

Dare to Read: Affect, Embodiment, and Agency in Reading

Robert Hanna



"A Philosopher Reading a Book," Dutch School (Artnet, 2023)

You, the reader of this very sentence, are consciously reading this very sentence from left to right here and now.

The first sentence of this essay, which I've called *a self-locating caveat lector sentence*, is not only immediately self-evidently true, but also, as I've argued elsewhere, it's more epistemically fundamental than the Cartesian Cogito (Hanna, 2023a: pp. 6-8, 2023b). This is for two reasons. **First**, your act or process of reading the first sentence of this essay

provides authentic, skepticism-proof, empirical or a posteriori knowledge (Hanna, 2015: esp. section 1.2). And **second**, the truth of the first sentence of this essay self-evidently entails at least twelve other truths:

1. Therefore, you exist.
2. Therefore, you are conscious.
3. Since you can tell the difference between your left and your right, between now and elsewhen, and also between here and elsewhere, therefore you are an egocentrically-centered, conscious subject locally embedded in orientable spacetime.
4. Therefore, you are also embodied.
5. Therefore, your embodied consciousness exists as locally embedded in orientable spacetime.
6. Therefore, your embodied conscious act or process of reading the first sentence of this essay also exists.
7. Therefore, you also possess a capacity for consciously reading legible sentences like the first sentence of this essay.
8. Therefore, legible sentences also exist, both as types and as tokens of those types instantiated in actual spacetime.
9. Therefore, legible texts exist, both as types and as tokens of those types instantiated in actual spacetime.
10. Therefore, the manifestly real external spacetime world that contains both types and tokens of legible texts exists.
11. Therefore not only you, an egocentrically-centered, embodied conscious subject locally embedded in orientable spacetime, possessing the capacity for reading, exist, but also the manifestly real external spacetime world that contains both types and tokens of legible texts, exists.
12. Because *I*, R.H., consciously wrote the first sentence of this essay, but *you*, Dear Reader, who are *not* R.H., consciously read the first sentence of this essay, therefore *at least two* conscious subjects, who are communicating intersubjectively by means of writing and reading, exist in the manifestly real spacetime world that contains both types and tokens of legible texts. (Hanna, 2023b: pp. 2-3)

Correspondingly, I've also proposed the following analysis of the act or process of reading:

1. A person P reads a text T-in-L if and only if P consciously or self-consciously at least minimally scans, at least minimally parses, and also at least minimally comprehends T-in-L, and
2. all and only such acts or processes are reading. (Hanna, 2023a: p. 14)

In *this* essay, however, I want to focus on three equally important but perhaps less immediately self-evident dimensions of the act or process of reading: (i) the *affective* or *caring-based* dimension, (ii) the *embodied* dimension, and (iii) the *agential* dimension.

By *affective* or *caring-based*, I mean that which inherently expresses our rational human innate capacities for desire, emotion, and feeling. By *embodied*, I mean *essentially embodied*, i.e., mental facts and mental properties that are necessarily and completely realized as activating forms of life in a single living organismic animal body whose material or physical structure is of a sufficient complexity for their realization. And by *agential*, I mean that which inherently expresses our rational human innate capacities for free will and practical agency, aka "free agency"—i.e., non-deterministic, non-indeterministic, non-mechanical, spontaneous or uncompelled choice and intentional action that's also inherently guided by principles and reasons, especially including moral principles and reasons. I've presented and defended these doctrines in detail and at length in (Hanna and Maiese, 2009, Hanna, 2011, 2018a, 2018b, 2020, 2022), so I won't attempt to do that again here.

Nevertheless, against that backdrop, I can now ask the following question: *why* did you read the first sentence of this essay? My working hypothesis is that you read the first sentence of this essay because

- (i) you desired to do so, and
- (ii) you desired to do so, in all likelihood, for reasons of general rational curiosity about the nature of reading, a curiosity which, in turn, in all likelihood, was specifically activated and inspired by reading the title of the essay on academia.edu, and then,
- (iii) either immediately or after some deliberation, you chose to enact that desire in a way that was not compelled by any inner or outer facts or forces beyond your control, hence it was of your own free will, and then,

(iv) in order to enact that desire by means of an intentional performance, you moved your own living animal body in such a way as to look at this essay on your laptop or desktop computer, your smartphone, or in hard-copy after downloading and printing it out, and then

(v) you started reading the essay from the top, thereby encountering its first sentence just below the title, author attribution, and image, and then finally,

(vi) as you read that sentence, you felt an intellectual enjoyment and satisfaction arising naturally from the fact that you'd self-consciously cognized a self-evident truth and thereby achieved authentic, skepticism-proof, empirical or a posteriori knowledge (Hanna, 2015: esp. section 1.2).

In short, your rational, conscious, self-conscious, intentional, and intersubjective act or process of reading the first sentence of this essay was literally *infused* and *suffused* with affect or caring, embodiment, and agency. So for convenience, let's call this a paradigmatic example of *free reading*, and also say that an act or process of reading counts as free reading if and only if it expresses affect, embodiment, and agency to an eminent degree.

To be sure, some of our reading is more-or-less compelled, or even coerced, and to that extent, it's *unfree* reading: for example, *required reading* in the contexts of primary education, secondary education, higher education, business, jobs or the workplace, and *mandatory reading* in legal and/or political contexts, including knowing the laws and your legal rights, voting, government, the military, policing, legal procedures of various kinds including public trials, prisons, and what I've called *the crime-&-punishment machine* more generally (Hanna, 2023c). But leaving aside reading in those contexts—which, when taken together, I'll call *civil reading*, since they belong to the everyday lives of ordinary citizens in contemporary nation-States—much or even most of our reading is free reading.

Significantly, mainstream professional academic research and textbooks in the psychology of reading are “primarily about how the mind processes information during reading [and] have virtually nothing to say about motivational and emotional issues during reading” (Rayner et al., 2012: p. 1). Nevertheless, at the same time, in recent years it has become widely recognized that free reading—as opposed to civil reading—significantly improves mental health, physical health especially including neurophysiological (i.e., brain) health, and rational human well-being more generally, and in particular that

[b]ibliotherapy, or the use of various reading materials for the promotion of psychological health, is a well-known adjunct to mental health treatment. Bibliotherapy can consist of any type of literature and may include self-help books, focused readings, first-hand accounts of other's experiences, and even relevant fiction. This can be a powerful strategy and has been used successfully to reduce depression, suicidal thinking, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, health anxiety symptoms, insomnia, and stress. (Psychology Today, 2023b, see also 2022, 2023a).

Moreover, in my opinion, free reading is *also* a principal means of what I call *radical enlightenment*—i.e., thinking or knowing, caring, and choosing or acting for ourselves—and therefore for the purposes of radical enlightenment, especially including *radically enlightened higher education*, the act or process of *free reading* is every bit as important as *free speech* (Freire, 1970; Hanna, 2023d, 2023e).

Nevertheless, for all its mental and physical health benefits, and also for all its central importance in radical enlightenment and radically enlightened higher education, in the contemporary real world, free reading is under constant, dire, and ever-increasing threat from two sources. **First**, it's under constant, dire, and ever-increasing threat from what I've called *the invasion of the mind-snatchers*, namely, our excessive and even addictive reliance upon and use of digital technology, especially including chatbots or Large Language Models (LLMs) in particular, and so-called artificial intelligence or AI more generally, which degrades and undermines our innate rational human capacities for thinking and knowing, affect and caring, free agency, and creativity (Hanna, 2023f, 2023g, 2023h, 2023i, 2023j). And **second**, it's under constant, dire, and ever-increasing threat from what, following the famous dystopian futuristic novel by Ray Bradbury (Bradbury, 1953), I'll call *fahrenheit 451*: book-banning and book-burning, censorship, and restrictions on public access to, and/or public use of, legible texts more generally (for example, classified information and paywalls), especially in public libraries (Drabinski, 2023), but also in primary education, secondary education, higher education, business, jobs or the workplace, government, the military, and the crime-&-punishment machine (Hanna, 2023c, 2023d).

How can we protect ourselves and others against these threats to free reading? I have two proposals. **First**, I'm proposing logging off, or turning off, our digital technology for several hours every day, and instead engaging in the daily reading of handheld hard-copy books or other handheld hard-copy legible texts, whether sitting down, lying down, standing up, or moving about, a practice I'll call *essentially embodied free reading* (Hanna, 2023j, 2023k, 2023l). In my opinion, it's in fact essentially embodied free reading that's the *primary* source of the mental and physical health benefits of free reading, due to the inherently affective or caring-driven and dynamic, organismic,

vitalistic character of essentially embodied free agency (Hanna and Maiese, 2009: esp. chs. 4-5; Hanna, 2018a: esp. chs. 2-3 and 5, 2020, 2022; Psychology Today, 2022, 2023a, 2023b). And **second**, I'm proposing that we demand, exercise, and then sustain by means of creatively modifying our existing social institutions, what I'll call *the nearly absolute moral right to free reading*.¹ Now, it's a characteristic feature of reading that, although just like speech (whether it's been produced via legible texts, acoustic blasts, or some other medium), reading is also *inherently intersubjective*, nevertheless unlike speech, which always and only *directs* meaningful content *at* or *towards* people, reading always and only *receives* meaningful content *from* people. Therefore, if (I'm right that) the only rationally and morally justifiable restrictions on free speech are the moral impermissibility of (i) coercive speech, (ii) incitements to violence against innocent people, and (iii) slander, all of them on the grounds that they're ways of directing meaningful content at or towards people that also involve violations of sufficient respect for human dignity, then since free reading (except in the special case of free reading aloud, which is a hybrid of free speech and free reading) is never directed at or towards anyone, then the scope of the moral right to free reading is essentially wider than the scope of the moral right to free speech. The *only* moral restriction on free reading has to do with the nature of the meaningful content that's being received from people, and it's the moral impermissibility of reading text-based information about other individuals that those individuals themselves, on rationally and morally justifiable dignitarian grounds,² have explicitly declared *private information* and therefore *off-limits* to readers other than themselves and/or some select others who have that individual's explicit permission to receive that meaningful content, during that individual's lifetime.

The conjunction of these two proposals about protecting free reading against the invasion of the mind-snatchers and fahrenheit 451—i.e., essentially embodied reading and the nearly absolute moral right to free reading—can then be capsulized under the following neologistic Latin motto (riffing of course on the classical Latin motto *Sapere aude!*, variously translated as dare to know!, dare to think for yourself!, dare to be wise!):

Legere aude!, dare to read!

¹ Self-evidently, the moral right to free reading also entails the moral right to literacy. Scandalously, the literacy rate in the USA is only 79% (NCES, 2023), whereas the global literacy rate is 87% (UNESCO, 2023). So another attack on free reading, in the USA at least, is allowing and enabling the scandal of illiteracy.

² Bad or evil people might of course peremptorily declare that any text-based information about them that provides evidence of their badness or evil is private, and therefore off-limits to being freely read by any people other than the select few to whom they've given their explicit permission; but that's obviously neither rationally nor morally justifiable on dignitarian grounds.

REFERENCES

(Artnet, 2023). Dutch School. "A Philosopher Reading a Book." Available online at URL = <<https://www.artnet.com/artists/dutch-school-19/a-philosopher-reading-a-book-PSlrodqY6DVYUPBN90CD0Q2>>.

(Bradbury, 1953). Bradbury, R. *Fahrenheit 451*. New York: Ballantine Books.

(Drabinski, 2023). Drabinski, E. "The Library Is a Commons." *In These Times*. Vol. 47, #7. Pp. 34-39.

(Freire, 1970). Freire, P. *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Trans. M. Ramos. New York: Seabury Press.

(Hanna, 2011). Hanna, R. "Minding the Body." *Philosophical Topics* 39: 15-40. Available online in preview at URL = <https://www.academia.edu/4458670/Minding_the_Body>.

(Hanna, 2018a). Hanna, R. *Deep Freedom and Real Persons: A Study in Metaphysics*. THE RATIONAL HUMAN CONDITION, Vol. 2. New York: Nova Science. Available online in preview at URL = <https://www.academia.edu/35801857/The_Rational_Human_Condition_2_Deep_Freedom_and_Real_Persons_A_Study_in_Metaphysics_Nova_Science_2018>.

(Hanna, 2018b). Hanna, R. *Kantian Ethics and Human Existence: A Study in Moral Philosophy*. THE RATIONAL HUMAN CONDITION, Vol. 3. New York: Nova Science. Available online in preview at URL = <https://www.academia.edu/36359647/The_Rational_Human_Condition_3_Kantian_Ethics_and_Human_Existence_A_Study_in_Moral_Philosophy_Nova_Science_2018>.

(Hanna, 2022). Hanna, R. "Merleau-Ponty Meets The Kripke Monster Redux: The Essential Embodiment Theory Now." Unpublished MS. Available online at URL = <https://www.academia.edu/88987003/Merleau_Ponty_Meets_The_Kripke_Monster_Redux_The_Essential_Embodiment_Theory_Now_December_2022_version>.

(Hanna, 2023a). Hanna, R. "Caveat Lector: From Wittgenstein to The Philosophy of Reading." Unpublished MS. Available online at URL = <https://www.academia.edu/103950659/Caveat_Lector_From_Wittgenstein_to_The_Philosophy_of_Reading_October_2023_version>.

(Hanna, 2023b). Hanna, R. "The Philosophy of Reading as First Philosophy." Unpublished MS. Available online at URL = [https://www.academia.edu/107390679/The Philosophy of Reading as First Philosophy September 2023 version](https://www.academia.edu/107390679/The_Philosophy_of_Reading_as_First_Philosophy_September_2023_version) >.

(Hanna, 2023c). Hanna, R. "Kant, Dignity, and Dismantling The Crime-&-Punishment Machine." Unpublished MS. Available online at URL = [https://www.academia.edu/107314883/Kant Dignity and Dismantling The Crime and Punishment Machine September 2023 version](https://www.academia.edu/107314883/Kant_Dignity_and_Dismantling_The_Crime_and_Punishment_Machine_September_2023_version) >.

(Hanna, 2023d). Hanna, R. "A Cosmopolitan Commons For Free Reading: In Defence of Public Libraries." Unpublished MS. Available online at URL = [https://www.academia.edu/105859559/A Cosmopolitan Commons For Free Reading In Defence of Public Libraries August 2023 version](https://www.academia.edu/105859559/A_Cosmopolitan_Commons_For_Free_Reading_In_Defence_of_Public_Libraries_August_2023_version) >.

(Hanna, 2023e). Hanna, R. "Higher Education Without Commodification, Mechanization, or Moralization." Unpublished MS. Available online at URL = [https://www.academia.edu/104757594/Higher Education Without Commodification Mechanization or Moralization September 2023 version](https://www.academia.edu/104757594/Higher_Education_Without_Commodification_Mechanization_or_Moralization_September_2023_version) >.

(Hanna, 2023f). Hanna, R. "How and Why ChatGPT Failed The Turing Test." Unpublished MS. Available online at URL = [https://www.academia.edu/94870578/How and Why ChatGPT Failed The Turing Test January 2023 version](https://www.academia.edu/94870578/How_and_Why_ChatGPT_Failed_The_Turing_Test_January_2023_version) >.

(Hanna, 2023g). Hanna, R. "The Myth of Artificial Intelligence and Why It Persists." Unpublished MS. Available online at URL = [https://www.academia.edu/101882789/The Myth of Artificial Intelligence and Why It Persists May 2023 version](https://www.academia.edu/101882789/The_Myth_of_Artificial_Intelligence_and_Why_It_Persists_May_2023_version) >.

(Hanna, 2023h). Hanna, R. "Creative Rage Against the Computing Machine: Necessary and Sufficient Conditions for Authentic Human Creativity." Unpublished MS. Available online at URL = [https://www.academia.edu/101633470/Creative Rage Against the Computing Machine Necessary and Sufficient Conditions for Authentic Human Creativity June 2023 version](https://www.academia.edu/101633470/Creative_Rage_Against_the_Computing_Machine_Necessary_and_Sufficient_Conditions_for_Authentic_Human_Creativity_June_2023_version) >.

(Hanna, 2023i). Hanna, R. " 'It's a Human Thing. You Wouldn't Understand.' Computing Machinery and Affective Intelligence." Unpublished MS. Available online at URL = https://www.academia.edu/102664604/Its_a_Human_Thing_You_Wouldnt_Understand_Computing_Machinery_and_Affective_Intelligence_June_2023_version >.

(Hanna, 2023j). Hanna, R. "Invasion of the Mind Snatchers, Or, The Easy Solution to the Problem of Chatbots in Higher Education." Unpublished MS. Available online at URL = https://www.academia.edu/102995569/Invasion_of_the_Mind_Snatchers_Or_The_Easy_Solution_to_the_Problem_of_Chatbots_in_Higher_Education_June_2023_version >.

(Hanna, 2023k). Hanna, R. "Further Thoughts on The Myth of Artificial Intelligence, the Mind Snatching Invasion of the Chatbots, and How to Save Higher Education." Unpublished MS. Available online at URL = https://www.academia.edu/103442312/Further_Thoughts_on_The_Myth_of_Artificial_Intelligence_the_Mind_Snatching_Invasion_of_the_Chatbots_and_How_to_Save_Higher_Education_June_2023_version >.

(Hanna, 2023l). Hanna, R. "Oppenheimer, Kaczynski, Shelley, Hinton, & Me: Don't Pause Giant AI Experiments, *Ban Them*." Unpublished MS. Available online at URL = https://www.academia.edu/97882365/Oppenheimer_Kaczynski_Shelley_Hinton_and_Me_Don_t_Pause_Giant_AI_Experiments_Ban_Them_July_2023_version >.

(Hanna and Maiese, 2009). Hanna, R. and Maiese, M. *Embodied Minds in Action*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press. Available online in preview at URL = https://www.academia.edu/21620839/Embodied_Minds_in_Action>.

(NCES, 2023). National Center for Educational Statistics. *Data Point*. "Adult Literacy in the United States." July 2019. Available online at URL = <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2019/2019179/index.asp>>.

(Psychology Today, 2022). Sima, R. "The Mental Health Benefits of Reading." *Psychology Today*. 16 March. Available online at URL = <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-art-effect/202203/the-mental-health-benefits-reading>>.

(Psychology Today, 2023a). Samuel, L.R. "The Psychology of Reading: Why a Book Can Be Good for Mental Well-Being." *Psychology Today*. 23 July. Available online at URL = <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psychology-yesterday/202307/the-psychology-of-reading>>.

(Psychology Today, 2023b). Kennedy, C.H. "Does Reading Improve Health? It Does—Mental Health, Physical Health, and Brain Health." 5 September. Available online at URL = <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/alpha-blog-charlie/202309/does-reading-improve-health>>.

(Rayner et al., 2012). Rayner, K., Pollatsek, A., Ashby, J., and Clifton Jr, C. *Psychology of Reading*. 2nd edn., New York: Psychology Press/Routledge.

(UNESCO, 2023). Global Education Monitoring Report. "Monitoring SDG 4: Literacy and Adult Learning." *UNESCO*. Available online at URL = <<https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/literacy-adult-learning>>.