

Higher Education, Higher-Order Illiteracy, and Moral Illiteracy

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(NYT, 2023, photograph by K. Szymczak)

As of 28 November 2023, 15,000 Palestinians had been killed in the Gaza War, including at least 6000 children and 4000 women; and there were at least 1200 civilians killed in Israel by Hamas on 7 October 2023 alone. Of course, the terrible political situation there has been at least 75 years in the making, and is immensely complicated (see, e.g., NYTM, 2023). But my point here is just there has been much more than enough killing of innocent people to go around on both sides of the bloody conflict, and to that extent, *a moral plague on both their houses*. Correspondingly, this essay is about morality, literacy, and higher

education (especially in the USA, but also elsewhere across the world), not about the Gaza War per se.

Back in mid-October, in a thoughtful and thought-provoking New York Times opinion piece entitled “The Moral Deficiencies of a Liberal Education,” Ezekiel J. Emanuel—a physician, vice provost, and a professor of medical ethics and health policy at the University of Pennsylvania— argued that

[w]e have failed.

When a coalition of 34 student organizations at Harvard can say that they “hold the Israeli regime entirely responsible for all unfolding violence” and students at other elite universities blame Israel alone for the attack Hamas carried out on Israelis on Oct. 7 or even praise the massacre, something is deeply wrong at America’s colleges and universities.

Students spouting ideological catchphrases have revealed their moral obliviousness and the deficiency of their educations. But the deeper problem is not them. It is what they are being taught — or, more specifically, what they are not being taught.

Certainly, not all students wear these moral blinders. But the fact that many students do, and that they are at some of the nation’s leading colleges and universities, should be a cause for profound concern across higher education.

Those of us who are university leaders and faculty are at fault. We may graduate our students, confer degrees that certify their qualifications as the best and brightest. But we have clearly failed to educate them. We have failed to give them the ethical foundation and moral compass to recognize the basics of humanity. (NYT, 2023)

I fully agree with Emanuel’s argument and his basic conclusions, as far as they go, but I also think that the problem is even more profound and serious than he describes it.

In my opinion, higher education has not only “failed to give [a substantial number of contemporary college and university students, especially including those at Harvard and other elite institutions of higher education] the ethical foundation and moral compass to recognize the basics of humanity,” but also *has effectively deprived them of the complex cognitive, affective or caring-based, embodied, and agential capacity for moral understanding*. Correspondingly, I call this effective deprivation *moral illiteracy*.

Let me explain. In one of a series of essays in the philosophy of reading, specifically on the right to literacy, I argued that

[i]lliteracy is ... a *deprivation* of the set of healthy, ordinary, undamaged innate capacities required for reading, and not a *disability, disorder, or impairment* of those capacities. (Hanna, 2023a; see also Hanna 2023b, 2023c, 2023d, 2023e, 2023f)

According to contemporary social scientists who study literacy and illiteracy, the principal causes of the legal and moral scandal of illiteracy in the USA—an astounding 21% of all adult Americans are illiterate (NCES, 2023)—are sociocultural, socioeconomic, and social-institutional, and also closely related to childhood (il)literacy:

Childhood literacy efforts are essential to reducing the rates of adult illiteracy. Some 36 million adults in the U.S. don't have basic reading, writing, and math skills above a third-grade level, according to ProLiteracy. And adult education programs are insufficient to meet the demand for services....

Socioeconomic Factors Behind Child Illiteracy

- Poverty plays a large role in whether children develop literacy skills during their early years. Some 22% of children in the U.S. live in poverty, according to the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. Some 43% of adults living in poverty have low literacy levels.
- About 80% of children living in economically disadvantaged communities will lose reading skills over summer breaks due to a lack of access to books and other resources, according to Reading Is Fundamental.
- Ethnicity is also a factor. About 52% of Black fourth-grade children and 45% of Hispanic fourth graders score below basic reading levels, compared to 23% of white students, according to NCES assessments.

Causes of Child Illiteracy

Some causes of child illiteracy include:

- **Family history of illiteracy**
 - Childhood illiteracy is typically intergenerational. Parents and caretakers with a low literacy level are not well prepared to nurture literacy in children. Some 73% of children with undereducated parents (less than a high school diploma) live in low-income settings, according to Comic Relief US.
- **Lack of books at home**
 - For families living in poverty, books are a luxury purchase outweighed by basic living expenses. More than half of families living in poverty don't have children's books in their homes, according to the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*.
- **Lack of attention to the importance of reading**
 - Low-income parents are often disengaged from their children's education, typically due to stress from financial and work insecurity, according to Literacy Partners.

- **Nonnative status**
 - Many families that immigrate from other countries have difficulty adopting the English language. Of low-literacy adults, about 35% are non-U.S.-born citizens, according to the NCES.
- **Poor access to technology resources**
 - Much of today's schoolwork requires access to online resources, and students living in poverty may lack computer or internet resources at home. (Regis, 2023)

In short, the malignant mixture of these sociocultural, socioeconomic, and social-institutional factors has effectively deprived 21% of all adult Americans of the complex cognitive, affective or caring-based, embodied, and agential capacity for reading.

Now, let's assume that someone actually *has* acquired the complex cognitive, affective or caring-based, embodied, and agential capacity for reading, and therefore possesses what I'll call *first-order literacy*. Then the effective deprivation of that complex capacity is what I'll call *first-order illiteracy*. Let's also say that a legible text is *first-order legible* if and only if it's able to be read by anyone who is first-order literate. Next, let's assume that someone is indeed first-order literate, yet has also been effectively deprived of the higher-order complex cognitive, affective or caring-based, embodied, and agential capacity for *understanding certain kinds of first-order legible texts*: say, first-order legible *natural-scientific* texts. Then they are what I'll call *higher-order illiterate with respect to first-order legible natural-scientific texts*, or *scientifically illiterate* for short. What I'm interested in for the purposes of this essay are people who are *higher-order illiterate with respect to first-order legible moral texts*, or *morally illiterate* for short, and my claim is that a substantial number of college and university students, especially including students at Harvard and other elite institutions of higher education, have been effectively deprived of the complex cognitive, affective or caring-based, embodied, and agential capacity for *understanding first-order legible moral texts*, and are therefore morally illiterate.

For example, a non-trivial number of students at Harvard and other elite institutions of higher education read (in all probability) online texts about the attack carried out by Hamas on 7 October, killing hundreds of innocent, non-combatant teenagers at a rave, in order to punish Israel for its oppressive apartheid politics with respect to the Palestinians. Now, let's suppose that it's self-evidently true for anyone capable of understanding first-order legible moral texts *that other things being equal, it's rationally unjustified and immoral to kill innocent, non-combatant people, and anyone who freely does such things is morally responsible for them, precisely because everyone everywhere has human dignity and should always be treated with sufficient respect for their human dignity*

(Hanna, 2018a, 2018b, 2023g). Then, when these students read about the killings, they understood that we should “hold the Israeli regime entirely responsible for all unfolding violence,” and also that we should “blame Israel alone for the attack Hamas carried out on Israelis on Oct. 7 or even praise the massacre,” and also that these innocent, non-combatant teenagers were members of “the Israeli regime.” But how can that possibly be what the sentences describing the attack actually said, unless the *Israelis* had killed those innocent, non-combatant teenagers? In effect, this means that these undergraduates understood a sentence of the form “Some Fs killed hundreds of innocent, non-combatant Gs, in order to punish the Gs for their oppressive apartheid politics with respect to the Fs” to mean “Some Gs killed hundreds of innocent, non-combatant Gs, in order to punish the Gs for their oppressive apartheid politics with respect to the Fs.”

How can such elementary misunderstandings of first-order legible moral texts—and correspondingly, such elementary misunderstandings of the moral concepts and moral propositions expressed by such texts—be possible? My thesis is that such elementary misunderstandings are possible precisely because these students are in fact *morally illiterate*, and also that, just as the principal causes of first-order illiteracy are sociocultural, socioeconomic, and social-institutional, so too the causes of this central sub-species of higher-order illiteracy, i.e., moral illiteracy, are principally sociocultural, socioeconomic, and social-institutional. More specifically, however, my thesis is that the moral illiteracy of a substantial number of contemporary college and university students, especially including those at Harvard and other elite institutions of higher education, has been caused by the *commodification*, *mechanization*, and *moralization* of higher education.

What do I mean by that? This is what I wrote in another essay:

[The belief that] the ultimate aim of higher education is ... how best to satisfy our individual or collective self-interests by means of instrumental reason and corporate capitalism, as per their ideological valorization, *neoliberalism* ... [is what I'll call] the *commodification* of higher education. [The belief that the ultimate aim of higher education is] how best to advance the research projects of mechanistic formal and natural science, especially including computer science and digital technology, as per their ideological valorization, *technocracy* [is what I'll call] the *mechanization* of higher education. [The belief that the ultimate aim of higher education is] how best to advance the coercive and moralistic demands of post-1970s identitarian multi-culturalist social justice theory, as per its ideological valorizations, *cancel culture* and *wokeism* [is what I'll call] the *moralization* of higher education....

Tragically, however, contemporary higher education is in fact *pervasively* commodified, mechanized, and moralized, as can be easily confirmed by critically monitoring and witnessing the never-ending roll-out of bland, bog-standard boosterism and bullshit

that's delivered weekly, monthly, quarterly, and yearly by college and university presidents, administrations, human resources (HR) bureaucracies, and alumni magazines, all of which is intended to normalize and vindicate the commodification, mechanization, and moralization of higher education—and above all, to raise more money Ironically, however, for all its commodification, higher education in the USA is actually pricing itself out of the market, by virtue of demanding exorbitant tuition costs but at the same time no longer providing guaranteed higher incomes for its student-consumers as compared to their non-higher-ed-consuming cohort, who don't incur the same crippling debts for their job-accreditation or job-training, and therefore currently higher education in the USA is even failing miserably at its own money-grubbing game.... So that's the way we live now. (Hanna, 2023g).

Moreover, so as to be fully explicit, what want to say about all that in *this* essay is threefold.

First, just as *poverty* is a principal cause of first-order illiteracy, so too *the commodification of higher education* is a principal cause of moral illiteracy in higher education. This is by virtue of systematically substituting the self-interested pursuit of wealth for any and all non-self-interested moral values.

Second, just as the lack of access to hard-copy reading materials for children living in poverty, together with the lack of support from care-giving people for nurturing and sustaining practices of hard-copy reading in children living in poverty, is a principal cause of first-order illiteracy, so too *the mechanization of higher education* for relatively or highly well-off college and university age students is a principal cause of moral illiteracy in higher education. This is by virtue of substituting the excessive and addictive use of digital technology for what I call *essentially embodied reading*, that is, reading hard-copy handheld books and other hard-copy handheld legible texts (Hanna, 2023f).

And **third**, just as the systematic discrimination and oppression that are suffered by people of non-white ethnicity or race and/or non-native status in the USA is a principal cause of their high rates of first-order illiteracy, so too *the moralization of higher education* is a principal cause of the high rates of moral illiteracy in higher education. This is by virtue of promulgating, implementing, and enforcing a set of coercive moralistic principles under the rubric of “diversity, equity, and inclusion,” *inside* institutions of higher education, especially including Harvard and other elite institutions, purportedly intended to help those millions of adult people of non-white ethnicity or race and/or non-native status in the USA who are first-order illiterate due to systematic discrimination and oppression, when at the very same time, self-evidently, *nobody* who is first-order illiterate *could ever qualify for admission to one of these institutions*, or, even if someone who

is first-order illiterate were to be misguidedly admitted under the rubric of “diversity, equity, and inclusion,” *could ever graduate from one of these institutions, since they have to be able to read* in order to qualify for admission, or at least in order to graduate.

Finally, how can moral illiteracy in higher education be effectively addressed, effectively dismantled, and effectively transformed into moral literacy? My proposal is that it should be by means of the program of what I call—perhaps not altogether surprisingly—*higher education without commodification, mechanization, or moralization*. But that’s the title and subject of an earlier essay, and also a longer philosophical story for another day (Hanna, 2023h, 2023i, 2023j, 2023k).¹

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