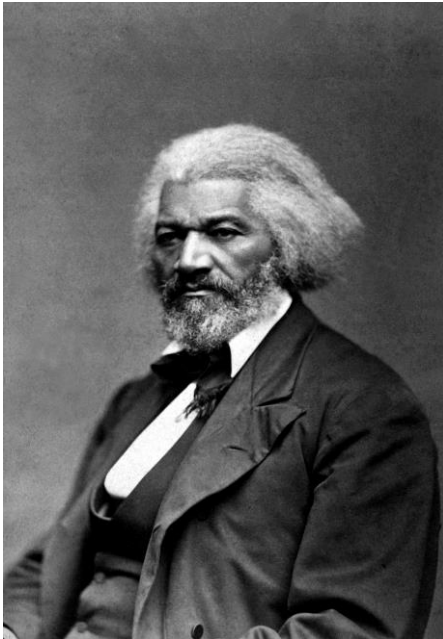
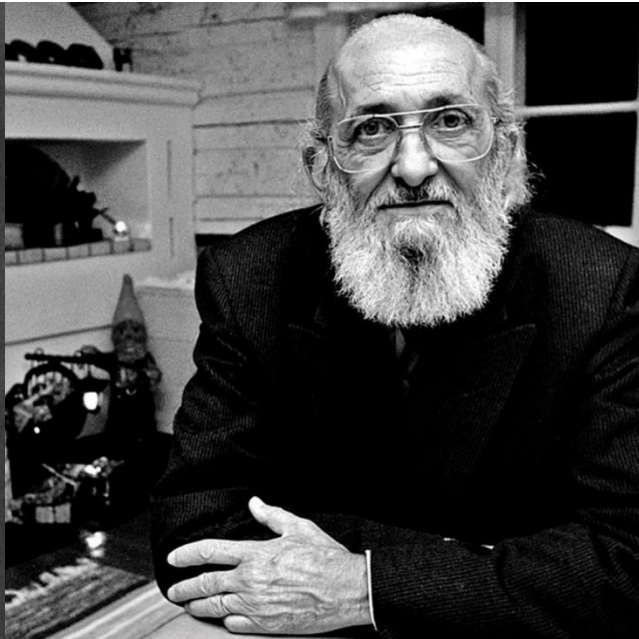


Free Reading, Civil Reading, and The Right to Literacy

Robert Hanna



Frederick Douglass (1817/1818-1895)



Paulo Freire (1921-1997)

It's a truth self-evidently known, that you, the reader of this very sentence, are able to read. Moreover, because I posted this essay on academia.edu, then in all probability you're also either a philosopher or philosophically-minded, and in any case highly educated, hence you live, and move, and have your being in an everyday world in which reading is as utterly familiar and yet also as utterly transparent to you as water is to fish (Hanna, 2023a: sections 1 and 7). Therefore, just like the (no doubt MIT) undergraduate mentioned directly below in the first paragraph of the first chapter of one of the standard texts on the psychology of reading, in all probability you take your acquired complex capacity for reading—i.e., your literacy—for granted:

Reading is a complex skill that is pretty much taken for granted by those who can do it. About 35 years ago (when cognitive psychologists first became interested in studying reading) one of the authors, then a graduate student, got into an elevator in the Engineering Department at a famous university in the northeastern part of the United States with a copy of Smith's book *Understanding Reading* (1971) under his arm. A bright young freshman engineering student, upon seeing the book, was quick to remark: "Oh, *reading*; I learned how to do that 15 years ago." That remark is pretty consistent with most people's attitudes about reading. Those who can do it take it for granted. Yet it is an extremely complicated process that is sometimes difficult to learn (particularly in

comparison to the ease with which children learn to speak). And illiterate adults find attempts to learn to read agonizingly frustrating. (Rayner et al., 2012: p. 3)

The last two sentences in this quotation, as forthrightly worded as they are, are still serious understatements. In fact, the acquired complex capacity for reading is of fundamental cognitive, existential, moral, sociopolitical, and more generally rational human significance, as the autobiography of Frederick Douglass, who, as a slave, suffered for a decade under forced illiteracy, movingly and vividly demonstrates:

I lived in Master Hugh's family about seven years. During this time, I succeeded in learning to read and write. In accomplishing this, I was compelled to resort to various stratagems. I had no teacher.... I was now about twelve years old, and the thought of being a slave for life began to bear heavily on my heart. Just about this time, I got hold of a book entitled "The Columbian Orator." Every opportunity I got, I used to read this book. Among much of other interesting matter, I found in it a dialogue between a master and his slave. The slave was represented as having run away from his master three times. The dialogue represented the conversation which took place between them, when the slave was retaken the third time. In this dialogue, the whole argument in favor of slavery was brought forward by the master, all of which was disposed of by the slave. The slave was made to say some very smart as well as impressive things—things which had the desired though unexpected effect: for the conversation resulted in the voluntary emancipation of the slave on the part of the master.... The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers.... As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would almost at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own. Anything, no matter what, to get rid of thinking! It was this everlasting thinking of my condition that tormented me. There was no getting rid of it. It was pressed upon me by every object within sight or hearing, animate or inanimate. The silver trump of freedom had roused my soul to eternal wakefulness. Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever. (Douglass, 1845/1995: pp. 22-24)

Jumping forward now to the 1960s and 1970s, the Brazilian sociologist Paulo Freire was able, brilliantly, to take the gravamen of Douglass's line of thinking one radical step further:

Years before Paulo Freire was "invited" by the Brazilian government to leave his homeland after the military coup of 1964, he had begun devoting his life to the

advancement of the fortunes of the impoverished people of Brazil. After his twenty-year exile he moved first to Chile, then emigrated to the United States before returning to Brazil. In the course of his work and travels in the Third World, and as a result of his studies in philosophy of education, he evolved a theory for the education of people who are illiterate, especially adults, based on the conviction that every human being, no matter how “ignorant” or submerged in the “culture of silence,” is capable of looking critically at the world in a dialogical encounter with others. Provided with the proper tools for such an encounter, the individual can gradually perceive his or her personal and social reality, and deal critically with it. When an illiterate peasant participates in this sort of educational experience he or she comes to a new awareness of self, a new sense of dignity. “I now realize I am a person, an educated person.” “We were blind, now our eyes have been opened.” “Before this, words meant nothing to me; now they speak to me and I can make them speak.” “I work, and working I transform the world.” As the illiterate person learns and is able to make such statements, the world becomes radically transformed and he or she is no longer willing to be a mere object responding to uncontrollable change. This radical self-awareness is not only the task of workers in the Third World, but of people in this country as well, including those who in our advanced technological society have been or are being programmed into conformity and thus are essentially part of the “culture of silence.” (Freire/Schaull, 1970)

Reduced to its essentials, what Douglass and Freire are telling us is that the achievement of literacy is not only *a fundamental emancipation from cognitive and existential enslavement*, but also *the gateway to all moral and sociopolitical emancipation and radical enlightenment*. But I also want to add a crucial postscript to their profound insights, which is that for those of us who *are* literate, not only taking our own literacy for granted but also ignoring the illiteracy of others, thereby failing to treat them with sufficient respect for their human dignity, is itself a form of *self-enslavement*, a prime example of what William Blake called *mind-forg’d manacles*:

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infants cry of fear,
In every voice: in every ban,
The mind-forg’d manacles I hear. (Blake, 1794/2021: lines 5-8)

In view of all that, and now jumping forward again, this time to the third decade of the 21st century, let’s consider in tandem the two facts that (i) in the USA the literacy rate for adults who possess the set of healthy, ordinary, undamaged innate capacities that would make it really possible for them to acquire the complex capacity for reading is only 79% (NCES, 2023), whereas (ii) the global literacy rate is 86% (UNESCO, 2023). Illiteracy is therefore a *deprivation* of the set of healthy, ordinary, undamaged innate capacities required for reading, and not a *disability, disorder, or impairment* of those capacities (see, e.g., Rayner et al., 2012: ch. 12). The fact or phenomenon of people with reading

disabilities, disorders, or impairments naturally gives rise to its own set of complex and important cognitive, existential, moral, and sociopolitical issues that, for reasons of philosophical concision and economy, I won't discuss in this essay. Nevertheless, the facts I just cited about US and global literacy rates entail that *21% of all people in the USA possessing the set of healthy, ordinary, undamaged innate capacities that would make it really possible for them to acquire the complex capacity for reading, and 14% of all such people worldwide, are illiterate.* I think that *both* of these facts—but *especially* the fact about the USA—are legally and morally scandalous. And that's because I also think that not only does *the legal right to literacy exist in the USA*, but also that *everyone everywhere has the moral right to literacy.*

Both the legal right to literacy in the USA and the universal moral right to literacy—often expressed as “literacy is a human right”—have been frequently asserted or declared (see, e.g., Lundsford et al., 1990; Valtin et al., 2016), usually alongside a list of the beneficial individual and sociopolitical effects of literacy (UNESCO, 2023). But to my knowledge, no one—and therefore, obviously, no philosopher—has ever presented a fully explicit and fully general case for the right to literacy. Correspondingly, in the rest of this essay, I'll present four arguments that, when conjoined, constitute a rationally decisive or “knockdown” cumulative case for the legal right to literacy in the USA and the universal moral right to literacy.

As a theoretical background or prolegomenon for that cumulative case, and for clarity's sake, I'll start by briefly rehearsing out some basic concepts and distinctions that I've presented and defended in earlier work. **First**, I've 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)

Second, I've also distinguished between *free reading* and *civil reading*, as follows:

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 [quotation], 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.... [Here, 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.

In short, your rational, conscious, self-conscious, intentional, and intersubjective act or process of reading the first sentence of this [quotation] 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..... 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. (Hanna, 2023b: pp. 1-4)

Third, I’ve also argued that free reading is not only *more important than* civil reading but also *every bit as important* as free speech:

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*. (Hanna, 2023b: pp. 4-5)

And **fourth** and finally, I've also presented and defended a moral theory I call *broadly Kantian dignitarianism*:

Broadly Kantian dignitarianism is a universalist moral and political theory that ascribes absolute, non-denumerably infinite, intrinsic, and objective value or worth—aka *dignity*—to all *human real persons*, and asserts that everyone ought always and everywhere to treat everyone, including themselves, with sufficient respect for their human dignity, which means (i) *universal anti-oppression*, i.e., never treating anyone, including yourself, either as a mere means or a mere thing, and (ii) *universal benevolence or kindness*, i.e., always trying to promote the satisfaction of everyone's true human needs, including your own. The very ideas of "universal human equality" and "universal human rights" presuppose the truth and rightness of broadly Kantian dignitarianism; and the very idea that "crimes against humanity"—including systematically persecuting people on the basis of their religious beliefs, ethnicity, race, sex or gender, "disappearing" people, genocide, murder, rape, slavery, torture, and so-on—are all absolutely immoral and heinously wrong, indeed evil, *also* presupposes broadly Kantian dignitarianism. Moreover, if we also feel the need of an argument from moral or political authority, then we can cite Frederick Douglass as one of the most morally and politically important proponents of broadly Kantian dignitarianism. (Hanna, 2023c: p. 2; on Douglass's broadly Kantian dignitarianism, see Bromell, 2021: p. 43, and Hanna, 2023d)

With those four theoretical building blocks in place, I now want to argue that the case for *the legal right to literacy in the USA* is overwhelmingly strong—indeed, it's rationally overdetermined. I'll use two different arguments to demonstrate this.

Argument 1: From Free Speech and The First Amendment

1. The First Amendment to the US Constitution reads as follows:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances. (NA, 2023, underlining added)

2. By virtue of The First Amendment, all US citizens have the legal right to any and all free speech that's expressible by writing, within the limits of legally permissible free speech: let's call this *the legal right to written free speech*.
3. But in order to be able to write legible texts, writers have to be able to read what they're writing.
4. Therefore, by virtue of The First Amendment, all US citizens have the legal right to read any and all free speech that's expressible by writing, within the limits of legally permissible free speech: let's call this *the legal right to free reading*.
5. Literacy is a necessary condition of free reading.
6. Therefore, by virtue of The First Amendment, all US citizens have the legal right to literacy.

Argument 2: From Public Education and The Fourteenth Amendment

1. Although the legal right to a public education is not a "fundamental right" that's explicitly formulated in the US Constitution, nevertheless, it can be compellingly argued that The Fourteenth Amendment—whether via the equal protection clause or the due process clause, or both—guarantees that all US citizens have the legal right to receive a public education:

All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws. (NA, 2023, underlining added; see also, e.g., Shaw, 2022)

2. No one can receive a public education unless they can read.
3. Required reading in public schools is a core example of civil reading.

4. Therefore, all US citizens have the legal right to civil reading.

5. Literacy is a necessary condition of civil reading.

6. Therefore, all US citizens have the legal right to literacy (see also, e.g., Blanchette, 2023).

Correspondingly, the case for *the universal moral right to literacy* is equally overwhelmingly strong and rationally overdetermined. As before, I'll use two different arguments to demonstrate this. Both arguments presupposes the truth of broadly Kantian dignitarianism.

Argument 1: From Free Speech

1. By virtue of the universal moral obligation to treat everyone everywhere with sufficient respect for their human dignity, everyone everywhere has the moral right to any and all free speech expressible by writing, within the limits of morally permissible free speech: let's call this *the moral right to written free speech* (for a philosophical defence of free speech as such, see, e.g., Hanna, 2018: section 3.12).

2. But in order to be able to write legible texts, writers have to be able to read what they're writing.

3. Therefore, by virtue of the universal moral obligation to treat everyone everywhere with sufficient respect for their human dignity, everyone everywhere has a moral right to read any and all free speech expressible by writing, within the limits of morally permissible free speech: let's call this *the moral right to free reading* (see also Hanna, 2023b: p. 6).¹

4. Literacy is a necessary condition of free reading.

5. Therefore, by virtue of the universal moral obligation to treat everyone everywhere with sufficient respect for their human dignity, everyone everywhere has the moral right to literacy.

¹ Indeed, it's also arguable that the scope of the moral right to free reading is even wider than the scope of the moral right to free speech (Hanna, 2023b: p. 6.) but this point isn't necessary for the purposes of my argument here.

Argument 2: From Public Education

1. By virtue of the universal moral obligation to treat everyone everywhere with sufficient respect for their human dignity, everyone everywhere has the moral right to receive a public education.
2. No one can receive a public education unless they can read.
3. Required reading in public schools is a core example of civil reading.
4. Therefore, by virtue of the universal moral obligation to treat everyone everywhere with sufficient respect for their human dignity, everyone everywhere has the moral right to civil reading.
5. Literacy is a necessary condition of civil reading.
6. Therefore, by virtue of the universal moral obligation to treat everyone everywhere with sufficient respect for their human dignity, everyone everywhere has the moral right to literacy.

I conclude that the four arguments I've just presented, when conjoined, constitute a rationally decisive or "knockdown" cumulative case for the legal right to literacy in the USA and the universal moral right to literacy. In turn, and above all, this knockdown cumulative case strongly supports and indeed sufficiently vindicates not only Douglass's and Freire's profound insights into the fundamental cognitive, existential, moral, sociopolitical, and more generally rational human significance of literacy, but also the crucial postscript according to which, as literate people, we all need to emancipate ourselves from our mind-forg'd manacles and face up to the contemporary problem of illiteracy both in the USA and worldwide.²

² I'm grateful to Scott Heftler and Martha Hanna for thought-provoking conversations on and around the main topics of this essay, that also inspired me to write it.

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