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## *YOU CAN'T READ*

**Mortimer J. Adler**

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### **III**

The second reading is constructive or synthetic. It also involves four steps, and here mastery of the procedure depends on sound training in grammar and logic as correlative of disciplines. We are here concerned with discovering the elements of communicable knowledge by construing the language of the text. On the grammatical side, the book consist of words, sentences and paragraphs. If these are rightly construed, we shall find the terms, propositions and arguments which constitute the authors teaching. There is a correlation here between words and terms, sentences and propositions, paragraphs and arguments; but it is not a simple one-to-one relation between the grammatical elements of language and logical elements of thought. To suppose the relationship is simple is the mistake commonly made by all who lack sufficient training in the liberal arts, who can't read, in short.

1. First, you must try to discover the basic terms which carry the author's meaning. You must come to terms with your author before you can determine what he is proposing, i.e., his propositions. You can do this only through his words, and by an active grammatical discernment. A book contains many words, but they are obviously not all equally important. In fact, most are not important at all, because the author uses them in an ordinary way, as most men do, or according to the common usage of his place in time. But there will always be, in an original or primary book, a small number of words which constitute the author's special vocabulary, the words which he has made his own for the purposes at hand, which are his analytical idiom. Finding such words or phrases will lead you to the terms, if you perform a second grammatical act. These special words are likely to be ambiguous, to have many related meanings. They are highly complex repositories of significance because the author will usually use them in many senses, shading his meanings up and down the scale. Bad writers use words equivocally, but even the best must use words with systematic ambiguity because there are not enough words in the language to make all the necessary distinctions.

A term is a word used unambiguously. By discriminating the several meanings with which the author uses the words of his special vocabulary, you will come to terms with him. Good authors are sometimes helpful, indicating explicitly by verbal qualifications that a word is now being used in one sense, now in another; but even the best authors frequently depend upon the context to provide such qualifications and require the reader to do the work. In this connection you must observe two things: first, that a single word or phrase may be, through ambivalent usage, the expression of many terms; and second, that through equivalent usage, different words or phrases may be the expression of the same term. No writer can avoid the use of synonyms or equivalent expressions.

The practice of this first rule is difficult enough in reading one book. It is much more difficult in reading two, since different authors will frequently use the same word for quite different terms, and also use different words to express the same terms, and so each may be helpful to the reader with regard to his own text, he is seldom helpful with regard to the writings of others. I would be almost be willing to say that you cannot read one book well unless you can read two—in the same field, of course—and know whether they are saying the same or different things. But I shall not complicate matters further by mentioning grammatical distinctions concerning types of words and phrases, and logical distinctions concerning other terms, knowledge of which would increase a

reader's penetration at this point.

The first step in the second reading underlies all the rest. Terms are the elements of propositions and they in turn are put together in arguments. But more than that, coming to terms with an author is absolutely indispensable to receiving communication from him. For unless they come to terms, reader and author are not using words in the same sense at the same time, and hence communication fails, for there is no community, no understanding common to two minds through the difficult and imperfect medium of language. For the transmission of knowledge, there must be communication (common understanding of words) parentheses by one, and arrived at by the other, establish such communication.

2. Having discovered the terms, you must next construe the basic propositions of the text, again by a grammatical discernment of the crucial sentences. Or, in other words you must find out what it is that the author is affirming and denying, what his ultimate judgments are. Here as before, most of the sentences the book contains are not crucial ones; only a few are. You must discriminate these leading sentences from all the interstitial, tangential and the digressive ones. Furthermore, these sentences may not only have ambiguous words, but they may be complex in structure even when ambiguity has been removed. They may express several related propositions. Grammatical skill is required to construe propositions out of sentences, the kind of skill which used to be taught in the grade school in the form of diagramming and which includes higher reaches of logical syntax. And logical skill is needed to recognize propositions which are the author's conclusions from those which are his premises, his principles or postulates, his statements of definition or verbal usage.

It is not enough to spot the important sentences. You must know their meanings, for otherwise you can't determine their propositional content. If you have done a good job at the level of words and terms, you will be greatly helped here in your effort to detect ambiguities of statement, and to match equivalent statements of the same proposition in different words, taken from different parts of the book. There are two simple self tests of whether you know the meaning of the sentences, whether you understand the propositions in them. The first is to translate: can you say precisely what the author is saying but in other words, preferably your own. The second is to exemplify: can you refer to concrete experiences or operations which illustrate the meaning, are cases or instances of what is being said.

3. Next you come to paragraphs, and here the rule is to find the ultimate paragraphic units which express the basic arguments. An argument is a sequence of propositions, having a beginning in principles and an end in conclusions. It may be simple or complex, having simple arguments as parts.

The difficulties of reading are here the greatest, because the relation of paragraphs, on the grammatical side, to arguments, on the logical side, is least apparent. Most authors, even the best, do not always write their arguments in single paragraphs. (Euclid is an outstanding exception.) Sometimes they do, in the form of the summary; but more frequently the basic paragraphs are in the text implicitly, and must be uncovered by the reader, or constructed by him through taking a sentence from here, and one from there, and making a sequence out of them. Though acquaintance with the author's terms in propositions is indispensable, it is not enough. Further grammatical sophistication is required for finding the real paragraphs which often lie under a misleading typographical format, which is dictated by mechanical considerations in bookmaking rather than intellectual ones; and for distinguishing paragraphs of various sorts. Correlatively, a high degree of logical skill is needed for the construction of different types of argument, conjunctions, inferential series, direct and indirect proofs, analytical sequences, and so forth.

4. Finally, there is there is a step which connects the second reading with the first. Which problems do the authors solve? You must not only be able to answer this question, but you must also know of those which the author failed to solve, and which he failed on knowingly, and which unknowingly? (One mark of a great writer is that he knows when and where he fails to execute his intention.) And you may even be expected to decide whether the solution of certain problems by the author raise new ones, known to the author, or unknown to him. If you can do these things, you can bring your analytic and synthetic readings into relationship, and thus ultimately when good habits get formed you may be able to do the two cooperatively.

#### IV

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 obey-

ing 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 train while another part is liberally educated. Even a democracy must have leaders, and its safety to 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 mediæval 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 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> 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. 

*We welcome your comments, questions, or suggestions.*

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