

How to Write a Critical Review

In recent years there has been a discussion about the *raison d'être* of the genre of review. As a matter of fact a number of scholars have come around to questioning the legitimacy of the review, because they have seen much misuse of this instrument. The genre of review has traditionally had a given place in scientific journals, helping the busy scholar, who is increasingly in lack of time to keep abreast of all that is published even within his own field of research, to get an idea of what is afoot: new areas of research, new questions, new attempts at answering old and new questions, and occasionally an interesting product of research.

The authors' profile has been enhanced by 'positive' reviews, opening up greater opportunities for scholarly work, advancement in position, and influence. And not least, the publishers have profited by the increased sales. We may then agree that the genre of review—when 'positive'—has done much for author and publisher.

Now leaving aside author and publisher and their respective gains in fame or in lucre, the question is, how much has the review done for the advancement of Truth, of scientific Truth? Ideally, a scientific book (or an article) ought to be written not for the author to get a better position—as is usually the case today—nor for the publisher to pocket more, but in order to serve the interests of science and progress in the subject. But how many authors today write for science and how many publishers publish impelled by love for Truth. Indeed, the exigencies that are there and the hard competition make almost all decisions in the art of publishing have as the central point of reference mammon's tangible results. Naturally, the publishers must make things go round in order to continue to 'serve science' with the sweat of their authorial *andrapoda*. However, nothing of all this answers the question posed above: how is Truth served by reviews? What should an ideal review look like? If it is positive, it helps author and publisher; if negative, it ruins them both. But which of them serves science? The first, the second, both, or none?

This question is more complex than that. First, the first demand is that the Reviewer and his review are critical. Many Reviewers—as, indeed, many scholars—have misunderstood the meaning of the Greek terms ‘criticism’ and ‘critical’ (κριτική). They think that these terms bear the sense of ‘negative remarks’. ‘Criticism’ means the ability to *sift and weigh evidence* and to make *right judgements*, whether negative or positive! The question, therefore, is: “Does a given review satisfy the scientific demands of a *truly critical* review—critical in its proper, scientific sense, in which a judgement corresponds accurately and in right proportion to both the merits and the demerits of a book?”

Second, the demand for scientific Truth is not an onus that is to be laid only on the Author; it is equally an onus to be placed on the Reviewer. For the Reviewer at least does not have the same press on himself to achieve recognition and advancement by his review as the Author has by his monograph. The Reviewer is the Judge. And as a Judge, the Reviewer must be unimpeachable. It is his duty to administer justice. The readers demand it. This, of course, implies that the Judge is well versed in the rules of the game as well as in the specialties of the case, and his overriding interest is scientific, objective Truth and nothing else. He must judge the Author with fairness and integrity. Whether the result will be a positive review or a negative review is beside the point. A good review is a review that corresponds with the merits or demerits of the Author! The ordinary judge, too, sometimes will acquit and sometimes will condemn. If the accused is guilty, it is not the judge’s fault that he is condemned. But if the accused is guiltless, and is condemned, then we have to do with a corrupt, unjust judge. A fair, critical, and just review, therefore, is neither a positive nor a negative review. It is a review that corresponds with what the Author and his book deserve, whether it is praise or blame. I wonder how many reviewers fulfill this criterion! I have read adulating reviews, where the reviewer was in a dependent relation to the reviewed author. And I have read negative reviews, where the reviewer felt sufficiently independent of the Author as not to fear any reprisals. Neither the one nor the other have anything to do with scientific Truth. They are degenerate forms of this genre.

The Reviewer should be acquainted with the subject treated in the reviewed book. But ideally he should not have a stake in the matter.

Otherwise, he is likely to fall victim to his instinct of self defence and self-preservation. A Reviewer who succumbs to that has lost the right to write a review. A Reviewer should be self-critical and in his decisions and comments constantly ask himself whether he is being honest with himself and the Author on whom he passes judgement. It goes without saying that the Reviewer's presentation of the thesis / theses and argumentation of the Author must be such that the Author will recognize his book, his thought and his expression, and say "Yes, that is my book"! Only then can the Reviewer proceed to advance his criticisms, and during the process, he must take care that his criticisms correspond with the Author's claims factually and are no twisted misrepresentations of the Author's meaning.

Naturally, a Reviewer is not a robot; he has feelings and preferences and views of his own, standpoints and commitments that sometimes clash with the views of the reviewed Author. The trick is how to keep these personal, subjective preferences in check, when writing about another Author. Failure to self-control here may result in a review that tells more about the Reviewer than about the Reviewed Author¹.

Sometimes, however, the Reviewer may have a professional interest to protect. What should one do in this case? Should he desist from writing a review of a book that undermines much of one's thesis? Should he acknowledge that he had erred? Or should he fight, using any means available, not even shrinking from misrepresentation? Unfortunately, some authors chose the last avenue. They decide to misrepresent the reviewed author's thesis and arguments in order to devalue the book and save their skin².

¹ This is, evidently, the case with Dr Moses Silva's 'review' in the *Westminster Theological Journal*. This gentleman made it his habit to seek for the most unnatural interpretation of my words, concoct his own reconstruction of what I supposedly had written, then present it as my thesis and criticize it! As I showed in my Response (published in the same Journal), he hardly ever interpreted my words in a natural way, let alone in the way intended by me. The whole review was a gross misrepresentation of my meaning. No doubt Silva had his reasons for doing that, as becomes obvious in his Postscript to which I made a detailed Reply.

² This appears to be the case with Dr Buist Fanning. As is well-known, he, along with others, has engaged in the investigation of Tense and Aspect. My book took up this subject in connection with another author, and explained how Greeks of all

times (beginning with the ancient grammarians all the way to Neohellenic grammarians) have dealt with this subject. It found, moreover, a number of serious inadequacies in the claims that have been advanced, claims that fly in the face of both the natural users of the language and the ancient texts themselves, such as mistranslations and misconstruals of the texts, thereby introducing confusion. It is understandable that Fanning should be unhappy with such criticism that partly applied to his own hypothesis, and feel that a central pillar of his work was knocked down.