The Promise of Higher Education for Justice-Involved People: Humanization

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For the past three years, I have directed and taught at a small prison education outreach program, which operates out of a medium-security prison in the Midwest. During non-pandemic times, I commute an hour south of my university to teach philosophy to 25 incarcerated male students. Though it is far more work than teaching a class with non-incarcerated students, it has been a life-altering and incredibly rewarding experience. It is also rather common to be asked by prison officials, incarcerated students, and extended family alike some variation of the question: Did you ever think that you would end up teaching in a prison?

I have to admit that it's true. I never *did* think that I would teach in a prison. More to the point, I never thought that I would be teaching at all, given my upbringing. Like too many others, I grew up in poverty with alcoholic and abusive parents with almost no sense of the importance of education—let alone the importance of higher education. Just as people of color are overrepresented in the prison population as compared to the U.S. general population, so too are those with a lower socioeconomic status. The same goes for educational attainment. At 41 percent, the number of high school dropouts among the incarcerated population is double that of the general population, and the number of incarcerated individuals in state prisons with some postsecondary education is about three times lower than their non-incarcerated counterparts.[1] Much focus should indeed be put on the racial injustice brought about by mass incarceration. But we should also be sure to focus on the educational injustice it perpetuates, the profound unfreedom wrought by an unnecessarily limited understanding of the world in which we live.

In this essay, I make the case that the aims of higher education for justice-involved people necessitate a different framing from what we might call

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"normal" non-carceral aims of higher education, made apparent by the different institutional contexts in which the two take place. Contemporary aims of higher education take for granted that students are actually treated as human beings in the first place. First, I will draw from the literature on aims of higher education meant for non-incarcerated people and consider how they might be enacted in the carceral setting (i.e., jails, prisons, juvenile detention centers, etc.). Second, I take up humanization as a *precondition* of higher education for justice-involved people and sketch out what meeting this precondition might entail. It is under this precondition of humanization that the contemporary aims of higher education may be successfully enacted. Third, I conclude by considering what this might mean for non-incarcerated students in non-carceral settings.

CONTEMPORARY AIMS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION: THE 4CS

Only in the past decade or two has the conversation about the aims of higher education for justice-involved people shifted away from recidivism (reoffending as to return to jail or prison) as its main aim onto other goods, such as those we take up here.[2] I wish to add to that conversation a survey of the landscape of the aims of higher education from non-carceral educational theorists. Among others, we'll look to Harry Brighouse, Amy Gutman, Danielle Allen, and Martha Nussbaum. Noting a consensus among these contemporary educational theorists around the aims for higher education, I organize this section around four generic categories, which I will refer to as the 4Cs: fostering cognition, cultivating citizenship, preparing for economic contribution, and building character. The authors' individual aims are listed in Table 1.[3] We'll explore what the 4Cs have to offer so that we can see the ways in which they might come up short in the carceral context.

Author/Aim	Fostering Cognition	Cultivating Citizenship	Economic Contribution	Building Character
Brighouse	self-government	creating citizens	economic participation	flourishing
Gutmann	creative understanding	opportunity	social contribution	
Allen	creative self-expression and world-making	civic and political engagement	prepare for breadwinning work	
Nussbaum		democratic citizenship		

Table 1. A Breakdown of Some Contemporary Aims of Higher Education

FOSTERING COGNITION

Life in confinement often consists in unimaginable boredom, with many incarcerated and detained individuals struggling to continue feeling connected with the world as it is occurring outside of their institution.[4] At the risk of stating the obvious, one thing that a proper college education should do is teach students how to think, to cognize.[5] "The primary goal of universities," Amy Gutmann tell us, "is to educate students to understand their world creatively and constructively."[6] In the commencement speech version of Gutmann's aim, David Foster Wallace invites us to consider how an education helps us rethink our monotonous life experiences, by applying a mindful awareness which allows us, in short, to appreciate life rather than despise it.[7] Wallace's message becomes particularly salient when considered in the context of carceral higher education, where an educational opportunity might afford one of the few spaces in which—against the backdrop of total institutional control—students are formally exposed to such a skillset. Near the end of one of my courses at the prison, one of the students related to me that participating in the course had given him his first real opportunity to think deeply in years, if not decades.

Along with Gutmann's creative understanding, I take it as more or less uncontroversial that Harry Brighouse's aim of educating for self-government is an expected and important aim of non-carceral higher education. Brighouse's aim depends on the state's intervention in teaching critical thinking and moral

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deliberation, among other things. His justification is, in part, that students

> appear to be deprived of the opportunity to make and act on well-informed and well-thought out judgments about how to live their own lives. In practice, the only feasible way of life for them is the one in which they were raised, whether it suits them or not. In other words, they are deprived of the opportunity to live autonomously.[8]

I also take it as more or less uncontroversial that corrections officials support this aim to foster a student's cognition only to the slightest degree in practice, even if the particular institution purports to do so in theory. For the deprivation of opportunity of which Brighouse speaks to apply to carceral institutions, we need only substitute in his justification the situation in which "they were raised" with the situation in which "they were confined."

Drawing on Hannah Arendt, Danielle Allen lists as one of the "basic potentialities that should be enacted by education" the aim of creative self-expression and world-making.[9] The basic idea is that, through our actions and speech, we set into motion processes which are both unpredictable and irreversible.[10] Connecting to Brighouse's point about autonomy above, the indeterminate nature of how we express ourselves in the context of others is an indication of who we are personally, our uniqueness, our agency.[11] As such, fostering cognition via creative self-expression is an obvious and important goal for higher education for incarcerated students—regardless of whether the student will someday be released. Inherent in this idea, however, is that people actually *are* able to express themselves to a significant degree. We need not dig too deep to discover that the dearth of opportunities for self-expression in the carceral setting is both astounding and complex.[12]

CULTIVATING CITZENSHIP

Gutmann's aim of opportunity addresses the general question: who gets to be educated? It largely has to do with ensuring and expanding access to higher education. By increasing socioeconomic and racial diversity, we accept life experiences and perspectives into the fold which enter into conversation

with those from the mainstream, changing both in the process.[13] Understanding and appreciating this diversity is key to becoming a successful actor in the U.S. Gutmann's aim of opportunity also deals with the question of whether or not we are serving as many qualified students as we could be. In both the carceral and non-carceral setting, the answer is a resounding 'no.' Despite the evidence of positive impacts resulting from higher education for justice-involved people, robust higher education programs are few and far between.

Martha Nussbaum defends liberal arts and humanities instruction for all, arguing that they are necessary for a successful democracy. If we're skittish about requiring formal humanities instruction for all, we might agree for the moment that the humanities are necessary for a robust citizenry, but that there are other ways to come to understand the humanities as to participate meaningfully as a democratic citizen besides formal humanities-based instruction.[14] For my purposes here, I need only highlight Nussbaum's point that critical thinking, reflection, daring imagination, and empathetic understanding are some of the skills inherent to the liberal arts and humanities which "are crucial in keeping democracies alive and awake."[15]

Toward this end, Allen writes about how education should prepare students for civic and political engagement. For one to be a successful civic and political actor, she claims, one needs education on what she calls "participatory readiness;"[16] one main component of which is verbal empowerment, which "consists of interpretive (or exegetical) and expressive skills."[17] For his part, Brighouse argues that the state should "educate [individuals] so that they can be effective, and reasonable, participants in public decision making and execution."[18] In *Liberating Minds*, Ellen Lagemann writes of the connection between democracy and higher education and how important civics lessons—both direct and indirect—are to college-in-prison programs. She talks about how such programs cultivate civic engagement, civic responsibility, and civic "survival"—often by way of improving communication (specifically, discourse) skills.[19] Only rarely are essential skills such as these imparted to incarcerated and returning citizens.

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PREPARING FOR ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION

Even the most ardent advocates of the life of the mind must admit that gainful employment and economic participation are an important part of our twenty-first-century lives. According to Allen, we would do well to consider both a neoliberal social utilitarian *and* a eudaimonistic conception of education. And, further, that these two conceptions overlap in the service of students' educational needs. Allen advocates for what she calls a 'humanistic baseline.' This consists of the above discussed aims of creative self-expression and world-making and civic and political engagement, as well as preparing for breadwinning work. This last aim is of concern here. While Allen doesn't give much in the way of an explanation of the aim, we can take it to be sufficiently similar to Brighouse's aim of educating for economic participation. He argues that we should educate folks to be able to participate in economic life in the twenty-first century, just not for specific jobs.[20]

This jibes with Gutmann's aim of preparing students to make valuable contributions to society and follows directly from her aim of creative understanding described above. She encourages us to consider the value of a liberal arts education, especially when widened to apply to the context of, say, professional schools. One way creative understanding is cultivated at university is through interdisciplinary learning in which we reach beyond the understandings and traditions of a single discipline. This is a necessary requirement, according to Gutmann, when tackling the intractable problems of our time (e.g., climate, health care, human rights, immigration, etc.).[21] A liberal arts education broadly conceived can be beneficial to individuals and society alike. This point might be particularly important in the carceral setting where oftentimes the aim of economic contribution is cashed out in terms of vocational education. One can see the value in the acquisition of specific technical skills and still recognize the value in simultaneously broadening one's knowledge and skill base as to be able to take up another career should one become unavailable, obsolete, or untenable.

BUILDING CHARACTER

Brighouse makes the connection between flourishing and happiness.

He argues that the state should provide students with the means necessary to flourish in the long-term.[22] To live a flourishing life, other philosophers say, we must cultivate a virtuous character to a large degree, despite the fact that none of us are,[23] or even able to be,[24] perfectly virtuous. During one of my classes at the prison, we read and discussed Julia Annas's article, "The Phenomenology of Virtue," in which she explores what it is like to be a virtuous person.[25] She describes character in terms of virtue, as a "disposition which is central to the person, to whom he or she is…" one that is active, persistent, and reliable.[26] Along these lines, Kyla Ebels-Duggan argues that, in order to develop students' autonomy, higher education should also teach students how to be charitable and humble.[27] Charitable interpretations allow the interpreter to find value in unfamiliar views. Humility does similar work with one's own views.

In *Intelligent Virtue*, Annas claims that virtue (and thus character) is at least partly constitutive of a flourishing life.[28] Virtues, she explains, are expressive of a commitment to goodness, which is a commitment to positive value.[29] This positive value guides how we reason in practice and so is involved in our interactions with others. Just as it is in non-carceral settings, we do not start our study of virtue and character in the carceral setting from a blank slate. We are all—and have been—moral actors, everyday moral doers. The point is that there must be some engagement with and consideration of human actions, motivations, and feelings, and how they may or may not contribute to outcomes within and without the prison setting as they collide with the lives of others.

It is the case that the *vast* majority (about 95 percent) of those currently incarcerated will one day return to the communities from which they came.[30] I should think that we would want those returning home to have the skills and character traits (both moral and non-moral) necessary for successful reintegration. When we treat carceral institutions as warehouses, we de-skill those we warehouse on many levels. On one level, this involves the de-emphasis of individual virtue and character. The reigning paradigm in prisons is to make good prisoners, not good people. Thus, there is no emphasis on improving character. Corrections officials seek to control prisoners' behavior in the most efficient manner possible. As a result of existing in this environment, incarcer-

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ated individuals might have no choice but to conform to it; indeed, their very survival may even be predicated on this fact.

At any rate, we would want to proceed cautiously on the topic of character education in the carceral context, making sure that it is not cashed out simply in terms of following rules to govern one's behavior. A proper education, Judith Suissa tells us, gives learners the tools to ask—and wrestle with—questions concerning meaning, interpretation, and value, and, hence, the ability to make sense out of the "wonder, horror, and richness" of life.[31] Though this process may be at times uncomfortable, unsettling, and challenging, the learners can truly come to see for themselves what it is to live well; particularly, they learn what it is to live well not being told how to do so, but by contemplating as much of their own accord.

THE PRECONDITION OF HIGHER EDUCATION FOR JUSTICE-INVOLVED PEOPLE: HUMANIZATION

Laudable as the 4Cs may be, our analysis of them in the carceral setting must be counterfactual—we must imagine how they might play out if they *were* to be enacted. In large part, of course, they are not. One reason I've chosen the authors whose aims we have examined above is because almost all of them make mention of flourishing as an important overall goal of education. Brighouse flat-out states that "the central purpose of education is to promote human flourishing."[32] Allen's humanistic baseline seeks to activate human potential toward this end as well. To be clear, I agree wholeheartedly with flourishing as an end of education. However, what contemporary aims of higher education do (at least the ones we've looked at here) *is take for granted that students are actually treated as human beings in the first place.*

At the end of an interview I recently conducted with Daniel, an individual who was incarcerated for over three decades, he spoke powerfully about the lack of educational opportunities and "how dead the time is" for incarcerated people.[33] Earning his degree while incarcerated helped Daniel fight off what I've come to think of as *DeadTime*, a deteriorative force that operates over time to dehumanize individuals. DeadTime is a more articulate way of explaining

the familiar concept of warehousing in carceral settings. It is brought about by the stress, neglect, and trauma of existing in environments in which the need and the desire for self-improvement is not met by the opportunity to do so. By self-improvement I mean a better understanding of reality coupled with an increased goodness of fit with one's environment. Thus, the dehumanization that occurs through DeadTime not only concerns a person's understanding and transformation of their own reality but also the environment in which they exist. What I'm suggesting here is a hybrid theory of (de)humanization based on Paulo Freire's work in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Gitterman and Germain's ecological theory metaphor in the field of social work.[34]

Working backwards from the problem of DeadTime in order to get to the solution, then, I take humanization to be (a) the lifelong process of understanding and transforming one's reality (b) in the attempt to improve the level of fit in one's person:environment exchanges.[35] I'll briefly say something about each of these parts in turn. According to Freire, humanization is our ontological and historical vocation: a never-ending process of becoming more fully human, in which we engage in "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it."[36] This task centers not on implanting subject matter, but on the process of awakening individuals' critical consciousnesses. In short, a proper education seeks to liberate minds from an oppressive reality; it seeks to expand horizons and delimit our understanding of the world in which we live.

Freire rightly assigns a major role to the agent in this process (and to the revolutionary leader who works beside the to-be-liberated individual to co-transform their reality). But a proper accounting of humanization would also assign a primary role to the environment in which the agent operates. Used metaphorically, ecological theory in the field of social work suggests that we ought to consider people and their environments as a unitary system, one in which each shapes the other. The term 'person:environment' is meant to signal the reciprocal nature of the interactions we have with others and our surroundings over time. Like Freire's ontological and historical vocation, seeking goodness of fit is a never-ending process. To improve our level of fit, we need opportunities to form secure attachments with others, to be able to

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cultivate and demonstrate our competence, and to operate within a safe and secure habitat. To the extent that we have these things, we foster human growth and well-being;[37] to the extent that we lack them, we foster squandered human potential and deterioration.

With respect to higher education for justice-involved people, a beginning sketch of a humanizing approach would look something like the following. To operate under the condition of humanization would be to adopt a relational approach in which we focus on forming secure attachments with students. This would also include fostering relationships between inside and outside students, for instance via experiential learning opportunities. At a bare minimum, this means that we are sure to address students by name and not by number. On countless occasions, my students have related to me the ways in which they have been reduced to mere numbers. Sadly, they are conditioned to represent themselves via their numerical identity.

Relatedly, operating under the condition of humanization would be to adopt a trauma-informed approach in which the relationships that are built make space to deal with the trauma and oppression students may have dealt with in their lives. There's the trauma that we might expect in a prison setting, like the story one of my students told of getting knocked unconscious by a blow to the back of the head on his first day of incarceration.[38] But there's also trauma that we might not expect. Still another student, a former Marine who served in Afghanistan, opened his heart to the class to tell the story of how, when his young son died of cancer, he was denied a furlough to be with him at his bedside and to attend the funeral. This same student wrote me a few days ago to say how much he missed and appreciated our classes. He also informed me that he, too, has been diagnosed with terminal cancer and will almost certainly die in prison. Yet another part of this process for practitioners would entail recognizing trauma in themselves, and that this will be thus more difficult for some than others.

To adopt a humanizing pedagogy would be to adopt a dialogue-rich approach in which students are given space to engage as peers and equals to those with whom they are learning. As with the aforementioned elements, such

an approach is necessarily time-intensive and will eschew the typical educational power dynamic in which an instructor instructs and the students learn, in favor of what Freire refers to as the teacher-student.[39] Undoubtedly, so much more needs to be said about how carceral higher education would play out under the precondition of humanization. For example, the question of program content strikes me as particularly salient. Unfortunately, such an inquiry is beyond the scope of this essay and must be grappled with at another time.

Lest the reader think I'm not fairly presenting the purposes of incarceration, allow me to disclose the fact that I am not a hardcore abolitionist. I believe that some people need to be segregated from society for the good of society and for their own good as well. But I also believe that American criminal justice as it stands is dehumanizing, discriminatory, and as destructive to individuals as it is to society. We need only look to carceral institutions in Scandinavia for a glimpse of how our system of punishment could be. We learn from comparative penology that the punishment at, say, Halden Prison in Norway is the incarcerated person's loss of freedom, which is symbolized by the wall that surrounds the prison grounds. The rest of what happens inside those walls is, frankly, geared at humanizing the individual. Dehumanization is a contingent fact of our justice system, not a necessary one.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR NON-CARCERAL HIGHER EDUCATION

Correctional administrators are not truly concerned with contemporary aims of higher education, such as those laid out by Brighouse, Gutmann, Allen, and Nussbaum, which means that they certainly aren't concerned with what I've laid out as the more fundamental precondition of humanization. It is under the precondition of humanization described above that the contemporary aims of higher education may successfully be enacted. Shedding light on the issue is, of course, only a partial solution to the problems of higher education for justice-involved people.

But it may also point to something bigger at play. When we unpack this assumption about the aims of higher education in places of incarceration and

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detention—that individuals are treated as human beings when they are, in fact, not—we put ourselves in a better position to unpack the same assumption about non-carceral, "normal" higher education as well. The logic of instrumental justifications that we often find in schools is exposed, which might help illuminate the fact that the way we educate our students is in many cases dehumanizing.

For my purposes here, I can only point out that the neoliberal, social utilitarian justification for education reigns. Passive, lecture-driven instruction (the banking model, in Freirean terms), dwindling offerings in the humanities and its attending lack of tenure-track jobs, impersonal online classes and degrees: these are some of the familiar concepts that do the work of dehumanization in higher education. Such practices turn students into widgets. It turns them into products that we construct and ship out into the world in order to improve the economy. In this context, the familiar concept of warehousing in prisons fits right in. We ought to wonder, then, whether and to what extent DeadTime is a feature of non-carceral higher education (and beyond) as well. To be sure, there are many differences between justice-involved and non-justice-involved students that we cannot and should not ignore. Still, I should think it is a feature of education we would want to disprove and, if we cannot, dismantle, irrespective of the setting.

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1 Ellen Lagemann, Liberating Minds: The Case for College in Prison (New York: The New Press, 2016), 20-21.

2 See Erin Castro and Mary Gould, "What is Higher Education in Prison?" Critical Education 9, no. 10 (2019): 1-16.

3 Clearly, this list is not exhaustive. I've selected these authors on the basis of their representation and influence.

4 Lagemann, Liberating Minds, 54-6.

5 I take cognition to be the mental action or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses.

6 Amy Gutmann, "What Makes a University Education Worthwhile?" in The Aims of Higher Education: Problems of Morality and Justice, eds. Harry Brighouse and Michael McPherson (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 14.

7 David Foster Wallace, "This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, About Living a Compassionate Life," (Boston, MA: Little Brown, 2009).
8 Harry Brighouse, On Education (London: Routledge, 2006), 14.
9 Danielle Allen, Education and Equality (University of Chicago Press, 2016), 17.
10 Hannah Arendt, The Portable Arendt (New York: Penguin Group USA, 2000), 180.
11 Arendt, The Portable Arendt, 178-9.
12 Ben Crewe, Jason Warr, Peter Bennett, and Jason Smith, "The Emotional Geography of Prison Life," Theoretical Criminology 18, no. 1 (2014): 56-74.
13 Gutmann, "What Makes a University Education Worthwhile?" 13.
14 Christopher Bertram, "Defending the Humanities in a Liberal Society," in The Aims of Higher Education: Problems of Morality and Justice, eds. Harry Brighouse and Michael McPherson (University of Chicago Press, 2015): 42-3.
15 Martha Nussbaum, Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities (Princeton University Press, 2010), 7-10.
16 Allen, Education and Equality, 28.
17 Allen, Education and Equality, 39.
18 Brighouse, On Education, 2.
19 Lagemann, Liberating Minds, 95-9.
20 Brighouse, On Education, 2.
21 Gutmann, "What Makes a University Education Worthwhile?" 14.
22 Brighouse, On Education, 42.
23 Christian Miller, The Character Gap (Oxford University Press, 2018): 20.
24 See Julia Annas, Intelligent Virtue (Oxford University Press, 2011).
25 Julia Annas, "The Phenomenology of Virtue," Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences 7, no. 1 (2008): 21-34.
26 Annas, Intelligent virtue, 9.
27 Gutmann, "What Makes a University Education Worthwhile?" 62.
28 Annas, Intelligent Virtue, 166-8.
29 Annas, Intelligent Virtue, 102.

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30 Lagemann, Liberating Minds, 33.

31 Judith Suissa, "Lessons from a New Science? On Teaching Happiness in Schools," Journal of Philosophy of Education 42, nos. 3-4 (2008): 589.

32 Brighouse, On Education, 42.

33 Personal Interview, 2020.

34 Alex Gitterman and Carol Germain, The Life Model of Social Work Practice (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

35 Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 94; Gitterman and Germain, The Life Model, 54.

36 Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 51.

37 Gitterman and Cermain, The Life Model, 55.

38 Besides being on the receiving end of the violence, the incident had nothing to do with my student; rather, it was a part of another incarcerated person's gang initiation.

39 Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 80.