

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Dec '20 *Philosophy is Everybody's Business* N° 1075



WHY YOU CAN'T READ

Mortimer Adler

PART 3 OF 3

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The third reading is critical. Where as in the first two readings, the effort is to understand what the author is trying to say in the book as a whole and in all its parts, here the task is to judge, to agree or disagree with the author, in part or whole. The rules of reading in this stage are based on rhetorical considerations, as well as logical ones, for they concern the discourse as a whole, communicated to the reader with the ultimate intention of instructing him or moving him to action, and hence the reader is called upon at last to say whether he is convinced or persuaded. The rules here fall into two parts, the first being general maxims governing the whole critical process, a sort of intellectual etiquette; and the second directing attention to the focal points of agreement or disagreement.

1. There are three general maxims. The *first* is that you cannot say I disagree before you are able to say I understand. It is equally true that you cannot say you agree, or even that you suspend judgment, until you say I understand. It is amazing how many people will do the contrary, will say "I don't know what you're talking about, but I think you're wrong." It is amazing how many readers will start

to judge a book almost as soon as they open it. Starting in this way with their prejudices active, of course they will never really read the book. They will merely find in it somehow all the things they have pre-judged. This first maxim insists upon the absolute priority of the first two readings over the third. A reader is a proper judge of an author only to the extent that he understands him, and that means that he can perform the third kind of reading only after he has completed the first two, and only in proportion as he has succeeded therein. Although the first two kinds of reading may be coalesced by well-developed habits, the third is almost always temporally as well as logically distinct, even for the best readers.

In connection with this first maxim, there are several further considerations. The reader must always distinguish two sorts of agreement between himself and the author. The first is agreement in the use of words, by which terms have been reached. The second is agreement about the truth of the author's propositions and arguments. The first sort of agreement is between two minds about the words which mediate their communications; the second is between two minds about the facts. The reason why the first two readings came first is that the first sort of agreement is indispensable to the second. No criticism, agreement or disagreement, is worth anything unless it is founded on adequate understanding. And since the reader cannot achieve adequate understanding of the text by himself, he should seek help before he begins to judge. Furthermore, if he is reading a great book, he should be loathe to begin judgment too soon, for would be rash to presume that he has readily gained adequate understanding. If he knows he has fallen short in his understanding, he should also blame himself rather than the author. Not only is that proper if the author is worth the great effort of reading at all, but in attention this much can triteness may encourage the reader to continue the task of interpretation and withhold judgment. Finally, the reader must be most cautious in obeying this maxim if he is reading only part of a book, or only one book by an author that was conceived by him in the context of others.

The *second* maximum is that there is no point in winning the argument if you know, or even suspect that you are wrong. This is an important rule of intellectual behavior in face-to-face controversies; how much more important it is in the controversy a reader has with an author. Disagreeing with an author who isn't there to defend himself demands the utmost in intellectual decency on the reader's part.

The *third* maxim is that there is no point in undertaking criticism at all unless you do so on the assumption that you can learn as well as teach: or, in other words, that you can discover yourself to be wrong as well as the author. If I were to explicate this maxim, I would say, first, that all rational man, as rational can agree; but second, that men are rational animals, and it is as animals that they disagree because of the pressure of their passions, the blindness of prejudice, and the imperfections of language they must use. In view of both these facts, this maxim calls upon the reader to assume that knowledge is at stake, and that the reader's quarrel with the author is not a meaningless battle of opposed opinions. If knowledge is at stake, then either the disagreements are apparent only, to be removed by a coming to terms; or if they are real, then the genuine issues can always be resolved,—in the long run, of course, it—by appeals to fact and reason. The maxim of rationality is to be patient for the long run.

2. There are five specific foci of criticism. After saying “I understand,” or better, after testing the adequacy of one's understanding in various ways, the reader can make one, several or all of five critical remarks, since they are not exclusive of one another, but additive. But saying “I don't understand” excludes all of them. Each of these five critical remarks must, of course, be supported by evidence and argument.

The *first* remark is that some of the things the author says are *irrelevant*, which means that some of his propositions have no bearing on the case, don't contribute to the solution of his problems, either his premises or conclusions. The *second* remark is that in some relevant details the author is *misinformed*, which means that he advances as true principles certain propositions which the reader judges to be false in fact and hence cannot serve as premises. The *third* remark is that with regard to matters which would be relevant, the author is *uninformed*, which means that he lacks definite items of knowledge which would make a substantial difference to his conclusions and the solution of his problems. The *fourth* remark is that the authors reasoning is *untenable* because invalid, which means that the author has made errors in analysis of inference, either wrongly drawing conclusions or failing to draw conclusions.

In each of these four cases the reader is obliged to show why the author is irrelevant, or to bring evidence of his misinformation, or to supply the information he thinks the author lacks, or to locate with logical precision the invalid link in untenable reasoning. If the reader fails in any of these critical efforts, if he cannot show

that the author is irrelevant, uninformed, misinformed or an invalid reasoner, then he is absolutely obligated to agree with the author for the time being. He has no freedom of will in this respect. If the author has bound his intellect by a sound and solid achievement, he must yield. He has been convinced, and he should admit it. He cannot say, as so many students and others do, "I find nothing wrong with your premises, and no errors of reasoning, but I don't agree with your conclusions."

The *fifth* and last critical comment can be made about any book. It is a remark that the author's analysis is incomplete. Men are finite and so are their works, every last one. There is no point in making this remark, therefore, unless the reader is in a position to do something about the author's inadequacy, that is, unless he can add to what the author has to say in some relative and definite way. I mention this fifth remark because it ties up with the last steps of both the first and second readings. The reader who by analytical reading knows what the author's problems are, who by synthetic reading is able to discriminate those which have been solved from those which have not and is further able to detect new problems arising in the course of the discussion, and who by critical reading is able, not only to disagree in part but also to go on further than the author in so far as he agrees with him,—that reader has done a job. And nothing less than that job, with all his subordinate steps that are involved, is good reading in the fullest sense. Perhaps I have made clearer now that "you can't read." It is no exaggeration. Shall I pause for a moment while you examine your conscience and ask how many books you have read, or whether you have ever read any?

V

Ars longa, vita brevis. True, but four years of schooling in the liberal arts could yield a competence in reading and writing that would be a lifetime's endowment. That our college graduates cannot read,—I won't mention writing and speaking,—is the result of an educational system which has placed its emphasis on other things. To demand a return to the 3 R's is radical, indeed, when you appreciate how much time it would take to teach such things as reading. Yet first things come first, and learning to read belongs nowhere if not first.

Those who do not learn to read analytically and critically are not only the victims of indoctrination during their school days, but are rendered defenseless against propaganda of all sorts thereafter. Years of listening to lectures and reading textbooks,—and that


without any intellectual disciplines whatsoever,—produces a mind whose only habits are those of passive absorption and yielding to the weight of opinion. A textbook is a device which makes it unnecessary for the student to learn how to read. Someone else has done,—let us hope,—the reading, and is dishing out material in a form that calls for nothing but memory. What would happen to one's digestive powers if one were fed for years on pre-digested food? Well, atrophy of one's intellectual powers is the inevitable result of years spent in passing courses by rehashing on examinations what has been dished out in lectures and textbooks. A college lecture course is well defined as a process whereby the notes of the professor become the nose of the student without passing through the minds of either.

Nor is it true that laboratory work in the natural sciences or all the social science courses that start in the grade schools and run through college provide the basic intellectual disciplines which manifest themselves in critical reading and clear, coherent writing. Unchecked by training in the liberal arts, the sciences breed their own brand of dogmatism or, what is worse, a shallow skepticism. Because of the human failings of most teachers, it is inevitable that students are exposed to the local prejudices of the teachers they have suffered. Nothing could protect them except being able to read and listen with analytical discrimination and the critical detachment of a disciplined mind.

There is a great deal of talk today about fascism and return to the Dark Ages. Educational programs are judged in these terms. The one which now prevails in this country is often defended as a bulwark of our liberties and our cultural advances; the one which President Hutchins of Chicago has proposed,—essentially a revival of the three R's, is as frequently attacked as leading toward fascism or going back to the middle ages. I do not like to descend to the stupidity of all this name calling by countering in the same vein: but there is a sorry jest in all this which must be challenged, for otherwise the joke will be on all of us. Liberal institutions and cultural vitality cannot be maintained or preserved except by a truly liberal education, and, in a democracy, for everyone who is capable of literacy. A truly liberal education consists of the discipline which the liberal arts can impart,—the formation of sound intellectual habits. Need we look further than the fact that our college graduates cannot read and write well to know that they have not been liberally educated. Their minds have not been liberated, not been made free and independent, for there is no freedom and independence without proper discipline. On the contrary, they have been indoctrinated with all sorts of local

prejudices and predigested pap. They have been fattened and made flabby for the demagogues to prey upon. Their resistance to specious authority, which is nothing but the pressure of a majority opinion, has been lowered to the point where they will even swallow the insidious propaganda in the headlights of their local newspapers.

The men who founded the liberal institutions of this country were liberally educated. To know the writings of Hamilton and Jefferson, Madison, Adams and Jay is to know that they could read and had read well. Look at the curriculum of their colonial colleges and you will see that the founding fathers and their fellows were trained in the liberal arts. True, not everyone received this liberal education. Democracy had not yet matured to the point of widespread popular education. But even today it may be true that some part of the population must be vocationally trained while another part is liberally educated. Even a democracy must have leaders, and its safety is in their hands upon their caliber, their liberalism. If we do not want leaders who boast of thinking with their blood, we had better educate and, more than that, cultivate a respect for those who can think with their minds,—minds liberated by discipline.

And a word more, about our vaunted cultural progress and our superiority to the Dark Ages. The dark ages were those centuries between the end of classical civilization and the flowering of mediaeval culture. The latter, by the way, was a period when educated men, however a few they may have been, could read. Probably because they had so few books to read, they read them well; in fact, the most striking achievement of the 12th and 13th centuries was the critical and analytical power of its reading. They were liberal artists *par excellence*. But to return to the point, the seventh and eighth centuries' men were *dark* because there was no light of learning. Men did not read, could not read, because the libraries were burned or closed, and educational institutions had almost ceased to exist. In contrast, we seem to be at the opposite extreme today. We have more schools, more libraries, more books than ever before in Western history. Our facilities are glorious; our population is eager for education. But if we continue to produce generations of men and women who cannot read, the libraries might as well be closed and it might be better if the schools were shut down. For we shall be preparing for dark ages of a more catastrophic sort than those which followed the fall of Rome, preparing, that is, if they are not already upon us. 

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THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Elaine Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Phone: 312-943-1076 Mobile: 312-280-1011

David S. Peterson, Managing Director

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

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