
Blind ALLEYS

Historical Contextualism Revisited

Preston King

To deal with the methodological problems of historical contextualism, it is useful to distinguish between (1) Text, (2) Context, (3) History, (4) Contextualism and (5) Historicism.¹ A text is by turn the outcome, and object, of all writing or research. A context is any perspective on a text, including the background data that one may append to it. History is a narrative, a story, which is focused upon a text or context - in as far as the two are the same, viewed as propositions. 'Contextualism' is a methodological claim that valid history is only secured or demonstrated via the reconstruction of 'the context' - especially where the latter is to do with a perspective on the background to a text. Historicism is disinclined either to extract present moral judgements from, or apply them to, the past; it resists more broadly any form of social generalisation over extended units of chronological time²; it thereby displays a liability to overrate the importance of the sometimes 'spectacular differences' (Popper 1960: p.101) between various historical periods. Historical contextualism may be construed as a new variety of historicism. The emphasis of the present account is more broadly upon the logical futility of historical contextualism in

general, and less upon its specifically historicist character.

Truism & impossibility

Methodological contextualism is a truism, and it is an impossibility. This stems from the understanding that a perception or perspective achieved by any observer, O, of any putatively independent datum, d, never leaves d alone, untainted. Harvey could not map the circulation of the blood without dissecting bodies. We characteristically measure the temperature of liquids by intruding thermometers. I know that my soup is ready by tasting it. The new novel I read is automatically made sense of by the data and dispositions that constitute my mind. I cannot handle any datum without somehow adding something of myself to it. The observer makes sense of a text by squaring it, or putting it in the context of, everything else that s/he knows. This descriptive position - in effect that one can make no claim which is not somehow automatically 'contextual' - we may call 'descriptive contextualism' (DC). And it is a truism.

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187

If DC is converted into a methodological principle - to the effect that we ought to place ideas in context - then we have something different, which we may call 'methodological contextualism' (MC). MC is the essence of historical contextualism. More than a truism, MC supplies us with an impossibility. MC is obviously redundant, in that we have no need to demand what we cannot escape. As we cannot avoid contextualising, it is pointless to ask that we do. More, the demand that we contextualise, presupposes that we can contextualise, which is to say that we can choose to do so or not. But since we have no such choice, the abstract demand that we choose the contextual methodology is a demand that it is simply impossible to meet. Nor is this the only sense in which historical contextualism is impossible.

Take the context to be a perspective on, including background to, a text. It is a matter of supplementary claims and arguments - related and/or additional to a text. The text is an initial set of claims or arguments. The context is just a subsequent set of such claims which take the text as its object. Now take historical contextualism to be a demand that I place every text I employ in context. If I am always to contextualise, then the context itself (which is substantively reducible to one or more additional propositions, i.e. 'texts') must in turn be contextualised. Let us say that I place text t1 in context by juxtaposing to it text t2. I place this in context in turn by adding to it text t3. But to contextualise this I must append... text tn. I cannot of course continue endlessly in this way. Am I being enjoined to do what I cannot do?

If a necessary condition of my securing a reliable grasp of a statement, of a text, is that I be able to place it in context, then my contextual claim must itself be able to pass the same test. This means that my contextual claim cannot hold unless I can place it, too, in context. So where my contextual claim is itself left... out of context, there can be no warrant for accepting it. But I cannot place everything I say in context. Such a demand is

infinitely regressive. The buck must somewhere stop. The demand for contextualisation, advanced as essential to getting at the truth, must then itself stop, even fall, short of the truth.

Identity & difference

Substantively, contexts and texts are identical. The text is a set of propositions. And so is the context a set of propositions. Contexts and texts are identical, taking account of their propositional character. The context, whatever it be, if communicable at all, takes the form of, or can be translated into, one or more propositions. Any contextual material ('background' or 'framework') offered to the reader as a piece of historical reconstruction, must be reducible to propositional form. The validity of contextual claims must be judged on the same basis as textual claims. The one can be assigned no authority higher than, or intellectually superior to, the other.

Relationally, contexts and texts are different. The text comes first, in time or emphasis, followed by the (some) context. They constitute a sequential relationship featuring the context as subsequent, and the text as prior. We designate contexts as subsequent propositions which erect a framework round initial propositions which are designated as texts. We can only distinguish between contexts and texts relationally or positionally by holding constant the identity between them as propositions. Musically, we may fancy the relationship of context to text as that of a variation to an underlying theme.

Because of the interplay between identity and difference, the comportment of the context is always shiftily ephemeral. All study inescapably begins with some form of 'text' as its object. (King 1993) And any context, once become an object of study, equally takes the propositional form of a text. Once the context is born, once firm enough itself to serve as an object of study, it automatically transmutes into a text. Here the relationship

of subject to object (context to text) is reversed, to become that of object to subject (text to context). The context, as a relational construct, proves too ephemeral to provide any foundation on which to build any solid methodological project. Substantively, the text is always privileged, since only it may be adjudged better/worse, true/false, probable/improbable. Relationally, the context is always subordinate, since it can only serve as a context on the grounds that it is relevant to - ie. governed by - the text.

The movement between text and context can go either up or down. An illustration of upward movement from the text is as follows. This sentence qua text may be placed within the context of this paragraph, the text of this paragraph within the context of this section, the text of this section within the context of this essay or chapter as a whole, the latter text within the context of this journal or book, such texts as these within the context of philosophical criticism of the next hundred years, or two hundred years, or as far forward as the record manages to stretch. Forward movement from the text is always contextualising movement, which sees later claims enveloping earlier claims - which equates with objects of attention being 'placed in context'.

An illustration of downward movement from the text is as follows. The text, 'L'Etat, c'est moi!', presupposes an innumerable string of further texts, among them, such as that: 'There is, or at least I imagine there to be, an entity called the state'. 'Order is at risk where there is no clear chain of command.' 'There are very good reasons for obeying my orders.' 'I have a distinct identity and a special claim to power.' And so on. One can see that every text can itself be made sense of, by being resolved into, or at least related to, yet further texts, which are either consistent with or contradictory to it. So what is for us the 'text', can always be repositioned downwards, revealing its purchase upon still earlier texts.

Plato's *Republic*, which advances one con-

cept of justice, involves - as a part of this - commentary upon and rejection of certain other concepts of justice, such as that justice is the same as 'giving every man his due', or that it is the same as promoting the interests of the ruling element (the most powerful) in society. The logic of the text, once we adjust to its focus, is not autonomous. It not merely relates to the world, it is a part of the world. It may be physically contained - like the pages between the covers of a book. But its claims cannot be similarly delimited. The text which we inspect, once entered into, can be seen itself to supply a perspective on and background to still earlier texts, related concerns, antecedent arguments.

Hobbes's *Leviathan* is a classic text of modernity. Were we able to treat with the text exactly as did the author at the point he created it, what we would be treating is not the 'text' we now know. Our hypothetical relationship to 'this' text, like Hobbes's actual relationship to it, would be one of internality, not our present externality. That with which we should have to treat, rather than the present text, would be the swirling perceptions and engagements upon which the author had set to work, but which only yielded up *Leviathan* when that labour was at an end. The author's text is not, while the author is engaged in generating it, a 'text'. It is the context, of whatever kind, that the author's perception, engagement and acuity impose upon other texts that serve as objects of attention. The text, for one who authoritatively inhabits it, is not a text. Only when completed, abandoned and allowed to make its own way in the world, does the authorial ego transmute from subject to object - from context to text.

So any text, like *Leviathan*, can be read, so to speak, 'up' or 'down'. To read it 'up' is to focus upon it within a wider framework. To read it 'down' is to focus upon it within a narrower framework. Both of these are contexts. And then there are further contexts within these contexts, which can be historical, cultural, social, logical (as in much of what we call 'textual' analysis), etc. It cannot be

abstractly supposed that to impose an historical context is necessarily more valid than to impose a logical context. Nor can it be supposed that to study the text from the perspective of how it has been influenced is either better or worse than from the perspective of what this text in turn comes to influence. Nor can we say it is better to focus more on the views of the contemporaries of the author as opposed to the contemporaries of the commentator. It seems quite useless to advise anybody, in the abstract, that they should read e.g. Hobbes contextually - whether 'up', 'down', or otherwise.

Lumpers & splitters

Properly to attend to texts need not be wantonly to worship them. But should their seriousness warrant it, there may be good reason for texts to be read 'over and over again'. Sustained attentiveness to serious argument in the form in which it actually appears can be no worse than insistently ignoring and reconstructing a text on the basis of what else may have been said - like it or about it - in 'the same' period. (There is usually a watery ambiguity attaching to what 'the same' here might mean.) Contexts, in short, are always in place. To appeal to 'the context' is no more likely to get at the truth than to appeal to 'the text'. The two are connected, like 'heads' and 'tails' on a coin.

If historical contextualism (understood essentially as MC) is to make any sense at all, it must presumably always be converted into a less categorical and more contingent demand, such as that we impose some particular type of context, perhaps a context suitable to the observer's interests or purposes - whether literary, economic, religious, historical, social or other. The abstract appeal to context is unintelligible without specifying some particular sort of context, given that contexts are many and infinitely varied.

If to make any claim is straightaway to impose a context, then any contextualist is

always such *malgre lui*. The interesting question will not be whether one imposes a context, but which context(s). Is the concern to inspect the logic of a specific text on its own? Will the focus be upon the entire *oeuvre* of a writer? Will interest settle upon the glutinous practices and assumptions of all this writer's contemporaries and competitors? Will the focus be more upon emblematic role, popularity, integrity, future notoriety, actual influence? Will the reconstruction privilege historical reliability? Contextualism supplies no answer.

Phillipson and Skinner (1993), as editors of a book of essays honouring John Pocock, contribute to a series whose specific object is to set 'Ideas in Context'. Such a project provokes two considerations. First, in as far as ideas, as part of the process of being apprehended, are necessarily placed in some context, the object of an ideas-in-context series can already be regarded as having been accomplished, on some general level, in advance of its initiation. Second, in as far as the different contexts in which ideas can be placed are to be presumed without end, the demand for contextualisation must prove meaningless, unless some limited type of context is plainly designated.

Skinner and Pocock are widely recognised as the most important of historical contextualists today. It cannot be enough to say that they laud 'contextualisation' in general, since any claim automatically and necessarily establishes some context. The only question worth exploring is the sort(s) of context which this contextualist or that might be disposed to promote. In Phillipson and Skinner (1993), perhaps the most obvious type of context is omitted - viz. one supplying some summary overview and location of Pocock's own texts, in part or whole. To supply such a context would at least make it easier to determine the sorts of context that this 'ideas-in-context' series recommends.

What then are the forms of contextualisation promoted by Pocock and Skinner? Broadly, where Pocock is excited, like A.O.

Lovejoy, by the sweep of great, integrative themes, Skinner is deeply suspicious of any such ideological abandon, and seeks to confine panoramic effect to some local setting, in some distant past. Where Pocock likes spectacular vistas and places great emphasis upon continuity, Skinner is fearful of false connections, and places great emphasis upon discontinuity. Where Pocock reaches for the telescope, Skinner clutches at the microscope. In sum, where Pocock lumps, Skinner splits.

If we take Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975), we note his emphasis upon the developmental links between Aristotle, Rome, Machiavelli, and indeed the US Revolution. The substance of this link - or tradition - consists in the idealisation of the citizen as an active agent who forms himself by virtue of civic engagement, thereby keeping despotism and corruption at bay. If Pocock, like Skinner, prefers contexts to texts, he also prefers great, vertical shafts of time to Skinner's local, horizontal clearings of understanding.

If we take Skinner's most extended work, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978), we find he avows that he has 'tried not to concentrate so exclusively on the leading theorists' and has 'focused instead on the more general social matrix out of which their works arose.' (x.) He discusses texts only in regard to the social and intellectual 'framework' or 'social base' out of which they emerge. This framework in which texts are set, is itself devised from such evidence as there is for it - which is merely a matter of additional (paper) texts, and inferences drawn from them. Skinner's 'intellectual context', accordingly, is secondary, supplementary, background, 'noises off'. Skinner's aim is 'to construct a general framework within which the writings of the more prominent theorists can... be situated'.(xi.) But this framework is also a gibbet, the object of which is to supply a final solution to what these theorists did or did not mean. Some profess to make out, fluttering above Skinner's architecture, the little ghost of reductionism.

Pocock (1962: pp.184, 186) appears to

sanction the possibility of independent logical reconstruction of a text, even if that is not his primary interest. He allows that texts 'exist on a number of different levels of abstraction', so that those texts which, by implication, are sufficiently coherent and abstract, may supply, through their logic, their own context. If this is right, then Pocock's contextualism becomes more private preference than methodological imperative.

Skinner (1964, 1966) seems concerned to close the door which Pocock leaves open. He seems to take the view that it is not tenable to suppose that the logic of any text can supply its own context. Skinner's reason is not that one can infer the context from the text (and so vice versa), but that 'the context' (which for him = the assumptions and responses of those contemporaries for and to whom the author might have communicated) imposes a lid - an 'ultimate framework' - on the range of conventional meanings that it was possible for an author to have entertained. (King 1983: pp.295-301)

Skinner (1978) argues that to focus upon the major texts themselves is of itself to defeat any prospect of 'genuine histories' of political ideas. His position is that we can achieve no genuine 'historical understanding' of political ideas if we 'focus our main attention on those who discussed the problems of political life at a level of abstraction and intelligence unmatched by any of their contemporaries.' So, for Skinner, to 'focus on the study of ideologies', to 'study the context of any major work of political philosophy, is not merely to gain additional information'. Rather, it is the method by which we penetrate the 'author's meaning'. (xiii.) The plain suggestion of this would seem to be that Skinner's context is not only an addition to, but also some form of substitute for, the text.

It is odd, despite such apparently obvious differences, that Pocock and Skinner appear to take it that the business which they are about is much the same. All schools, of course, betray significant internal divergence.

But the sharpness of divergence among contextualists may be more economically explained by the uncertain foundations on which their cathedrals of hope are raised.

'Contexts' are as various and encompassing as are any other propositions, including 'texts'. To be instructed to recover 'the' context is consistent with recruiting anything at all that is additional to the text. Logically, the context could be the recent past or the distant past, the near future or the distant future. One may reflect upon a text in the context of its past or present or future. Nor is there anything at all problematic about reflecting on a text in the context of its future. Indeed, we who reflect upon any text always and necessarily do so subsequent to its appearance, are associated with its future, and thus create for it a future context. 'The' context then is virtually all-encompassing. It extends front and back - chronologically speaking - of any designated text. There is no field - science, architecture, social structure, economics, politics, philosophy - which can be excluded from it in principle.

Those who embrace a methodological project so apparently redundant as contextualism must, presumably, be forced out along many different paths. What binds proponents together is less an ammoniac awakening to some specific context, than the treacherous embrace of context as such. Since contexts overall are infinitely extensive, one student is always liable to be glued to this perception, while her fellow student is stuck to that. The adept is disposed to assume that 'the' context means 'my' context. What excites Ego's attention, may repel Alter's. The construction of some new context will tend, usually mistakenly, to be viewed as burying claims for some older or more familiar context. Most who seek to elucidate 'contexts' are historians, genuinely interested in some particular patch of academic terra incognita, unburdened by the hunched back of an enlarged dogma. Those, however, who insist that direct textual analysis must only follow contextual reconstruction (which, in Skinner's case, =

an account of what contemporaries were about) are in a bind.

To contend that one can never take the meaning of a text as given, even where the text seems perfectly perspicuous, appears perverse. Of course, apparent clarity may mislead. But here the old saw applies: hard cases make bad law. One best signals the danger without forging from it a rigid rule of procedure. The use of context seems most appropriate, in the sense of an emphasis upon contemporary background, not where the text appears perfectly clear and sensible, but precisely where it does not. First-year students, reading Plato's Republic, seem rarely to give the author the benefit of the doubt, finding his text highly unpersuasive. It is in this circumstance - rarely otherwise - that the instructor rightly resorts to contextual reconstructions, so to portray the text as more coherent than it can possibly appear to be in the light of present-day understandings.

Indefinite rationality & historicism

In the end, it may be that even the lumpersplitter divergence assigned to Pocock-Skinner, is untenable. For Skinner, it is clear, every text is opaque, from which opacity his contextualism is designed to rescue us. Can a fair reading of a parallel sort be derived from Pocock? It would appear so. The claim by Pocock (1962: p.186) that texts are burdened by an 'indefinite rationality' may be held to reverse the direction earlier established for his position. If Pocock intends by 'indefinite rationality' that every text is somehow opaque, that none in se discloses its meaning, then the difference between his position and Skinner's seems to dissolve.

So it is in order to consider two questions. The first is whether all texts are ambiguous. The second is whether the consequences would favour contextualism, even if they were. To the second question first.

As we have already observed, If the text is

intrinsically ambiguous, requiring a context, then so must the context be ambiguous, itself requiring a context. If the audience of readers need texts to be interpreted first, before these texts are directly approached, they will also require the interpretations to be interpreted first, before the interpretations are directly approached. Thus, even were it true to claim that all texts are of 'indefinite rationality', this would not strengthen the methodological pretensions of historical contextualism. Now to the first question.

The claim that all texts are 'indefinitely rational', is doubtful. And the fact that some or many or even most texts are opaque will not allow us to infer that all are. It is not clear as to the sense in which such a claim as ' $2+2 = 4$ ', or ' $a+b = b+a$ ', is 'indefinite'. The same applies to any strictly historical claim, such as that 'Einstein claimed that $E = mc^2$ ', or that 'Hobbes believed there to be no conception in a person's mind which is not generated in whole or part by sense experience.' Any such claims may prove untenable. But none is strikingly opaque or ambiguous. If these are ambiguous, then all are ambiguous. If all are, we can no longer distinguish between what is clear and what is not. And if that is so, then the contextualist position will prove as ambiguous - trivial and self-defeating - as any other.

Along with the assumption that texts are marked by an 'indefinite rationality', Pocock (1962: p.186) supposes there to be some 'strictly historical task' involved in the assessment of the meanings of texts. This task he claims to consist in 'determining by investigation on what levels of abstraction thought did take place'. But this either means that (a) historical investigation of contexts centrally determines the meaning of texts or that (b) such historical investigation merely circumstantially adds to what we know about texts. There is room for argument. If the preponderant weight of Pocock's position points to (b), then it is sound, but not startling or innovative. Pocock would be making no radical claims for history being, or becoming, but

only for it circumstantially adding to, the understanding of philosophy. And that is more or less the traditional position, sometimes misleadingly called a 'textualist' position. On the other hand, there are, at the very least, elements of a rigid methodological contextualism in Pocock.

So Pocock, like Skinner, may view the context as a way of determining the meaning of the text, to the point of being at least a partial substitute for it. Further colour is lent to this reading by the fact that Pocock gives firm preference to tradition (= context) over text and, unlike Michael Oakeshott, effectively construes the tradition as a form of ideology. Though the contextualism of Pocock (1968: pp.209-237) is partly influenced by Oakeshott on tradition, Oakeshott himself (1962: pp.1-36) never evinced any particular problem with 'textual' analysis. For him, it was rather 'the tradition' which proved 'a tricky thing to get to know', and which might be violated by ideological forays of the sort apparently approved by Pocock.

For Pocock, mastery of the trickiness of tradition became the special preserve of the historian. Where, for Oakeshott, ideology was an 'abridgement' of tradition, for Pocock (1962: pp.194-195), the business 'of abstracting ideas from particular situations' itself constituted 'the language of tradition'. Where Oakeshott opposed ideological 'abridgement' on the grounds that it violated the integrity of tradition, Pocock seems to embrace such abridgement as the proper unit of study. Where Oakeshott's 'particularist' position (King 1983: pp.96-132) could be squared with the defence of texts, Pocock's defence of ideology would be consistent with the erosion of these defences. Pocock, registering an interest in traditions qua ideologies, risks removing the insulation which, in Oakeshott, protects tradition from ideology. The concern with recovering the gross ideology of a given period threatens to undermine the integrity of singular texts located there. Thus, Pocock's dispositional liking for ideology over text, may yet give way to Skinner's firm

methodological preference for ideology, for the framework, as superseding recourse to the text.

Methodology v. disposition

There can be no objection to the concern with context, taken as a disposition. The disposition only goes wrong where re-invented as a 'methodology'. There is nothing wrong with reconstructing, or even inventing, a context. Every hypothesised context is necessarily in part invention. What is wrong is to suppose that peripheral vision always trumps telescopic stare. 'Contextualism', as an approach, is as prone to mislead as is 'textualism' – if not more so. Sappho's poetry seems, plainly and textually, to reveal elements of Lesbian desire and longing. But some contextualist readings have simply reduced Sappho's texts to an ancient poetic genre which conventionally depicts the desire of adolescent girls for one another as preparation for heterosexual marriage. (DuBois 1991) Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* is a light romantic comedy. But in the hands of one inventive contextualist, it implausibly becomes a serious attack on Elizabeth's persecution of Catholics. (Stocker 1995).

Contextual or background readings, as such, cannot prove more reliable than textual or foreground readings. Indeed, were it substantively possible to distinguish 'contextual' from 'textual' approaches, the latter must prove sounder. If we ask for (a) the reconstruction of a context, this cannot coherently be set out in advance of (b) some sense or logic for the text to which the context relates. For (a) is a function of (b). If we cannot somehow recoup the sense of the text, then neither can we deploy any relevant context for it. In as far as we accept a later-earlier sequential relationship between context and text, then to attempt to establish the propositional logic of the text first, would have to be the rule, else one could have no idea how to decide between the amorphous and infinitely

extensive contextual claims that may pop up claiming inheritance.

The priority of the logic of the text is a primitive sine qua non for the creation of any related context. To accord the logic of the text formal priority, is not to concede it autonomy. The text can always be resolved 'downwards' into those antecedent propositions or concerns out of which it later emerges. This downward movement buries the text in an inescapable spiral of antecedent or parallel texts, in parallel to the way the same text, looking 'upwards', subverts the autonomy of later commentary upon itself. So again: to plump for the priority of the logic of the text, is not to plump for the autonomy of the text.

As for deciphering the argument of a text, it cannot be a matter of over interpretation, but only of sound and fair procedure, to press the most logically coherent reading which the letter of the text allows. This is not to be confused with according to texts strengths they have not got. But it does defend against reducing texts to Rorschach tests, taking on the appearance, at the worst, of straw men. Historical contextualism would have to be considered an irrational procedure in as far as it is committed to reconstructing contexts in advance of securing the internal logic of the texts to which they relate, and in so far as it opposes the most rational possible reconstructions of these texts qua texts.

No defect is to be found in a contextual disposition, where the predominant interest is less in the logic of the text, than in the broad circumstances out of which the text emerges. The real difficulty is the contextual methodology, which prioritises context over text, and seeks either wholly or partly to dissolve the logic of texts into their contexts, into background, into the claims of contemporaries. A contextual methodology, as distinct from a contextual disposition, either tempts or requires him or her who has it to impose context upon text. This may take the form of either allowing the context (here = 'background') to override the text, as with Pocock

on Machiavelli (following Sullivan 1992). Or it may take the form of allowing the context (here = 'views of author's contemporaries') to determine the meaning of the text, as with Skinner (1966: p.314) on Hobbes (following King 1983: pp.303-315).

Closing the circle

Historical contextualism, conceived as a methodological demand, seems hopelessly circular. The trouble is that it is logically and physically impossible for any observer endlessly to contextualise the context of the context... of the context. A 'context' is nothing more than a text which, by virtue of being last in place, has not yet been - and cannot itself yet be - contextualised. Abstractly to recommend contextualisation is then to place an automatic value on subsequent propositional claims in preference to previous propositional claims. The effect is a *fuite en avant*. The construction of a context is never conclusive, nor logically sounder, in virtue of being a context. If I privilege claims merely because they are contextual, then I only privilege those claims last made. My contextual claims are only dubiously contextual anyway, since I cannot myself confer upon the very last context I create its own context. My contexts, further, are doubly dubiously contextual since, so long as there are other and subsequent observers, their reflections and researches will convert my contexts into texts, which must underscore the universally tenuous and ephemeral status of contexts.

If 'the context' is distinctive only by virtue of representing the last claim advanced, it cannot follow that it must be the soundest claim advanced. The context, at the conclusion of any proceedings, supplies 'the last word'. But this is no more than an elementary, procedural matter of fact, which does not stretch to a methodological Golden Rule, allowing us to equate 'the last word' with the right word or any form of sensible conclusion. There can be no reason why what we

call a 'context' should be accorded any moral or methodological finality. There seems no sound reason to privilege 'contextual' above 'textual' assertions, nor to allow 'contexts' moral or hermeneutic or scientific precedence over 'texts'.

'The context' is not magically self-revealing or methodologically privileged. It supplies no miracle cures or instant restoratives. It may mark a direction (considered e.g. as 'background') in which one might explore. But it ring-fences no methodologically preferable type of exploration. It may advise where to look - outside the text - but not how to render the text more or less valid. Contexts and texts are not distinguishable in terms of truth-claims. The preference for context over text is not the same as a preference for a valid over an invalid claim. The relational order of context to text (of subsequent to previous) does not correlate with any order of superior to inferior validity. It involves nothing more than a matter of logical sequence, where text is antecedent to context and may serve it accordingly as an object of attention.

If one encounters a difficulty in a text, then it may be wise to look elsewhere for solutions to it. But if one has not looked closely enough at a text to determine the problems that it itself disgorges, then 'to look elsewhere' - call it context - is bound to be a bootless business. 'The context' after all is as large as life itself, and as unrelenting. Nor is it one: contexts are irresistibly plural. If one has no sense of what the text is about, if one does not first take from it some sense of what is to be pursued, then the context in turn, unbounded as it is, neither will nor can reveal anything of relevance. The preference for context over text only presumably makes sense on the misleading assumption that texts, as distinct from contexts, are necessarily unclear or incomplete, or on the assumption that more data always make for greater clarity.

The trouble is, that if all texts, qua propositions, are necessarily unclear or incomplete,

then all contexts - the propositions we advance to explain or embellish texts - are equally unclear and incomplete. If all texts are defective, then so are all contexts defective. If all texts require further explication, then all contexts require such explication. If all texts require to be enhanced, in order to make sense, then all contexts require to be enhanced, in order to make sense. If no textual proposition is entirely autonomous, then no contextual proposition is entirely autonomous. If, to legitimate texts, I must place them in context, then to legitimate contexts... so must I place them in context. More detail does not necessarily get us closer to the truth. Most detail is irrelevant to what we can or seek or need to learn. A contextualising procedure, which perhaps asks us to inspect the views of Hobbes's contemporaries rather than the text of *Leviathan*, may well take us further from, not closer to, what we can or seek or need to grasp.

What can be the purpose of an abstract insistence upon 'contextualisation'? There will always be some context. Normally, to cite the logical context of Machiavelli's *Arte della Guerra* may prove more relevant than its military context, and the latter more relevant than its architectural context, etc. But which of these one has recourse to is appropriately a function of the purpose one seeks to realise. If one takes the logic for granted, or alternatively if it is ambiguous, then the study of the military setting may richly illustrate the logic, or even help to remove some of its ambiguity. If one takes the military setting for granted, or if it is ambiguous, then the study of the structure and emplacement of early sixteenth century forts, may underscore or clarify the significance of some of the strategies and tactics Machiavelli was concerned to promote.

The vital difference between text and context is to do with the position and purpose of the observer. As some context is always automatically in place, there is nothing intelligible about recommending context as such. The matter of relevance concerns the context to

be chosen. As this is a function of the angle and purpose from which one happens or chooses to observe, the appropriate context to explore cannot be recommended in the abstract. Viewing events e.g. up close will not plausibly be shown always to be preferable to seeing them from a distance. A thorough grasp of detail will not always prove more valuable than a sense of perspective. Taking in the view from the Lincoln Monument will not always prove more apt or valuable than peering directly at the Monument.

Beyond the logical problems that dog historical contextualism, there is the oddity of its actual effect upon historical practice. Even where historical contextualism has not directly consigned normative theory to prison, it has nowhere helped to bail it out. Contextualism, in its historicist mode, by morally neutering history, has helped to make the history of thought (appear) irrelevant to contemporary moral issues and crises. Those few contextualists who seek to plot an escape from neutrality and indeterminacy seem lost in a maze (Dunn 1979). To qualify contextualism as a species of historicism - however different from historical materialism, or social Darwinism, or liberal progressivism - is still to identify it as a relativism. Only as a relativism is it like contemporary postmodernism. The latter commonly emits a bright anti-authoritarianism, as in Foucault. The colours of contextualist historicism, by contrast, fly at half-mast, and range from neutral to conservative.

What historical contextualism indirectly underscores, and perhaps rightly fears, is the celerity of change in modern times. Being intensely aware of change, it warns against anachronism with a renewed sense of urgency - and indeed against making connections of almost any kind. None the less, historical contextualism draws the wrong moral. The difficulty is not so much that the past is dead, and that we must turn our backs on it. Nor is it that we require to cocoon the past against the vulgar, probing eye of modernity in order to keep it as it was. The problem, on

the contrary, is that all of our past, as far as we know it, is (and has to be) present to us and in us. In as far as we know the past, what we know is only by courtesy of a present perspective. The trick is not to make the past inaccessible, which we can only pretend to do, but to heed more the sense than the nonsense in what it has to say.

Notes

- 1 See King 1995: 223-232 for a less brief treatment of concepts 1 through 5.
- 2 See King 1983: 21-65, on distinction between chronological and substantive time.

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