

**READING A TEXT**

*Prepared for The Ontological Design Course*

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### *Reading A Text*

This paper is an introduction to a theory of reading. Our concern in the paper is to produce the possibility of reading as a structured, productive practice. Many people read without any structure. They read, but nothing *happens* when they read. No valuable conversation is produced by their reading a text. They do not expand their possibilities, enrich the background out of which they listen to possibilities, or formulate actions to take. What is lacking is competence in designing the conversation with a text that reading can be for them. This lack of direction or structure is the breakdown we want to address here.

Our comments in the paper concern reading all kinds of texts. We are investigating the general basic skill of reading, that will be a valuable investigation for reading texts within the ontological design course and outside it.

We cannot produce mechanical procedures to follow, procedures that will guarantee effective reading. What we can do is produce a discourse about reading that allows you to design what you do when you read, to design what conversation reading is for you.

We write the paper as observers and designers of what reading is. Our claims here are what we say now, in the interest of helping you to design what reading is for you. We do not claim that what

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we say here is the final word on what reading is -- it is our own well-grounded observation, research, and design formulations.

### I. What is Reading?

Most of us today in the United States know how to read, in some sense. We know how to pass our eyes over a text, recognizing words and sentences. Knowing how to recognize words and sentences, though, does not guarantee that we are also capable of understanding a text and making it valuable for ourselves. In fact, as writers of this paper, we believe that few people really know how to read in that more important sense.

Learning to read is crucial to the possibility of the historical design of our lives. Who we are is constructed in our historical conversations about ourselves, including historical narratives we are all born into without being aware of them. Reading is the key to recovering these narratives and designing who we are now against their background. When we read of the Greek world, the early history of Europe, the founding of the American colonies, or the Viet Nam war, we are not reading about what has happened; we are reading our own histories, the historical background, the *story* of our own concerns and identities today. When we read commentaries on apartheid in South Africa or on abortion and the right to life, we are not reading the opinions of others, so that we can agree with or reject them; we are joining a conversation to produce our concerns and possibilities together today. When we read manuals on household repair or on applying for a government loan, we are not gathering information; we are introducing ourselves to a new domain of concerns and possible actions. Reading is never a matter of gathering facts, information, or opinions; it is always a matter of designing ourselves -- the concerns, the capacities, and the narratives we are right now.

### II. What is a Narrative?

The first crucial point here is that every person is who he is -- has the concerns that he has, sees the possibilities that he

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sees, and acts as he acts -- on the basis of certain historical narratives. What is a narrative?

A narrative is a story that someone tells. Narratives are not accounts of events; they are the stories that people build to explain, justify, and give coherence over time to themselves and their world. For example, the narrative of the industrial revolution is not a simple accounting of events that took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is the story that we in the west, looking back on ourselves, tell about who we have come to be and how we came to be such people. It is a self-interpretation. In explaining, justifying, or giving coherence to our history, we produce a story about who we are and how we came to be who we are.

We *live* in these narratives. What we call our "values", our "concerns", and our standards for living are grounded in such narratives. For example, as Americans, we live in historical narratives about the founding of our country in religious freedom, the settling of our country through hard work and independence, and the founding of our government on guarantees of personal freedom. We do not *think* about these narratives so often as we act out of them -- consistent with standards of acting and justifying actions embodied in them.

All of us are already in these narratives. They are not the personal stories of an individual's life. They are social and historical. Any individual always finds himself in the midst of narratives that have preceded him and that are bigger than his own life. The conversations of an individual's life grow out of these historical narratives. They ground his concerns, possibilities, and standards for acting and assessing actions. He is already in the midst of these narratives before he performs any action, before he speaks or listens in any conversation.

Reading is a conversation that we, as readers, produce within the narratives we already are. It is a conversation prompted for the reader by a text. When we begin to read, we are already the persons that we are, with concerns, possibilities, standards, opinions, and beliefs grounded in the historical narratives that

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we are. As readers, we are always who we are in our lives -- doctors, students, housewives, "cowboys", mathematicians, or catholics, in front of a text that is now a text *for* a doctor, student, housewife, etc.

Reading is part of living. It is one of the ways in which we continue the conversations that we are and the concerns and possibilities that we are in our conversations, and in which our conversations, concerns, and possibilities shift. Reading is a conversation that continues the history of conversations that we are.

Our histories of conversations limit our reading. We are always "prejudiced" with concerns and opinions. But it is also our histories of conversations that make effective reading possible for us. *Because* we already have concerns to deal with, reading a text can address those concerns. For example, it is because you are already concerned with your health that reading a book on nutrition can be valuable. Or, it is because you are already concerned with the question of political rights and protection that reading a book on the power of the federal government can be valuable to you.

The question that we now need to turn our investigation to is what we can do to design reading as effective conversations for the concerns and possibilities that each of us is. In doing so, we will produce a series of practical suggestions for you, the readers of this paper, to follow. These suggestions are not rules to follow for effective reading. But they are a structure of questions for designing the conversation that reading can be for you.

### III. Preparing Yourself to Read

You can design what conversation happens when you read in a way that will make you a more effective reader. Becoming a "more effective reader" means that you will be able to open greater possibilities, enrich the historical background within which you listen for possibilities, and produce greater results within the concerns that you are.

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Most of us today have been trained to read for information. In school, we read our geography textbooks to find out information about other places and other peoples. We read novels to find out what happens in them, to follow their plots. We read to find out facts, and we try to remember what we have read so that we can repeat it in conversations or apply it in actions.

It is true that we always read *for* something; we always have some concern behind our interpretation of a text. That is part of the inescapable history of concerns that we are when we approach a text. But now let's try to reconstruct what we read for in the light of what we have already said concerning what conversation reading a text is.

Ultimately what we always read for is *ourselves* -- our histories of concerns and opportunities. But not all of this history is brought to bear on every text that we read. You can single out a particular concern that you anticipate addressing in reading a particular text. This particular concern may be a breakdown you have declared, an opportunity you have seen but haven't availed yourself of, or a new domain which has been missing for you up to now -- it is a question, or a request of yourself, that has been produced in your history of conversations up to now.

This concern may be a very specific question, as when you sit down with an electrician's manual to fix a lamp. "How do I make this lamp work?" Or you may sit down to read a history of the American Civil War with no such practical question in mind. But what you are going to do is to produce a conversation within some concern, perhaps a concern over taking a stand on racial issues in your own life today, or to identify yourself politically as the result of the history of tensions between regional and federal authority in your country.

Your reading may not *answer* the concern -- that is, it may not produce a solution to some problem. It may shift what the concern is, it may alter your listening to what possibilities you have for dealing with the concern, or it may allow the concern to disappear. Reading may produce nothing you recognize as

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"practical" at all. It may produce a shift in your mood in life; for example, it may prompt you to a mood of wonder or a mood of peace.

Reading then starts with the concerns that you are. And preparing yourself to read will be producing a conversation about the concerns that you are that you can address by reading a particular text.

Our first suggestion for preparing yourself to read a text is,

Ask yourself what concerns you bring to the particular text that you are about to read.

Often, you will not have an immediate answer to give to that question. For example, you may pick up a novel to read, a book that you say "appeals" to you, or that has been recommended to you by someone. Take the time to ask this question of what concerns you bring to the book. The novel may deal with marriage, or making a change in the direction of your career or in the standards on which you assess yourself and other people; or it may present to you a "hero", someone who acts on some concern that all of us share today and can be stimulation for your own conversation for acting on that concern.

Our second suggestion is,

Ask yourself what you anticipate will be said in the text you are about to read in response to your concerns. Formulate your anticipations in terms of new domains of action, opportunities, or assessments that may be opened to you.

We always anticipate *something* from the conversation we are about to enter. We anticipate the opinions of others, we anticipate opportunities that may open up, breakdowns that others may produce for us, opinions they may prompt us to form, give up, or modify. And the same is true when we read a text. Reading is a conversation.

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Preview the text by reading the title, table of contents, first paragraph or two, and whatever else you find to orient yourself.

If you are about to begin reading a newspaper editorial on unemployment, you anticipate opening a domain of political assessment (and perhaps action) for new opinions or revisions of old opinions. As you begin reading a text on low calorie cooking, obviously you anticipate a new domain of action and opportunities for you - managing and cooking your own diet.

Our third suggestion for preparing yourself to read a text is,

Ask yourself what opinions, assessments, or beliefs you already hold in the domain you are about to enter with the text.

We are all prejudiced. Even in those domains in which we claim no knowledge or facility, we have opinions and beliefs. We already know *something* about computers before reading the manual, even if it is only that we don't like them.

These prejudices are not all obstructions to learning. Our prejudices originate in our own histories of conversations. Our capacity to enter new conversations depends on those histories of conversations. The conversations we already are, including the concerns, opinions, beliefs, and assessments we already hold, are the necessary background to learning in new domains.

What is dangerous is that we often close our opportunities for learning with our pretensions to knowledge. Where we have already decided what is true or false, right or wrong, we close conversations.

The prejudices will work unseen, unless they become explicit in your own conversation for interpreting the text. Then you can question them, reject them, or confirm them when you confront them with the text.

#### IV. Reading and Interpreting a Text

Your reading and interpreting has begun before you've read the first word of the text itself. That is not surprising. In fact, you began interpreting this text long ago, before you even heard of it. Interpretation of this text is continuous with the history of conversations, with the historical narrative, in which all of your concerns, possibilities, prejudices, and beliefs were born.

In preparing to read the text, you were making yourself aware of the conversations of concerns, anticipations, and prejudices you already are before reading the text. Now, in beginning to read the text itself, you can begin to carry the conversations forward. Reading is a conversation that can produce a change in the conversations that you are.

Again, we offer suggestions for questions to ask yourself as you read. First,

As you begin to read the text, ask yourself what domain is being opened for a conversation. What new domain of action or opportunities is being opened to you?

You may not be clear yet on what domain is being opened to you. But you can start to formulate it in terms already familiar to you. No domain is entirely unfamiliar -- it always appears to you in terms of concerns, opportunities, breakdowns, or actions with which you are already familiar. The same is true of any *invention*, and a text can be an invention of a new domain for you. Reconstruct the domain for yourself in terms of your concerns, breakdowns, capacities, and the opportunities with which you are already familiar.

For example, you may be reading a text in which the author talks about what she calls "the modern Prometheus". That phrase may mean nothing to you, but you can begin to formulate what new domain your conversation with the text is in, that, say, it has to do with new moral questions raised with modern technology.

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Our next suggested question for reading and interpreting is,

As you read and after you have read the text, ask yourself what are the particular linguistic distinctions the writer has made that his text depends upon?

Linguistic distinctions are the elements that make a conversation intelligible -- that in terms of which anything said in the conversation makes sense. Facility with these essential distinctions of a text is facility in the conversation the writer of the text has begun and you can carry forward.

Then before you can be a participant in that conversation, you must construct for yourself the system of distinctions that makes the conversation possible.

For example, a philosophical essay on truth may be founded on distinctions the author makes or relies on: evidence, confirmation, justification. Or a manual on investment banking may be founded on distinctions of loans, interests, returns, etc. None of these distinctions is a label for some real object. All are grounded in what the author says -- they are the distinctions he makes in his text. When he says that evidence is whatever someone may produce to convince someone else that an assertion is true, he is not *describing* evidence, he is *producing* the linguistic distinction called "evidence" -- he is establishing what we say when we say evidence in his conversation with you, the reader.

Produce this system of distinctions for yourself in terms with which you are already familiar, in another system of distinctions with which you already move with facility. Thus you produce the banker's distinction of loans in terms of promises and conditions of satisfaction (if you already have facility with the distinctions called "promises" and "conditions of satisfaction"), or produce the philosopher's distinction of justification in terms of assertions and judgments.

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You won't often find any system of linguistic distinctions listed or laid out explicitly for you in a text. You will have to construct them yourself by reading for them. *After* doing so, you can join the author's conversation -- joining that conversation requires that you first reconstruct the system of distinctions the conversation depends upon. Read the text for this system of distinctions several times perhaps, before reading it for what the author says with that system -- what opinion he is offering, what action he is recommending, what opportunity he is opening, etc.

Our final suggested question for designing your reading conversation is,

After you have read the text, ask yourself what conversations the text has enabled you to continue yourself.

These new conversations may be practical -- new requests and promises you are now competent to make in a new domain of action. For example, after reading and interpreting a text on real estate, you may say that you are competent to begin making loan requests of bankers, or specific requests of real estate agents.

Or the new conversations may not be so narrowly practical. They may be conversations for new possibilities -- not only new possibilities for action but also new possibilities for your own conversation about who you are, for example, what assessments you are going to make of yourself and act on or what prejudices you recognize in yourself. They may be conversations about new moods that are possible for you in life, as when reading a book fills you with wonder, or peace, or adventure.