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A Response to Peter Ochs

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In his carefully argued "Reflections on the Rules of Textual Reasoning," Peter Ochs reminds us that The Society for Textual Reasoning (TR) is already some twelve years old. TR has provided a variety of forums –an electronic journal, presentations and panels at academic conferences– for a variety of people invested in the study of Jewish philosophy and texts within contexts shaped by the culture and theories of "postmodernism." Its most free-wheeling venue has been an online mailing list where participants have addressed a bewildering host of issues and arguments in a spirit that borders somewhere between deep camaraderie and mild irritation and hostility. In his essay, Peter has sought to move TR to the next level, as it were. He presents a three-stage method to come to methodological clarity regarding the rules and standards by which TR generates a discourse particular to the interface between Jewish texts, philosophy, and postmodernity. In doing so, I think he overlooks some basic points about on-line networks. At the same time, I found the brilliance of his proposal to rest not on this or that particular content, but on the way the form of the argument turned at least this critic into an unwitting accomplice.

Peter's proposal rests on three steps or stages. He devotes the 1 st stage to the collection of a loose set of "rules" from the ad hoc discussions that

have heretofore appeared in the chat-group online. He now suggests a 2nd stage in the operation of TR. This would involve choosing a set of "standards" (i.e. ideal portraits or pictures) and use them to assess the discussions that have appeared to date. A 3rd stage would involve the application of these "standards" back to the ad hoc rules from the first stage in order to derive sets of refined and self-reflexive rules by which to do TR at the various levels of discourse at which it operates (midrashic, academic, communal, etc.).

I will admit that reading and responding to Peter's essay presented me a very serious problem. At first, I found myself deeply at odds with the entire idea of rules and standards. But the very act by which I wanted to reject the specific rules proposed by Peter only worked to reinforce the more general form of rules and standards. To reject the particular picture of TR presented by Peter requires one to create one's own –which only goes to prove Peter's point about the general need to come to some formal clarity regarding TR and its *modus operandi*.

I.

I cannot help but think that the rules and standards proposed by Peter reflect a deep, but ultimately impossible desire to form TR into a community. Indeed, I do not want to underestimate the importance of trying to figure out what we all share with each other and why many of us might have found in TR, not just a forum for obtuse debate, but an important part of our daily lives. Peter's attempt to create such a community builds not on the basis of abstract and apriori principles, but pragmatically, on the basis of actual interactions that have occurred online. His own attempt to think about TR and the modes of inquiry that shape its practice represents a bold, provocative, and fruitful step. Nevertheless, I am not sure it will work. The reasons why speak not just to the nature of TR as a whole, but to the state of "the picture" in this postmodern period (or if one prefers, this current stage in the history of modernity).

Peter's interest in rules rests on a particular notion of standard. As Peter defines it, a standard constitutes an "ideal portrait," a "shared portrait" At one point, he adds parenthetically: "and it really is a picture." It is here that my own critique of his proposal begins.

This reference to "pictures" requires careful scrutiny, since at least in the field of art–from which so much postmodernism draws–there are no hard and fast rules or standards by which one might agree about pictures. This stands in marked contrast to the period of High Modernism in post-war America, one dominated by the paintings of a Pollack or a Rothko and the critical canons set out by Clement Greenberg. Once upon a time, before the explosion of Pop Art in the 1960s, the doyens of the art world enjoyed a shared consensus about what a picture should look like: abstract and non-representational, self-referential, big, flat, etc. Today, however, styles in art are marked by a profound and radical eclecticism. Artists freely mix and match representational and non-representational figures and work beyond and across historically defined aesthetic media. In effect, there are no clear-cut rules that define representation and its method.

TR has been characterized by a similar give-and-take and mix-and-match, combining varied intellectual, ideological, religious, and political commitments. This has contributed to the vitality and even to the frequent oddity that has marked its operation. Given this, I do not quite understand how the members of TR will ever want or be able come to a set of rules that define the act of textual reasoning. As Peter himself admits, "Depending upon the standards it has adopted, the community may decide to make its rules clear-cut and highly directive or vague and open to various sorts of interpretation." I understand how certain types of rules are sometimes open to interpretation. But I remain unsure how a "rule" can remain vague and still remain a rule. This possibility, I am sure, rests on a theoretical literature (logic, semiotics, game theory) that Peter knows quite well and I do not.

Still, I wish Peter had been more forthcoming as to his own intent. The late admission that rules might be vague and open to interpretation does not jibe with the rules that he himself provisionally set out in the first half of the essay. After all, TR requires "personal acquaintance," that it build

upon a kind of textual eros, that a TR member must speak as a member of some kind of community, that we address "real problems in the Jewish community today," that "personal and communal concerns interrupt academic inquiry," that we seek to make "normative claims," that "the general form of rabbinic jurisprudence remains prototypical," and that we have to come to some agreement about these standards.

And yet, Peter's aesthetic aside has this going for it. The very idea of a picture in its most general "form" works to solicit debate on the part of those who might not agree with the specific "contents" defining the particular picture that Peter developed. He has developed one kind of picture: TR as a more or less coherent, intimate, and engaged community formed around basic and overlapping sets of common purpose. To contest this picture requires one to propose a counter-image of one's own.

II.

With this in mind, it seems far more likely to me that TR will continue on as it has: a set of freewheeling conversations whose participants will as often as not remain strangers to each other, who violate the set of standards, values, and commitments held by each other. For that reason, I do not think TR neither constitutes nor should constitute a "community" per se. Without wanting to contest the need for loose rules restricting certain kinds of hostile expression, I do not believe in discourse-generating standards online. To my eye, TR works more like a *Gesellschaft* (a far-flung society composed of disparate members) and not like the *Gemeinschaft* that Peter seems to desire. That's why I think it's a pity the group changed its name from "The Postmodern Jewish Philosophy Network" (although perhaps it could have been called a Text- Philosophy Network). In a post quoted by Peter, Ira Stone suggested that the previous name put too high an emphasis on philosophy. But to me, the term postmodern suggests not just Levinas and Derrida, but Andy Warhol, Las Vegas, and television–i.e. the world in which we actually live, a world of loosely coordinated networks, defined by a process by which one jumps from point to point, like in a hypertext.

In contrast, the very name "The Society for Textual Reasoning" has something contrived about it. The name demands the types of tortured definition that networks never need. Unlike "Postmodern Jewish Text-Philosophy Network" the meaning of "Textual Reasoning" does not define itself. And in not clearly defining itself, it does not immediately open itself to others out the group. It does not communicate, but sounds needlessly esoteric, forced, cryptic, even cult-like. The words "textual" and "reasoning" suggest, but never name a unified set of text and methodology around which we all have equal access and investments. The word "society" complicates the picture even more by suggesting the need for a set of rules, the ultimately artificial clarity of which networks do not enjoy and from which they are free.

Certainly, the dynamics that shape TR and bind it together deserves the serious inquiry that Peter has given it. I also do not think that this means that life online has to mean what it often means, "anything goes." I would not remain a member of a network in which members regularly abused each other verbally. Indeed, I know of at least one instance when a member has been thrown off the network for that very reason.

But can standards of basic human decency generate a discourse? I don't think so. Such standards ("Love your neighbor as yourself," Kant's categorical imperative) do not generate the kind of positive rules that define games like chess or soccer, or the rules that Peter has suggested in the first part of his essay. At best, the rules that govern TR are "discourse-preventing" rules. They delineate a border of verbal civility, the type of names we do not call each other, perhaps even the types of texts and rituals we do not regularly explore (Christian, Islamic, etc.). I may very well be wrong, but I do not think we will be able to come up with "discourse-generating" rules that determine the way one moves from point to point, utterance to utterance, topic to topic, text to text.

For example, Peter recalls in great depth the summer 2000 discussion about the "postmodernism of Vice-Presidential candidate Joseph Lieberman." It roiled TR, shedding a lot of light on a number of issues, but also a lot of silliness. Much of it was tongue in cheek, but some of us got offended. Some found the remarks of others absurd and off the point. Still

others may have found the whole debate patently ridiculous. For her part (Peter cites her post), Gesine Palmer wrote from Germany registering the surprise of a European as to how a conversation about an American politician skipped between Marx, postmodern architecture, mechitzas, rabbinic text interpretation, and feminism. Indeed, as I remember it, the conversation worked best under two conditions: when members jumped from point to point in no obvious order, and when they violated "standards" held by others, without resorting to personal and verbal abuse. So perhaps Peter has it right. These might constitute the germ of rules that generate discourse. In the imperative form, they might read: "Jump from point to point!" or "Violate the standards of other people!" But if these indeed constitute discourse-generating rules, they have nothing to do with community per se. They are the rules of a far-flung network with far-flung interests.