

René van Woudenberg: *The Epistemology of Reading and Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2021. viii + 244 pp.
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The central thesis of René van Woudenberg's *The Epistemology of Reading and Interpretation* is "that reading and interpretation are sources of knowledge" – and that they are not reducible to other sources, particularly not to perception and testimony. (6) The central questions of the book are the following: "What precisely is required for something to qualify as a source of knowledge? What exactly *is* reading? How does it relate to perception and to testimony? What is it to interpret a text (or an author)? How do reading and interpretation relate to each other? What is required for an interpretation to be justified?" (6)

According to van Woudenberg, these questions have not been discussed so far. (5) This is one of the few points in van Woudenberg's book with which I disagree. Indeed, the questions of what it is to interpret a text, and what is required for an interpretation to be justified, have been discussed extensively, for example by, to name a few: Wimsatt & Beardsley 1946, Hirsch 1967, Iseminger 1992, Currie 1993, Margolis & Rockmore 2000, Krausz 2002, Bühler 2003, Ritivoi 2003, Stecker 2003. Reference to this and other related literature would have provided the reader with valuable contextual knowledge and the option to dig deeper into some of the issues discussed in the book. That said, it should be emphasized that large parts of it indeed cover novel ground. The book as a whole provides fresh perspectives, numerous very useful distinctions, thought-provoking theses (most of which I agree with) and arguments. In addition, it is very well structured and clearly written, such that not only philosophers may benefit from it, but also literary scholars, linguists, and even educational scientists.

Van Woudenberg starts with a number of general commitments: 1) The book is about reading in general, including literature, but also, for instance, newspaper articles, emails, scientific papers etc. (6f.) 2) The book is about *textual* interpretation only, that is, it excludes, among others, the interpretation of actions, behavior and events as well as "musical interpretation" (as the activity of a musician or conductor who performs or takes part in performing a musical work). (7) 3) Truth is a goal of reading (although, of course, not the only goal); and "truth" here is to be understood as *objective* truth. (9f.)

In **Chapter 1** ("Knowing and Reading"), van Woudenberg argues that reading can yield three kinds of knowledge: propositional knowledge, knowledge by acquaintance (including knowledge of what it is like), and knowing-how ("ability knowledge"). This holds

“irrespective of the text’s genre: we may acquire knowledge through reading newspaper articles, scientific papers, and historical narratives, as well as through reading poems, novels, and plays.” (15)

Moreover, reading may yield *diverse kinds of* propositional knowledge, or, perhaps more adequately put, propositional knowledge about various sorts of facts: first of all, it may yield propositional knowledge of facts concerning the text itself – what its first sentence is, what its topic is, what story it relates etc.; second, it may yield propositional knowledge about the author’s views and attitudes; third, it may yield propositional knowledge about the world. Propositional knowledge about the world may be either knowledge of general truths or of particular facts. (21f.) Concerning the objection that (fictional) literary texts cannot yield propositional knowledge about the world because they do not have “declarative power”, van Woudenberg replies:

[I]t just doesn’t seem right to say that literary works lack declarative power. First, it isn’t *works* that make declarations – it is *persons* who do so. Second, persons who are literary authors often do make declarations, and they do so by writing their works: Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Fyodor Dostoyevski [...] do make – and intend to make – declarations on many different topics, albeit in indirect ways. But if they do, readers can come to know these declarations. (22)

In the section “Knowledge by acquaintance through reading” (25–32), van Woudenberg distinguishes four kinds of knowledge by acquaintance that are closely related to reading: 1) acquaintance with words and sentences (as linguistic tokens); 2) acquaintance with the meanings of words; 3) acquaintance with propositions that are expressed by the sentences; 4) “proxy acquaintance” of experiences that are lived through by narrators or characters. The first two kinds of knowledge by acquaintance (acquaintance with linguistic signs and their meanings) are *presuppositions* of reading. The second two kinds are (or at least should be) *generated* by reading.

In **Chapter 2** (“Reading and Understanding”), the author claims that knowledge and understanding are distinct things. He distinguishes three types of understanding:

- Type I: understanding *X* consists in seeing how *X*’s parts hang together (or what *X*’s place is in the broader scheme of things) or grasping how *X* fits a pattern; [...]. Here, *X*

can be a part of the natural world, but it can also be a social constellation or token behavior.

- Type II: understanding X consists in grasping the desired goals that X aims to attain. Here, X is a person (or a person's behavior) or a collective of persons [...] (or a collective's behavior).
- Type III: understanding X consists in grasping (and so endorsing) the desirability of the goals that X aims to attain. Here, too, X is a person or a collective of persons (or a person's or a collective's behavior). (40)

The distinction between type II understanding and type III understanding is explained by means of the following example:

Suppose you have a neighbor A who always leaves his house on Monday evening at 7:00 p. m., and another neighbor B who, when the moon is full, opens all the windows and doors of her house. [...]

[...] Suppose now that A tells you that on Monday evenings, he sings in a choir. [...] You now understand A (or A 's behavior) because you see that it serves a purpose; it has a point. Now suppose also that B tells you that she opens doors and windows at full moon so that the bats can fly in. Then you understand B (or B 's behavior) in the same way that you understand A (and A 's behavior): you see that B 's behavior also serves a purpose; it too has a point. (39)

This is understanding of type II. Understanding of type III, however, requires something in addition, namely "endorsing the desirability of the neighbors's goals". In this sense, one may understand neighbor A (since one agrees that singing in a choir is a desirable goal) but not neighbor B (since one cannot endorse the desirability of letting bats into one's house). (39)

I understand the intuitive difference between the two cases, but I disagree with the explanation. I think the point is not that one needs to agree with the person's goals (accept her particular value) but merely that one can *imagine* that a person may have such a value. The lack of understanding for neighbor B is a result of one's inability to imagine that someone might want to have bats in their house.

Van Woudenberg also discusses Peter van Inwagen's claim that he cannot understand anti-realism (i.e., the thesis that there is no objective truth). According to van Woudenberg, van Inwagen lacks understanding of type III, because he believes anti-realism is wrong. (46–48) –

I disagree. I can understand van Inwagen's inability to understand anti-realism. But I think that there is more to this inability than just disagreement. Some people say that the earth is flat, that humans appeared on earth just a week after the universe came into existence, that there is no man-made climate-change etc. I disagree, but I can fully understand these claims.

At any rate, van Woudenberg's discussion raises intriguing questions: What, exactly, does van Inwagen's failure to understand anti-realism consist in? It seems to be an inability to grasp a certain thought. But in what sense is one unable to grasp the thought expressed by a sentence if one perfectly understands the words and how the sentence is composed? What is missing here?

Van Woudenberg states: "Reading can yield understanding. In fact, the relations between reading and understanding are manifold. One way to organize them is this: when we read, our aim can be (i) to understand a text, (ii) to understand the author(s) of the text, or (iii) to understand the subject matter (or, the Matter) of the text." (40) Understanding a text, van Woudenberg argues, is understanding of type I, i. e., understanding how the text's parts are connected. Thus, "*one understands a text to the extent that one sees or grasps that or how its parts hang together so as to form a meaningful whole.*" (40)

Understanding the author of a text is to grasp "the authorial aim or aims for the text" (44). Van Woudenberg explicitly states that it is one of the "epistemic aim[s] we have when reading [...] to come to understand authors – i.e., to understand the aims they had and tried to attain through the production of the text." (44) Understanding the author is not the same as understanding the text. One can read a text without the goal of understanding the author; but often readers do have the aim of understanding the author.

Understanding the author in the sense explicated above is, in van Woudenberg's taxonomy, type II understanding. Type III understanding of authors involves something else, namely *agreeing with what the authors say* (45), or agreeing "that the aims they had in producing their text can be deemed desirable and choiceworthy". (53) – Again, I disagree: it seems to me that, for a type III understanding of authors, I do not have to share their values. Sometimes, I can understand that people have the aims and values they actually have, without regarding them as desirable and commendable. In such cases, I can *empathetically imagine* that people have these aims and values.

In **Chapters 3 and 4** ("Sources of Knowledge and their Individuation" and "Why Reading doesn't Reduce Either to Attending to Testimony or to Perception"), the author argues that

reading is a source of knowledge in its own right and not reducible to other sources, notably not to perception and testimony. Consider Jennifer Lackey's account of testimony:

S testifies that *p* by making an act of communication *A* iff (in part) in virtue of *A*'s communicable content (1) *S* reasonably intends to convey the information that *p* and/or (2) *A* is reasonably taken as conveying the information that *p*. (91; this is a direct quote from Lackey 2008, 35f.)

Van Woudenberg gives a list of examples which, according to him, count as knowledge that we acquire through reading – but not as knowledge through testimony. (85) The examples fall into three categories: 1) knowledge of text properties (such as: what a text's first sentence is, that the text contains numerous metaphors, that the text is humorous); 2) knowledge about the author (e. g., that the author assumes that *p*, although *p* does not occur in the text; that the author has extensive knowledge of, e.g., Scottish Enlightenment); 3) knowledge about the world that the author conveys through the text *in an indirect manner*.

I agree that examples of the first two kinds are not cases of knowledge by testimony. However, I think that knowledge about the world that an author conveys through a text in an indirect manner should be counted as knowledge by testimony – even more so as it fulfills the conditions of Lackey's account. – Let's have a closer look at van Woudenberg's examples:

Likewise, that the article contains an invalid argument, that the review is based on a misunderstanding, that the book is a warning call for people not to harbor grudges, or that the author assumes that *p* [...] is, in the contexts as sketched, known through reading. But that knowledge isn't based on [testimony]. [...]: the reviewer certainly doesn't intend to convey the information that their review is based on a misunderstanding [...]; nor can a reader reasonably take the review's communicable content to express the information that the review is based on a misunderstanding [...]. This means that the knowledge acquired just isn't based on Lackeyan testimony. (92)

Knowing that the review is based on a misunderstanding is certainly not knowledge based on testimony. So far I agree. I take this to be a case of knowledge about the author. Knowing that the article contains an invalid argument is not knowledge by testimony either. This is a case of knowledge about the text. However, I am less sure about the case of knowing that the book is a warning call for people not to harbor grudges. This may well be something that the author

intended to communicate – though he did so in an indirect fashion. I admit, however, that a reader may draw this lesson from a book although the author did not intend to communicate it. In this case, it is surely not knowledge by testimony.

Likewise, that the author is intimately familiar with the Scottish Enlightenment, that what the Dutch did in the Caribbean was wrong, or that the square root of two is not a rational number [...] is, in the contexts as sketched, knowledge acquired through reading. But it isn't knowledge based on Lackeyan testimony. [...] : when you come to know that the square root of two is not a rational number because you have read, followed, and comprehended the proof, then your knowledge isn't based on [...] testimony since you now "see," intellectually, for yourself that this is true. (92f.)

The final two cases are the most convincing ones. These are cases of knowledge about the world (independently of text and author). But what exactly is at stake here? Are these cases of knowledge by acquaintance rather than knowledge by testimony? Or knowledge by reason? Or knowledge by moral or rational intuition?

The discussion can be summarized as follows: Reading knowledge is not identical with knowledge by testimony, for reading may yield various kinds of knowledge that are not cases of knowledge by testimony, namely knowledge about texts and authors as well as knowledge about the world, insofar as it is knowledge by reason, by acquaintance, by moral or rational intuition. I admit that these are more than just peculiar and rare special cases. Rather, they happen to readers regularly. Thus, there is some truth to the claim that reading cannot be reduced to testimony.

However, it seems that all that has been said so far on the irreducibility of knowledge by reading to knowledge by testimony also holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for *listening*. Thus, it is still unclear why reading (as opposed to listening) should be treated as a unique source of knowledge in its own right. For an answer to this question, the reader has to wait until Chapter 6.

In **Chapter 5** ("Reading as a Source of Knowledge"), van Woudenberg provides an analysis of the notion of reading and distinguishes three kinds of "reading knowledge". He proposes the following set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for a person to be reading:

S is reading iff

- (i) *S* object-sees words and sentences [one may “object-see” a word without *seeing that* the object of one’s visual perception is a word]
- (ii) *S* knows the language to which the words and sentences belong; this includes acquaintance knowledge of word meanings
- (iii) *S* fact-sees words and sentences; i.e., *S* believes (mostly dispositionally) that what they are looking at are words and sentences that belong to this particular language, that this particular word means such and such, and so forth
- (iv) through object- and fact-seeing the words and sentences, *S* acquires some understanding of what the words and sentences jointly mean – i.e., they grasp at least something of the text’s content (117)

Some philosophers, van Woudenberg notes, disagree with his commitment to seeing as a necessary condition for reading: isn’t that discrimination against blind people who read Braille, or others, who use auditory means (like listening to audiobooks, for instance)? Van Woudenberg defends his position as follows:

This account [that listen to audiobooks is a kind of reading] is unsatisfactory, at least when it is intended as an analysis of our ordinary notion of reading and not meant as a proposal in revisionary semantics. [...] [I]t entails either that there are virtually no analphabets or that analphabets (those that don’t also have a hearing impairment) can read. The latter is a contradiction in terms, and the former is false [...]. (118)

Van Woudenberg distinguishes between knowledge about the text, more specifically, about a text’s *content* or *meaning* (RK_A), and knowledge about the things the text is talking about – knowledge about the world (RK_B). (RK_A) and (RK_B) are defined as follows:

S has RK_A of *p* or, more precisely, *S* knows through reading that what text *T* (or its author) says is *p* iff

- (i) *S* has read *T*
- (ii) *T* (or its author) says *p* [explicitly or implicitly]
- (iii) *S* believes that (ii) because (i)
- (iv) *S* has textual evidence for her belief that (ii) (121)

S has RK_B or, more precisely, *S* knows through reading that what text *T* (or its author) says (viz., *p*) is true iff

- (i) *S* believes that *p* because *S* has RK_A of *p*
- (ii) *S* is justified in believing *p* at least in part because *S* has RK_A of *p*
- (iii) *p* is true (123)

However, van Woudenberg notes that there are examples of reading knowledge that apply neither to RK_A nor to RK_B :

- S knows what the opening sentence of *T* is;
- S knows that *T* contains metaphorical expressions;
- S knows that *T* is funny;
- S knows that *T* contains an invalid argument;
- S knows that *T* is based on a misunderstanding. (124)

Van Woudenberg responds to these examples by introducing a third kind of reading knowledge, (RK_C), which is defined as follows:

S has RK_C of *p* or, more precisely, *S* knows through reading text *T* that *p*, where *p* is not something that the text (or its author) says, iff

- (i) *S* has read *T*
- (ii) *S* knows from other sources that *q*
- (iii) *S* believes *p* because (i) and (ii)
- (iv) *p* is true
- (v) *S* is justified in believing *p* (128)

The basic idea is that in some cases, reading knowledge arises – trivially – from reading, but not from reading *alone*. Some extra source is needed, be it reason, the moral sense, the aesthetic sense, memory or something else.

The basic idea is plausible enough. However, I have two objections. The first objection is that, as I see it, not all of van Woudenberg's own examples fit the proposed definition. Van Woudenberg explicitly claims that the opening sentence case fits the definition, since knowing that the opening sentence of a text *T* is “*p*” requires the background knowledge that “texts have opening sentences”. This is unconvincing. This very example is one of the cases where virtually no background knowledge is required. The only requirement is that the reader has the concept of an opening sentence. But having the relevant concepts is, trivially, a

precondition for knowledge of all sorts and therefore cannot be the distinguishing feature of a particular category of reading knowledge. In order to know what the opening sentence of a particular text is, I do not need to have any general knowledge about texts, nor do I have to remember other texts.

This relates to my second objection: Reason and memory are, arguably, preconditions of every kind of reading knowledge – at least if the text is not extremely short. In order to understand a text (even in a superficial way), I need to have some memory of the sentences I read before; and I must be able to comprehend how the meanings of the particular sentences in this particular order form a more comprehensive meaningful whole. Hence reason and memory are general preconditions for any kind of reading knowledge and thus cannot individuate the particular kind of reading knowledge RK_C .

Towards the end of Chapter 5 (129–134), van Woudenberg applies some distinctions made in contemporary epistemology to reading: the distinction between a transmission source and a generation source of knowledge, basic and non-basic sources, essential and inessential sources, unique and non-unique sources. A transmission source transmits knowledge, a generation generates it. A basic source is independent of the operation of other sources, a non-basic source is dependent on other sources. An essential source is one without which our knowledge would “collapse”. A unique source is one that generates knowledge that could not be generated by any other source. Van Woudenberg argues “that reading is both a transmission source and a generation source, a nonbasic source, and increasingly an essential source, and that sometimes it is even a unique source.” (134)

I largely agree with this – with the exception of the uniqueness claim. Van Woudenberg argues: “Reading certain kinds of poetry, for instance, or reading elaborate historical narratives may yield in a reader beliefs that constitute knowledge that could not be yielded by any other source.” (133f.) It seems to me that the knowledge that reading poetry and historical narratives yields can also come from listening to recitations or audiobooks. I admit, however, that reading may often considerably *facilitate* the gaining of knowledge through texts, in comparison to listening. In this regard, a better example than literature would be texts that contain a lot of formal logic. A knowledge transmission from such texts via audio descriptions is arguably not, in principle, impossible, but I take it that it would be less than ideal.

The question of the differences between reading and listening in terms of gaining knowledge is not only intriguing but also practically relevant, given that educational institutions these days increasingly substitute texts with videos as teaching materials. Indeed, one might suspect that this might have detrimental effects on learning success.

In **Chapter 6** (“The Objects of Reading are the Objects of Writing”), van Woudenberg finally addresses the worry that it is hard to see the substantial epistemological difference between reading and listening. He admits that “through listening we can acquire knowledge and understanding” and that “if [his] argument in Chapter 5 is any good, then there is a parallel argument for the conclusion that listening is a source too.” (135) But he adds: “Yet there is something special and unique about reading. It has to do with its objects: these have properties that the objects of listening lack – either entirely, or to some degree.” (135)

In the course of his comparative investigation of listening and reading (or oral speech and written text), van Woudenberg refers to Paul Ricoeur’s essay “The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation” (1973). According to Ricoeur, there is a “triple distanciation introduced by writing: (1) distanciation from the author; (2) from the situation of discourse; (3) from the original audience”. (Direct quote from Ricoeur 1973, 134; van Woudenberg, 142.)

Van Woudenberg’s discussion of Ricoeur is valuable in itself, but it does not explain the allegedly particular epistemological status of reading as opposed to listening – not even the allegedly particular epistemological status of the objects of reading (written texts) as opposed to the objects of listening (oral speech). An explanation of the latter is provided in the final section of Chapter 6. The central claim of this section (“Creative-investigative writing”, 151–160) is that writing enables the formulation (and even the generation) of thoughts that could not be formulated (and sometimes not even generated) without writing, i.e., not by speaking alone. Van Woudenberg calls writing processes by which thoughts are formed “creative-investigative writing”. His definition is as follows: “*S*’s writing of work *W* is creative-investigative if and only if *S* would not or even could not have formed the thoughts expressed in *W* if *S* had not engaged in writing *W*.” (154) Obvious cases in point are writings in mathematics and formal logic. But, van Woudenberg argues, the same holds for philosophy and literature: “[Often], it is through writing that *one finds out* what one thinks, knows, or believes. Often, we may clarify our thoughts through writing. [...] It is possible that through writing one may come to believe or even come to know things one didn’t believe or know prior to writing them up.” (154)

Van Woudenberg gives some nice examples of confessions of writers (philosophers and scientists) that strongly suggest that they regularly engage in creative-investigative writing. He admits, however, that there is not only creative-investigative writing but also creative-investigative *speaking*. Yet it seems that writing enables thoughts of a depth and complexity that can hardly be reached by speaking.

So, the *principled* distinction between speaking and writing seems to boil down to this: speaking and writing operate with distinct media and involve the use of different sense organs. Analogous reasoning holds for the distinction between knowledge through reading and knowledge through writing. This finding is, by itself, not terribly exciting. The truly important insight lies in the explanation of the *gradual* difference between writing and speaking. I fully agree that writing often makes easier (and sometimes even enables) the generation of complex and subtle thoughts. I would like to add that this fact is relevant for educational matters, in particular in light of current developments. Creative-investigative writing is hard and time-consuming labor – it is natural that students try to circumvent it, if there is an easy way to do so. However, if van Woudenberg is right, the common use of text generating devices like ChatGPT might result not only in the decline of yet another cultural technique (such as mental arithmetic or calligraphy) but is likely to have detrimental effects on young people’s cognitive abilities.

In **Chapter 7** (“Texts, Meanings, and Interpretations”), van Woudenberg investigates, first, the notion of meaning and, second, the notion of interpretation. He distinguishes the following notions of meaning: sentence meaning (162f.), word meaning (163), author’s meaning (164–169), “indicative meaning” (169–171), “effect meaning” (171), “functional meaning” (171f.), “value meaning” (172f.):

- Author’s meaning, as van Woudenberg uses the term, is determined by the author’s intentions, including her illocutionary and even perlocutionary intentions.
- Something has indicative meaning if it is an indication or *symptom* for something. For example: “Mary is singing again; this means she feels happy again.” (169) Texts can also be symptoms, sometimes even symptoms of something that the author was not aware of. In the latter case, texts have “subconscious meaning”. (169f.)
- An item’s *effect meaning* (or *significance meaning*) is “a set of (alleged) unspecified or unspecifiable future effects or consequences of the item that has the meaning in question” (171). For instance: “The government has fallen, which means there will be elections”.
- An item’s *functional meaning* are the functions it is intended to perform. “We speak of such meanings when we discuss the meaning of national anthems, or the meaning of Mao’s ‘little red book’ in contemporary China [...]” (171)
- An item’s value meaning is the value that the item has for a particular person (e. g., “Nick’s latest book means a lot to me”). (172)

Obviously, we cannot come to know meanings through (natural) scientific inquiry. But how, then, can we come to know them? Van Woudenberg makes, as he himself puts it, “some *very sketchy positive suggestions* about how we do know about meanings.” [173; my italics.]

These suggestions include a great variety of different sources: implicit and explicit testimony, linguistic competence, perception, reason, memory, reading, historical investigation, knowledge of literary genres, social research, self-observation.

The concept of interpretation is defined as follows:

General account of interpretation: a statement, or a set of statements, is an interpretation of a text *T*, or of a part thereof, provided it attempts to specify the meaning or meanings of *T*, or of parts thereof. (176)

Van Woudenberg adds several comments to this general account, including the following:

“[I]nterpretations can be misguided, incorrect, false, unjustified, implausible, or problematic in some other way. [They] are subject to standards of success, and [they can] meet those standards – it is possible for interpretations to be well guided, correct, true, justified, plausible, or unproblematic.” (176) The general account does *not* cover statements about value meaning. However, it is supposed to cover a wide range of meanings: word meaning, sentence meaning, author’s meaning, indicative meaning, effect meaning and function meaning. (177f.)

In **Chapter 8** (“Knowledge through Interpretation (1)”), the author distinguishes two kinds of “interpretation knowledge” and discusses the question of whether *all* reading involves interpretation.

The general account of interpretation knowledge (IK) is as follows: if a subject *S* interprets a text, and if *S* believes that her interpretation is true, and if the interpretation is indeed true, and if *S* is justified in believing that the interpretation is true, then *S* has interpretation knowledge.

Van Woudenberg distinguishes interpretation knowledge about the text (IK_A) and interpretation knowledge about something external to the text (IK_B). (186f.) He notes that it is an open question, first, under what conditions *S*’s interpretation of *T* is justified; and, second, it is an open question under what conditions (if ever) *S* can be justified in believing *p* because she has IK_A of *p*. As to the first question (under what conditions an interpretation is justified), he provides some hints about what the answer might be. As to the second question (under

what conditions a belief about matters external to a text can be justified through interpretation knowledge about the text), he proposes “to put it aside”. (187) This is unfortunate, since this is surely a central epistemological question concerning interpretation.

According to the “difficulty account of interpretation”, interpretation is the endeavor to overcome difficulties of understanding that are the result of some kind of *ignorance* on the part of the reader. Van Woudenberg discusses the objection that it is inappropriate to consider only the *conscious* effort to overcome difficulties as interpretation. The objection goes that those readers who are able to easily understand a text, without any conscious effort, are also engaged in interpretation. The only difference is that, in these cases, the interpretation proceeds unconsciously, automatically.

Van Woudenberg rejects this claim. He argues that there is no reason to assume that a reader who needs to consciously deal with difficulties undergoes the same kind of process as a reader who easily understands the (basic) meaning of a text. He presents the following analogy: Suppose a child is asked to make an addition. The child needs to calculate; it undergoes a rather complex process. A professional mathematician, by contrast, can just “see” the solution, she can “intuit” it. There is no reason to say, van Woudenberg argues, that the mathematician calculates “unconsciously”. In a similar way, there is no reason to say that the expert reader is engaged in the same type of process as the untrained reader, only unconsciously.

This is a difficult issue. I would surmise that in many cases of what we call “intuition”, something happens on the unconscious level. I believe that this also holds for some cases of “easy reading” and that some of these unconscious processes may rightly be called “interpretation”.

Interestingly, van Woudenberg seems to accept some sort of unconscious interpretation when he discusses the view that all reading involves interpretation. (199) Surprisingly, he *accepts* this view. He argues that *disambiguation* is always an interpretative endeavor; and disambiguation may occur (and, in fact, it often does) in an implicit, automatic way. (205) There is, to put it cautiously, a certain tension between this statement and the above claim that only conscious efforts to overcome difficulties of understanding should count as acts of interpretation.

In **Chapter 9** (“Knowledge through Interpretation (2)”), the author discusses, among other things, “holistic textual act interpretation”, “reconstruction”, and a reader-response theory of interpretation. (208)

Van Woudenberg (rightly) states “that there are holistic textual acts, as I shall call them – acts that are performed by the production of textual wholes such as entire articles, chapters, books, poems, and essays [...]” (208) Holistic textual act interpretations “are attempts to state the holistic textual act intentions of an author.” (212)

Another kind of interpretation – which is particularly important for philosophy – is “reconstruction”. Reconstruction is called for when a text is “opaque”. A text may be “opaque” because it is difficult to determine the structure of its arguments, because it contains underdeveloped thoughts or because it is ill-structured. (218)

Reader-response theories of interpretation may be characterized, roughly, as follows: interpretation is not an attempt to grasp the meaning of a text which is determined prior to, and independently of, the reader’s response. Rather, the reader *generates* the text’s meaning through her interpretation.

Unsurprisingly, van Woudenberg rejects reader-response theories of interpretation. His target is Stanley Fish’s version of a reader-response theory. Van Woudenberg’s argument in this context is basically a commonsense argument. Fish’s reader-response theory is “unbelievable” because it entails the denial of a number of commonsense assumptions, namely:

- (A1) Texts or text parts are bearers of meanings; meanings are properties of texts or of parts thereof.
- (A2) A text’s author’s meaning doesn’t change over time; it is fixed at the time of the production of the text.
- (A3) Readers with epistemic interests should not project their own ideas onto the text but yield to the norm of getting at the meanings of texts.
- (A4) Texts and readers are, metaphysically speaking, different things. (224)

Van Woudenberg asserts that “[a] number of the claims that Fish considers and makes fly in the face of common sense: they deny, directly or by implication, (A1) – (A4).” (231) Since Fish provides no convincing arguments for these violations of commonsense, his reader-response theory should be rejected. (231f.)

I share with van Woudenberg the rejection of reader-response theories. However, van Woudenberg’s discussion of Fish’s theory strikes me as violating the principle of charity. At several points, he misconstrues Fish’s views. Consider: “One problem is that Fish doesn’t say what notion of meaning he is using. But the most likely candidate is what I have called

author's meaning, or something in the neighborhood." (227) This seems to me to be a gross misinterpretation. Fish is not talking about *author's meaning* when he claims that meaning is the product of interpretation. Because of this misunderstanding, van Woudenberg erroneously believes that Fish rejects his principle (A2). But Fish does not claim that a text's *author's meaning* may change over time. Rather, according to Fish, "author's meaning" is – at best – the product of one particular interpretation (namely, the author's) among many (possible and/or actual) interpretations. Fish simply denies that the author's communicative intentions bring into being a fixed and stable objective meaning. One may reject this claim (as I do); but it is unfair to ascribe to Fish the view that author's meaning (in van Woudenberg's sense) may change over time. Also consider the following:

What Fish now believes entails that interpretation is responsible for the existence (i) of the text that is John Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* [sic!], (ii) of me and many other readers of the *Essay*, and (iii) of the author, John Locke, himself. I take this to be a sufficient *reductio ad absurdum* of the belief that Fish claims to have now. (231)

I take Fish to claim the following: (i) Interpretations are responsible for the existence of the *meanings* of Locke's essay; but, of course, interpretations are not responsible for the string of symbols that gives rise to these interpretations. Since, as Fish uses the term "text", a text is a complex of meanings, a meaning structure, and not a complex of symbols, text – in Fish's sense of "text" – is indeed the product of interpretation. (ii) Fish does not, of course, claim that interpretations bring into existence René van Woudenberg, or any other reader. He rather claims that a reader, as a reader (i. e., under the description of a reader) comes into existence only through interpretation. That is to say, reading is always interpretation. (iii) Fish surely does not intend to say that John Locke came into being through someone's interpretation of the *Essay* (or any other of Locke's writings). Rather, I take his view to be one of the following (or perhaps both): (i) In a sense, the readers are the authors (for they bring about complexes of meanings through their interpretations); and since readers are the products of interpretation (see above), authors are also the products of interpretation. (ii) The author in the traditional sense (e. g., John Locke) becomes an author only once the strings of symbols he produces are interpreted. (But note that one and the same person, e. g. John Locke, may have the role of a reader/interpreter of his own "text" as well.)

Each of the claims that I ascribe to Fish in my above interpretation may be questioned, of course, and one may object to each that they violate commonsense views. But this is not the same as ascribing to Fish the nonsense voiced by van Woudenberg in the above-quoted passage from p. 231.

Moreover, it strikes me as a bit too hasty to simply dismiss Fish's concept of interpretation as utterly outlandish. There are indeed various concepts of interpretation in use; and Fish's is one of them. It may be that it is not widely used, at least not among "common people"; but this, by itself, is no reason to dismiss it as unintelligible or utterly useless.

As I see it, at the bottom of the disagreement between author-intentionalists like van Woudenberg (and me) and anti-author-intentionalists like Fish lies a metaphysical question that deserves further investigation: Is there such a thing as an objective meaning of linguistic entities? Do strings of signs have meanings as objective properties? This question, however, goes beyond the scope of van Woudenberg's book.

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