



LESSON IN CRITICISM

Four questions to ask yourself when you
are making up your mind about a book

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Let us suppose that you are reading a good book, and hence a relatively intelligible one. And let us suppose that you are finally able to say “I understand.” If in addition to understanding the book, you agree thoroughly with what the author says, the work is over. The reading is completely done. You have been enlightened—and convinced or persuaded.

Hence it is clear that we have additional steps to consider only in the case of disagreement or suspended judgment.

The meaning of agreement and disagreement deserves a moment’s further consideration. The reader who comes to terms with an author, and grasps his propositions and arguments, is *en rapport* with the author’s mind. In fact, the whole process of interpretation is directed toward a meeting of minds through the medium of language. Understanding a book can be described as a kind of agreement between writer and reader. They agree about the use of language to express ideas. Because of that agreement, the reader is able to see through the author’s language to the ideas he is trying to express.

If the reader understands a book, then how can he disagree with it? Critical reading demands that he make up his own mind. But his mind and the author’s have become as one through his success in understanding the book. What mind has he left to make up independently?

There are some people who make the error which causes this apparent difficulty. They fail to distinguish between two senses of “agreement.” In consequence, they wrongly suppose that where there is understanding between men, disagreement is impossible.

The error is corrected as soon as we remember that the author is making judgments about the world in which we live. He claims to be giving us theoretic knowledge about the way things exist and behave, or practical knowledge about what should be done. Obviously he can be either right or wrong. His claim is justified only to the extent that he speaks truly, or says what is probable in the light of evidence.

If you say, for instance, that “all men are equal,” I may take you to mean that all men are equally endowed at birth with intelligence, strength and other abilities. In the light of the facts as I know them, I disagree with you. I think you are wrong. But suppose I have

misunderstood you. Suppose you meant by these words that *all men should have equal political rights*. Because I misapprehended your meaning, my disagreement was irrelevant. Now suppose the mistake corrected. Two alternatives still remain. I agree or disagree, but now if I disagree, there is a real issue between us. I understand your political position, but hold a contrary one.

Agreement about the use of words is the absolutely indispensable condition for genuine agreement or disagreement about the facts being discussed. It is because of, not in spite of, your meeting the author's mind through a sound interpretation of his book, that you are able to make up your own mind as concurring in or dissenting from the position he has taken.

What seems to me now like many years ago, I wrote a book called *Dialectic*. It was my first book, and wrong in many ways, but at least it was not as pretentious as its title. It was about the art of intelligent conversation, the etiquette of controversy.

Since men are animals as well as rational, it is necessary to acknowledge the emotions you bring to a dispute, or those which arise in the course of it. Otherwise you are likely to be giving vent to feelings, not stating reasons. You may even think you have reasons, when all you have are feelings.

Furthermore, you must make your own assumptions explicit. You must know what your prejudices—that is, your pre-judgments—are. Otherwise you are not likely to admit that your opponent may be equally entitled to different assumptions. Good controversy should not be a quarrel about assumptions. If an author, for example, explicitly asks you to take something for granted, the fact that the opposite can also be taken for granted should not prevent you from honoring his request.

Finally, I suggested that an attempt at impartiality is a good antidote for the blindness that is inevitable in partisanship. Controversy without partisanship is, of course, impossible. But to be sure that there is more light in it, and less heat, each of the disputants should at least try to take the other fellow's point of view.

I still think that these three conditions are the *sine qua non* of intelligent and profitable conversation. They are obviously applicable to reading, in so far as that is a kind of conversation between reader and author. Each of them contains sound advice for readers who are willing to respect the decencies of disagreement.

But I have grown older since I wrote *Dialectic*. And I am a little less optimistic about what can be expected of human beings. I am sorry to say that most of my disillusionment arises from a knowledge of my own defects. I have so frequently violated all of my own rules about good intellectual manners in controversy. I have so often caught myself *attacking* a book rather than *criticizing* it, knocking straw men over, as if mine were any better than the author's.

I am still naïve enough, however, to think that conversation and critical reading can be well disciplined. Only now, twelve years later, I am going to substitute for the rules of *Dialectic* a set of prescriptions which may be easier to follow. They indicate the four ways in which a book can be *adversely* criticized.

The four points can be briefly summarized by conceiving the reader as conversing with the author, as talking back. After he has said, "I understand, but I disagree," he can make the following remarks. (1) "*You are uninformed.*" (2) "*You are misinformed.*" (3) "*You are illogical, your reasoning is not cogent.*" (4) "*Your analysis is incomplete.*"

These may not be exhaustive, though I think they are. In any case, they are certainly the principal points a reader who disagrees can make. They are somewhat independent. Making one of these remarks does not prevent your making another. Each and all can be made, because the defects they refer to are not mutually exclusive.

But, I should add, the reader cannot make any of these remarks without being definite and precise about the respect in which the author is uninformed or misinformed or illogical. A book cannot be uninformed or misinformed about *everything*. It cannot be totally illogical. Furthermore, the reader who makes any of these remarks must not only support his point. He must give reasons for saying what he does.

The first three remarks are somewhat different from the fourth, as you will presently see. Let us consider each of them briefly.

(1) To say that an author is *uninformed* is to say that he lacks some piece of knowledge which is *relevant* to the problem he is trying to solve. Notice here that unless the knowledge, if possessed by the author, would have been relevant, there is no point in making this remark. To support the remark you must be able yourself to state the knowledge which the author lacks and show how it is relevant, how it makes a difference.

A few illustrations here must suffice. Darwin lacked the knowledge of genetics which the work of Mendel and later experimentalists now provides. His ignorance of the mechanism of inheritance is one of the major defects in *The Origin of Species*. Gibbon lacked certain facts which later historical research has shown to have a bearing on the fall of Rome. Usually, in science and history, the lack of information is discovered by later researches. Improved techniques of observation and prolonged investigation make this the way things happen for the most part. But in philosophy it may happen otherwise. There is just as likely to be loss as gain with the passage of time. David Hume lacked knowledge of the distinction between ideas and images, which had been well established by earlier philosophers.

(2) To say that an author is *misinformed* is to say that he asserts what is not the case. His error here may be due to lack of knowledge, but the error is more than that. Whatever its cause, it consists of assertions contrary to fact. The author is proposing as true or more probable what is in fact false or less probable. He is claiming to have knowledge he doesn't possess. To support the remark you must be able to argue the truth or greater probability of a position contrary to his.

For example, in a political treatise, Spinoza appears to say that democracy is a more primitive type of government than monarchy. This is contrary to well-ascertained facts of political history. Spinoza's error in this respect has a bearing on his argument. Aristotle was misinformed about the role which the male factor played in animal reproduction, and consequently came to unsupportable conclusions about the processes of procreation. Thomas Aquinas erroneously supposed that the heavenly bodies only changed in position, that they were otherwise unalterable. Modern astrophysics corrects this error and thereby improves on ancient and medieval astronomy. But here is an error which has limited relevance. Making it does not affect St. Thomas's metaphysical account of the nature of all corporeal things as composed of matter and form.

These first two points of criticism are somewhat related. Lack of information, as we have seen, may be the cause of erroneous assertions. Further, whenever a man is misinformed, he is also uninformed of the truth. But it makes a difference whether the defect be simply negative, or positive as well. Lack of relevant knowledge makes it impossible to solve certain problems or support certain conclusions. Erroneous suppositions, however, lead to wrong conclusions and untenable solutions. Taken together, these two points

charge an author with defects in his premises. He needs more knowledge than he has.

(3) To say that an author is illogical is to say that he has committed a fallacy in reasoning. In general, fallacies are of two sorts. There is the *non sequitur*, which means that what is offered as a conclusion simply does not follow from the grounds proposed. And there is the occurrence of *inconsistency*, which means that two things the author has tried to say are incompatible. To make either of these criticisms, the reader must be able to show the precise respect in which the author's argument lacks cogency. One is concerned with this defect only to the extent that the major conclusions are affected by it. A book may lack cogency in irrelevant respects.

It is more difficult to illustrate this third point, because few great books make obvious slips in reasoning. When they do occur, they are usually elaborately concealed, and it requires a very penetrating reader to discover them. But I can show you a patent fallacy which I found in a recent reading of Machiavelli's *Prince*:

“The chief foundations of all states, new as well as old, are good laws. As there cannot be good laws where the state is not well armed, it follows that where they are well armed they have good laws.”

Now it simply doesn't *follow from* the fact that good laws depend on an adequate police force, *that* where *the* police force is adequate, the laws will necessarily be good. I am ignoring the highly questionable character of the first fact. I am only interested in the *non sequitur* here. Machiavelli failed to distinguish between what are called necessary and sufficient conditions.

In his *Elements of Law*, Hobbes argues in one place that all bodies are nothing but quantities of matter in motion. The world of bodies, he says, has no qualities whatsoever. Then, in another place, he argues that man is himself nothing but a body, or a collection of atomic bodies in motion. Yet, admitting the existence of sensory qualities—colors, odors, tastes, and so forth—he concludes that they are nothing but the motions of atoms in the brain. This conclusion is inconsistent with the position first taken, namely, that the world of bodies in motion is without qualities. What is said of *all* bodies in motion must apply to any particular group of them.

This third point of criticism is related to the other two. An author may, of course, fail to draw the conclusions which his evidences or principles imply. Then his reasoning is incomplete. But we are

here concerned primarily with the case in which he reasons poorly from good grounds.

The first three points of criticism, which we have just considered, deal with the soundness, the truth and accuracy, of the author's statements and reasoning. Let us turn now to the fourth adverse remark a reader can make. It deals with the completeness of the author's execution of his plan—the adequacy with which he discharges the task he has chosen.

Before we proceed to this fourth remark, one thing should be observed. If you as a reader cannot support any of these first three remarks, you are then obligated to agree with the author as far as he has gone. You have no freedom of will about this. It is not your sacred privilege to decide whether you are going to agree or disagree.

Since you have not been able to show that the author is uninformed, misinformed or illogical on relevant matters, you simply cannot disagree. You must agree. You cannot say, as so many students and others do, "I find nothing wrong with your premises, and no errors in reasoning, but I don't agree with your conclusions." All you can possibly mean by saying something like this is that you don't *like* the conclusions. You aren't disagreeing. You're expressing your emotions or prejudices. If you have been convinced, you should admit it.

(4) To say that an author's analysis is *incomplete* is to say that he hasn't solved all the problems he started with; or that he hasn't made as good a use of his materials as possible, that he didn't see all their implications and ramifications; or that he has failed to make distinctions which are relevant to his undertaking. It is not enough to say that a book is incomplete. Anyone can say that of any book. Men are finite, and so are their works, every last one. There is no point in making this remark unless the reader can define the inadequacy precisely, either by his own efforts as a knower, or through the help of other books.

Let me illustrate this point briefly. The analysis of types of government in Aristotle's *Politics* is incomplete. It doesn't consider, naturally enough, either representative government or the modern kind of federated state. The analysis would have to be extended to apply to these political phenomena. Euclid's *Elements of Geometry* is an incomplete account because he failed to consider other postulates about the relation of parallel lines. Modern geometrical works, making these other assumptions, supply the deficiencies.

Dewey's *How We Think* is an incomplete analysis of thinking because it fails to treat the sort of thinking which occurs in reading or learning by instruction, in addition to the sort which occurs in investigation and discovery.

This fourth point is strictly not a basis for disagreement. It is critically adverse only to the extent that it marks the limitations of the author's achievement. A reader who agrees with a book in part—because he has failed to support any of the other points of adverse criticism—may, nevertheless, suspend judgment on the whole, in the light of this fourth point about the book's incompleteness.

Related books in the same field can be critically compared by reference to these four criteria. One is better than another in proportion as it speaks more truth and makes fewer errors. If we are reading for knowledge, that book is best, obviously, which most adequately treats a given subject-matter. One author may lack information which another possesses; one may make erroneous suppositions from which another is free; one may be less cogent than another in reasoning from similar grounds. But the profoundest comparison is made with respect to the completeness of the analysis which each presents. That is one of the marks of real greatness. 📖

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