***The Epistemology of Reading and Interpretation***. By Rene van Woudenberg. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pp. v + 244. Price $99.99.)

It’s unorthodox for a book review, I realize – but let me begin with some quick self-promotion, neither gratuitous nor shameless. In 2019, I published an article, ‘On Reading’ (*Acta Analytica*, 35(1), p. 51-59), the composition of which was the result of very little research. But this wasn’t due to negligence. I was (and still am) a metaphysician and philosopher of language interested in the nature of (textual) reading. Precisely under what conditions does reading occur? What sense modalities can one use to read? Specifically, can one read audiologically? What counts as a text? How much content, and of what sort, must be grasped in order for one to read a text? I simply had trouble finding anything written by other philosophers, in either the Continental or analytic tradition, on these topics. As you would expect, then, I found van Woudenberg’s *The Epistemology of Reading and Interpretation* to be a much needed, highly welcome contribution.

Not only does van Woudenberg’s treatise address in a rigorous way the issue I was mainly interested in, *viz*., the necessary and sufficient conditions for reading, but he further focuses on the analyses of understanding and interpretation. His overarching, most ambitious aims, however, involve providing an epistemology of reading and interpretation. How exactly do these activities function as sources of knowledge? What *sorts* of knowledge are thereby attainable? Does reading facilitate a *unique* path to epistemically justified beliefs?

Here's an obvious truth: we can learn worldly facts, linguistic facts, and facts about the mental states of authors and other people by reading both fiction and non-fiction. Reading can make non-occurrent knowledge occurrent, can weaken or strengthen evidence already in our possession, and can provide insight into how various propositions cohere. So, why then has so little attention been paid to reading as a source of knowledge? Why have no epistemologists attempted to say anything about the ways in which information conveyed *via* reading bears on the internalism/externalism debate, the nature of justified belief generally, or the analysis of knowledge?

Van Woudenberg aims to rectify this situation. He begins by pointing out that any kind of text – a novel, a grocery list, a poem, a cookbook – can yield *propositional knowledge*. But not only may we come to have justified beliefs about facts contained or conveyed by any sort of written work, reading also requires *knowing by acquaintance* the words comprising the text, their contents, and in some cases, some of the thoughts that the texts produce in us. Furthermore, *know how* can – sometimes easily – be gained through reading.

One of van Woudenberg’s goals early on is to confront the deeply entrenched assumption that reading is not a *sui generis* source of knowledge and understanding, but rather our evidence from reading must be reducible to either testimony or perception. His thesis is that prominent accounts of testimony are such that each either fails on its own merits or fails to account for how we often learn some propositions *p* *through* reading *p* instead of *by* reading that *p*. And he argues convincingly that evidence from reading can’t be just the *simple seeing* of words, *perceiving that* with one’s eyes, Reidian ‘acquired perception’ nor, lastly, Dretskean ‘primary or secondary epistemic seeing’. Ultimately, a powerful case is made for thinking that reading truly is a *sui generis* source of knowledge, wrongfully, if tacitly, mis-categorized until now.

The middle parts of van Woudenberg’s text tackle the metaphysics of reading and writing. I found the views defended here implausible, but more on that below. The last half of his book focuses on the concepts of meaning and interpretation. After a helpful taxonomy of meanings is discussed, his focus turns to the question: how do we come to know these different sorts of textually embedded meanings? Van Woudenberg argues compellingly that we come to know meanings by applying traditionally discussed sources of knowledge – testimony, memory, reason, and perception – to our interpretations of texts, as interpretations are just our attempts at meaning specification. When interpretations succeed, then, reading knowledge is attainable.

But what are interpretations, and how and when are they successful? The last two chapters address various accounts of interpretation. The critical discussion here was generally enlightening and thorough. I thought his employment of David Lewis’ (1996) infallibilistic, relevant alternatives epistemology to model the ways in which reader disambiguation occurs was poorly motivated, however, and I wished there had been some discussion of the phenomenon of vagueness and its place in interpretive activities. Furthermore, I worried that some of the treatment of Stanley Fish’s (1980) view may have been uncharitable. But these issues arose in my mind as minor grievances.

My main quarrels arose with respect to van Woudenberg’s metaphysical claims regarding reading and writing. On his analysis of (*Person)* *S is reading* (p. 117), vision is required. Clearly, however, Braille-adept people can read with the sense of touch alone. So what is going on here? According to van Woudenberg, when we talk of reading by Braille, we are using *reads* merely in an ‘analogical sense,’ and the fact that Louis Braille developed a tactile code for the French alphabet based on Charles Barbier’s method of night writing is supposed to provide us with an argument for that claim. People using Braille’s method can thus ‘easily be said to be reading, even though they [a]ren’t doing the exact same thing as seeing people who are reading.’ (p. 119) He then goes on to assert that ‘the conditions for ‘“*S is reading*” need rather obvious modifications if they are to apply to reading Braille’, but it would be an ‘overgeneralization’ to ‘require in the analysis of reading the unqualified ‘“use of some sensory modality”.’ (p. 119)

First, it is not obvious *to me* what the relevant Braille modification would be, nor why it would be needed if he’s correct that tactile reading is reading in a mere ‘analogical sense’. Second, it may be that here, in our world, such a facility is one intimately, yet contingently connected to vision, but that doesn’t undermine its claim to legitimacy. It is not difficult to imagine possible worlds with tactile reading *only* or worlds in which visibly legible texts were instead coded audiologically (or with smells or tastes, for that matter). An utterly sightless society where reading occurs by way of feeling raised dots is clearly possible, as is one where texts are read by way of echolocating the very large, high-relief letters that compose them. Third, if visual reading is actual, and (‘non-analogical’) tactile and audiological reading of texts occurs in some possible worlds, on what grounds can van Woudenberg base his claim that the inclusion of ‘some sensory modality (or other)’ would amount to a mistaken overgeneralization? In principle, any sense modality could properly connect us to a text; the correct analysis of *S is reading* needs to reflect that.

I also found van Woudenberg’s metaphysics of writing troublesome. He contends that while both speaking and writing are (usually) *intentional* (in a variety of senses), there are some communicative activities that humans can *only* perform through writing. He first alleges that writing makes for a ‘deeper form’ of communication because it is more permanent (p. 153). But this is an odd claim; recorded speech, at least nowadays, is probably more securely recorded and passed on, and is *prima facie* no less ‘deep’. He then claims that the extemporaneous nature of speech is not found in certain forms of writing, and that speaking often relies on cues and tone that cannot get expressed easily otherwise. Specifically, when one engages in ‘creative-investigative’ writing, there are thoughts that can be expressed ‘that are longer, more complex, more complete, more precise, more definite, and more rigorous, and […] with more subtlety and nuance than is possible by speaking […].’ (p. 153) Van Woudenberg contends that texts are only the products of writing, and he argues that creative-investigative writers not only use writing to think, they in fact ‘*need* writing as an aid to reason and memory.’ (p. 155, my emphasis)

But neither is the case. Audio recordings (of intentional speech) may be converted to meaningful inscriptions, and this work may be done completely by mindless machines. (And while it’s a bit more controversial, I contend that mindless machines may be *entirely* responsible for meaningful texts. At the very least, his focus on writing as an activity that is nearly always intentional seems to imply that it’s very rare that what we read is the product of a mindless machine. But that occurs all the time nowadays.) While I happily concede that creative-investigative authors need access to some kind of recording method to aid reason and memory, this could consist in writing things down or dictating one’s speech. And when the dictated speech of philosophers, novelists, and mathematicians and the like gets converted to inscription, I claim that there is absolutely nothing *in principle* that would allow a reader to distinguish it as something originally spoken.

Of course, speaking and writing are activities providing speakers and writers, respectively, with radically different phenomenal states, as van Woudenberg notes. But there is nothing *necessarily* divergent about the consumable contents produced by either. All of this is perfectly consistent with van Woudenberg’s claim that reading is an interesting, oft-neglected source of knowledge; my related claim (one that he explicitly rejects [p. 160]) is that there is nothing that matters that necessarily distinguishes it from the equally interesting, equally neglected source that is (non-testimonial) listening.

So, while I found some uncareful metaphysics to be a drawback, I thought van Woudenberg’s overarching epistemological project was a highly worthwhile and fruitful one, of interest to philosophers in both the analytic and Continental traditions. His writing is accessible and clear; the book is well researched; there is a good balance between explanation of general, abstract notions and concrete examples to illustrate, and the reader never feels bogged down by either. This is a thorough investigation of some topics that rarely, if ever, have been given their due.

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