

**RETHINKING
ETHICS
THROUGH
HYPERTEXT**

**DOMINIC
GARCIA**

Rethinking Ethics Through Hypertext

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Rethinking Ethics Through Hypertext

By

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Preface

Among many other uses, the text has always been one of the major media for communicating desires and interests and in judging whether moral acts are 'right' or 'wrong'. This, however, requires an interpretation of the text and a better understanding of the concept of hermeneutics. Discourse ethics, as a meta-text, has provided the means by which one could come to judge whether particularistic desires and interests are morally 'right' or 'wrong'. This mode of communication has always been carried out through the physicality of unilinear writing.

This study explores the shortcomings of such mode of unilinearity and its effect on discourse ethics in particular. This will in turn bring to question judgements that are interpreted and recorded as acceptable or unacceptable by society at large. In due course, the physicality of the text will be challenged and will have a resonating effect on the discipline of hermeneutics as traditionally conceived and understood. Ultimately this study will push the reader to conclude that the unilinear mode of writing may not be effective enough for an exhaustive expressability.

Hypertext writing, or what is here called the Multiplicity of Discursive Paths, is introduced as an alternative to this long-standing tradition of unilinearity. This Multiplicity of Discursive Paths is intended to give the individual a better emancipatory expressability – uncastigated by the chronology of a rigid method of expression – so much needed in a post-truth culture. It is argued that such mode of expression will give discourse ethics, as a process of determining 'right' from 'wrong' moral actions, a better exhaustive expressability. This will result in contributing to a profounder way of perceiving justice and a broader way of understanding hermeneutics in the future. It shall be argued that pedagogical practices in hypertext writing may be beneficial for those institutions where the issuance of justice is so important and necessary.

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Introduction

Setting up the Scene: *On the Way to Hypertext*

The main purpose of this book is to show how interpretations are crucial to the way we understand texts and people. With this in mind, however, it is important to note that the forms we utilize to reconstruct the meaning of an action or a text are dominated by unilinear logic creating, in the process, one interpretation that is better than all others. This means, in turn, that one single method of interpretation – *just one* – is the best route to that ideal interpretation.

This unilinear form is not only the product of a long philosophical tradition: it also coincides with the scientific method which itself determines a particular way of reasoning. I would like to refer, in fact, to this traditional mode of writing as the scientific and the metaphysical mode of writing. One might think that the old format of unilinearity in writing is the best form of expression. However, one should also consider the possibility that this traditional format may privilege a particular way of reasoning to the detriment of a more pluralistic interpretative reasoning.

It will be worthwhile to gain some familiarization with the history of writing techniques in order to understand the format of unilinearity and thus draw attention to the fact that this format – while admittedly efficient – is just one out of other possibilities which individuals may opt for as a means of discursive expression. It is essential to emphasize, however, that this project's *raison d'être* is not to elaborate on the history of writing *per se*. It seeks to demonstrate, rather, that hypertext offers the possibility of returning not only to earlier pluralist forms of writing but also to, in addition, enhanced forms of reasoning which will, in turn, have a spillover effect on the future of ethical deliberations.

According to Crystal's *How Language Works* (2005), languages may vary insofar as the direction in which they are written is concerned. Thus the direction may be from left to right or right to left, as in Arabic, top to bottom, as in traditional Japanese, or the less common form of bottom to top, as occurs in some forms of Ancient Greek. In the boustrophedon style more than one direction is involved and lines alternate directions. This direction resembles 'ox-turning' – like an ox pulling a plough, moving first in one direction and then in another. Also known to us is the use of other conventions such as the vertical arrangement used in signs and on book spines. Throughout the ages the materials used to write on

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have varied greatly and have included animal bone, rock, clay, wax, pottery, cloth, papyrus, parchment, paper, film and, more recently, a widespread array of electronic devices. The heavy proliferation of the use of electronic devices is of utmost significance to our present discussion.

The point of our focus is unilinearity. This style of writing is responsible for the organization of our mental activities. Although thoughts may come to us in multifarious ways, the text transforms these multifarious thoughts – these multiple paths of ways of thinking – into a single path, that of a unilinear discourse. This means that our ideas are tailored to meet the organizational requirements of a logical unilinear style.

This unilinear style contains deceptively seductive features that entice the individual to automatically take a writing path that forces him or her to make a conclusion or adopt a position and a perspective about an issue. The seductive/teleological aspect of such a form of writing is to be found in the fact that the speaker will feel compelled to end with *one* particular conclusion. This is particularly appealing in the subject that I wish to reflect on, namely, discourse ethics. Upon reflection one may ask whether such a unilinear infrastructure of discourse is a deliberate choice of the speaker or whether it is imposed upon the individual's discursive expression from early childhood.

The fact is that we are used to such a form of writing. According to Crystal, the minuscule has been with us since the seventh–eighth century AD, and the dual alphabet, that is, the combination of capital letters and small letters in a single system, dates back to the Emperor Charlemagne – 742–814 AD, thus giving rise to the name Carolingian minuscule. Children learn this form of handwriting at school, and we know of no other way of expressing ourselves when it comes to handwriting. This undoubtedly works in that it is both easy to use and fast. The Carolingian minuscule was 'widely acclaimed for its clarity and attractiveness, and exercised great influence on subsequent handwriting styles throughout Europe' (Crystal, 2005, p. 101).

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1975/1991) undertakes a meticulous study of what he calls techniques of normalization. One could hardly anticipate the philosophical relevance of such a book as it starts by describing ways and methods of torture and ends with how the self is transformed into a docile 'being,' able to follow an ordered way of walking, sleeping and writing as well as other various forms of regimentation. The significance of *Discipline and Punish*, although still written in a unilinear form, lies in the fact that Foucault undertook a study that was unobserved (*or* ignored?) by most intellectuals. His studies have, however, proven to be important for understanding the notion of power and its relation to knowledge. This present study of *unilinearity* and its implications on interpreting actions and events of ethical nature hints at the way we have become normalized in our interpretation of reality, whose interpretation also includes making ethical judgements. Foucault might have left out an important aspect of writing – its unilinear structure. This book intends to revisit such a technique with the intention of disrupting the orderly way in which we think about ethics.

This project will adopt the stance that unilinearity is a regimented form of discourse – a confinement. Are there ways we can sidestep this regimented style of

unilinearity, and if there are, how will they transform our ways of thinking? What implications will this have on the art of interpretation, especially ethical interpretation? This project will consider hypertextuality as an extension of our mental ability to deliberate and the way such a technique could affect interpretation as well as the (in)ability or the reluctance to pass judgement without having a proper panoramic view of the diverse intentions and desires involved. The individual might find it awkward to choose between either formalistic ethics or particularistic ethics preferring, instead, to work with both. Through hypertext this expressibility could be made manifest. Could this lead us to a remediation of doing ethics? This project will argue in the affirmative.

According to Landow (1992) hypertext can be conceptualized as ‘blocks of words (or images) linked electronically by multiple paths, chains, or trails in an open-ended, perpetually unfinished textuality described by the terms link, network, web, and path’ (Landow, 1992, p. 3). This concept resembles the one in Barthes’ book *S/Z* (1970/1974). Barthes forges a philosophical rendition to hypertext when analyzing the short story *Sarrasine* by Honoré de Balzac. In my view, Landow rightly sees a number of things in common between hypertextuality as a concept and Barthes’ analysis (1974) of this short novel:

In this ideal text, the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signification, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable; the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language. (pp. 5–6)

While describing the conceptualization of hypertext, Landow also quotes from Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Foucault describes the text as a network in that books are references to other books.

The term hypertext was coined as early as the 1960s by Theodor H. Nelson. According to Nelson (1981):

By ‘hypertext’ I mean non-sequential writing – text that branches and allows choices to the reader, best read at an interactive screen. As popularly conceived, this is a series of text chunks connected by links which offer the reader different pathways. (p. 0/2)

Owing to the fact that this book is directly connected to discourse ethics, any reference made to hypertext refers to written text and does not include, therefore, that branch of hypermedia which embodies the use of visual information, sound and animation except for one solitary example taken from Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* which will be explored in Chapter 2. While this project limits the concept of hypertextuality to just text, I do not exclude, however, the idea that hypermedia,

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which Landow includes in his description of hypertext, may prove to be beneficial in moral decision making. We could also here recall Vilém Flusser's early experiments with hypertext which I shall also make mention of in Chapter 2.

I shall be focusing on hypertext as a writing tool that is constantly changing epistemology – 'writers in these areas offer evidence that provides us with a way into the contemporary episteme in the midst of major changes' (Landow, 1992, p. 2). Experiments are constantly being carried out in order to discover the potentiality of this technology not only in the field of science but also in the field of humanities. The objective of this book is squarely focused on the latter as it merges hypertextual writing with the process of moral decision making.

In dealing with the concept of hypertext as an abstract possibility reference will also be made to its utopian element. In other words, addressing this will allow me to propose what I think are the potentialities for hypertext in the handling of ethics or, more specifically, discourse ethics. The scope is to engage the reader in a reflective exercise insofar as the potentiality of hypertextuality is concerned. Hypertext is here being used as a *tool* that provides the reader with a better understanding of how to judge actions. The act of judging actions is an exercise which implicitly demands a consideration of ethical issues. By making use of the word *tool*, I do not mean that hypertext is here considered as something external to the self. On the contrary, I am considering hypertext to form part of the person that we are – it is more of an implosion of the *technical* with the *self* rather than something which is alien to the self.¹ However, it is important to keep in mind that this was not the original reason why hypertext was explored. It is crucial to point out that hypertext was originally conceived to facilitate the technical aspect of the organization of information. In an article titled *As We May Think*, Vannevar Bush, as early as 1945, wrote that publications:

extended far beyond our present ability to make real use of the record. The summation of human experience is being expounded at a prodigious rate, and the means we use for threading through the consequent maze to the momentarily important item is the same as was used in the days of square-rigged ships. (p. 101)

It is here going to be argued that hypertext could provide a far-reaching effect over and above the basic purpose of storing information. This is, in fact, an explorative study into its use when dealing with ethics, particularly discourse ethics. It will be argued that hypertext, as a technique, may eventually become crucial in processing judgements and interpreting ethical actions in the future.

But first we have to break free from the unilinearity that hounds hypertexts. We have to find ways how, given the overwhelming dominance of hypertextual writing and reading, one can break free from the hierarchy imposed by unilinearity. I am suggesting that by improving the technology currently in use,

¹I am here adopting the philosophy of Bernard Stiegler's notion of the *who* in relation to the *what*. See Stiegler (1994/1998).

expression could be redeemed from its regimental and hierarchical finality. Unilinearity has taught us to be rigid and hierarchical, with norms established through this mode making it impossible, at least until now, to break free from what I call the *metaphysics of writing or discourse*. In Bolter's (2001) words:

Even today our major forms of nonfiction – the essay, the scientific article, and various genres of bureaucratic reports – are expected to be hierarchical in organization as they are linear in presentation. This is the paradigm for scholarly and scientific as well as business and technical writing. A scholarly essay should lead the reader step by step through its argument, making clear how each piece of evidence is relevant. The backbone of a technical report is supposed to be a careful outline of topics, which not only shows how each piece fits, but also directs the reader's movement through its parts. Whether we are told to write deductively or inductively, the result is still supposed to be a hierarchy of ideas and a carefully controlled reading. (p. 105)

This is the present reality of how judgements and interpretations are handled and how this reality informs ethics, specifically discourse ethics. The task of my project is to give the reader some hope to judge, interpret and handle ethics more effectively. This will transform the nature of judgement by becoming more sensitive towards difference, and by becoming, perhaps, more aware of our own psyche. We may therefore understand ourselves better and become more accepting of incongruities in our own nature.

Hypertext, as a technique, is not to be considered as external to the human as such but is to be looked upon as an incorporation of the human – that which will give rise to a transformation in the human. Rethinking ethics through hypertext implies disclosing that which is intimate in the individual – the ability to rationalize upon whether actions are 'right' or 'wrong' – to the prosthetic of hypertext. According to Stiegler (1994/1998), prosthesis

does not supplement something, does not replace what would have been there before it and would have been lost: it is added....The prosthesis is not a mere extension of the human body; it is the constitution of this body qua 'human'...it is not the 'means' of the human but its end. (pp. 152–153)

By prosthetic I, like Stiegler, do not mean something which is exterior to the individual but which is, rather, a disclosure of what was already there, logged within our mental capacity. I believe that Stiegler's notion of technics is ideal when it comes to explaining the concept inbuilt in hypertext – hypertext is what the mind is and forms part of the *who* without, at the same time, dismissing the reality of its *what*. It is rather a process of becoming aware – 'Neither one precedes the other, neither is the origin of the other, the origin being then the coming into adequacy [con-venance] or the simultaneous arrival of the

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two – which are in truth the same considered from two different points of view’ (Stiegler, 1994/1998, p. 152).

I am here borrowing the notions of the *who* and the *what* from Stiegler – ‘the “who” and the “what” are named respectively: the human, and the technical’ (Stiegler, 1994/1998, p. 134). The ‘*who* is nothing without the what, and conversely’ (Stiegler, 1994/1998, p. 141). The human can be considered as the interior, while the technical as the exterior but ‘[t]he interior and the exterior are the same thing, the inside is the outside, since man (the interior) is essentially defined by the tool (the exterior)’ (Stiegler, 1994/1998, p. 141). As described above, my take on the notion of hypertext, as a tool, partakes with the interior – with that which makes the individual a complete rational being able to deliberate in a most exhaustive way. According to Stiegler (1994/1998):

Its body and brain are defined by the existence of the tool, and they therefore become indissociable. It would be artificial to consider them separately, and it would therefore be necessary to study technics and its evolution just as one would study the evolution of living organisms. (p. 150)

This would potentially mean a change in the way discourse ethics is handled. While unilinearity is rigid and hierarchical and results in a restrictive form of discourse ethics, hypertextuality presents us with a new *what* that transforms the *who* that can evolve into an improved deliberative potential to serve a post-truth era – the present.

According to Bolter, Ted Nelson claimed that ‘hypertext was natural to the mind’ (Bolter, 2001, p. 42). According to Bolter, Nelson suggested that ideas and thought processes are not sequential (Bolter, 2001, p. 42) and also argued that ‘hypertext was natural or true to our tradition of literacy.’ (Bolter, 2001, p. 42) Bolter further observes that ‘hypertext becomes a transparent form that actually captures and reveals the structure of the underlying written record’ (Bolter, 2001, p. 43). This has important philosophical implications. As will be explored further in Chapter 4, this could mean transforming the way we defined ‘being’ in its metaphysical framework. Hypertextuality could provide the individual with a new way of perceiving the self.

While conventional writing material can only supply us with a two-dimensional device on which we can express our thoughts, digital texts can supply us with a three-dimensional way of writing. This may potentially furnish us with a profounder and more useful way of interpretation. The use of digital texts could make it possible for us to transgress unilinearity and express thought in a multidimensional way. The reader or the interpreter could be in a position of enriching his or her understanding in such a way that the narrowness of what is said on paper or voiced in discourse is overcome, with significant insight being gained into the different perspectives that a notion might have to offer. This may be marked as a post-revolutionary period – a time of breaking away from traditional expressions, offering us the chance to deconfine discourse from the politics of control. This project will ask whether this new infrastructure may

provide us with a new way of interpretation and meaning. If it does, what will the future of hermeneutical understanding be, especially when it involves ethics?² Through this mode of expression one can be in a position to voice one's authentic view and one's authentic desires in a better way.³ It is thus hoped that the Hegelian notion of actuality, which will be explored in Chapter 4, will be fully understood, with ethical interpretation reaping the ensuing benefits.

It is also believed that hypertextuality could help us eradicate ourselves from the ambiguities that may be present in discourse ethics. This does not mean that this project is a move towards a form of analytic philosophy in the style of logical positivism. On the contrary, the phrase *eradicate ourselves from ambiguities*, as used in this project, encourages the probability of profound interpretation, making the text more complex. It is believed, however, that *complexities* in ethical deliberation and in the eventual interpretation of whether an act is to be judged as 'right' or 'wrong' will result in a better way of exposing meaning and a better way of interpretation. The unilinearity of discourse evidently creates the kind of culture in which ambiguity may easily thrive. Austin's *A Plea for Excuses* (1956–1957) is, in fact, an important paper where the ambiguity of language is unequivocally exposed. This book will show how most of the time society is built on the ambiguity of language, an ambiguity that reproduces itself into the ambiguity of the text.

This study will be undertaken, first of all, as a means of encouraging the reader to be more sceptical of the *oversimplification* of ethical judgement made manifest through the mode of unilinear text, a mode which becomes a handy tool in the hands of those dubbed as competent speakers. The intention is to encourage the reader to ask what makes a speaker competent and to further question how such a degree of ambiguity could have made its way to the higher rankings of society under the direct scrutiny of that which is interpreted as historical fact. In other words, the matter that is subject to interpretation – the matter that comes to be the study of hermeneutical analysis – is only the product of the ambiguity of a language that is rigidly structured on what is clearly a unilinear form of writing. The result of such a dilemma is immediately evident in Lyotard's studies of justice. As will be discussed in Chapter 1, Lyotard maintains that injustice is the result of the lack of language available to the victim since the language he or she has access to is itself the product of a means of communication hitherto created to serve the needs of the dominant.

Here it is argued that while the digital text has been created to enhance performativity and thus benefit the powerful strata of society, it could also be used in the service of the powerless or the less powerful. It could allow them to take advantage of other paths alongside the one used by the competent speaker who is, invariably, representative of the dominant class. Although one may question the

²This future does not annihilate the agent. As I discuss in Chapter 4, the agent is still present in deliberations and judgements although I also retain the position that language is ontological.

³This will remind us of the philosophy of images in the Flusserian sense where, in our case the images of hypertext may articulate thought in a better way.

digital text's ability to provide more agency, *hypertext* as digital text becomes more democratic in the sense that it is more inclusive: it allows individuals more freedom and gives them more emancipatory power than the discursive form of our current legal system.⁴ This is possible precisely because it has a more redemptive potential – allowing an all-inclusive prospect that lays bare all intentions and interests – than the unilinear writing created for clarity's sake, ease and speed. The hypertextual considerations will evidently mark a paradigm shift in discourse ethics as we start to experience a more *actualized* form of ethical actions and desires. In conclusion, this book will reflect upon the Hegelian notion of *actuality* and ascertain how hypertext can play a better role in the realization of such notions. This book will thus make the case that through hypertext, desires may be better expressed and lead, as a result, to an exhaustive *actuality* – the 'condition which will exist when the reason which modern life prefigures is fully, as against imperfectly, realized' (Knowles, 2002, p. 69).

What is here referred to as the *metaphysics of the unilinear infrastructure of language* can be compared to the traditional metaphysical idiom of the Platonic style as the mode providing the only means to 'truth.' What can therefore be said of metaphysics, namely that it takes up the dominant traditional discourse of absolute 'truth,' can also be applied to traditional unilinear writing. The reason for this is that unilinear writing dominates all thought processes: thinking must be shaped in such a way as to accommodate the confines of the book – it is like furniture having to tailor its design in accordance with the tools one has rather than using tools to make or reconceptualize furniture.⁵

Referring to the Hegelian actualization process,⁶ one can say that a unilinear infrastructure is providing us with a rationalized understanding *in appearance only*. In actual fact, however, the unilinear infrastructure shatters the exhaustive possibility of an actualized expressibility.⁷ Furthermore, it superficially gives the impression that it is providing 'the patient insightful observers' (Stewart, 1996,

⁴Admittedly one needs to have a device at hand in order to be in a position to appreciate better what is described in this book. Here I give the theoretical/philosophical aspects and implications of hypertextual writing. I am presently working on the possibility of transforming this theoretical concept into a computer application that can be easily accessed from cell phones. This book is intended to be the launching pad and the theoretical foundation for this computer application. Such a device will be fully functional and depend on humans. This does not, however, mean that some actions cannot work independently from humans.

⁵I am here taking the *book* to be the main tool; however, the reader should be mindful of the fact that before the *book*, the alphabet is the primary tool as a source of expression. Consideration is given to the *book* as a tool because I am here trying to provoke the use of linearity.

⁶This will be dealt with in Chapter 4.

⁷This argument will be taken several times in this project as I think it is a very important feature of hypertext theory. Works such as Borges' *Garden of the Forking Paths* (1941) defying the concept of time, Perec's *Life: A User's Manual* (1978; transl. 1987) giving the possibility to expose every like a façade-less apartment block are all essential to my philosophy of hypertextual writing. This will be taken up in Chapter 2 of this project.