

HOW TO READ A BOOK



AUTHOR OF *THE ONE-IN-A-MILLION BOY*

MONICA WOOD

Chapter 11

Agreeing or Disagreeing with an Author

The first thing a reader can say is that he understands or that he does not. In fact, he must say he understands, in order to say more. If he does not understand, he should keep his peace and go back to work on the book. There is one exception to the harshness of the second alternative. “I don’t understand” may itself be a critical remark. To make it so, the reader must be able to support it. If the fault is with the book rather than himself, the reader must locate the sources of trouble. He should be able to show that the structure of the book is disorderly, that its parts do not hang together, that some of it lacks relevance, or, perhaps, that the author equivocates in the use of important words, with a whole train of consequent confusions. To the extent that a reader can support his charge that the book is unintelligible, he has no further critical obligations. Let us suppose, however, that you are reading a good book. That means it is 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 analytical reading is completely done. You have been enlightened, and convinced or persuaded. It is clear that we have additional steps to consider only in the case of disagreement or suspended judgment. The former is the more usual case. To the extent that authors argue with their readers—and expect their readers to argue back—the good reader must be acquainted with the principles of argument. He must be able to carry on civil, as well as intelligent, controversy. That is why there is need for a chapter of this sort in a book on reading. Not simply by following an

author's arguments, but only by meeting them as well, can the reader ultimately reach significant agreement or disagreement with his author. The meaning of agreement and disagreement deserves a moment's further consideration. The reader who comes to terms with an author and grasps his 103 CHAPTER 11. AGREEING OR DISAGREEING WITH AN AUTHOR 104 propositions and reasoning shares 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, 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 that 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. They say that all disagreement is simply owing to misunderstanding. The error in this becomes obvious as soon as we remember that the author is making judgements about the world in which we live. He claims to be giving us theoretical 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, to the extent that he says what is probable in the light of evidence. Otherwise, his claim is unfounded. If you say, for instance, that "all men are equal," we 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 we

know them, we disagree with you. We think you are wrong. But suppose we have misunderstood you. Suppose you meant by these words that all men should have equal political rights. Because we misapprehended your meaning, our disagreement was irrelevant. Now suppose the mistake corrected. Two alternatives still remain. We can agree or disagree, but now if we disagree, there is a real issue between us. We understand your political position, but hold a contrary one. Issues about matters of fact or policy—issues about the way things are or should be—are real in this sense only when they are based on a common understanding of what is being said. Agreement about the use of words is the 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. Prejudice and Judgment Now let us consider the situation in which, having said you understand, you proceed to disagree. If you have tried to abide by the maxims stated in the previous chapter, you disagree because you think the author can be shown to be wrong on some point. You are not simply voicing your prejudice or expressing

CHAPTER 11. AGREEING OR DISAGREEING WITH AN AUTHOR 105

your emotions. Because this is true, then, from an ideal point of view, there are three conditions that must be satisfied if controversy is to be well conducted. The first is this. Since men are animals as well as rational, it is necessary to acknowledge the emotions you bring to a dispute, or those that 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 strong feelings. Second, you must make your own assumptions explicit. You must know what your prejudices—that is, your prejudgments—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. If your prejudices lie on the opposite side, and if you do not acknowledge them to be prejudices, you cannot give the author's case a fair hearing. Third and finally, an attempt at impartiality is a good antidote for the blindness that is almost 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. If you have not been able to read a book sympathetically, your disagreement with it is probably more contentious than civil. These three conditions are, ideally, the sine qua non of intelligent and profitable conversation. They are obviously applicable to reading, insofar 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 civilities of disagreement. But the ideal here, as elsewhere, can only be approximated. The ideal should never be expected from human beings. We ourselves, we hasten to admit, are sufficiently conscious of our own defects. We have violated our own rules about good intellectual manners in controversy. We have caught ourselves attacking a book rather than criticizing it, knocking straw men over, denouncing where we could not support denials, proclaiming our prejudices as if ours were any better than the author's. We continue to believe, however, that conversation and critical reading can be well disciplined. We are therefore going to substitute for those three ideal conditions, a set of prescriptions that may be easier to follow. They indicate the four ways in which a book can be adversely criticized. Our hope is that if a reader confines himself to making these points, he will

be less likely to indulge in expressions of emotion or prejudice. 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 to the author: (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 we think they are. In any event, they are certainly the principal points a reader who disagrees can make. They are somewhat independent. Making one of these remarks does not prevent you from making another. Each and all can be made, because the defects they refer to are not mutually exclusive. But, we 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 make it definitely, by specifying the respect, but he must also support his point. He must give reasons for saying what he does.

Judging the Author's Soundness The first three remarks are somewhat different from the fourth, as we will presently see. Let us consider each of them briefly, and then turn to the fourth. 1. To say that an author is uninformed is to say that he lacks some piece of knowledge that 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 that the author lacks and show how it is relevant, how it makes a difference to his conclusions. A few illustrations here must suffice. Darwin lacked the knowledge of genetics that 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 that 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. The ancients, for example, clearly distinguished between what men can sense and imagine and what they can understand. Yet, in the eighteenth century, David Hume revealed his ignorance of this distinction between images and ideas, even though it had been so well established by the work of 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 owing to lack of knowledge, but the error is more than that. Whatever its cause, it consists in making 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 does not possess. This kind of defect should be pointed out, of course, only if it is relevant to the author's conclusions. And to support the remark you must be able to argue the truth or greater probability of a position contrary to the author's. For example, in one of his political treatises, 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 that the female factor plays in animal reproduction, and consequently came to unsupportable conclusions about the processes of procreation. Aquinas erroneously supposed that the matter of the heavenly bodies is essentially different from that of terrestrial bodies,

because he supposed that the former change only in position, and are otherwise unalterable. Modern astrophysics corrects this error and thereby improves on ancient and medieval astronomy. But here is an error that has limited relevance. Making it does not affect Aquinas' metaphysical account of the nature of all sensible things as composed of matter and form. These first two points of criticism may be related. Lack of information, as we have seen, may be the cause of erroneous assertions. Further, whenever a man is misinformed in a certain respect, he is also uninformed in the same respect. But it makes a difference whether the defect is 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 possesses. His evidences and reasons are not good enough in quantity or quality. 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 drawn as a conclusion simply does not follow from the reasons offered. 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 safely lack cogency in irrelevant respects. It is more difficult to illustrate this third point, because few really good 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 we can show you a patent fallacy in Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Machiavelli writes: 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 does not 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. We are ignoring the highly questionable character of the first contention. We are only interested in the non sequitur here. It is truer to say that happiness depends on health than that good laws depend on an effective police force, but it does not follow that all who are healthy are happy.

CHAPTER 11. AGREEING OR DISAGREEING WITH AN AUTHOR 108

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. The 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, including the atoms of the brain. This third point of criticism is related to the other two. An author may, of course, fail to draw the conclusions that his evidences or principles imply. Thus his reasoning is incomplete. But we are here concerned primarily with the case in which he reasons poorly from good grounds. It is interesting, but less important, to discover lack of cogency in reasoning from premises that are themselves untrue, or from evidences that are inadequate. A person who from sound premises reaches a conclusion invalidly is, in a sense, misinformed. But it is worthwhile to distinguish the kind of erroneous statement that is owing to bad reasoning from the kind previously discussed, which is

owing to other defects, especially insufficient knowledge of relevant details. Judging the Author's Completeness The first three points of criticism, which we have just considered, deal with the soundness 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. Since you have said you understand, your failure to support any of these first three remarks obligates you 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. If 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 some thing like that is that you do not like the conclusions. You are not disagreeing. You are expressing your emotions or prejudices. If you have been convinced, you should admit it. (If, despite your failure to support one or more of these three critical points, you still honestly feel unconvinced, perhaps you should not have said you understood in the first place.) The first three remarks are related to the author's terms, propositions, and arguments. These are the elements he used to solve the problems that initiated his efforts. The fourth remark—that the book is incomplete—bears on the structure of the whole. 4. To say that an author's analysis is incomplete is to say that he has not solved all the problems he started with, or that he has not made as good a use of his materials as possible, that he did not see all their implications and

ramifications, or that he has failed to make distinctions that 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, therefore, unless the reader can define the inadequacy precisely, either by his own efforts as a knower or through the help of other books. Let us illustrate this point briefly. The analysis of types of government in Aristotle's *Politics* is incomplete. Because of the limitations of his time and his erroneous acceptance of slavery, Aristotle fails to consider, or for that matter even to conceive, the truly democratic constitution that is based on universal suffrage; nor can he imagine either representative government or the modern kind of federated state. His analysis would have to be extended to apply to these political realities. Euclid's *Elements of Geometry* is an incomplete account because Euclid 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 that occurs in reading or learning by instruction in addition to the sort that occurs in investigation and discovery. To a Christian who believes in personal immortality, the writings of Epictetus or Marcus Aurelius are an incomplete account of human happiness. 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 finds no reason to make 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. Suspended judgment on the reader's part responds to an author's failure to solve his problems perfectly. 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 that 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 that each presents. The measure of such completeness is to be found in the number of valid and significant distinctions that the accounts being compared contain. You may see now how useful it is to have a grasp of the author's terms. The number of distinct terms is correlative with the number of distinctions. You may also see how the fourth critical remark ties together the three

CHAPTER 11. AGREEING OR DISAGREEING WITH AN AUTHOR 110

stages of analytical reading of any book. The last step of structural outlining is to know the problems that the author is trying to solve. The last step of interpretation is to know which of these problems the author solved and which he did not. The final step of criticism is the point about completeness. It touches structural outlining insofar as it considers how adequately the author has stated his problems, and interpretation insofar as it measures how satisfactorily he has solved them.

The Third Stage of Analytical Reading

We have now completed, in a general way, the enumeration and discussion of the rules of analytical reading. We can now set forth all the rules in their proper order and under appropriate headings.

I. The First Stage of Analytical Reading: Rules for Finding What a Book Is About

1. Classify the book according to kind and subject matter.
2. State what the whole book is about with the utmost brevity.
3. Enumerate its major parts in their order and relation, and outline these parts as you have outlined the whole.
4. Define the problem or problems the author is trying to solve.

II. The Second Stage of Analytical

Reading: Rules for Interpreting a Book's Contents 5. Come to terms with the author by interpreting his key words. 6. Grasp the author's leading propositions by dealing with his most important sentences. 7. Know the author's arguments, by finding them in, or constructing them out of, sequences of sentences. 8. Determine which of his problems the author has solved, and which he has not; and as of the latter, decide which the author knew he had failed to solve. III. The Third Stage of Analytical Reading: Rules for Criticizing a Book as a Communication of Knowledge A. General Maxims of Intellectual Etiquette 9. Do not begin criticism until you have completed your outline and your interpretation of the book. (Do not say you agree, disagree, or suspend judgment, until you can say "I understand.") CHAPTER 11. AGREEING OR DISAGREEING WITH AN AUTHOR 111 10. Do not disagree disputatiously or contentiously. 11. Demonstrate that you recognize the difference between knowledge and mere personal opinion by presenting good reasons for any critical judgment you make. B. Special Criteria for Points of Criticism 12. Show wherein the author is uninformed. 13. Show wherein the author is misinformed. 14. Show wherein the author is illogical. 15. Show wherein the author's analysis or account is incomplete. Note: Of these last four, the first three are criteria for disagreement. Failing in all of these, you must agree, at least in part, although you may suspend judgment on the whole, in the light of the last point. We observed at the end of Chapter 7 that applying the first four rules of analytical reading helps you to answer the first basic question you must ask about a book, namely, What is the book about as a whole? Similarly, at the end of Chapter 9, we pointed out that applying the four rules for interpretation helps you to answer the second question you must ask, namely, What is being said in detail, and how? It is probably clear that the last seven rules of reading—the maxims of intellectual etiquette and the criteria for points of criticism—

help you to answer the third and fourth basic questions you must ask. You will recall that those questions are: Is it true? and What of it? The question, Is it true? can be asked of anything we read. It is applicable to every kind of writing, in one or another sense of “truth” — mathematical, scientific, philosophical, historical, and poetical. No higher commendation can be given any work of the human mind than to praise it for the measure of truth it has achieved; by the same token, to criticize it adversely for its failure in this respect is to treat it with the seriousness that a serious work deserves. Yet, strangely enough, in recent years, for the first time in Western history, there is a dwindling concern with this criterion of excellence. Books win the plaudits of the critics and gain widespread popular attention almost to the extent that they flout the truth—the more outrageously they do so, the better. Many readers, and most particularly those who review current publications, employ other standards for judging, and praising or condemning, the books they read—their novelty, their sensationalism, their seductiveness, their force, and even their power to bemuse or befuddle the mind, but not their truth, their clarity, or their power to enlighten. They have, perhaps, been brought to this pass by the fact that so much of current writing outside the sphere of the exact sciences manifests so little concern with truth. One might hazard the guess that if saying something that is true, in any sense of that term, were ever again CHAPTER 11. AGREEING OR DISAGREEING WITH AN AUTHOR 112 to become the primary concern it should be, fewer books would be written, published, and read. Unless what you have read is true in some sense, you need go no further. But if it is, you must face the last question. You cannot read for information intelligently without determining what significance is, or should be, attached to the facts presented. Facts seldom come to us without some interpretation, explicit or implied. This is especially true if you are reading digests of

information that necessarily select the facts according to some evaluation of their significance, some principle of interpretation. And if you are reading for enlightenment, there is really no end to the inquiry that, at every stage of learning, is renewed by the question, What of it? These four questions, as we have already pointed out, summarize all the obligations of a reader. The first three, moreover, correspond to something in the very nature of human discourse. If communications were not complex, structural outlining would be unnecessary. If language were a perfect medium instead of a relatively opaque one, there would be no need for interpretation. If error and ignorance did not circumscribe truth and knowledge, we should not have to be critical. The fourth question turns on the distinction between information and understanding. When the material you have read is itself primarily informational, you are challenged to go further and seek enlightenment. Even when you have been somewhat enlightened by what you have read, you are called upon to continue the search for significance. Before proceeding to Part Three, perhaps we should stress, once again, that these rules of analytical reading describe an ideal performance. Few people have ever read any book in this ideal manner, and those who have, probably read very few books this way. The ideal remains, however, the measure of achievement. You are a good reader to the degree in which you approximate it. When we speak of someone as “well-read,” we should have this ideal in mind. Too often, we use that phrase to mean the quantity rather than the quality of reading. A person who has read widely but not well deserves to be pitied rather than praised. As Thomas Hobbes said, “If I read as many books as most men do, I would be as dull-witted as they are.” The great writers have always been great readers, but that does not mean that they read all the books that, in their day, were listed as the indispensable ones. In many cases, they read fewer books than are now

required in most of our colleges, but what they did read, they read well. Because they had mastered these books, they became peers with their authors. They were entitled to become authorities in their own right. In the natural course of events, a good student frequently becomes a teacher, and so, too, a good reader becomes an author. Our intention here is not to lead you from reading to writing. It is rather to remind you that one approaches the ideal of good reading by applying the rules we have described in the reading of a single book, and not by trying to become superficially acquainted with a larger number. There are, of course, many books worth reading well. There is a much larger number that should be only inspected. To become wellread, in every sense of the word, one must know CHAPTER 11. AGREEING OR DISAGREEING WITH AN AUTHOR 113 how to use whatever skill one possesses with discrimination—by reading every book according to its merits.