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Commentary on: M. Kagan's "Informal Logic and Critical Thinking (ILCT) and Secret Writing"

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Michael Kagan's reflections on "secret writing" cut right to the core questions we face when we study informal logic and critical thinking: How can we, and how *ought* we, make sense of texts that encourage multiple interpretations or resist interpretation altogether? We encounter these challenges in their most extreme form when we deal with secret writing, which Kagan defines as writing that is deliberately designed to mislead. Like a prisoner's file-concealing birthday cake, secret writing is the vehicle for some special message or meaning. Those who are not competent to detect the meaning, or who are incompetent at decoding it, take the vessel at face value, completely missing what lies within.

Understandably, secret writers rarely send clear signals that they are engaging in secret writing, but this is the source of real trouble for the earnest reader. It is one thing to crack a code one knows about, but it is far more difficult to recognize, without somehow being in on the scheme, that a message is encoded in some otherwise unassuming (or even inscrutable) text.

As Kagan suggests, those trained in informal logic and in critical thinking are undoubtedly better off when it comes to recognizing secret writing. They will be trained to catch hints, allusions, rhetorical and pragmatic features of a text, enthymemes, audience-relative presumptions, etc., and they will be practiced at weaving together alternative interpretations. They are ready, in other words, to make the most of the principle of charity—if there's something to get, they are in the best position to get it.

But the principle of charity can be pushed too far, and this presents a problem that is both interpretive and moral. The problem comes from the simple fact that any text can be interpreted to mean absolutely anything, once we step away from our general, shared understanding about how words and texts (and other things) usually work. The temptations to step away can be powerful—we sometimes seem to notice the author winking at us, or we suddenly feel that the author, *this* author, just *can't* mean *that*, or we are just stumped—the text can't make sense unless something else is going on.

If these temptations lead us too far off the path of normal interpretation, however, then we end up on slippery ice, as Wittgenstein might say, without the benefit of any of the friction that would normally lead us to one interpretation over another. Are the tricky passages in the *Metaphysics* actually about fishing? Is some of the *Kama Sutra's* more absurd advice actually a sly commentary on politics? The answer in both cases might be "yes," but are we critical thinkers licensed, solely by the trickiness or the absurdity, to take them that way? Surely not.

Or, at least, probably not. We know that some texts are written in code, some are parables, some are so thick with irony that they mean nearly the opposite of what they say. Plenty of texts are not what they seem to be on the surface, or at first glance—or even at fifth glance. But we cannot come to that judgment with confidence unless we have some sort of license. Of course the tricky thing is to determine what counts as license. Perhaps the author tells us pretty plainly: "This is in code" or, more coyly, "Let those who have ears listen."

Perhaps something about the circumstances in which the text is presented raises suspicion, as when the barricaded kidnapper insists on reading to the press a carefully-worded statement that appears to have nothing to do with the situation at hand. Perhaps the text contains its own hedges of the sort that Kagan finds in the *Meno*: "Of course I don't insist on any of this..." There are many such cues. But what they have in common is that they signal to us, in more or less clear ways, that we can't take words at face value, that something out of the ordinary is going on. When the cues grow too subtle, our license fades.

I would suggest that we ought to resist the idea that something as simple as the fact that a text is difficult to interpret constitutes a license-granting cue that secret writing is present. We might think that there's no harm done if we get into the habit of entering a diagnosis of secret writing when we are thoroughly stumped. But there is harm. In the first place, a habit like that would get us off the hook too easily, letting our interpretive skills grow as dull as our arithmetical skills in the age of computers. Kagan is clearly a very skilled reader of notoriously difficult texts, but I would suggest that we don't *have* to see Plato as a secret writer, at least not based on the presentation of the doctrine of recollection in the *Meno*.

Plato's Socrates is indeed frustratingly non-committal on the details of the "doctrine," but surely this can be explained largely by the fact that, within the dialogue, his main goal seems to be to get Meno to submit to a proper investigation into the nature of virtue. If a fable about recollection, complete with a demonstration, will get Meno's mind off of the "debater's paradox" he raises, then so be it. Whether or not the recollection idea stands up to scrutiny on its own seems beside the point—it needs to satisfy Meno, and it does. Sort of. (If there is a remaining problem, unnoticed by Meno, about how learning happens *before birth*, that can be taken up where it is more to the point, as it is in the *Phaedo*.) Socrates may be speaking without believing fully in what he is saying, but that's no reason to suppose that he—or Plato—is at the same time trying to communicate some other doctrine in which he really does believe.

By weakening our interpretive skills, the habitual appeal to secret writing would actually threaten our ability to understand difficult texts, but there is a more important reason to avoid the habit. Getting used to the idea that any text could mean something very different, inaccessibly different, from what it "says" would undermine the very conditions of significance themselves. Linguistic community--community, period--depends on our faith that, as Cavell puts it, we mean what we say. Some of the paradigm cases raised by Kagan involve emergencies—cases in which the straightforward communication of the actual message would have placed the author's livelihood or life at risk. It is an emergency indeed when communication requires, strictly speaking, the erosion of the grounds of communication. We should feel for those in such straits, and at the same time we should refuse to believe that those in less weighty circumstances would similarly endanger our very hard-earned signficatory practices. Without those practices we would be in dire straits indeed. We should thus teach our ILCT students to resist, for as long as they can, the idea that the inscrutable text before them contains secret writing. I don't insist that every part of this argument is exactly right, but I do insist that we'll be better off if we proceed as if it is.