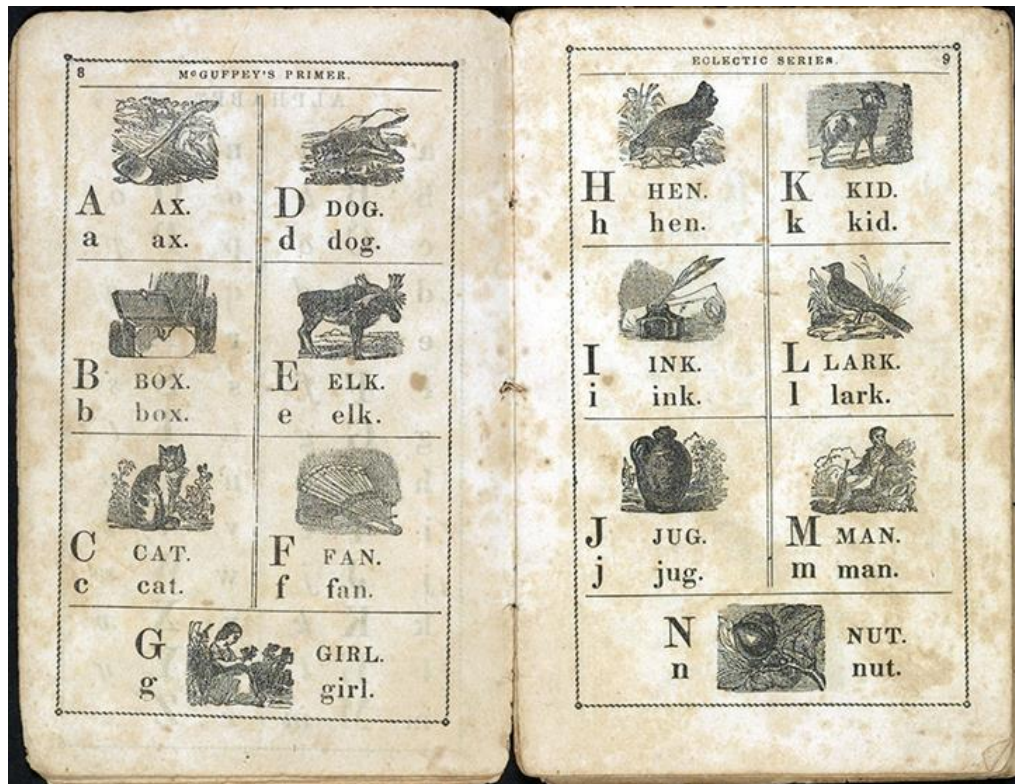


Moral Literacy: A Primer

Robert Hanna



McGuffey's Primer, 1836 (Wikimedia Commons, 2016)

In an essay called "Higher Education, Higher-Order Illiteracy, and Moral Illiteracy," I argued the following:

[L]et'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. (Hanna, 2023a: p. 4)

Then I claimed that there are three principal causes of this moral illiteracy: the *commodification, mechanization, and moralization* of contemporary higher education (Hanna, 2023a: pp. 5-6; see also Hanna, 2023b), and correspondingly, I also claimed that this moral illiteracy can be

effectively addressed, effectively dismantled, and effectively transformed into moral literacy [only] by means of the program of what I call ... *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, 2023a: p. 7)

In reflecting on those claims, however, it occurred to me that even assuming the soundness of what I've argued in (Hanna, 2023a, 2023b), it might *also* be philosophically helpful if I tried to state, as precisely and succinctly as possible, just what those who are morally illiterate would have to learn in order to become morally literate. So that's what I've tried to do in this essay, in twelve steps.

But before I get started on that, here's a *caveat lector*. Because this is a *primer*, I'm going to present only a McGuffey-style *ABCs of morality*, and that's it. Those wanting a full-dress study in moral philosophy can look at (Hanna, 2018a; see also Hanna, 2023c, and Hanna and Paans, 2019), those wanting a full-dress study in social philosophy can look at (Maiese and Hanna, 2019), and those wanting a full-dress study in political philosophy can look at (Hanna, 2018b; see also Hanna, 2023d, 2023e). Correspondingly, the first seven footnotes provide indications of what more precisely to look for and where to look for it.

1. *Morality* is guiding people's choice and conduct by means of **first**, rationally formulating and justifying principles, rules, or laws that inherently express our *basic* personal and social commitments and our *leading* ideals and values, and then **second**, our freely choosing and acting in conformity with those principles, rules, or laws.

These principles, rules, or laws are

either (i) *strictly or unconditionally universal*, which means that they hold for all contexts, situations, or states-of-affairs whatsoever, hence absolutely or *omnino*,

or else (ii) *fairly or conditionally universal*, which means that they hold for all and only those all contexts, situations, or states-of-affairs in which certain background enabling conditions are met, hence other things being equal, or *ceteris paribus*.

2. Choice or conduct that's *necessarily required* or *prescribed* by the principles, rules, or laws of morality is *morally obligatory*: that is, it's choice or conduct that people *morally ought* to engage in, even if, as a matter of brute fact, they don't actually engage in it.

Otherwise put, choice or conduct that's morally obligatory, is what it's morally *right* to choose or do.

3. Choice or conduct that's *necessarily excluded* or *proscribed* by the principles, rules, or laws of morality is *morally impermissible*: that is, it's choice or conduct that it's morally obligatory *not* to engage in, and *ought not* to engage in, even if, as a matter of brute fact, they do actually engage in it.

Otherwise put, choice or conduct that's morally impermissible, is what it's morally *wrong* to choose or do.

4. And choice or conduct that's *compatible or consistent with*, and *neither* necessarily required or prescribed by *nor* necessarily excluded or proscribed by, the principles, rules, or laws of morality is *morally permissible*: that is, it's choice or conduct that people *morally may* engage in and *neither* ought to engage in *nor* ought not to engage in.

Otherwise put, choice or conduct that's morally permissible is what it's morally *acceptable* or morally *OK* to choose or do.

Obviously, what's morally obligatory must also be *not* morally *impermissible*, hence it's also "morally permissible" in what I'll call *the merely double-negative sense*.

5. Let's suppose that *there really and truly is* a set of moral principles, rules, or laws that reflect our basic personal and social commitments and our leading ideals and values.

Then, to the degree or extent that our choice or conduct *conforms to* those moral principles, rules, or laws, and thereby *expresses* and *realizes* those moral commitments, ideals, and values, that choice or conduct is *morally good*.

But, to the degree or extent that our choice or conduct *violates* those moral principles, rules, or laws, and thereby *fails to express* and *fails to realize* those moral commitments, ideals, and values, then that choice or conduct is *morally bad*.

6. If a person is generally disposed to choose or do what's morally good, then they have a *virtuous character*, i.e., they're a *good* person.

But if a person is generally disposed to choose or do what's morally bad, then they have a *vicious character*, i.e., they're a *bad* person.

7. In the brief, cogent, and widely-taught first chapter, "What is Morality?," of their excellent and indeed exemplary introductory book, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, James Rachels and Stuart Rachels plausibly propose what they call "the minimum conception of morality":

Morality is, at the very least, the effort to guide one's conduct by reason—that is, to do what there are the best reasons for doing—while giving equal weight to the interests of each individual who will be affected by one's action. This paints a picture of what it means to be a conscientious moral agent. The conscientious moral agent is someone who is concerned impartially with the interests of everyone affected by what he or she does; who carefully sifts facts and examines their implications; who accepts principles of conduct only after scrutinizing them to make sure they are justified; who is willing to "listen to reason" even when it means revising prior convictions; and who, finally, is willing to act on the results of this deliberation. (Rachels & Rachels, 2015: pp. 13-14)

Rachels & Rachels's "minimum conception of morality" is the same as what I'll call *the standard conception of morality*.

8. There are three things about the standard conception of morality that are of special importance.

First, the standard conception of morality is intended to be a *minimum* conception of morality in *the dual sense* that it's not only a *bottom-line* or *required* feature of anything we'd be reasonably prepared to call "morality," but also *commonsensical* or *widely shared*.

At the same time, however, the standard conception of morality is also far from being *banal* or *trivial*, in that the crucial sub-concept of the "conscientious moral agent" is actually quite *thick*, *rich*, and *substantive*.

Second, the standard conception is grounded on our capacity for *rationality*, which is essentially concerned with *reasons*, and more specifically, with

(i) recognizing reasons *as* reasons,

(ii) adopting reasons as *our* reasons,

(iii) *critically analyzing* those reasons,

(iv) *justifying* those reasons, and finally

(v) *choosing and acting* according to all and only those principles, rules, or laws for which we have *good* reasons.

Third, in being rational, we are also *impartial* in the sense that we always take into account not only *our own interests*, but also *the interests of all other people*.

9. Presupposing the standard conception of morality, I'm now going to present an even thicker, richer, and more substantive moral theory called *dignitarianism*.

Dignitarianism ascribes absolute, non-denumerably infinite, intrinsic, and objective value or worth—i.e., *dignity*—to all *human persons*, or *people*, and asserts that *everyone ought always and everywhere to treat everyone, including themselves, with sufficient respect for their human dignity*,¹ which means

(i) *universal anti-oppression*, i.e., never treating anyone, including oneself, 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,² including one's own.

10. Personhood is constituted by a unified set of innate cognitive, affective or caring-based, and agential or practical capacities present in all and only those animals possessing the essentially embodied neurobiological basis of those capacities.

These capacities are

(i) *consciousness*, (i.e., subjective experience),

(ii) *self-consciousness* (i.e., consciousness of one's own consciousness, or second-order consciousness),

¹ For a detailed presentation and defence of the very idea of human dignity, see (Hanna, 2023c).

² For a list of true human needs, see (Maiese and Hanna, 2019: ch. 3).

- (iii) *caring* (i.e., desiring, emoting, or feeling),
- (iv) *sensible cognition* (i.e., sense-perceiving, episodic remembering, or imagining),
- (v) *intellectual cognition* (i.e., conceptualizing, believing, judging, or inferring),
- (vi) *volition* (i.e., deciding, choosing, or willing), and
- (vii) *free agency* (i.e., free will and practical agency).

11. Some human animals are born permanently lacking the essentially embodied neurobiological basis of personhood or have suffered its permanent destruction by accident, disease, or violent mishap, and therefore *some* human animals do not have human dignity because they are not human persons: so not necessarily all human animals are persons.

Conversely, not necessarily all persons are human: it's really possible for there to be real persons belonging to other animal species, whether on the Earth or other planets; if so, then they'll have dignity too.

This means that dignitarianism rejects *speciesism*, or attributing special moral and values and virtues to members of a certain biological species.

From a specifically moral point of view, what's *special* about creatures like us is only the fact of our *personhood*, and *not* the fact of our belonging to the biological species *homo sapiens*.

Nevertheless, our treatment of *non-person animals*—that is, non-rational human or non-human animals—must *also* be in conformity with moral principles, rules, or laws that adequately take into account the interests and moral value or worth of those non-person animals.³

12. Here are three basic principles, rules, or laws of dignitarian morality.

³ For full details, see (Hanna, 2018a: ch. 5).

I. The Anti-Coercion Principle: All coercion is rationally unjustified and morally impermissible.⁴

Why? By *coercion*, I mean

either (i) using violence (for example, injuring, torturing, or killing) or the threat of violence, in order to manipulate people according to certain purposes or reasons of the coercer (*primary coercion*),

or (ii) inflicting appreciable, salient harm (for example, imprisonment, termination of employment, large monetary penalties) or deploying the threat of appreciable, salient harm, even if these are not in themselves violent, in order to manipulate people according to certain purposes or reasons of the coercer (*secondary coercion*).

So all coercion is manipulation, and the most extreme form of manipulating people is killing them.

Moreover, all coercion is rationally unjustified and morally impermissible, precisely because, as manipulation, it inherently involves treating people as *mere means* or *mere things*, and it thereby fails sufficiently to respect their human dignity: indeed, it either *undermines* their human dignity or outright *violates* their human dignity.

Therefore, any and all purposes or reasons that coercers use (putatively) to justify their coercion, are morally *bad* purposes or reasons.

II. The Killing of Innocents Principle: Other things being equal,⁵ it's rationally unjustified and morally impermissible to kill innocent people, and anyone who freely does such a thing is morally responsible for that morally impermissible act.

⁴ For the presentation and defence of a political theory that's grounded on The Anti-Coercion Principle, see (Hanna, 2018b). And for an application of The Anti-Coercion Principle to the morality of owning, carrying, or using guns, see (Hanna, 2023d).

⁵ What if other things aren't equal? Under certain adverse conditions, it's morally permissible or even morally obligatory to kill an innocent person or a few innocent people as a foreseen but unintended side-effect of choice or action that's *already* either morally permissible or morally obligatory. For example, under certain adverse conditions, it's morally permissible or even morally obligatory to kill an innocent person or a few innocent people (i) in self-defence, (ii) in saving the life or lives of people towards whom one has special moral duties or to whom one has a special emotional commitment (e.g., a life partner, son, or daughter) or (iii) in saving the lives of significantly many more than a few innocent people, in cases in which some innocent people are going to die no matter what one does. For full details, see (Hanna, 2018a: ch. 5).

Why? Other things being equal, killing innocent people is primary coercion by means of the most extreme form of manipulating them, and all coercion is rationally unjustified and morally impermissible according to The Anti-Coercion Principle.

III. *The Two Wrongs Principle:* Two moral wrongs don't ever make a moral right.

Why? Two morally wrong choices or acts, when taken together, *are at least twice as morally bad as either one of those choices or acts on its own.*

Therefore, there is no such thing as “balancing the scales of moral justice,” by, for example, coercing people who are either coercing or have already coerced other people, since *all* coercion is rationally unjustified and morally impermissible according to The Anti-Coercion Principle.^{6,7}

Suppose, for example, that some person (P), or some group of people (the Ps), morally impermissibly kills some innocent people.

Then killing that morally responsible bad person (i.e., P) or that group of bad people (i.e., the Ps), or even worse, killing some innocent person or some group of innocent people who happen to be related by ethnicity, race, gender, sex, family, national origin, or any other kind of social connection, to that bad person (P) or those bad people (the Ps), as punishment, retribution, or revenge for P's or the Ps' morally impermissibly killing some innocent people, is *nothing but another instance of the most extreme form of manipulation*, hence it's rationally unjustified and morally impermissible by The Anti-Coercion Principle.

By way of concluding this primer, I'll simply point out that the direct relevance of The Killing of Innocents Principle and The Two Wrongs Principle to the two current wars (i) between Russia and Ukraine and (ii) in Gaza, should by now be self-evident.⁸

⁶ It follows from this, that what I've called “the crime-&-punishment machine,” i.e., the criminal justice system, including the government, courts, police, and prisons, in the USA and all other contemporary nation-States—although, to be sure, some are better or worse than others—is rationally unjustified and morally impermissible (Hanna, 2023e).

⁷ It *doesn't* follow from this, however, that there *aren't* any morally permissible or even morally obligatory uses of force, for the purposes of self-defence or for protecting or saving the lives of innocent others; on the contrary, there *are* some morally permissible or even morally obligatory *non-coercive* uses of force for these purposes: see (Hanna and Paans, 2019).

⁸ I'm grateful to Martha Hanna for thought-provoking conversations on and around the main topics of this essay.

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