The Dilemma of Context

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This book is meant for philosophers and for cultural anthropologists and other social scientists who feel the need to grapple with the all-important issue of context. I want to explore what it would mean to take the problem with full seriousness and to explain why, in my view, it lays an intellectual burden on us that we cannot evade but that can become so heavy that it destroys the understanding it is meant to further. The need to respect context, but only within reasonable limits, leads me to a position that is less decisive or less completely decisive than we may find comfortable. Even skeptics are usually firmly skeptical, but I argue sometimes for context or relativism and sometimes against. The cause for this variability is not the unwillingness to decide, but the force majeure that life exerts in the form of such intractable dilemmas as those that will be displayed here.

The need to understand everything in context makes it impossible to arrive at a fully objective solution of the intellectual problems created by the differences between cultures; the solutions proposed are always necessarily inadequate. In the effort to overcome this inadequacy, thinkers tend to become polarized and to adopt one of two possible extremes—the one, that the problems are inseparable from their contexts, and the other, that the problems can and often should be divorced from them. Both extremes, I argue, miss or conceal too much, and neither matches our experience well.

It is the inexhaustibility of contextual differences that makes it so difficult for the members of one culture to appreciate the position of those of another. The philosophers, anthropologists, and others
who make a serious attempt to enter into the life of alien cultures
are likely to reflect the ambiguity of their positions, of their divided
or doubled sympathies, by their ambivalence. Yet there are grounds
for assuming that the human world is best judged to be one rather
than many, with a different world for each point of view, and that
the different cultures are to a significant though elusive degree
commensurable with one another.

I try to use the arguments of African, Indian, and Chinese think-
ers without prejudice, that is, to judge them with the same atten-
tiveness and seriousness as those of European thinkers. The book is
therefore both a discussion of the difficulties of cultural comparison
and an exercise in its actual use. It is of course true that, by my
own argument, I cannot represent the thinkers I have cited to their
own satisfaction.

The intellectual strategy I have followed is that of the destruction
of extremes by one another. The extreme of contextualism, relativ-
ism, or individualism is destroyed, I say, by its tendency to contra-
dict itself because, cleverly though it has been argued, it cannot
really dispense with the assumption of sameness and objectivity.
But the extreme of sameness and objectivity is equally vulnerable
to self-contradiction because it cannot in the end dispense with the
assumption of context and relativity. My strategy of the mutual
destruction of extremes is not, as such, particularly original. It has
some resemblance to Sextus Empiricus’s attack on all positive philo-
sophical views, to Nagarjuna’s neater but equally broad attack, and
to Kant’s reasoning on the antinomies; but the upshot is, of course,
different, in keeping with what I see as an empirically oriented
philosophy. The strategy is itself open to attack, I agree; but I do
not use it because I presume it to be invulnerable, a state that no
philosophy can attain.

In writing I have tried to weave together a number of themes in
a natural way. Taken separately, the main theme may be put in
these words:

To understand anything well we must grasp it in its context. This
is particularly evident when we try to understand cultures other
than our own. However, the attempt to be thorough in understand-
ing context leads to a total contextualization, in which everything
becomes the context of everything else. Such a contextualization is equivalent to total relativity, a position the attractions of which I exemplify. Not the least of them is that it satisfies our fantasy of omniscience—in this case, our ability to grasp philosophically how we might occupy every position and point of view at once. But total relativity is very difficult to defend and seems at odds not only with essential human impulses but with science as well. It seems more plausible to take this extreme position as a necessary pole of thought, to which the opposite, complementary pole, that of the noncontextual or absolute, is equally necessary. Many thinkers prefer one of the two poles, perhaps because logic appears to say that only one of them can be true. But logic is often applied with a destructive crudeness and, in its two-valued form, is often empirically inadequate or inadequately interpreted for empirical ends. A position intermediate between the two poles is closer to the way in which we actually think and live. This intermediate position is unstable because it is threatened by inconsistency, but it fits our endless attempt to understand the world in which we exist. The constant adaptation of the position to different empirical circumstances may give it an ad hoc quality at times, but this quality is justified in the sense that our intellectual constructions never prove adequate to all that we experience.

Of the secondary themes, two stand out. The first is that the emphasis on context tends to make every event and individual essentially different from every other. When consistent and thorough, such an emphasis leads to the esthetically beguiling notion that everyone and everything is an absolute individual. It is doubtful, however, if this notion is intellectually coherent.

The other secondary theme is that the attempt to enter into an alien culture is likely to be difficult and even painful, but is correspondingly important and rewarding. The intermediate position I have recommended is adapted to both the difficulty and the attempt to overcome it. That is, the attempt is plausible in the sense that the world is judged to be essentially one; but the strangeness one tries to grasp or dispel can be appreciated at whatever depth of context is most useful to one's aim. The desire for a better world lends the attempt a genuine moral compulsion.
In one of his novels, Henry James said, "We work in the dark—we do what we can—we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion, and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art." I should like to amend this remark and say instead, "We work in a light filled with shifting shadows. To overcome our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task. But in carrying out our task, we learn as best we can that the passion can never be quite fulfilled and that we had best reconcile ourselves to knowing less than we want. This is the sacrifice that makes it easier to give what we have. The rest is the madness of philosophy."