



Good Reading

Is Digital Culture Reducing Our Ability to Think Deeply?

MARK TALBOT | WHEATON COLLEGE

The first two chapters of Genesis portray us as embedded in creation. We and the land animals are *nephesh*—living, breathing, biological creatures. We, like they, have come from the ground (1:24–31; 2:7) and survive by eating other living things (1:29–30).¹

Yet according to those chapters we also transcend the rest of creation. Unlike everything else, God did not make us with a mere “Let there be.” After taking counsel with himself (1:26), he formed the first man’s body of dust from the ground and breathed into it the breath of life (2:7), making Adam a responsible person. He then gave him a special command (2:16–17) before blessing him and his wife by commanding them to reign benevolently over the other living creatures (1:28).

Humanity’s special status is generally recognized. Almost all Western philosophers have acknowledged it, with most grounding it not merely in some difference in degree from the other animals but in a genuine difference in kind. They have cited different grounds. For Aristotle, we share a life of nutrition and growth with plants and a life of perception with the animals, but we alone can live a life of reason. Other animals can’t be virtuous or vicious because “they have no universal judgment but only imagination and memory of particulars.”² Our capacity to form such judgments makes us “the best of the animals” and indeed different in kind

from them.³ Kant grounded the difference in our self-consciousness. Yet the result was the same:

The fact that the human being can have the “I” in his representations raises him infinitely above all other living beings on earth. Because of this he is a *person* ... [and thus] through rank and dignity an entirely different being from ... irrational animals.⁴

Empirical psychologists, among others, often stress our uniqueness, grounding it in our possession of language, our desire for emotional communion, our capacity to tell stories, or some other distinctively human trait.⁵

No matter what grounds it, we transcend all other living beings in being able to step back from immersion in the flow of things in order to consider, judge,

and act according to general principles. To whatever degree each of us can, God calls us to step back in this way.⁶

ture emphasizes information. It beckons us to focus primarily on the passing show, on spectacle not principle, and it tends to be addictive, as shown by airline travelers from toddlers on their tablets to adults with their Kindles and laptops.

The contrasts are scientifically confirmable by objectively measurable and diagnostically observable changes in the brain’s neurological networks.⁷ Digital culture develops the neural networks that enable sophisticated visual-spatial skills but not the crucial higher-order cognitive skills of reflection, inductive and deductive reasoning, critical thinking, and creative insight that are nurtured only by the painstakingly developed processes associated with deep reading. Nicholas Carr’s *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* plumbs how an

*Digital culture
beckons us to focus on
the passing show,
on spectacle not principle.*

internet-heavy diet starves these linear thought processes. Yet more is at stake. In *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*, Karen Swallow Prior puts flesh on one kind of deep reading, arguing that literary fiction forms us in ways that transcend even the life-orienting truths that the higher-order cognitive skills can bring. A regular diet of imaginative literature is both virtuous in itself—requiring attentiveness, patience, interpretive prudence, and enough temperance to make reading time in a world rife with distractions—and makes us more virtuous: “Just as water, over a long period of time, reshapes the land through which it runs,

and act according to general principles. To whatever degree each of us can, God calls us to step back in this way.⁶

Yet our propensity to step back is under threat, according to a spate of articles and books urging us not to lose our capacity for *deep reading*.

The threat arises from our transition from a print-based culture to a digital one. Paper and print flourished from Gutenberg’s invention of movable type until the introduction of the personal computer. It encouraged comprehension. It was immersive, enabling readers to withdraw temporarily from the perceptual world and get lost in books. Digital cul-

ture emphasizes information. It beckons us to focus primarily on the passing show, on spectacle not principle, and it tends to be addictive, as shown by airline travelers from toddlers on their tablets to adults with their Kindles and laptops.

The contrasts are scientifically confirmable by objectively measurable and diagnostically observable changes in the brain’s neurological networks.⁷ Digital culture develops the neural networks that enable sophisticated visual-spatial skills but not the crucial higher-order cognitive skills of reflection, inductive and deductive reasoning, critical thinking, and creative insight that are nurtured only by the painstakingly developed processes associated with deep reading. Nicholas Carr’s *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* plumbs how an

so too we are formed by the habit of reading good books well.”⁸

Maryanne Wolf’s *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World* may be the most balanced assessment of the potential gains and losses brought by the transition from print to digital culture. She avoids false “binary solutions”: the internet is not all bad, and paper-and-print is not all good. If you want a good laparoscopic surgeon, find a doctor who plays video games. In fact, most of the evidence for the cases Carr, Prior, and Wolf present is available on the internet. Yet reading these books is crucial to getting the full picture.⁹

Most of us had to learn to read deeply in order to earn our terminal degrees. Dicta like Proverbs 4:7—“The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom. *Though it cost all you have, get understanding*”—drive home the indispensability of deep understanding, which for embodied creatures requires expenditures of both our time and our treasure. Superficially contradictory statements like those found at Proverbs 26:4–5 can prompt us to read more critically and comprehensively. Moreover, Scripture must be read not merely intellectually but also *aesthetically* if we are to be properly formed by its characters’ plights. We must read it as we read great literary fiction in order for it to engage our imaginations so that we are lifted out of the mundane flow of things. Only then are we likely to begin considering, judging, feeling, and acting as God’s people.

In *Reader, Come Home*, Wolf relates how even she, a “researcher of reading and its changes in a digital culture,” was forced to confront whether she too had been changed by the internet. She realized her “grafted, spasmodic, online style, while appropriate for much of [her] day’s ordinary reading, had been transferred indiscriminately to all of [her] reading, rendering [her] former immersion in more difficult texts less and less satisfying.”¹⁰ Only deliberate and sustained effort recovered her loss.

The fact that God’s word is full of stories, claims, commands, proclamations, exhortations, and counsels means we must step back from the flow of things to consider what he has said. Deuteronomy’s command that Israel’s future kings copy out the Torah by hand and then read from it all their days so they would remain humble and obedient shows that Israel recognized the life-giving power of deep reading from the start (17:18–20). Understanding is indeed a tree of life (Prov 3:13–18). “Hold on to instruction,” Solomon urges, “do not let it go; guard it well, for it

*Deeply
meaningful
lives are
especially
satisfying,
but meaning
needs time to
marinate.*

is your life” (Prov 4:13). Biblically, the verbal trumps the visual. Adam and Eve were to hear God’s command and obey. In Romans, the personal transformation that deep reading can bring is something all Christians are exhorted to seek (12:1–2).

When I challenge my students to heed that exhortation, I know that for them to be forewarned is for them to be forearmed. Consequently, I remind them that as embodied creatures we aren’t just immaterial intellects. Developing the neural networks that can read deeply takes time. It is like acquiring a complex athletic or musical skill—and thus often a frustrating process. I coach them by telling them that deep reading requires courage in the guise of fortitude, the moral strength to keep our rears fastened to our chairs for however long it takes to understand something difficult, and patience as we wait for the networks to mesh.

I tell them that deep reading is slow. We can’t speed read our way to intellectual, moral, and spiritual depth.¹¹ The rhythm of deep reading involves looking down at the text to understand and then looking up to reflect. Our embodiedness means that if we are having difficulty understanding something, reading aloud can help because it requires us to make auditory sense. Paper texts are good because they can be judiciously marked up and then kept long after the latest digital medium is dead. In fact, there is evidence that we comprehend better

and retain more when we read paper texts.¹²

I tell them that deeply meaningful lives are especially satisfying, but meaning needs time to marinate. With Scripture's aid, this kind of life can help orient them regarding some of the moral, political, and spiritual conundrums of our day.¹³ And this kind of thinking is best done together, over years, with likeminded friends.

Yet God doesn't intend it to be simply a matter of "hammer, hammer, hammer, on the hard, high road." There are many pleasures, both intellectual and aesthetic, to savor on the way. In Eden, before God gave Adam a prohibition, he told him to wander through the garden, experiencing the pleasure of every fruit (Gen 2:16). Tasting all of them can be taken to include enjoying all of life's pleasures, including those arising from deep reading.

Much of what God calls us to be is enhanced by deep reading. May we always practice it. **D**

¹ I am conflating the two accounts of Genesis 1:1–2:3 and 2:4–25, as our Lord did at Mark 10:2–8. I argue for my claims in chapters 5 and 6 of *When the Stars Disappear: Understanding and Coping with Our Suffering* (Crossway, forthcoming).

² *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1147b5; trans. W. D. Ross.

³ Aristotle develops his view especially in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. His discrimination of the three kinds of life is found at 1098a. My first quotation is found at 1147b and the second at 1141a.

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, ed. and trans. Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 15.

⁵ See, e.g., respectively, Albert Bandura, "Towards a Psychology of Human Agency," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 1 (June 2006): 164–80; Michael Tomasello, Malinda Carpenter, et al., "Understanding and Sharing Intentions: The Origins of Cultural Cognition," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 28 (2005): 675–735; Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); and Jerome Kagan, "The Uniquely Human in Human Nature," *Daedalus* 133 (Fall, 2004): 77–88.

⁶ My claim in this paragraph demands a great deal more careful development and qualification than space allows here. Psalm 32:8–9 is best interpreted, I think, as portraying God himself calling us to hearken to his instruction, teaching, and counsel in order to live a different kind of life than the one available to other living creatures. Psalm 49:20 implies that our ability to step back and hearken to God's instruction, teaching, and counsel (referred to in Scripture as *understanding*) is what is to distinguish us from them. Jude 10 reiterates the point in the New Testament.

A proper concern not to deny or denigrate the humanity of those who cannot effectively step back, whether because of immaturity (as with very young children) or because of genetic or geriatric conditions (such as severe Down syndrome or advanced Alzheimer's disease) may make us hesitant to acknowledge what I think is the clear implication not only of

these verses but of what God requires of his people in order for them to be in a proper relationship with him. (This capacity is presupposed in God's issuing commands both to our first parents and to us.) Yet the necessity of acknowledging my claim becomes clear when we realize that it is their relationship with those of us who *can* step back effectively that protects, preserves, and enhances the lives of those who cannot. We are called by God to love and care for those who cannot care for themselves.

⁷ Patricia M. Greenfield, "Technology and Informal Education: What Is Taught, What Is Learned," *Science* 323 (January 2, 2009): 69–71, notes many of the objectively measurable changes. She cites the link between laparoscopic surgery and videogame playing that I mention in my next paragraph. Both Carr and Wolf (see note 9) consider the brain circuitry underlying those changes.

⁸ She writes that "reading well is, well, simple (if not easy). It just takes time and attention" (16), and then counsels us to seek books we enjoy while also demanding books "that make demands on you: books with sentences so exquisitely crafted that they must be reread, familiar words used in fresh ways, new words so evocative that you are compelled to look them up, and images and ideas so arresting that they return to you unbidden for days to come" (17). Keith Oatley cites some of the empirical evidence that literary fiction, in contrast to popular fiction, nurtures our empathetic competencies in "Fiction: Simulation of Social Worlds," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 20 (August 2016): 618–27.

⁹ See Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: Norton, 2011); Karen Swallow Prior, *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2018); and Maryanne Wolf, *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018). Wolf rejects "binary solutions" on p. 12. Her discussion of her own predicament as a denizen of the digital world is found on pp. 96–104. Carr recounts his similar experience in the first chapter of *The Shallows*.

¹⁰ Wolf, *Reader, Come Home*, 96–97, 102.

¹¹ For a realistic assessment of the tradeoffs, see Prior, *Reading Well*, 17, and David A. Balota, "Speed Reading: You Can't Always Get What You Want, but Can You Sometimes Get What You Need?," *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 17 (2016): 1–3.

¹² See Wolf's chapter "From Laps to Laptops in the First Five Years: Don't Move Too Fast," in *Reader, Come Home*. Also see Anne Mangen, Bente R. Walgermo, Kolbjørn Brønneick, "Reading Linear Texts on Paper versus Computer Screen: Effects on Reading Comprehension," *International Journal of Educational Research* 58 (2013): 61–68.

¹³ For our need to labor at getting properly oriented in life, see John Edward Huth, "Losing Our Way in the World," *New York Times*, 20 July 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/07/21/opinion/sunday/losing-our-way-in-the-world.html.



MARK TALBOT'S current research focuses mainly on philosophical anthropology and philosophical psychology.