiritual will typically include the thinner ones. For example, a person who regards union with the divine as the core spiritual state will usually have views about the psychological, ethical and ecological qualities that express such a union and are needed to attain it.

1 Thomson (2014). *A Framework for a Religious Life*.

In making the distinction, we are not affirming that richer descriptions are straightforwardly better than thin ones, or vice versa. Thicker conceptions appear less superficial, but even a psychological account might have depth in how it is structured around a unifying core. For example, some psychotherapeutic theories have detailed and profound accounts of human development. Likewise, every religious tradition has deep characterizations of the spiritual life, and its various stages and conditions, which include the psychological.

Nevertheless, we need this distinction because thinner and thicker accounts have distinct advantages and drawbacks. Writers often employ thinner accounts because they are more easily operationalized and measurable. However, this is a questionable reason for employing thin conceptions: should we require that the concept can be operationalized? The pertinent issue is not that some things are not measurable. Rather, the concern is the underlying assumption that to understand a phenomenon requires measuring it. Doing so may degrade qualitative differences into quantitative ones.

More relevant, thin conceptions may appear better because they are more readily acceptable by people of varying backgrounds. Different religious traditions disagree about the nature of God, or even if there is a God or something divine at all. These kinds of disagreements can be repeated for all the issues that often arise in a metaphysical or theological definition of spirituality. Under such diversity of opinion, it seems best to define the spiritual in thin terms so that the varying religious traditions have some common ground. However, this approach may be seen as throwing out the baby with the bath water. It reduces the spiritual to the psychological and omits what is distinctive about spirituality. The problem is: to understand spiritual harm, how can we avoid apparently irresolvable theological and metaphysical debates without appealing to the psychological?

Fortunately, these are not the only two options. We are not condemned to be wedded to metaphysical traditions or else relegate the spiritual to the psychological. Following on from the first criterion, as an alternative we might characterize how and why thick conceptions have something important to say about the non-instrumental value of living in a spiritual way. In short, we do not have to be theologically or metaphysically precise to characterize the distinctive non-instrumentally valuable features of living in a spiritual way. We can do this while avoiding such pitfalls.

In thicker conceptions, a spiritual life has to involve a connection to something divine, sacred or transcendental. Otherwise, it is purely secular. Connection with the existence of God as traditionally defined (as an all-perfect creator) in the theistic religions satisfies this general condition. However, it is not a necessary formulation. There are many other less specific beliefs, which might appear non-theistic, that would also satisfy this condition. For example, one need not

assume that the divine is a non-material spirit, or a morally perfect person, or even a being or entity at all. The divine might be more like a characteristic or aspect of reality. Perhaps Spinoza and Whitehead had such an idea.² Alternatively, one might conceive of the transcendent as an all-encompassing and sacred ideal of truth, as perhaps Gandhi did.³ Indeed, one might think that there is something about being or existence itself, or about the universe as a whole, that is divine or sacred or holy, and as such worthy of worship or dedication. Such views would also satisfy the second criterion. In short, we can be open-ended about what the connection is with while trying to be clearer about how this translates into meaning or value in people's lives. We don't start the analysis with the metaphysics or theology, but rather with the kind of value or meaning pertaining to this aspect of human life. We then work outwards from this starting place.

In this manner, a second criterion can be formulated as follows: the spiritual is the aspect of a person's life that is non-instrumentally valuable precisely because it consists in an appropriate connection to the sacred, divine or transcendent. In other words, the spiritual is an aspect or part of living that consists in such a connection and that, as such, is valuable in itself. The beauty of this description is that it allows us to avoid getting caught up in metaphysical and theological tangles but without losing the distinctive feature of the spiritual (by reducing it to the psychological).

To count as a feature of a spiritual state, the connection to the transcendent must be of a certain kind. After all, everything is connected *with* everything else in some way or other, and so the general idea of a connection is of no help. What counts as a *relevant* kind of connection in this context? The thesis is that different spiritual practices involve one being connected to the divine, the sacred, the transcendent or to the spirit world in appropriate ways, such as through acts of meditation, prayer, rituals, acts of sacrifice, purification and worship. The connection might be in one's feelings or in the mood of one's life: a person may carry stillness or peace or a joy or a generosity or openness through his or her connection. For example, the general feeling of being deeply at home in the world might count in some traditions as appropriate connection. In many traditions, work and service count as such a connection. There is also the idea of direct experiential or mystical contact with the divine, sacred or transcendent.

What counts as a relevant or appropriate connection will be disputed between and within traditions. Nevertheless, the main point is that these connections will consist in experiences, activities and processes that are valuable in themselves and

2 Spinoza, B. (1985). *The Ethics* and Whitehead, A. N. (1929) *Process and Reality*.

3 Gandhi M.K. (1993). *An Autobiography or the story of my experiments with truth*.

valuable for a person to engage in or to live through simply because of what they are (rather than because of any benefits). Thus, “appropriate” is limited to connections that have this kind of valuable nature. Furthermore, these practices and feelings will track features of the divine, sacred or transcendent in a way that is analogous to the idea that reliable perceptual beliefs typically track truths about the world around us. However, there is a disanalogy here: reliable beliefs track truth cognitively, whereas we are referring to ways of life, practices, feelings and moods tracking aspects of the divine. It is not merely cognitive; it will involve the whole person.

A third criterion is needed to specify how this connection is non-instrumentally valuable. We need to unravel the earlier metaphor that the spiritual concerns the core of one’s being. The central idea is that spirituality requires a certain kind of answer to the question “who or what am I?” People self-identify in a variety of ways depending on the social context. Sometimes, I consider myself as European and sometimes as a male, and on other occasions as an academic. Nevertheless, these self-identifications are derivative and secondary. They depend on more basic ones, such as my self-identification as a human and as a person. A spiritual understanding must insist that, for example, purely social answers to the question “who am I?” are incomplete. This is because one is more fundamentally a person than one is, for example, European or Asian. This is reflected in the claim that one could have been from another region of the world. Also, one could have been born with a different gender. In contrast, however, because I am an I, I could not have been anything other than a person. I-ness or personhood is a fundamental identity. Losing it would mean the end or death of me.

This conclusion has implications for how I should self-identify. It implies that how one self-identifies should reflect the reality of what one is. For instance, if I self-identify primarily as a European then my self-identification not only excludes kinship with non-European people, but it also fails to track what I most fundamentally am. I am more fundamentally a person. We are trying to understand the I that does the self-identifying rather than what it self-identifies with. A spiritual life requires one to self-identify in a way that is consistent or harmonious with what one most fundamentally is, which is the I that does the self-identifying.⁴

Different religious traditions would disagree concerning what one most fundamentally is. For example, one might be a soul, a spark of the divine light, a spirit or simply emptiness. Nevertheless, despite such disagreements, these

4 Gill & Thomson (2019). *Understanding Peace Holistically: From the Spiritual to the Political* (Chapter 2).

diverse traditions would agree with two propositions required to explain the nature of the spiritual: that one is more fundamentally a self-conscious person, or an I, than any social self-identification, and that a spiritual life requires one to self-identify primarily or non-derivatively with what one most fundamentally is (i.e. with the I that does the self-identifying rather than what it identifies with).

In conclusion, the criteria for the spiritual argued for so far may be summarized as follows: it must be a non-instrumentally valuable aspect of one's life which consists in being in an appropriate connection with the divine, sacred or transcendent in such a way that it allows one to self-identify with what one most fundamentally is.

However, the fusion of these three necessary criteria is insufficient because the concept of the spiritual must also include the idea that this appropriate connection is part of one's development as a person, which includes the ethical. In other words, in addition to being non-instrumentally valuable, the connection must manifest itself in terms of the ethical qualities of the person. For example, it should express itself in terms of the person becoming kinder or more peaceful. In short, the way of life or the mystical experiences that constitute appropriate connection to the divine or the transcendent must be integral to a person's development as a person, which must express itself in terms of the person's ethical capacities. It would also manifest itself in terms of well-being, such as happiness. The connection must express itself as an enrichment and development of a person's life. In short, the connection must have positive fruits, which would include the ethical. Because these are simply manifestations of a deeper state, these claims do not imply that all ethical people are spiritual, nor that to be ethical one needs to be spiritual.

Given this discussion, a minimally thick account of a spiritual state might have the following structure:

- 1 One's being connected appropriately with the divine or sacred or transcendent through one's experiences and activities in such a way that these are non-instrumentally valuable.
- 2 This appropriate connection must include that one self-identifies non-derivatively in such a way that it harmonizes with what one most fundamentally is.
- 3 This connection will manifest itself as a development of the person as a person, which would be constituted through ethical values and well-being.

These criteria are general and vague. However, they are supposed to be! If one tries to be more specific one risks tying the spiritual to a particular tradition. For this reason, these criteria outline the structure of the concept of the spiritual as well as its general content. I contend that these conditions would be jointly sufficient to carry the functions of a conception of a spiritual state and life. In

other words, a person who put 1–3 into practice can be said to be living or embodying a spiritual life,

This characterization assumes a minimal ontological condition, namely the existence of something divine or sacred or transcendental, for the person to be connected to. It deliberately evades making that commitment more specific because doing so would tie the concept too closely to a particular conception.

Well-Being and Harm

Before we can characterize spiritual harm, we also need to outline what harm is. The best way to do this is to describe a framework for well-being. Harm would be defined in terms of the deprivation of well-being or as ill-being.

What is well-being? Let us start by sketching some important meta-points.⁵ First, an account of well-being needs to include what is non-instrumentally valuable. It cannot remain at the level of what is only a means or what is instrumentally valuable, such as money, power and the useful. We do not want to confuse one's well-being with one's material interests.

Second, well-being is a rich and pluralistic evaluative concept. In affirming this, I exclude truncated monist accounts that are usually implicitly based on neo-classical economic assumptions, including individualism. These tend to exclude or minimise the normative aspect of the concept, and reduce it to a single central notion such as happiness or desire rankings. Furthermore, being individualistic, such conceptions tend to treat human relationships as a means to some self-interested state rather than as a primary good themselves. This results in an impoverished picture of human life.

Third, we are not *primarily* concerned with what causes or detracts from well-being, but rather what constitutes well-being. The issue is “what is it?” Questions about what causes well-being are empirical. In contrast, what *constitutes* well-being (or harm) is a conceptual question. One cannot study what causes well-being without some prior idea of what well-being is.

Fourth, we need to distinguish what constitutes well-being from how well-being might be measured in different contexts. In other words, we are assuming that the issues concerning how to measure well-being presuppose some prior account of what it is, and that they do not replace that.

5 Thomson, Gill, & Goodson (2021). *Happiness, Flourishing and the Good Life: A Transformative Vision for Human Well-Being* (Chapter 1).

Finally, the phenomenology of experience is often excluded from contemporary accounts of well-being, except perhaps insofar as subjective reports are used to provide a set of external measures. Well-being has to include the idea of how aspects of living feel to or are experienced by the person, the phenomenology.

Given these five meta-points, to answer the question “what constitutes a life of well-being?” we need a framework that specifies the relevant value-making facets of human life in terms of its structural features. We need to outline the major dimensions of human life. This can be based on the idea that any action or experience has four aspects: 1) the external action or experience itself; 2) one’s awareness of it; 3) the relations involved in the action; and 4) one’s self-consciousness. These four aspects constitute the dimensions along which living can be good in itself, and therefore can comprise a framework for well-being.

These four structurally constitutive features of human life have potentially good-making features relevant for well-being. The core thesis is that well-being is constituted by intrinsic goodness along these necessary dimensions of our (human) way of being. Let’s explore these four aspects further below.

1. The External Action or Experience Itself

The first concerns the activities of life. For a person to live well, their life must consist of processes, activities and experiences that are suited to their nature, given the socio-cultural contexts in which they live.⁶ This counts as one aspect of living a good life. For example, if a person is unable to engage in activities such as singing, working, walking, chatting with friends, telling jokes and seeing the clouds then they are deprived of non-instrumentally valuable features of life. To turn this insight into a theory necessitates that one identifies the basic kinds of activities that have such value, which requires specifying the relevant evaluative criteria. We cannot do this here.

2. One’s Awareness

The second structural feature of human life is awareness. When we engage in an activity that is valuable, we need to appreciate that activity as such. This appreciative awareness might be emotional and not just cognitive. For example, we feel joy when we see our parents after a long separation. This account

6 Thomson (1987). *Needs* (Chapters 4 and 5).

means that it is necessary for well-being that we experientially appreciate the desirable feature of the activities that we engage in. This depends on the quality of one's awareness, including one's capacity to feel emotions. This implies that major impediments to well-being would include negative feelings such as anxiety, resentment and complaint, which block emotional appreciation. It would also include a general incapacity to feel emotions.

I have expressed the point in this way to avoid pleasure-based accounts of well-being. Such theories should be rejected. It is an error to regard pleasure as a mental object because this attempts to objectify the intentional or subjective nature of our mental lives. Furthermore, the conception of pleasure as a mental object instrumentalises the relationship between the activity and the feeling. The activity becomes no more than a means to the pleasure. Instead of positing pleasure as a mental item, we should conceive "pleasure" as the way in which one performs activities, i.e. with appreciation.

By avoiding the pleasure account we don't have to reduce the phenomenology of experience to a single pleasure–pain dimension. This allows for the idea that well-being depends on the personal and social construction of one's phenomenological world. For example, the phenomenological world of a person who is depressed is very different from that of a person who isn't. The mood constructs an experiential world that the person inhabits. This is important for understanding the spiritual aspects of life: they are not just feelings but rather how one constructs one's experiential or lived reality.⁷

3. Relations Involved in the Action

The third structural feature of human life is that we live in relations. As we shall see, this structural feature is not confined to relations with other people. It also includes one's relations to nature and to the spiritual, which is a point for later. However, our relations with other people are of special importance.

There are at least three features of human relationships relevant for well-being: 1) doing-for (e.g. building a house); 2) being- and doing-with (being and doing things together); and 3) being-in (being in a community). In each case, these three aspects connect directly to what is non-derivatively valuable, namely other people. This idea repudiates instrumentalised conceptions of social relationships. For instance, in the first case (doing-for), the point of work must be directly connected to other people rather than, say, performance targets or the production

⁷ Thomson, Gill, & Goodson (2021), Chapter 4.

of material goods. In the second case (being-with), a non-instrumentalised relationship requires that the other person becomes part of one's life, and that this is an irreducible aspect of one's well-being. When other people are part of one's life, it is as if one imports their value into one's own life through the relationship. Regarding the third feature (being-in), it is a *constitutive* feature of well-being to be part of a community, rather than just a cause.

4. Self-awareness

Self-awareness is another dimension of the human way of being and forms a general aspect of living well. We can classify the kinds of self-awareness that constitute well-being in relation to the past, present and future. Regarding present experience, given the nature of reflexive self-consciousness, well-being is constituted by the joy of being an I; a person who is an embodied subject and agent within a community of other people. Concerning the past, one's evaluative self-awareness takes the form of personal narratives. These are constitutive (as opposed to being merely causally conducive) of well-being when one is reconciled or at peace with one's past, and when this is an expression of one's perception of oneself as a being of value. Regarding the future, evaluative self-awareness is constitutive of well-being when it is an expression of one's perception of oneself as a being of value. In this case, it takes the form of agency and the sense of one's future being appropriately open (given certain caveats). The unity of the self through past, present and future consists in one's identity, which should be understood in terms of what one non-derivatively identifies with. In this aspect, well-being is constituted by one's awareness of oneself as a being that is non-instrumentally valuable. In this regard, well-being requires self-respect.

It is important to note that the self is not like an alleged atom that exists independently of its relationships (alleged, because even atoms aren't atomic). Therefore, self-understanding and self-awareness are also relational. An aspect of good self-awareness will need to include how one is aware of oneself in relation to others.

This introduces the important principle that all people are of equal non-instrumental value. We are all equally non-instrumentally valuable. This means that there are no grounds for saying that one person or group or nation matters more non-instrumentally. While such a claim might serve to characterize ethics, here we are interested in its relation to well-being. We have already seen that it is a constitutive aspect of well-being that one should treat oneself with respect and as a person who is non-instrumentally valuable. We have also already seen that it is a constitutive aspect of well-being that one is in relationships with

other people in which they treat one, and we treat them, as persons who are non-instrumentally valuable. The new point is that it is also constitutive of one's well-being that one should regard others as equally non-instrumentally valuable.

At first, such an idea sounds counter-intuitive because we are accustomed to conceiving well-being as on a par with self-interest. However, this is a huge mistake: self-interest concerns what has purely instrumental value, such as money and social influence. In contrast, well-being is about what has non-instrumental value in one's life (i. e. the four dimensions mentioned earlier). The appreciation of the equal non-instrumentally valuable nature of all people is an aspect of one's own well-being. It is so because the opposite comprises a form of egoism or self-aggrandisement that contradicts reality. It contradicts the equal reality of other people.

Conclusion

I have characterized well-being in terms of four dimensions. Of these, the fourth is the most important because harm at this level has greater damaging effects on the other three. If a person has a self-relation that is instrumentalized or damaged, then this will express itself in terms of the other three dimensions. It will have a harmful effect on their relations to others and on their capacity to appreciate and to engage in meaningful or valuable activities.

Any account of well-being (and harm) has to be multidimensional and pluralistic. It cannot be reductive in the same way as pleasure and preference theories. As we shall see, this pluralism allows for the spiritual aspects of well-being. Furthermore, the outlined framework is arguably robust enough to be employed in serious social critique and open-ended enough to be applicable to different cultural settings. More pertinently, the outlined framework allows for a conception of spiritual harm, unlike the standard conceptions.

Non-instrumentalization

One important aspect of well-being and harm *along all four dimensions* is non-instrumentalization. The fundamental thesis here is that persons (or more widely conscious beings) are valuable in a primary or non-derivative manner. Conscious beings, including humans, have non-instrumental or non-derivative value. This means that their lives also have such value and so too do the constituents or aspects of those lives. The latter amounts to well-being. In sharp contrast, goods and services, which make up an economy and the social infrastructure necessary

for a functioning society, all have value derivatively. They are valuable because the lives of conscious beings are valuable.

The term “non-instrumentally valuable” needs explaining. The difference between being valuable instrumentally or non-instrumentally is that something is instrumentally good insofar as it leads to something good or prevents something bad, and something is non-instrumentally good insofar as it is good for what it is. As a paradigm example, money is only instrumentally valuable; it only has value insofar as it enables us to purchase items that in some way contribute to our well-being. In sharp contrast, persons and their lives are non-instrumentally valuable. Work and actions are typically valuable in both ways. Things that are merely instrumentally valuable are valuable only because they lead to or are conducive to something that is non-instrumentally so. The former is entirely derivative of the latter. The activities that comprise a person’s life have value because the person does. This idea is required to avoid the instrumentalism of goal-based conceptions of rationality.

We instrumentalize insofar as we treat as purely instrumentally valuable something that is non-instrumentally valuable. In simple terms, we treat a person as an object. This denigrates the person by denying their subjectivity and agency as a conscious being. This is bad because it results in many other different kinds of harm, which may be experienced as trauma, and it is also bad in itself. It is like a betrayal of our being a person. Such instrumentalization confuses the two ways things can be valuable. If something is valuable non-instrumentally then we can cherish, appreciate and value it for its own sake. Whereas if something is valuable instrumentally, it is valuable only as a replaceable or dispensable means. In effect, its use is a cost, which is rational to reduce, and it is something that becomes valueless when it is no longer needed for the relevant ends in question. It is expendable. Think of a ticket for a concert that happened last week or the keys to a house that has been demolished. If something is treated instrumentally, nothing about it matters except how it can help accomplish the relevant ends. These are the reasons why the instrumentalization of persons is an error. They explain why it is a mistake to treat the non-derivative as derivative.

Instrumentalization is a form of harm along all four structural aspects of human well-being: activities, awareness, relationships and self-consciousness. For example, along the first it is comprised of treating one’s actions and activities merely as a means to a set of goals rather than as being valuable in itself. Along the second dimension, we direct our attention only towards aims for ends. We forget to appreciate the process or activity as such. In the third, the relevant relationships are regarded as valuable mainly for their benefits. Finally, with regard to our self-consciousness, instrumentalization can consist in the commodification of the self and in self-perception that is dominated by instrumental value. Whilst a dehuman-

ising act normally *causes* material, psychological, relational and spiritual harm, it also needs to be understood as something pernicious in itself along each of the four dimensions.

Instrumentalizing is often something which is done to people by other people. However, it can also be the result of the actions of institutions and of the structural features of a society. It can also be something one does to oneself. With regard to instrumentalization, the relevant agent can be a person, a group, a community, an institution and a whole system. Instrumentalization has variants such as dehumanization, commodification, marginalization and alienation.⁸ These all share the common evaluative core of treating a person as a mere thing.

Spiritual Harm

Following these explanations of the spiritual and well-being, we now propose how the concept of spiritual harm might be understood. I will do so in three ways, starting with the thinnest and working towards the thicker.

The first is the most psychological: when someone is harmed spiritually in this first way, they suffer diminution in terms of their capacity to emotionally appreciate and engage actively in the relational aspects of life. The second consists of the instrumentalization of oneself as a person. When people are treated purely as means, this treatment degrades them as if they were objects, and this constitutes harm to well-being that counts as a second kind of spiritual harm. It consists in damage to one's connection to dignity. Instrumentalizing is something that one can do to oneself. The third kind of spiritual harm is when some action damages the person's capacity to connect appropriately to the divine, sacred or transcendent, as discussed earlier. The first two kinds of harm are necessary, but not sufficient, for the third.

As just indicated, the first conception of spiritual harm pertains to one's emotional awareness or appreciation, especially in one's close emotional relationship with others. For instance, if a person's capacity to love is damaged then this would count as a spiritual harm. This kind of harm constitutes a *spiritual* harm because it entails a diminution of the person's capacities to engage in, and connect to, what is most meaningful. When our capacity to feel emotionally is damaged, it is as if our heart has been neutralized or deactivated. This is because to feel an emotion is to care. Emotions are a sensitivity to what is valuable or to what matters. Therefore, insofar as one's emotional capacities are impaired, one

8 Thomson & Gill (2024). *Beyond Instrumentalised Politics: Re-Conceptualising Public Governance*.

has lost the capability to care. Being insensitive to what matters or to what is meaningful is like a form of death.

Such incapacities are very different from the deprivation of material benefits. Indeed, the harm of material deprivations would need to be explained in terms of the incapacity to feel what matters. Material deficiencies are harmful only insofar as they affect lived experience. Arguably, the incapacity to feel what matters is a kind of spiritual harm, which is common in egoistical and individualistic societies in which people's lives are dominated by their self-directed desires, and in which their capacity to love others has been eroded.

A second form of spiritual harm occurs when a person is instrumentalized, especially with regard to their self-consciousness or in their relations to themselves. As we have seen, instrumentalization occurs when someone treats a person as less than fully human, as an object to be used. Although this instrumentalization constitutes harm along all four dimensions of human life, its major form concerns self-consciousness, such as when it infects our sense of self. This harm erodes the connection that each person has to dignity. It introduces a perceptual virus that is contradictory: "I am an it". This perceptual virus is the sense that one is primarily an object to be commodified and used merely as a means, and this manifests as feelings of worthlessness or superiority. It is like an emotional self-denial that one is a person. The thesis is that this self-instrumentalization is a form of spiritual harm, quite apart from its harmful consequences.

Why this constitutes a form of *spiritual* harm might be articulated with the concepts of soul and spirit. Such actions and feelings violate the dignity of the human soul, our sacred essence. Our spiritual being is embedded in our awareness of ourselves as a "soul", and this awareness is a fundamental form of dignity expressed as self-respect and self-love. Violations of this dignity treat the "I" as an "it". This kind of spiritual language resonates well with our earlier account of instrumentalization as harm: to be consonant with their dignity as an "I", a person must appreciate their life as having non-instrumental primary value. Anything that damages the capacity for this appreciation counts as a spiritual harm.

Why this dehumanization constitutes a *spiritual* harm can also be explained by the fact that it goes well beyond the other kinds of harm. Of course, it transcends harm understood instrumentally as the lessening of one's access to exchange value and use-value. However, it also goes beyond harm understood in terms of the first three non-instrumental dimensions of well-being. In short, it transcends the outer activities and experiences of life; it is not the same as the feelings and emotions that comprise the appreciation of those experiences; and it goes beyond personal and community relationships. The spiritual harm (in

this second sense) is distinct from all of these because it concerns a state of ill-being regarding one's intimate sense of and relation to oneself.

The third kind of spiritual harm embraces the metaphysical, but in an open-ended way. For this reason it is the thickest conception. The idea is that the divine, sacred or transcendent exists, or else that there is some kind of spiritual realm or aspect to reality. We can understand the role that this has in human life, its various meanings, without being forced to characterize this realm itself and thereby being drawn into complex and speculative theological or metaphysical debates. The spiritual should be understood in terms of our relations to this during the course of our lives. We live spiritually insofar as we are appropriately connected to the sacred, divine or transcendent. Spiritual harm should be understood as damage to our capacity to live this connection. Given that the connection to the sacred constitutes the core of what it means to be and to develop as a person, this damage is also at the heart of our lives. Being disconnected from oneself as an I is like being disconnected from being itself.

We have briefly described three conceptions of spiritual harm, from the thin to the thick. The first consists of emotional emaciation, the second loss of connection to dignity and the third the inability to connect to the sacred. These three types of harm are intimately linked. Unfortunately, the exploration of their interconnection is another project.

Slavery, Colonization and Spiritual Harm

The dehumanization of slavery comprises a form of spiritual harm. Its legacy of ongoing racism also constitutes spiritual harm, even though it is also structural. Not all aspects of dehumanization constitute spiritual harm. For example, economic injustice such as poverty, material deprivation, lack of access to good quality education, healthcare, housing and services do not constitute spiritual harm, though they might cause it. Such harms do count as dehumanizing structural violence, and they are serious and grave. Nevertheless, they are not spiritual harms.

What is the difference and why does it matter? The difference is that spiritual harm comprises a state of ill-being at deeper levels than that of outer activities and material deprivations. At its most psychological, it is an incapacity to feel the emotions that are a necessary part of non-instrumentalized human relationships. Emotions such as love are a feeling or perception of, or an emotional sensitivity to, what is most meaningful or what matters most in one's life. Having one's capacity to feel such emotions damaged or diminished counts as a spiritual harm because it is damage to one's awareness or consciousness. This kind of harm does not consist

of feeling bad, and it does not require that one recognize it. As we shall see, this kind of harm is widespread in our society.

At a deeper level, spiritual harm consists of one's being present to oneself primarily as a useful or useless object. In other words, spiritual harm is damage to one's relation with oneself. Insofar as I feel myself to be an object (whether it be as a glittering object of success or as a dull object that is worthless), I am not connected to myself as a being of non-instrumental value. I am not appreciating my dignity as a person. If I am in such a state, I am harmed spiritually. Again, this kind of harm does not consist of feeling bad, and it does not require that one recognize it. For example, people who feel themselves to be successful, approved of or useful may well feel good, even though their self-relation is instrumentalized.

At the deepest level, spiritual harm consists of people not being connected to the divine, sacred or transcendent in appropriate ways. Praying for divine help, meditating for mental health and performing rituals to fit into a group do not constitute such appropriate ways because these activities are instrumental. In contrast, prayer as worship, meditation as connection to being and ritual as an expression of reverence may constitute appropriate connections, insofar as they are activities valuable for their own sake that express a fundamental self-identification. The capacity to engage in such activities is vulnerable. There is much in our societies that diminishes or detracts from such capacities.

The sceptical reader might object that, even if there is something to the idea of spiritual harm, we should question the importance of such a concept. Why is the distinction between spiritual and non-spiritual harm relevant for understanding the damaging effects of enslavement and colonization? It may look like a subtle distinction that is pragmatically inconsequential. In response, from our analysis, there are three general reasons why it is significant.

First, the notion of spiritual harm allows us to see the depth of the effects of the transatlantic enslavement and colonization. It is not merely a question that some people enriched themselves by killing and violently debasing, depriving and dehumanizing others. While this is indeed true, enslavement and colonization also fundamentally changed the trajectory of different civilizations, and to characterize what this involved we need the notion of spiritual harm.

How we conceptualize harm must reflect what is important about human life, and the sacred and the spiritual are aspects of life which are of prime importance for reasons already articulated. To not include an aspect of human life of such central importance from our understanding of harm is a serious omission. Even if the spiritual is difficult to conceptualize, we should resist the temptation to reduce it something else such as mental health. Moreover, we need to avoid charac-

terizing the importance of the spiritual aspects of life solely in terms of their causal benefits, because that would render the spiritual as something replaceable.

This last comment comes close to the heart of the matter. Many of us live in societies that systematically confuse and conflate the instrumentally and the non-instrumentally valuable. Metaphorically speaking, we often don't know the difference between our purses and our souls. Less metaphorically, we misidentify well-being with self-interest. We muddle up the instrumentally and the non-instrumentally valuable, as if a lot of the former were equivalent to some of the latter. This is integral to the tendency to reduce qualitative differences to quantities. In this sense, we are living in a civilization that tends to put value-relations back-to-front. We invert those relations when we make the instrumental primary and the non-instrumental secondary. This inversion is a necessary feature of spiritual harm.

This inversion is not a question of bad priorities or of misplaced rankings, such as profit before people. It is rather a question of something much more elusive and sinister: systematically confusing two fundamentally different ways in which something can be valuable, namely treating the derivatively and non-derivatively valuable as if they were on a par, directly exchangeable. This confusion disregards what we argued earlier, namely that what has purely instrumental value is entirely derivative on the non-instrumental value of persons. For this reason, cost-benefit analysis betrays the non-instrumentally valuable when we measure it in terms of instrumental costs and benefits.⁹ This is akin to expressing the value of the life of a baby in terms of bottles of whiskey. It places monetary units alongside one's baby, as if the value of the two were comparable.

Someone might object that the two kinds of value are indeed comparable because we continually swap things of the one kind of value for those of another. For instance, when we spend money, we exchange funds for seeing friends or for medical treatment for one's baby. In reply, this is a misleading way to conceptualize a purchase. Appearances to the contrary, we are not exchanging money for the non-instrumentally valuable. Rather, we are exchanging what we could have brought with the money for what we actually did buy (both viewed in terms of non-instrumental value). The swap is for one of the other alternative unspecified non-instrumentally valuable things that we could have used the money for, and not the money *per se*. We should view purchasing in this manner because the value of the money is entirely derivative. Placing money and persons on the same level as if they were exchangeable is a bit like comparing a person and their shadow.

9 Thomson (2025). *Beyond Instrumentalised Economics*.

This kind of value inversion is a necessary feature of spiritual harm. It indicates that people dehumanize others and themselves. We live in societies that systematically confuse the instrumentally and non-instrumentally valuable. We conflate harm to our self-interests (which is purely instrumental) with harm to our well-being (which is non-instrumental). As I shall soon argue, the socio-economic conditions that currently make such spiritual harm possible are similar to those that enabled colonization and slavery in the past. As a result of industrialized slavery and colonization, there are many people across the world who are systematically treated as less than human and who feel themselves to be less valuable non-instrumentally. This is a direct consequence of slavery and colonization, which have resulted in systemic racism. If people tend to feel that they are less valuable than others it will be harder for them to connect in the appropriate ways to the transcendent, sacred or divine. Unless one has active resilience (more about this later), if one is treated as lesser and if one feels oneself to be lesser, one will tend not be connected to one's dignity, which is a precondition of a spiritual connection.

Second, the concept of spiritual harm helps us to see how the ongoing harms of enslavement and colonization are structural. "Structural" means roughly the following. A society is defined by the kinds of institutions that predominate in people's lives and that allow a society to sustain and reproduce itself. The structural features of a society are those that characterize the interrelations between those institutions. For example, we might describe a school in terms of what teachers and pupils typically do. However, we could also portray it institutionally, in terms of what schools are for. In sharp contrast, when we describe the educational system as a whole in terms of its structure, we do so in terms of the relations between the relevant institutions, such as schools, employers, examination bodies and governmental departments.¹⁰ In short, the term "structural" refers to the features that define how a system functions as a whole.

Enslavement and colonization are derived from economic structures. They were integral to the historical birth of the industrial mode of production and capitalism. Let us suppose that the latter is a mode of production defined as the maximal accumulation of capital for its own sake. This is a structural feature of an economy. Given this, such an economy necessarily tends to instrumentalize people. If the sole end of an economy is maximal profit for the sake of the accumulation of capital, all the so-called factors of production are purely instrumentally valuable. This means that all work and natural resources are only valuable insofar as they contribute efficiently to the sole end. In short, under these conditions the

10 Gill & Thomson (2012). *Rethinking Secondary Education: Towards a Human Centered Approach*.

ideal would be that such factors are free of costs. Such an ideal clearly entails the tendency towards slavery and colonization. Additionally, under these conditions, consumption itself is only valuable as a means to profit. This implies that economic actors would try to capture new markets for the sake of maximizing profits.

Given all this, a capitalist mode of production must have an inherent tendency to expand for the sake of cheaper labour and natural resources, and for the sake of larger markets. Furthermore, in each of these cases, it will tend to instrumentalize and dehumanize. This means that it has an inherent tendency to colonize. In so doing, it treats people as merely instrumentally valuable for the sake of maximal profits. This predisposition to colonization implies an inherent propensity towards racism, i.e. towards dehumanizing people based on racial markers.

These brisk pieces of reasoning show us why slavery and colonization were integral to the birth of industrialization and capitalism. They also show why some kinds of contemporary racism are derived from the structural features of our economy. The tendency to dehumanize is integral to contemporary capitalism both structurally and historically.

How does the notion of spiritual harm help us to understand these structural features? It does so because the idea of systematic instrumentalization is indispensable to both. On the one hand, spiritual harm requires the idea that a person is considered as an object: an I is treated as an it. It involves people being turned into commodities, and it instrumentalizes our self-perceptions accordingly. Spiritual harm requires such instrumentalization. On the other hand, instrumentalization is also a feature of the structure of our economy insofar as it is capitalist. Together, these two points mean that spiritual harm is a necessary tendency given the structural nature of such dehumanizing (i.e. colonization, slavery and racism). In short, spiritual harm is built into the structure. Both treat people as things.

As we shall argue, this means that if one is stuck with characterizing colonization primarily in terms such as material benefits, right-claims and even emotional trauma, then one has missed something of vital importance. One has omitted the deeper harms which are inherent in the history and the structure of our economic system.

The third reason spiritual harm is important is that the concept enables us to characterise the harms to all those involved: the descendants of the enslaved, the descendants of the enslavers and third parties. It is quite understandable that when one describes violence and its ongoing legacies, one tends to focus on the harms caused to victims and to their descendants. It is understandable because obviously these are the people who have been harmed by others. Nevertheless, it is insufficient. To comprehend a conflict we need to understand those who were and are perpetrators, as well as bystanders. As we have indicated, part of

this understanding will involve reference to the political economic structures in place, but this is not the point at hand now.

The issue at the moment is that the notion of spiritual harm can help us better conceptualize what may have happened to the perpetrators, their descendants and those who have benefited economically and socially from the wealth gained from colonization and enslavement. Clearly, those on the top are better off materially! Nevertheless, we may question their well-being from the point of view of the spiritual. For example, those who have benefited materially may feel superior in their wealth and in their social standing. As we have seen, such primary self-identifications are forms of ill-being: one is not self-identifying primarily with what basically is. It would be like living in a self-illusion. Additionally, such self-identifications are likely to *cause* ill-being to oneself because they condemn the person to live in identities that exclude and define others antagonistically. Furthermore, a person who feels superior to others will feel arrogant and entitled. This indicates that this person has not come to terms with the equality of us all as beings of non-instrumental value, and this is a form of self-absorption that renders it difficult to have relations with others that are not instrumentalized. In short, as we argued earlier, self-interest and well-being can come apart. What promotes the first is not necessarily good for the second.

The notion of spiritual harm allows us to appreciate that material gains may at the same time be bearers of a deep harm. It may not feel or seem like that. On the one hand, for those living in poverty and deprivation, who struggle to make ends meet, those who live in luxury appear to be supremely fortunate. On the other hand, those who are wealthy cannot easily perceive the spiritual harms they themselves might be undergoing. They don't feel it. However, we have argued that harm does not need to be felt to be real. A multidimensional account of well-being allows for the idea that a person can be harmed without feeling this. Indeed, we would expect people not to feel spiritual harm if that harm is generated by the structural features of the economic system. It is part of the system one swims in. However, once again, material self-interest is not the same as well-being. The first concerns what is only instrumentally valuable and the second concerns what is non-instrumentally valuable. The concept of spiritual harm requires us to make this distinction.

Towards Practice

The points made regarding the systemic have some general implications that pertain to the practice of collective healing. However, before that we need a quick detour. We should note that the term “healing” may be misconstrued as

suggesting that collective healing processes are to be conceived as being analogous with medical treatment, where patients who are ill need to be cured by expert doctors. These misleading implications are hereby cancelled. Collective healing processes are dialogical. The participants support and help each other, mainly by listening proactively and non-judgmentally. The collective process itself may help the people in the group to alleviate some of the traumas that come with dehumanization, and it may also help participants to overcome or repair some of the harms they have undergone. Sharing and hearing from others enables us to understand more deeply the harms of dehumanization. The primary job of the facilitators is to enable the collective processes to run smoothly by constructing the right kind of space for deep dialogue; they are not therapists or doctors. Here ends the detour.¹¹

In the previous section, we examined some of general reasons why the notion of spiritual harm is needed to characterize more completely the damaging effects of slavery and colonization. In this concluding section, we shall examine four implications of this for practice.

The Distinction between Trauma and Harm

First, the concept of spiritual harm helps us to appreciate the need to separate trauma from harm. Being dehumanised is traumatic, and it has traumatic effects. However, the harm of being dehumanized isn't the same as the trauma and its effects. Causally, the first is primordial and the second is subsidiary, even if it doesn't feel like that.

This distinction also applies to one of the hugely important effects of transatlantic slavery, namely racism. The history connects the commodifying and enslavement of African people to contemporary racism. These causal links include the history of social institutions such as the prison, justice and educational systems. These ongoing harms generate trauma and permit its transmission across generations. In other words, racism is both harmful and traumatic.

The concept of trauma includes some of the most important ways in which dehumanization enters into and affects the lives of people. It includes the damage done to the relationships between people. For instance, traumatic suffering exacerbates an antagonistic us-versus-them, or a hard and fast division between perpetrator and victim. Trauma can damage a person's sense of themselves, especially the capacity to feel self-worth. One manifestation of such damage is

11 Thomson (2021). *Healing: Towards a conceptual framework*.

confused self-identifications. The damage of trauma may also include one's connection with the divine or sacred. In each of these cases, trauma is both effect and cause. In short, spiritual harm may be manifest as trauma, and trauma can reinforce this very same harm. Nevertheless, the two are distinct.

The distinction is important because people who are harmed spiritually need not experience this as trauma. Perhaps, some of the guards in concentration camps suffered trauma because of their experience, but perhaps some didn't. The camp commanders and their bosses may not have suffered trauma. The claim that they did undergo spiritual harm doesn't require that they *felt* trauma. It requires that they were subject to the kind of value-inversion that we discussed earlier. It does not require that they felt the trauma that typically results from such inversions.

The damage of dehumanization also occurs at a collective level, and this means that large groups of people experience this harm as shared trauma, which can be inherited from one generation to another. The collective experience of a trauma can be embedded within a culture. For instance, descendants from both sides of a mass atrocity (i.e. both survivors and perpetrators) may share common responses to the harmful effects of events, such as avoidance, denial and silence. Some of these responses (such as denial) may be expressions of collective trauma. However, the harm itself does not require such expressions. People can undergo spiritual harm without recognizing it, even in their silence and indifference. The harm isn't its expression.

Collective trauma also occurs when groups undergo structural violence such as social marginalization, economic deprivation and political disempowerment. These forms of structural dehumanization may be internalised in terms of group identity, which adds to the trauma and tends to perpetuate the cycles of antagonism. As always, violence tends to breed violence. Violent antagonism is usually a symptom of trauma, as well as being a cause of further violent antagonism and resulting trauma. Such cycles of violence are rooted in the original systemic dehumanisation, which is typically embedded in political-economic structures, as we have seen.

Although many of these points are recognized in the literature on trauma, often the spiritual nature of the underlying harm is not. The idea of such harm shows us that the trauma experienced is not the same as the harms that underlie and cause it. This point is important because people need their traumas to be treated insofar as possible. Their peace and well-being requires this. Nevertheless, this is not the same as the removal or lessening of harm. Healing trauma is not the same as the diminution of harm, although it may be conducive to it. The idea of spiritual harm forces this distinction on us because spiritual harm occurs at a level deeper than the psychological, and because spiritual harm need not be

felt. This indicates that healing practices need to include a component that helps people overcome the evaluative inversions that are typical of spiritual harm. It suggests that while the traumatic may come first in collective healing, the process should not end at that point. The collective process can go deeper.

Social Justice

Second, a similar point applies to social justice. Within our current political-economic system, social justice is typically understood in terms of fairness, or receiving one's due or what one deserves. These ideas readily translate into right-claims. In short, it is unjust that people have important right-claims that remain unmet, and this is unjust because they deserve that those right-claims are met.

Such statements are the obverse side of a retributive theory of justice, which maintains that it is intrinsically right that people who commit seriously wrong actions are punished because they deserve such punishment. Conceiving social justice primarily in terms of rights commits one to this kind of retributivist conception of justice as receiving what one deserves. Such discourses are typically about who should receive the material harms and benefits of the system: who should be punished or penalized and who should be compensated or rewarded.

Although the discourse regarding social justice as competing right claims is important and necessary, it has limitations. Its primary focus is on material benefits, and this may constitute a failure to recognise the underlying deeper harms. Such a failure tends to lock us into ways of thinking that identify self-interest with well-being. Such an identification fails to see that the distinction between the instrumentally and non-instrumentally valuable is one of kind. My wallet is not my self. In this way, the relevant discourses about justice implicitly accept the value-inversions that are a necessary characteristic of spiritual harm. In short, our economic system tends to understand all human issues in terms of money and social power. This is a reductive tendency that permits the spiritual aspects of harm to be ignored or set aside.

This failure is pernicious in a number of ways. For example, public efforts to address the legacies of slavery and colonization are usually directed primarily towards material compensation. While economic justice is very important, this material approach is limited insofar as it ignores the human and spiritual aspects of these legacies. It is highly important that many people and whole societies were treated as less than persons for several centuries, and that they still are. Material compensation cannot make up for that. This is a matter concerning the living essence of people's lives and their relations. Thus, what needs to be addressed

and redressed is also on a quite different level from financial compensation. Sincere public apologies may help, and material compensation can express the sincerity of those apologies. Changes to public policy and expenditure that reduce racism can also help to redress the economic injustices. Additionally, we need spaces for public discourse and healing across racial divides.¹² The overall point is that the social-wide healing of the legacies of slavery and colonization aren't primarily economic. Rather, they are relational and spiritual. All actions of recompense should be an expression of a recognition that all persons are equally non-instrumentally valuable. So long as some people are treated as lesser, human relations are not just. We are all people of equal value.

The recognition of this requires cleaning the past, and this is part of collective healing. Consequently, given the arguments presented in the previous section, such healing must involve political-economic awareness and changes. It cannot be adequately understood only at individual and group levels. Appealing to economic rights can only tackle the symptoms of structural violence. It cannot address the underlying social relations and the dehumanising economic system itself.

The Structural Roots of Spiritual Harm

Third, the analysis of spiritual harm is also important insofar as the healing of people must include the recognition that spiritual harm has structural roots. The healing of a whole society must include the recognition of and changing of those structural conditions insofar as possible. Although each one of us feels powerless in this regard, the recognition that we are all subject to a dehumanizing economic system that systematically causes spiritual harm can help transcend the antagonistic binaries between oppressor and oppressed. The dehumanizing is systemic. This means that it has its roots in the structural features of our economic system.

While it is important that whole nations and racial groups were dehumanized historically, it is more significant that they continue to be today. The past is present in the now. This dehumanization is more than just institutional; it is structural. As we have already argued, structural dehumanization is a form and condition of spiritual harm. Because of the structural features of the economic system itself, we all tend to be treated as objects. Those who suffer this dehumanization most severely are those at the bottom of the pile, the marginalized and the poor.

¹² Gill & Thomson (2021). *Collective Healing to Address Legacies of Transatlantic Slavery: Opportunities and Challenges*.

However, the harsh realities of this fact should not tempt us to think that the relevant harms are only economic or material. They are also both psychological and spiritual. Structural harm is also spiritual.

Resilience

Fourth, the concept of spiritual harm allows us to understand resilience as the capacity to not allow dehumanizing acts to inflict such harm. Resilience makes it possible for people to prevent and transcend spiritual harm even when they are being systematically dehumanized. Resilience is the cause without the effects.

This diagnosis has important implications for healing practices. In many cases, African and Indigenous communities have been able to survive centuries of systemic dehumanization because of their religious and spiritual traditions. Such traditions have enabled communities to separate how others treat us from how we treat ourselves. That the first dehumanizes doesn't mean that the second need follow suit. People who are being dehumanized acquire resilience from their spiritual practices, which allow them to maintain their connection to the sacred and to their dignity. In this way, these traditions may enable them to transcend the systematic instrumentalization of society.

This indicates that collective healing practices should include spaces for communities to maintain and strengthen this aspect of their cultures, even when contemporary society tends to undermine it.¹³ Indeed, Indigenous and other marginalized communities can learn from each other in this regard. Eventually, such learning can help transform mainstream societies in which the value-inversions predominate.

Conclusion

In conclusion, contemporary accounts of the damage of slavery and colonization seldom explicitly capture the spiritual dimensions of harm. I have tried to remedy this defect. The four-fold framework for well-being indicates that harm is multidimensional, and it includes instrumentalization at each level. Such a framework resists reducing harm to the quantitative and financial. It recognizes the various qualitative dimensions of harm, and this enables the development of a more

¹³ Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace Research Institute (2020). *Healing the Wounds of Slave Trade and Slavery. Approaches and Practices: A Desk Review*.

holistic approach to healing. This non-reductive approach is necessary for understanding spiritual harm. Insofar as we recognize the spiritual aspects of harm, we understand that the harms from enslavement and colonization are not merely individualistic or group phenomena; they are also structural. Recovery from the horrific history of slavery, of colonialization and of their genocides must consist in healing the wounding of systemic dehumanization.

References

- Gandhi M.K. (1993). *An Autobiography or the story of my experiments with truth*, Beacon Press
- Gill, S., & Thomson G. (2012). *Rethinking Secondary Education: Towards a Human Centered Approach*, Pearson Education
- Gill, S., & Thomson G. (2019). *Understanding Peace Holistically: From the Spiritual to the Political*. Peter Lang.
- Gill, S., & Thomson, G. (2021). Collective Healing to Address Legacies of Transatlantic Slavery: Opportunities and Challenges. *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*, 15(3).
- Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace Research Institute. (2020). *Healing the Wounds of Slave Trade and Slavery. Approaches and Practices: A Desk Review*.
- Spinoza, B. (1985). *The Ethics*, Princeton University Press.
- Thomson, G. (1987). *Needs*. Routledge.
- Thomson, G. (2014). A Framework for a Religious Life. In S. Gill & G. Thomson (Eds.), *Redefining Religious Education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Thomson, G. (2021). Healing: Towards a conceptual framework. *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*, 15(3).
- Thomson, G., & Gill, S. (2024). *Beyond Instrumentalised Politics: Re-Conceptualising Public Governance*. De Gruyter.
- Thomson, G., Gill, S., & Goodson, I. (2021). *Happiness, Flourishing and the Good Life: A Transformative Vision for Human Well-Being*. Routledge.
- Thomson, G. (2025). *Beyond Instrumentalised Economics: Well-Being, Ecology and Alternative Economies*, De Gruyter.
- Whitehead, A. N. (1929). *Process and Reality*. Cambridge University Press.

