

# The Weave of Meaning: Holism and Contextuality

Jeff Malpas

University of Tasmania

*ABSTRACT: Context and meaning are notions inseparably tied together. Yet although appeal to context would seem inevitable in any discussion of meaning and understanding, the notion seems to be resistant to any attempt to render it in precise and non-question-begging terms. Context may be ubiquitous, but it is also opaque. This paper explores the notion of context in general, arguing that an understanding of context is essential for any attempt to elucidate the structure and possibility of meaning. Moreover, while the contextual character of meaning is seen to imply a form of holism about meaning, it also requires that any such holism be understood in a way that is realised only in relation to particular settings or 'locales'. In this respect, contextuality not only gives rise to holism, but also constrains it, thereby pre-empting certain objections that are sometimes advanced against holistic approaches to meaning.*

*KEYWORDS: Context, Meaning, Holism, Understanding, Horizontality, Locality*

I.

Umberto Eco, in one of the short essays that make up How to Travel with a Salmon, recounts an experience that will, in its general form, be familiar to almost everyone:

A few months ago, as I was strolling in New York, I saw, at a distance, a man I knew very well heading in my direction. The trouble was that I couldn't remember his name or where I had met him. This is one of those sensations you encounter especially in a foreign city, you run into someone you met back home, or vice versa. A face out of context creates confusion. Still, that face was so familiar that, I felt, I should certainly stop, greet him, converse... We were now only a few feet from one another, I was just about to break into a broad, radiant smile, when suddenly I recognised him. It was Anthony Quinn. Naturally I had never met him in my life, nor he me. In a thousandth of a second I was able to check myself, and I walked past him, my eyes staring into space (Eco, 1994: 46-7).

The difference between a pleasurable encounter with an old friend and acute social embarrassment may well come down a matter of context – either of our ability to find the right context for the things around us or correctly to identify the context in which we find ourselves. The example with which Eco provides us demonstrates, not merely the way in which correct identification of the context can be crucial to correct identification of the feature in question, but also the way in which the presentation of some feature or combination of features apart from their usual context can prove an obstacle to such identification. In Eco’s case, recognition of the face before him as that of Anthony Quinn, the actor, comes with recognition that this is a face that is a part of the imaginary world of entertainment, rather than the world of everyday life. Indeed, Eco uses the example to pursue the idea of what might be viewed as a certain ‘contextual confusion’ that seems to arise for many people between the real and the imaginary. The phenomenon at issue here is not, of course, restricted to faces or to images from entertainment alone. Identification of an object, a grasp of its significance, or a correct attribution of meaning to it, invariably depend on some capacity to situate the object in question within an appropriate context. We might say that this is true of meaning in general: no matter whether we are interested in what some presented object means or what is meant by it, still access to any such meaning is fundamentally dependent on our ability appropriately to contextualize the object in question.

Wherever we are faced with a problem of interpretation or understanding, it thus seems inevitable that considerations of context will arise. Yet the ubiquity and inevitability of the appeal to context is matched by the opacity of the notion of context itself. There is no way of specifying what context is other than in terms that are specific to each situation – and even then any specification of context remains indeterminate and incomplete. We might say that the context in which Eco was familiar with Quinn’s face was that of the film (perhaps even a film – ‘Zorba the Greek’, or ‘Viva Zapata!’), the movie theatre, the entertainment industry, but these remain merely gestures in the direction of a field of content, of genres, activities and locales, rather than providing a clear and precise delineation of the nature and identity of the context at issue. Indeed, we may be inclined to the view that there is no such clear and precise delineation of context, even in its specific instances, because context is, at best, an approximative or indicative notion – a concept geared to a certain sort of everyday, rule-of-thumb, ‘colloquial’ use that will not bear the load of any attempt at explicit theorization or explicit conceptual articulation. On this basis, if we want to arrive at any developed understanding of meaning (whether it be within linguistics, hermeneutics or

whatever), then notwithstanding the apparent centrality of the notion of context in our ordinary understanding, it is not a notion that can play any significant theoretical role.

To suppose that the investigation of meaning can leave the notion of context to one side, or that as a general concept it can be abandoned in favour of more specific determinations of the particular features that are relevant to the semantic, pragmatic or hermeneutic aspects of meaning, is, however, to be fundamentally mistaken. Indeed, more explicit attention to the notion of context as such may turn out to be crucial in any adequate account of meaning and understanding whether from within a narrower linguistic or a broader socio-cultural framework. More particularly, a better understanding the nature of contextuality may also enable us better to understand the essentially holistic character of meaning and avoid certain otherwise problematic understandings of what such holism might imply.

## II.

For all that context resists incorporation within theory as a precise or determinate concept, still it also resists any attempt to exorcise it from theory. As a result, the centrality of context is often given implicit or explicit recognition, even if the difficulty in making use of the notion in any precise or non-question-begging form means that, as a general concept, it also tends to recede into the theoretical background.

The tension between the opacity of the notion of context and its apparent centrality is perhaps most evident within pragmatics. Indeed, it is evident as soon as one attempts even to provide a characterisation of the field itself that goes beyond talk of pragmatics as just the study of language ‘use’. Geoffrey Leech treats pragmatics as the study of meaning ‘in relation to speech situation’ (Leech, 1983: 13) including context as an aspect of that situation such that context designates ‘any background knowledge assumed to be shared by s and h and which contributes to h’s interpretation of what s means by a given utterance’ (Leech, 1983: 13). The immediate difficulty here, of course, is that the notion of ‘background knowledge ... which contributes to... interpretation’ already implicitly relies upon, rather than providing any elucidation of, the idea of context. But the very distinction between situation and context, such that context is viewed as an element of the situation, is itself quite artificial. This is especially so once one recognises that even within pragmatics context is sometimes specified in so broad a fashion – as including, for instance, ‘relevant aspects of the physical or social setting of an utterance’ (Leech, 1983: 13) – that it is hard to see how there could be any element of the speech ‘situation’ that was not also an element of the context.<sup>i</sup>

If Leech's definition of pragmatics refers to context only via the notion of situation, context is nevertheless an explicit element in many other definitions. It appears, for instance, in a range of characterisations considered by Stephen Levinson according to which pragmatics is variously understood as: 'the study of those relations between language and context that ...are encoded in the structure of the language' (Levinson, 1983: 9); 'the study of the relations between language and context that are basic to an account of language understanding' (Levinson, 1983: 21); 'the study of the ability of language users to pair sentences with the contexts in which they would be appropriate' (Levinson, 1983: 24). Context is not merely an element in these definitions, but it also remains itself largely undefined or else, if it is defined, then it is defined in terms that must already call upon some prior notion of contextuality (even if obscured under notions of 'relevance' or 'appropriateness'). Moreover, this reflects a general difficulty in the attempt to define pragmatics: any definition would seem to rely, either directly or indirectly, on some notion of context (or situation or background) that is without further elucidation. The difficulty here is not, of course, restricted to the attempt to arrive at some definitional clarity in relation to pragmatics as such – context appears as a recurrent background notion across almost every discussion within pragmatic theory.

The fact that context is indeed such a ubiquitous and indispensable concept within pragmatics, even while it retains its conceptual opacity, does not mean, however, that pragmatics is therefore a flawed discipline whose conceptual foundations are somehow incomplete or inadequate. Pragmatics is forced to draw upon the notion of context, and may even present itself as having a central interest in context, and yet most of what constitutes pragmatics consists, not in an investigation of context as such, but rather in the investigation and explication of the specific relations between quite particular features of linguistic structure and practice, and between those features and particular social, cultural or environmental elements. The notion of context is thus assumed here, rather than being itself given clear conceptual articulation. The features that are explicated may be viewed as features that are part of the contextual setting of language and language use (and so are part of the structure that determines and constrains such use), but they are not exhaustive of that setting. The same is true of the notion of context as it appears elsewhere in linguistics as well as in other fields. Where appeal is made to the notion of context it is typically to an already implicitly grasped idea of what may be encompassed, more or less, by the notion of context in the specific field at issue and in the specific case in question.

This means, however, that the notion of context is not itself directly addressed within any of the fields in which context appears as a central notion. One might be inclined to say that this is just as it should be and that the

notion of context requires no more explication or articulation than is already available within the various fields of pragmatics, semantics, hermeneutics and the rest. Such a response would, however, be both too hasty and rather too easy. While we are right to be suspicious of attempts to provide analyses of concepts that sever those concepts from their actual deployment, we should also be suspicious of attempts to prevent any analysis or investigation of concepts that looks beyond the particular instances of the use of those concepts. It is in the nature of concepts as concepts that they connect up with other concepts and the tracing out of such connections is a valuable activity in itself – not because it is likely to somehow provide a clarification of what was otherwise opaque, but because it may help us to understand what are the legitimate boundaries of employment of certain concepts, with what concepts and in what manner certain concepts are connected, and what the point of those concepts may be. Closer consideration of the notion of context is unlikely to enable us to define context in a way that will make a difference to the use of the notion in pragmatics or elsewhere, but it may help us better to understand what is at issue in such use and may also enable us better to understand why it is that context is indeed both so central and so resistant to elucidation.

### III.

At its most general, the notion of context refers us to the ‘setting’ in which some object – whether linguistic or otherwise (for we can speak about the context in which some physical thing is set, about the context in which an event or action takes place, or, as Eco’s story reminds us, about the context in which some person is encountered) – is given meaningful presentation and to the relation between the presented object and the presentational setting. This is not to provide a definition, of course, since this characterisation itself presupposes the notion of context through invoking the idea of ‘setting’, but it does provide a starting point for further consideration of the concept. Since meaningful presentation is dependent on the presentational setting, when the relation between object and setting is somehow severed, so the meaningful character of the object presented may be correspondingly undermined. Eco’s near-embarrassment in his close encounter with Anthony Quinn is a consequence of just such a severing of presented object (Quinn’s face, let us say), from its usual presentational setting (‘Zorba the Greek’, the cinema or whatever). To talk of context is thus already to talk, not of a single element that stands alone, but of a relational, one might say, ‘holistic’ structure.

The Latin origin of the word context – from contextus, meaning ‘woven together’ (from texere/textere, meaning ‘to weave’) – is indicative of the way in which the idea of contextuality already implies a certain relational

or holistic conception of the structure of meaningful presentation. If meaningful presentation is always of an object within a setting, then all such presentation implies a context of presentation. Thus, from so-called Fregean ‘semantic holism’ (‘it is only in the context of a proposition that words have any meaning’ – Frege, 1950: §62) through to the holism of the hermeneutic circle (‘the particular can be understood only through the whole, and conversely, the whole, only through the particular’<sup>ii</sup> – Ast, 1990: 45), holistic conceptions of the nature of meaning and understanding inevitably either embody or rest upon some version of what might be termed a ‘principle of contextuality.’ Such a principle can be said to consist in the claim, along the lines formulated above, that ‘all presentation implies, and is, in some cases, dependent upon, a context of presentation’.

There are, of course, stronger and weaker versions of holism and so of the contextualism with which it is associated. The more the object of presentation is indeed seen as itself dependent, in its very existence or identity, on the context against which it is set – the more it is seen as a ‘function’ of its context – the stronger the holism or contextualism at issue. Within linguistics and philosophy of language, positions according to which the meaning of an expression is wholly determined by the context in which the expression occurs are representative of a strong form of holism or contextualism with respect to meaning. The work of the linguist J. R. Firth provides one example of such a position, while philosophers such as Hilary Putnam, W. V. O. Quine and Donald Davidson have all been seen as committed to forms of ‘meaning holism’ in which meaning is tied, not merely to a linguistic, but to a broader behavioural, social or environmental context.<sup>iii</sup> Such holism has its origins in some strands of pragmatist thought, as well as in the work of foundational figures within the analytic tradition such as Frege and especially Wittgenstein. Phenomenological, structuralist and hermeneutic thinking have also given rise to strong forms of holism or contextualism in German and French thought (from Heidegger and Gadamer through to Saussure) and this remains even in post-structuralist and post-modernist theorists such as Foucault and Derrida. Indeed, one may view the suspicion of meaning in the work of Derrida, in particular, as arising out of a particularly strong sense of contextuality, but a sense of contextuality in which the emphasis is on indeterminacy and incompleteness – contextuality may thus be taken to itself imply the deferral and dispersal of meaning, rather than its coming to rest in any ‘real presence.’<sup>iv</sup>

Not only is contextuality, whether or not it is made explicit, an inevitable part of understanding or interpretation no matter where it occurs, but the notion of context, and the associated commitment to some form of holism or contextualism, whether more strongly or weakly formulated, would seem to be an inevitable element in

any account of the structure of meaning. It is, indeed, characteristic of meaning as such that it is always contextually constituted on the basis of a relation between the meaningfully presented object and some surrounding ‘context of presentation’. Thus, in the phenomenological tradition, the analysis of the very structure by which meaningful presentation comes about (the structure of ‘meaning-constitution’) is given in terms of the relation between an ‘intentional’ object and the ‘horizontal’ setting within which every such object is always located (see Kuhn, 1968; Gadamer, 1989: 245ff; Malpas 1992, 113-114).<sup>v</sup>

The centrality of contextuality in the structure of meaning reflects, not only on the character of meaning (and so of understanding, interpretation and the like), but also on the character of contextuality as such. Just as the original use of ‘context’ was to refer to the larger text in which a part of text might be embedded, so the contemporary notion of context has its primary application in relation, if not to issues of textuality and language alone, then certainly to issues of meaning and understanding. Contextuality brings into view just the general kind of relation that obtains between elements according to which one or another of those elements is rendered meaningful. To speak of a context, then, is already to indicate that there is something presented as meaningful within that context. But the use of ‘within’ here should not mislead. The ‘within’ of contextuality is not the ‘within’ of simple containment, but is indicative of a relation of meaning. Thus while there are many cases where we may speak of one thing as standing ‘within’ a larger setting – as water may be held within a cup, a rock may stand within a riverbed, the earth may be located within the solar system – not every such case counts as instantiating a contextual relation. To say, for instance, that the cup provides the ‘context’ for the water is already to say something the oddity of which requires some further explication.

The basic point at issue here is one that appears, in a slightly different form, in Martin Heidegger’s preliminary analyses in Being and Time. The focus for Heidegger’s analysis in that work is the essential structure of human being and Heidegger uses the word ‘Dasein’ to refer to the particular mode of being that characterises the human. Dasein never exists alone or apart, but is only to be found (and only ever finds itself) already ‘in-the-world’. Heidegger emphasises, however, that the way Dasein is ‘in’ its world is not the way in which one physical object may be ‘contained’ or located in another (Heidegger, 1962: H54). Dasein is ‘in’ its world in the sense of being ‘involved’ in that world, rather than merely ‘contained’ by it. Much of Being and Time is given over to an analysis of the nature of that ‘involvement’ – an analysis that moves from the account of Dasein’s world in terms of its ‘equipmental’ character (so that Dasein first encounters things as they are available for use – as ‘ready-to-hand’ –

and only secondarily as 'present-at-hand' objects of knowledge or acquaintance) to the explication of the way in which Dasein's being is fundamentally temporal.<sup>vi</sup> Given the primary orientation of Being and Time towards the question concerning the meaning of being (Heidegger, 1962 H1), one can say that the analysis of the structure of Dasein's 'being-in' its world is also an analysis of the possibility of meaning as such. In that case, the inquiry into meaning can be seen as essentially bound up with the inquiry into the structure of that 'in-ness' which appears elsewhere in terms of the notion of contextuality.

Rather than context being an independent notion on which we may draw in our attempts to explicate the structure of meaning and understanding, context is a notion with which meaning and understanding are already implicated, just as meaning and understanding already imply some notion of context. It is not surprising, then, that any attempt to provide an account of context as a central notion in the account of meaning and understanding (whether within pragmatics, semantics or even Heideggerian ontology), must be doomed to failure or, at least, to circularity.<sup>vii</sup> Context, meaning and understanding are interconnected notions, no one of which can be explored independently of the others. The difficulty that attaches to any attempt to provide an elucidation of the notion of context merely reflects, therefore, the same difficulty that attaches to the attempt to elucidate the notions of meaning and understanding and to ask 'what is context?' is to ask a question no more nor less tractable than 'what is meaning?' or 'what is understanding?' Moreover, the circularity that is also evident in the brief exploration of context undertaken in the immediately preceding pages – a circularity that was evident as soon as context was characterised in terms of a 'presentational setting' – ought to indicate the way in which it would be mistaken to expect that the notion of context could be simply replaced by some other concept or set of concepts to which it could be definitionally reduced. If meaning is tied to context, just as much as context is tied to meaning, then so meaning and context must both be seen as absolutely basic concepts which, if they can be characterised at all, can only be characterised in ways that already rely upon some prior understanding of those very notions.

In this respect, both semantics and pragmatics, which might crudely be seen as taking meaning and context as, respectively, their two core concepts, nevertheless fail to provide any real elucidation of either of those concepts. Instead, the concepts of 'meaning' and 'context' serve as markers indicating the particular territory within which semantic or pragmatic inquiry takes place. Within the territory thus established, and so against an already understood background of which the concepts of meaning and context are part, specific relations between particular linguistic and social phenomena can be mapped out. Strictly speaking, however, no real elucidation is given of the

concepts of meaning and context that are determinative of the territory at issue and that are, therefore, the determining concepts for semantics and pragmatics. This is not to present any criticism of either semantics or pragmatics, but is merely to point to what is a feature of inquiry as such. The determining concept of any inquiry establishes, and so limits, the general field in which the inquiry operates. As a consequence of this, however, no inquiry can ever provide an elucidation of that which is its guiding or determining concept.

Thus, even when we do find, within semantic or pragmatic theory, an account being offered of meaning or of context, such accounts typically provide only a stipulative definition of the notions at issue, or, to point to what is more fundamental here, they define those notions in ways that already rely on a prior grasp of the concepts concerned (stipulative definitions themselves rely on just such a prior grasp). Thus, inasmuch as pragmatics, considered as a whole, provides an ‘account’ of context, it provides only a partial such account that consists in an analysis and description of certain contextual elements (more accurately, of course, we may say that pragmatics simply examines the encoding of certain contextual elements in the structure of utterances or linguistic exchange). Similarly, semantics can be seen as providing an ‘account’ of meaning, but only as it arises within an already circumscribed frame, and in a way that already relies on a grasp of the concept that can never be completely elaborated within semantic theory itself. Thus truth-conditional semantics, for instance, explicates meaning via the notion of the conditions under which a sentence is true. However, while this may appear to reduce meaning to truth, and so to reduce the intensional to the extensional, it achieves this only within a certain narrow theoretical ‘context’,<sup>viii</sup> since the explication of the notion of truth, or of truth-conditionality, itself turns out to depend upon the concept of meaning (or sameness of meaning).<sup>ix</sup> Rather like meaning and context, truth and meaning are here evident as interdependent concepts, each of which can be used to elucidate the other, but neither of which can be reduced to anything more fundamental.

If we talk of the concepts at issue here – and this applies to truth and meaning, as well as to meaning and context – as ‘basic’ concepts, then this should not be taken to imply that they are conceptually independent. While these concepts always resist complete theoretical explication or conceptual articulation, they also implicate one another in such a way that each may be used to elucidate the other. Thus truth may be defined, at least in part, via the notion of meaning and meaning via truth; context may, in part, be defined through the notion of meaning and meaning via context. To draw on the notion of contextuality itself, we may say that just as the elucidation of meaning always depends on making a connection to a broader contextual setting, so the elucidation of the notion of

context itself, and of the other concepts with which it is associated, must likewise involve the elaboration of a wider conceptual context within which the notion of context itself stands. Indeed, one might say this is true of all concepts: conceptual elaboration is seldom a matter of conceptual reduction, but almost always of conceptual relation. The content of a concept is determined by the wider conceptual web – the contextus – into which it fits. Reductive definition is achieved by the artificial isolation of one portion of the web from the rest (this, on might say, is precisely what formalisation involves) – by the marking out of a certain conceptual domain within certain specified boundaries. None of this renders impossible the attempt at a more general elucidation of concepts – not even of concepts such as that of context itself – but it does mean that any such elucidation will need to look at showing how the concepts at issue are indeed interconnected. It will not be a matter of defining context (or meaning or understanding), but of showing something of the structure within which the concept of context operates and how it relates to other concepts also implicated in that same structure. Indeed, it is just such a contextual elaboration that has already been partially achieved in the discussion immediately above.

#### IV.

Context and meaning are, as we have already seen, co-relative concepts. To situate something within a context is already to make it meaningful, while to grasp something as meaningful is also to grasp its situation within a context. The tie between meaning and contextuality can be expressed, as I expressed it above, in terms of the idea that meaning is always contextual. We might also say that, insofar as it is contextual, meaning is always holistic. In this respect, the principle of contextuality (‘Every presented object implies a presentational setting’) is invariably associated with holistic theories of meaning, whether within semantics or pragmatics, within the various spheres of hermeneutics or even, more generally, within the philosophy of mind and epistemology. Talk of the holistic character of meaning here may, however, give rise to concern, for so-called ‘meaning holism’ has, at least in some quarters, come to be viewed as a rather disreputable notion. Since contextualism and holism seem closely tied together, it is important, therefore, to give some consideration to the problems that supposedly attach to such holism. Indeed, such consideration may well prove useful in enabling a clearer understanding of the structure and significance of the notion of context.

‘It seems that it all depends on the context’ write Jerry Fodor and Ernest Lepore “‘The bark,’ for example, means one thing in the context “...of the tree,” but something quite different in the context “...of the dog.” “Flying

planes” means aircraft in the context “...are dangerous,” but it means piloting in the context “...is dangerous.” “The” out of context means nothing at all (so, anyhow, Bertrand Russell assures us), but “the F is G’ is adequately well-defined... Meaning is, therefore, something that words have in sentences; and its something that sentences have in a language.’ (Fodor & Lepore, 1992: ix). Fodor and Lepore comment that the holistic conception of meaning expressed here seems to require ‘only truisms’ as its premises and is, indeed, quite widely accepted, but they query whether ‘meaning holism’ – according to which ‘only whole languages or whole theories or whole belief systems have meanings’ (Fodor and Lepore, 1992: x) – is actually well-founded. Fodor himself has gone further, expressing the view that meaning holism is ‘a crazy doctrine’ (Fodor, 1987: 62). Clearly one might question the specific arguments advanced in favour of a holistic conception of meaning, but of more interest here is the possibility of arguments against such a holistic conception as such.

While Fodor and Lepore do not focus on arguments against meaning holism in their 1992 book, they do briefly consider some such arguments. Thus they write that:

Meaning holism would require that if any one sentence in your theory occurs in my theory, then practically all the sentences that occur in your theory must occur in my theory . And similarly, mutatis mutandis, if ‘theory’ is replaced by ‘language’ . If holism is true, then I can’t understand any of your language unless I can understand practically all of it. But how then, save in a single spasm of seamless cognition, could any language ever be learned? (Fodor & Lepore, 1992: 9).

The argument at issue here is one that can also be found in Michael Dummett’s work (see: Dummett, 1973: 599-600 & Dummett, 1975: 133), as well as elsewhere in Fodor (see Fodor, 1987: 56-7), and it is one that can be seen as taking a number of different forms. The idea is that if meaning is determined by a whole system of interconnections, then there is no way in which meaning can be learnt without grasping the whole system of interconnections at once; there is no way in which any one utterance, belief or whatever can be understood without having already understood the entire system; there is no way in which two utterances, beliefs or whatever can ‘mean’ the same, unless they are interconnected within the entire system in exactly the same way.

Holism can be viewed, as I noted above and as Fodor and Lepore’s own comments might be taken to suggest, as arising out of recognition of what I have called the principle of contextuality. That principle consists in

the idea that every meaningful presentation implies a context of presentation where the notion of ‘context of presentation’ refers us to the particular setting in which the object is presented as meaningful. There is clearly an important question as to how the contextual setting is to be characterised in any particular case (and the context will never, of course, be amenable to any exhaustive specification), but in general the notion of contextuality does not imply that meaning is determined by one single context, namely, ‘whole languages or whole theories or whole belief systems’, or that every meaningful presentation has the same context. To suppose that it was determined in such a fashion would, indeed, be to misapprehend what is involved in the notion of contextuality as such.

Just as a difference in context brings with it a difference in the contextualised object – since the context determines the character of the object’s presentation – so a difference in the character of the object’s meaningful presentation implies a difference in the context. Moreover, no object is ever encountered other than within a certain mode of meaningful presentation and thus no object is ever encountered other than within some context or other – every object is always encountered as something (see, for instance, Heidegger, 1962: H164). Thus even when Eco finds himself face-to-face with Anthony Quinn and yet unable, until the last moment, to recognise him, this does not mean that Quinn’s face is encountered in a completely de-contextualised fashion. Instead, the encounter is of an object presented in one context, and so presented as having a certain character appropriate to that context – what is presented is a face that ‘looks familiar’ and so is taken, in that context, as the face of a real person with whom one is personally acquainted. Not only does the Eco example demonstrate the necessary contextualisation of objects, but it also shows how objects bring their contexts with them – Quinn’s face is presented in one context in which it seems not quite to fit (although it is still a face that is seen), but the face actually evokes the appropriate context in which it does fit, suddenly bringing the context into view and thereby also bringing the face into sudden recognition in a way that is reminiscent of the sudden cohering of an image into a particular meaningful form (rather like those hidden 3-D pictures that require one to look at them in just the right way before the object they contain within them can be seen).

The notion of object is, of course, ambiguous: in one sense it refers us to that which underlies many different modes of meaningful presentation (and in this sense is ‘independent’ of any such mode of presentation, even though it can only be specified through some particular such mode<sup>s</sup>); in another sense it is not distinct from the meaningful presentation as such. Thus the object that Eco sees can be described merely as a face that has an air of familiarity about it or as the face of Zorba the Greek. Both of these presentations can be said to be presentations of

different objects, but, of course, both can also be seen as presentations of the same object, namely, of the face of the man who is (or was) Anthony Quinn. Nevertheless, the crucial point here is to recognise the way in which, since every presentation involves a particular context of presentation, just as every context of presentation implies something presented, so a difference in the presentation (a difference, in one sense, in the 'object of presentation') always brings a difference in the particular context. Context is, one might say, always 'localised' around, or 'indexed' to, the presented or presented object.

In that case, however, 'whole languages or whole theories or whole belief systems' cannot properly count as the contexts in which particular meaningful objects are presented as meaningful: differences in meaning, and in the meaningful object presented, can arise within the same language, theory or 'belief system', but a difference in the meaning, or in the presented object, ought to imply a difference in context. In fact, the idea that whole languages, theories or systems of belief count as the contexts for particular meaningful presentations (if it is not just a form of conceptual shorthand) would seem to rest on a failure to distinguish between the context in which meaning as such may arise, and the context in which particular meanings arise or particular objects are presented. One may, of course, talk of the whole language as the context of meaning, but not as the proper context for this meaning – that is, not for any particular instance of meaning, but only for meaning in general – and the same holds in the case of whole theories or systems of belief.

The idea of the 'whole' that is at issue in talk of the holistic determination of meaning is not the idea of some static and determinate system that determines everything else that somehow stands within its compass, but instead the 'whole' refers us to the interconnected character of some only incompletely and indeterminately specifiable set of contexts and associated objects. Thus the media-world in which the image of the actor Anthony Quinn belongs, is not a world that can be viewed as one enormous framework that directly confers meaning on the elements that stand within it. Instead, talk of such a world serves merely to indicate the way in which a whole set of more particular contexts stand in loose interconnection to one another and in relation, perhaps, to a set of interconnected practices. The case of language, or of any other 'meaning-system' is, in this respect, no different. Of course, there is a 'grammar', and a structure, that can be used to chart the way in which the varieties of context, and the variety of objects that stand within them, intersect and connect up, but it is a grammar and a structure that is abstracted out of an ongoing and concrete interaction, rather than determinative of it. Holism essentially consists, then, in a commitment to the principle of contextuality, as well as to the interconnected character of context itself,

where this is understood in terms of a commitment to the idea that meanings never stand alone, but only within particular settings, where those settings are themselves seen as interconnected and interdependent. Understood in its proper contextual character, then, holism does not make understanding impossible, since it involves no requirement for complete understanding of the whole (the whole language, the whole theory, the whole system of belief) as a prerequisite of understanding any part. Indeed, the very idea of such ‘complete’ understanding turns out to depend on a failure to take proper heed of the contextual character, not only of meaning, but of any understanding of meaning – understanding is always of particular meaningful objects within their presentational contexts.

The basic point at issue in this discussion of the necessarily contextual character of holism is one that I have made elsewhere by reference to notions of ‘horizontality’ (taking the cue from phenomenology) or ‘locality’ (see Malpas, 1991: 47-58; 1992: 110ff; 1999: 94ff). Just as a particular view always stands within a particular horizon even while that horizon is itself part of a larger landscape, or as a specific locale has a character of its own even while it is situated within a wider region, so does meaning always arise within particular contexts even while those contexts themselves interconnect. Moreover, the indeterminacy that attaches to notions of horizon or locality – where does the horizon end? what non-arbitrary boundary can be set that distinguishes this locale from another? – also attaches, of course, to the notion of context. Not only, then, is there no way of defining context, but, with respect to any particular context, there is no complete or determinate specification can ever be provided of it.

Since contexts are always tied to the object or objects of presentation that arise within those contexts (just any particular meaningful object is itself tied to its context of presentation), the identification of contexts is partly dependent on the identification of the objects that present within those contexts. But as objects can also be understood as capable of presentation across a number of contexts (just as objects are always capable of more than one description), so the interconnection between contexts can be seen as given through the way in which the ‘same’ object can figure as meaningful in more than one context.<sup>xi</sup> The interconnectedness of contexts is, indeed, presupposed in the idea of the interconnectedness of the different meaningful presentations of the one object. Moreover, the interconnectedness of contexts also means that contexts often implicate one another in various ways, just as some descriptions similarly mutually imply one another, and this can be seen as another way in which context is rendered necessarily indeterminate. What counts as part of this context is never capable of complete or determinate exposition precisely because of the way in which different contexts intersect in their relation to the ‘same’ object. And what goes for context also, of course, goes for meaning.

Indeed, the features of context that have so far been explicated are features of meaning itself. Meaning, like context, is a web of interconnections from which particular meanings can only ever be partially untangled. Of course, rather than talking of different contexts here, we may choose to talk instead of context as merely the ever-shifting background against which particular meaningful presentations arise. Context as normally employed to refer to a particular such background would then become merely a shorthand means of designating what is a pervasive structural feature of the meaningful encounter with things within the world. We might understand context as then closely tied to idea of orientation, place and position – ideas indeed already suggested by talk of ‘horizontality’ and ‘locality’. Heidegger’s attempt, in Being and Time, to explicate the structure of Dasein’s ‘being-in’ through the ideas of readiness-to-hand and presence-at-hand, along with the larger constellation of ideas with which these fit, can be seen as an attempt to explicate just such notions (ultimately by showing how they are grounded in temporality). Significantly, Dasein’s ‘being-in-the-world’ is always a being-in that is realised, not through some general relation to the world as such, but always through the ‘nearing’ (Näherung) or ‘bringing-near’ of things in Dasein’s particular and proximate activity (see Heidegger, 1962: H105). Context can be seen as itself established in just such ‘bringing-near’.

It is no wonder that context is such a difficult notion to fit within any precisely delineated theoretical framework. Not only is the explication of context subject to all the usual ambiguities associated with any attempt to articulate the conceptual space – the context – in which a particular idea belongs, but contextuality refers us directly to the dynamic and interconnected character of meaning as such. Every context always implicates other contexts, just as one meaning always implicates others, and yet any such implication and interconnection is itself realised only through particular contexts and in relation to specific meanings. There is no possibility of the ‘holism’ that is at issue here being expressed merely in relation to some single all-encompassing framework or ‘theory’ – the ‘whole’ is given in the ongoing, dynamic interconnecting and interweaving of elements between specific contextual presentations, between specific meaningful encounters.

If we focus on the notion of encounter here, then we can also begin to see something of the way in which context must be understood, not only in relation to the notion of the object presented nor the meaning that is made possible, but also in terms of the active involvement of an agent in an environment (something already suggested by the earlier references to Heidegger’s ‘being-in-the-world’ – see also Malpas, 1999: 94ff). How the agent is specified and how the environment is understood depends on the particular sort of meaningful presentation at issue (for

instance, whether it is viewed from a semantic or pragmatic, a semiotic or hermeneutic, perspective), but every context can be viewed as established in relation to a particular act or type of act. Context might thus be viewed as a way of specifying the particular orientation on the part of an agent within an environment that is required for certain objects or features of objects within that environment to become salient for that agent. Understanding context, and also meaning, as having an important relation to agency enables us better to appreciate the dynamic character of context and of meaning. But we are also then better able to understand the way in which the holism with which contextuality is associated ought to be a holism that encompasses subject and object, agent and environment, rather than merely a set of abstracted ‘meanings’, ‘presentations’ or whatever. Thus Davidson’s elaboration of the structure of meaning, which turns out, in his work, to be closely associated with the structure of truth, as well as of the propositional attitudes and action, turns out to be underpinned by a triangular relation between particular subjective, intersubjective and objective elements – between a particular speaker, an interlocutor or group of interlocutors, and some object or objects that are the focus of attention and action (see Davidson, 1991; see also Malpas 1999: 138ff). Here the structure of context is itself exhibited as a function of the concrete engagement of an agent within an environment or locale that includes specific objects as well as other agents.

If the contextual character of meaning is understood in the complex fashion suggested by Davidson’s account, so that meaning – and content generally – arises through the interplay between, to use Davidson’s framework, subjectivity, intersubjectivity and objectivity, then we cannot simply prioritise any one of these elements as the over-riding factor in the determination of meaning (nor can we assert any absolute determinacy of meaning – which is not to say that there is no meaning, but only that meaning is always multiple). The dependence of meaning on context is not a dependence on one element, but on many such elements. One implication of this is that one can never completely sever the ‘meaning’ of an act or utterance from the agent to whom that act or utterance is attributed. If meaning is determined by context, then the agent, and so the agent’s own self-understanding, is always a part of that context, and so is partially determinative of the meaning.<sup>xiii</sup> At the same time, the context also includes that which goes beyond the agent – namely, the interaction with other agents and the environment in which and in relation to which that interaction takes place. The tendency to separate out particular elements – the speaker, the existing linguistic practice, the object – as the primary element in the determination of meaning, involves an artificial separation of the various elements that are only ever given together within a specific context or locale.

Thus, to take one example, Davidson rejects the idea that meaning can be seen as determined by prior linguistic convention or that it is simply determined by speakers' intentions (see Davidson, 1986 & 1994).

V.

If context is an opaque concept, it is only as opaque as is the concept of meaning with which it is inextricably intertwined. Meaning, no matter what 'kind' of meaning is at issue, is itself always contextual, while context, in its own turn, is always 'meaningful'. The contextual character of meaning is expressed, in one form, in various holistic approaches to meaning whether within the study of language, epistemology or psychology and philosophy of mind. But if we recognise the contextual basis of such holism, we are also forced to recognise that such holism cannot properly be captured in accounts that would treat meaning simply as generated through the structure of language as a whole or through some theoretical or epistemic framework. The contextual basis of any form of meaning holism implies that meaning is always constituted in and through specific contexts – specific horizons or locales – which themselves stand in dynamic and complex inter-relation. Inasmuch as the idea of context refers us to the larger weave of meaning with which any particular instance of meaning is interwoven, so we can see meaning as constituted through the weave itself, rather than through any single, separable element within that weave. Thus meaning is a function of the relating of elements rather than being already intrinsic to any single such element. But what ought also to be evident is that the weave of meaning that is brought to our attention via the notion of context is not something that simply extends out in every direction as part of some enormous swathe of fabric. The weave of meaning is a patchwork, and a thoroughly variegated and loosely stitched one at that, rather than a seamless broadcloth. It is, moreover, a cloth that is woven together only in and through the particular concrete engagement of agents in relation to other agents and to the things around them within a larger world.

## Notes

- 
- <sup>i</sup> The distinction between situation and context employed here by Leech is, however, a distinction that has a longer history to it. It is prefigured, for instance, in Malinowski's comments in 1923: 'Exactly as in the reality of spoken or written languages, a word without linguistic context is a mere figment and stands for nothing by itself, so in the reality of a spoken living tongue, the utterance has no meaning except in the context of a situation' ( Malinowski, 1949: 307).
- <sup>ii</sup> This is the formulation given by the German hermeneuticist Friedrich Ast in 1806.
- <sup>iii</sup> Indeed, it is not merely the meaning or content of linguistic utterances alone that may be seen to be dependent on context. Contemporary externalism (in relation to the development of which Putnam, Quine and Davidson can all be seen to have played important roles) claims that content itself, whether of linguistic utterance or mental state, is dependent on contextual circumstances that are external to the individual to whom the content in question is attributed. Putnam (1975) provides a classic statement of one form of externalism as does Davidson (1991).
- <sup>iv</sup> Of course, Derrida himself argues that context is never sufficient to 'fix' meaning since context is not itself capable of exhaustive determination (see Derrida, 1982: 327). In this respect, it should be noted that my own emphasis on the role of context in the possibility of meaning is not an attempt to find in context some real presence that is otherwise missing from the word, sentence or sign, but rather to point to the way in which any meaningful presentation always refers beyond itself and so is always incomplete, always indeterminate, always to some degree opaque. Contextuality is thus not far removed from what is at issue in Derrida's 'différance'.
- <sup>v</sup> Just as context can never be completely elucidated, so too is the 'horizon' or 'horizontal setting' similarly 'indeterminate'. Edmund Husserl, who develops the notion of horizon from James' idea of 'fringe', is explicit on this point, writing of the horizon as 'a dimly apprehended depth or fringe of indeterminate reality' (Husserl, 1931: 102). Here the indeterminacy of the phenomenological horizon (and so of context) mirrors the indeterminacy of the visual horizon – the more we move away from the centre of the field and the closer we get to the horizon, the less clearly and determinately do things appear. On the issue of indeterminacy in general, see Malpas (1992: 104ff).
- <sup>vi</sup> For detailed account of Heidegger's Dasein-analysis in Being and Time see Dreyfus, (1991).

- 
- <sup>vii</sup> Heidegger explicitly recognises such circularity as a necessary and inevitable element in his own account (see Heidegger, 1962: H152ff).
- <sup>viii</sup> In other words, when we try to arrive at a formal definition of meaning, we do so by restricting our analysis to a certain domain – thus we do not pursue our analysis beyond certain boundaries and we take certain concepts as foundational within the domain established within those boundaries. But that is not to say that those concepts are foundational tout court or that they are not in need of elucidation when we move beyond the boundaries of that particular inquiry.
- <sup>ix</sup> As Tarski’s formalisation of truth demonstrates (see Tarski, 1956).
- <sup>x</sup> The same point can be made with reference to description: any and every object is always capable of being given an infinite number of possible descriptions, even while the specification of an object always requires some particular description.
- <sup>xi</sup> It is worth noting the ambiguity in the notion of ‘same’ here – what counts as ‘the same object’ is itself something that varies with the context – there is no unique criterion of ‘sameness’ nor is there any context neutral description that can be applied to an object. It should also be noted that there is an inevitable circularity that attaches to the identification of contexts or of objects: while the identification of the context is dependent on the identification of the object, the identification of the object is itself dependent on context.
- <sup>xii</sup> Thus the idea that speakers may sometimes, because of the contextual meaning of meaning, misidentify the context and so misidentify the contents of their own utterances, thoughts, acts or whatever, is largely mistaken. While there are circumstances in which self-knowledge may fail, it is not, for the most part, compromised by the contextual (that is to say, holistic) character of meaning. For more on this problem, specifically in relation to Davidson, see Malpas (1994: 165-184; 1999: 95-100).

## Bibliography

---

- 
- Ast, Friedrich, 1990. 'Hermeneutics'. In: Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift (Eds.), The Hermeneutic Tradition. From Ast to Ricoeur. State University of New York. Albany, pp.39-56.
- Davidson, Donald, 1986. 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs.' In: Ernest Lepore (Ed.), Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson. Basil Blackwell, Oxford, pp. 433-46.
- Davidson, Donald., 1991. 'Three Varieties of Knowledge'. In: A. Phillips Griffiths (Ed.), A. J. Ayer: Memorial Essays. Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement 30. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 153-66.
- Davidson, Donald, 1994. 'The Social Aspect of Language'. In: Brian McGuinness and Gianluigi Oliveri (Eds.), The Philosophy of Michael Dummett. Kluwer, Dordrecht, pp. 1-16.
- Derrida, Jacques, 1982. Margins of Philosophy. Trans. Alan Bates. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Dreyfus, Hubert L., 1991. Being-in-the-World. A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I. Cambridge, Mass., M.I.T. Press.
- Dummett, Michael, 1973. Frege: Philosophy of Language. Harper & Row, New York.
- Dummett, Michael, 1975. 'What is a Theory of Meaning? I'. In: S. Guttenplan (Ed.), Mind and Language. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 97-138.
- Eco, Umberto, 1994. How to Travel with a Salmon and Other Essays. Harcourt Brace & Co, San Diego.
- Frege, Gottlob, 1950. The Foundations of Arithmetic. Trans. J. L. Austin. Basil Blackwell, London.
- Fodor Jerry, 1987. Psychosemantics: The Problem of Meaning in the Philosophy of Mind. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Fodor, Jerry and Ernest LePore, 1992. Holism: A Shopper's Guide. Basil Blackwell, Oxford
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. Truth and Method. 2<sup>nd</sup> Rev. Edn. Trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. Crossroad, New York.
- Heidegger, Martin, 1962. Being and Time. Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Harper & Row. New York.
- Husserl, Edmund, 1931. Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology. Trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson. George Allen & Unwin, London.
- Kuhn, Helmut, 1968. 'The Phenomenological Concept of 'Horizon''. In: Marvin Farber (Ed.), Philosophical Essays in Memory of Edmund Husserl. Greenwood Press, New York, pp. 106-23.
- Leech, Geoffrey N., 1983. Principles of Pragmatics. Longman, London.

- 
- Levinson, Stephen C., 1983. Pragmatics. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Malinowski, B, 1923. 'The problem of meaning in primitive languages'. In: C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards (Eds.), The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, pp. 296-336.
- Malpas, J. E., 1991. 'Holism and Indeterminacy'. Dialectica 45, 47-58.
- Malpas, J. E., 1992. Donald Davidson and the Mirror of Meaning. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Malpas, J. E., 1994. 'Self-knowledge and Scepticism'. Erkenntnis 40, 165-184.
- Malpas, J. E., 1999. Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Putnam, Hilary, 1975. 'The Meaning of "Meaning"'. In: Philosophical Papers, Vol II: Mind, Language, and Reality. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1975, pp.xx-xx.
- Tarski, Alfred, 1956. 'The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages'. In: Logic, Semantics and Metamathematics. Clarendon Press, Oxford, pp. 152-278