

## On Reading “Aspects of Reading”

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### Synopsis

In this paper I will share the impact of reading [Desa Markovic's 2021 paper 'Aspects of Reading'](#) in this journal, *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice* when I was a student family and systemic psychotherapist. I will discuss my academic journey and the way in which reading the paper helped me expand my initially linear way of understanding argument. I will make connections between the structure of the paper and a traditional Jewish form of textual exegesis, and will finish with some comments relating to the task of learning to read as it connects to Bateson's ideas about learning to learn. Through this article I will refer to the key paper as *Aspects* for brevity.

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### Learning To Read Systemically

I was invited to read *Aspects* in the middle of my intermediate level systemic training. Despite having completed a masters' degree in social work, the academic experience that had come to shape my young adulthood was my undergraduate degree at the London School of Economics. I took tremendous pleasure in having my thinking shaped in the analytical tradition of 'The Department of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method'. In seminars we would be taught to puzzle out whether a core philosophical argument was valid or not, and in essays our task would be to attempt to find further holes or contradictions (Blunt, 2014). This was the context into which my systemic education came. *Aspects* invited me to step away from this hyper-linear approach to argumentation and start to embrace a multi-faceted approach where the validity of logic was not the only noteworthy quality of a piece of writing.

Markovic introduces four 'aspects' for reading papers: the author's view, the reader's personal response, the critique, and self-reflexivity, and then the fifth area of 'limitations/multiple context influences'. Each of these distinct ways of reading a paper hold a subtlety different purpose. Markovic states that it is the coming together of these different perspectives that "gives validity to each by emphasising the distinctions

between them.” For example, the ‘the author’s view’ is the attempt to state the ‘objective’ argument of the paper which Markovic acknowledges is a non-systemic position in and of itself, but nevertheless an important one to argue from. Similarly, the fourth aspect of ‘self-reflexivity’ is important to consider for the practitioner’s own sake, but also because doing so “can enhance the position of critique” the reader seeks to make.

Earlier in my social work education I had been introduced to approaches that sought to critique singular dominant narratives. However, the difference in reading Markovic’s paper is that she does not seek to argue for this in a straightforward narrative way, but instead leads the reader through the experience of inhabiting different perspectives, by suggesting questions the reader should ask themselves. By way of comparison, Mc Kenny (2022) presents four distinct ways of reading the canonical ‘Hypothesizing - Circularity – Neutrality’ paper. (Selvini et al., 1980) One of his readings is at ‘the level of experience’ and he suggests that one intention of that paper was to have the reader experience a similar thing to what the Milan team may have wanted a family to experience during a traditional therapy session. I cannot know what Markovic’s intention was but in reading *Aspects* I felt I both understood her argument whilst also having an experience that I think embodied the argument she sought to make.

### Learning to Read Jewishly

In focussing on self-reflexivity, Markovic suggests asking oneself the question ‘how come I like these ideas?’ For me, I could not shake a particular religious association I made when I initially read *Aspects*. Growing up as a religious Jew, I remember sitting as a teenager in the living room of our community Rabbi, Laura Janner-Klaunser, whilst she introduced a small group of us to the study of *Talmud* (the multi-volume compendium of Jewish law, commentary, and story, dating from around 500CE, that is studied alongside the *Torah*). Although there are many ways to engage with a religious text, one traditional approach we were introduced to was a four-stage process that goes by the acronym *PaRDeS* – פַּרְדֵּס (which itself is a Hebrew word meaning orchard). In brief: The four levels of study are as follows: the ‘*peshat* - פְּשָׁט’ (the plain meaning), ‘*remez* - רֵמֵז’ (the hinted at meaning), ‘*drash* - דְּרָשׁ’ (the metaphorical or allegorical meaning) and ‘*sod* - סוֹד’ (the hidden or mystical meaning). Although arguments are made that the approach is far older, the mystic Moses de Leon, is thought to have formalised the method in the late 13th Century (Van der Heide, 1983).

One similarity between the Jewish *PaRDeS* approach, and Markovic’s systemic *Aspects* is that both assert that different meanings can be derived from a single text when the right method is put into practice. Both approaches imply that a text is never just one thing, and that the act of reading is essentially always an act of interpretation. Both approaches also imply that there is a function to reading and/or study beyond basic comprehension. It is clear that for Markovic the purpose of learning to critically evaluate systemic literature serves a purpose – to help develop the training therapist. Similarly, one of my favourite lines of Jewish wisdom from the Babylonian *Talmud* states that ‘the rabbis ask the question: which is greater, study or action?... All of them answered: study is greater, because study leads to action’ (Kiddushin 40b).

One important challenge to my comparison could be that in the Jewish *PaRDeS* hermeneutic there is a canon of Jewish religious texts that both relates to itself constantly, and also shares a coherent, albeit polyphonic, thread of traditional thought within it. In comparison, can we say that there is a

similar body of systemic writing that itself carries a coherent intellectual thread? It makes sense to search for a 'hidden' meaning in a Jewish text. Does the same follow in systemic literature?

Yet we do make implicit nods towards this idea. As a student family and systemic psychotherapist, my class participated in a guest lecture by Umberta Telfener. In response to a question about therapeutic technique she paused, and then said that although she had practiced as a therapist immediately after qualifying, it probably took her around eight further years before she really 'understood what systemic thinking was' (2022). It was a marvellously honest answer that I think intended to put us final-year students at ease, but on reflection it also suggested that Telfener thought there was some consistent thread 'of' systemic thinking to be understood – not simply a collection of articles and book chapters, but a sense of some intellectual constant that she started to understand eight years later. Perhaps, in line with my prior argument, the consistent spirit of systemic thinking is not some given content – but is method itself. The intellectual constant to be studied and explored is the way one studies, put differently, the way one learns to learn!

### Learning to Learn

Bateson put forward his position on learning through an appeal to logical types. He noted that, 'Learning I' occurs in the context of no contextual change where "all learning is of one logical type" (Bateson, 2000, p. 288). Yet, 'Learning I' is only really a feature of laboratory conditions, whilst appreciating difference is at the core of Bateson's idea about 'Learning II' (or 'deutero-learning') which is "a necessary preparation for behavioural disturbance" (Bateson, 2000, p. 296). Learning I exists where the choice is 'doing x' or 'not doing x', but for Learning II it is integral to recognise the illusion of this solution. A second-order change requires that the 'x or not x' paradigm is surpassed in favour of 'not x, but also not-not x' (Watzlawick et al., 2011). In order to do this, it needs to be understood that 'x or not x' is only one context for learning, and that others are possible. The proactive attempt to inhabit more than one perspective when reading a text, whether four Aspects or four levels of PaRDeS, is the embodiment of this Batesonian idea.

### To Practice

Where does all this reading and learning leave a practitioner in the messy world of therapy? In one sense, the embrace of Markovic's multiple perspectives supported my journey to embrace multiple perspectives whilst working with family systems. Yet it also helped me to bring forth more of myself, and to remember to hold dear my own cultural wisdom. Training as a family and systemic psychotherapist, initially felt like a task in separating myself from who I was before. Reading *Aspects* and drawing connections to the levels of *PaRDeS* helped to pull me back into the reality that I was only ever going to become the therapist I am, because I was a social worker, a philosophy student, a Jew, and much more besides.

*Aspects* also helped me to appreciate that practice must be informed by different kinds of knowledge. Rabbi Daniel Lichman teaches that Jewish indigenous wisdom relates to cycles of time. Through the daily experience of prayer, the weekly experience of shabbat (sabbath), the yearly experience of marking festivals, Judaism ensures distinct practices "that infuse the present moment of reality with

the truthfulness of the past guaranteeing a messianic - a redemptive - a hopeful future.” (Lichman, 2024, p. 36) By bringing my full self, with my own indigenous wisdom as a Jew, into my work as a therapist I can better meet families in whatever present moment of reality they find themselves in, whilst being able to hold onto the hopeful future, for them, and for us all.

## Conclusion

In this short article I have described my experience of reading Desa Markovic’s *Aspects of Reading*. In drawing a comparison between Markovic’s four lens schema, and the four levels of Jewish textual analysis known as *PaRDeS*, whilst appealing to Bateson’s notion of learning to learn, I sought to show that the coherent thread in systemic literature is one of approach, as opposed to content. For my own practice, in encountering *Aspects*, what started as a ‘how-to’ guide to reading, helped me to return to the methods of study of my own religious tradition, and in doing so, to bring forth indigenous wisdom that supports me to continue to hold onto hope for the families with whom I work today.

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