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Contextualism and Anti-Substantialism

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- ¶1. My contextualism is a philosophy of change. It is a kind of pragmatic naturalism shared in varying ways and degrees by such American philosophers as C. S. Peirce, William James, John Dewey, George H. Mead, Stephen C. Pepper, S. Morris Eames, and myself. All of us emphasize change and time as lived duration and agree that context is very important for all areas of philosophy. Change the context of a texture, and you change its felt quality. How important the qualitative change is for a particular purpose, however, may depend on the purpose or the context. With an appropriate context almost any event may have enhanced quality, and by setting up suitable instruments and control textures we can tackle both our practical and theoretical problems.

- ¶2. The key fact or root metaphor of this pragmatic outlook, as Pepper put it in his *World Hypotheses*, is patterned events, happenings, or historical events, viewed not as something past and done with, but rather as concrete presences. Nor do these happenings have to be ones of the magnitude of a world war or of the significance of the disappearance of our rain forests, an economic depression, or the war on drugs. They may be everyday ones like crossing a street, doing the laundry, or mowing the lawn. If we understand the structure and quality of ordinary happenings like these, we may be on the way to a better understanding of the cosmos and our place in it, for the main traits of such events comprise the categories of our contextualistic world hypothesis,^[1] and they may be used to categorize or explain any set of problematic happenings.

- ¶3. For convenience I place these categories, not without some overlapping, in two groups: (1) a set of textural or filling traits which indicate the nature or "stuff" of an event, and (2) a group of contextual or environmental traits which denote the place of the event in relation to other events. The textural categories include *texture*, *strand*, *quality*, *fusion*, and *reference* (direction-distance values), whereas the most important contextual ones are perhaps *environment*, *initiations*, *means* (or *instruments*), *consummations*, and *frustrations* (blocking).
- ¶4. It will be noted that in this set of categories the self-sufficient substances of the older substance-attribute metaphysics are replaced by textures. The external relations in terms of which these substances were to be connected are replaced by contexts, and the antecedent mechanistic spatiotemporal field of location likewise gives way to a set of contextual references. Furthermore, these contextualistic categories do not give rise to disparate "inner" and "outer" metaphysical domains of matter and mind such as developed from the primary and secondary qualities of the mechanistic naturalism of a Democritus or Lucretius, a Descartes, or a Locke. My sort of pragmatic naturalism or contextualism recognizes that there are different textures with different qualities but claims that these facts do not justify setting up insulated metaphysical realms.
- ¶5. Furthermore, as I put it in another essay,[\[2\]](#) the patterned event with which contextualists start is not a discrete atomic unit but rather a complex interrelationship of tendencies all interwoven into an integral whole with its own individual character or quality. Or to phrase it somewhat differently, as the term texture (borrowed from the weaver's art) suggests, each historical event is a web or network of happenings (strands), a focal center into which features of other histories somehow enter. Texture, strand, and context are relative to each other so that what is strand or detail in one context may become texture in a larger context. As a detail of a texture, moreover, a strand reaches out into the context and brings some of the quality of the latter into the texture. Since the character of a texture is a fusion of the qualities of its strands and the latter are partly from its context, analysis of a texture takes us into the textures of other events.
- ¶6. References also have double roles. They are both part of the character of an event and links with its context. Strands reach out or refer to other textures. They move from initiations through means-objects or instruments to frustrations or consummations, and to control the direction of affairs we must attend to the means.

- ¶7. So much, then, for a sketchy outline of the conceptual framework we contextualists use to describe our world and our place in it. By way of elaborating on this categorial system, I should now like to comment on four sets of implications important for a contextualistic world hypothesis: namely, (1) rejection of such metaphysical dualisms as the mind-matter dualism of Descartes and Locke, (2) the method of critical or reflective inquiry, (3) analysis as tracing patterns of change, and (4) persons as histories rather than immutable substances.
- ¶8. 1) With the major traditions of Chinese thought as outlined in Thomé H. Fang's *Chinese Philosophy: Its Spirit and Development*, [3] contextualists oppose such sharp metaphysical dualisms as those between mind and matter, self and the world, and subject and object. The Cartesian or Lockean dualism gives rise to a difficult if not unsolvable problem of how an insulated "inner" mind can know a real external world. It also conflicts with the contextualistic doctrine of interactionism or transactionalism. As contextualists see it, we live, move, and have our being in our natural, social, and cultural environment. Indeed, human organisms have commerce with their environment in numerous ways and enter into multiple interactions or transactions with it, some of them so integral to the events related that the distinction between organism and environment becomes, as G. H. Mead saw, a functional one which may be drawn differently depending on the context.
- ¶9. Our environment supports some of our activities and fails to support others. For example, a natural environment without lakes or other suitable bodies of water does not support swimming, but critical inquiry may lead to an indoor pool which does. At any rate, where our environment fails to support a particular activity, we must either modify our goals or develop instruments for realizing them. In any event, however, the conception of two insulated domains of mind and world, or the like, does not accord with the contextualistic idea of textures and their contexts, with strands of reference running from one to another in open and aboveboard fashion. Fang also opposed bifurcationism as a method and found dualism uncharacteristic of the Chinese spirit. [4]
- ¶10. Thinking in terms of sharp metaphysical dualisms, moreover, does not encourage a proper ecological notion of the environment, one which may foster caring for or protecting our environment rather than thinking simply in terms of conquering it, for we and our environment may have more in common than we sometimes recognize. As Thomé Fang properly points out in *The Chinese View of Life*, contrary to a common Western presumption, nature is not always hostile to humans, and one Chinese excellence lies in their sympathetic fellowship of unity in nature as well as in human community. [5] It seems clear to me that both contextualists and Chinese philosophers stress continuity between people and their environment. At any rate, as I noted in an essay on "Contextualism and Chinese Philosophy," "the natural order within which the incomplete and the unstable, the contingent and uncertain, the novel and the precarious are as genuine as the relatively complete, stable, and well-

established, affords not merely challenges to seek intelligent ways of redirecting ongoing affairs but also much of the time welcome support and on occasion a world rich in quality to be enjoyed." [6]

- ¶11. 2) A second important set of implications for a contextualistic world hypothesis is the method of critical or reflective inquiry. With it we can meet the challenge of finding intelligent ways of redirecting ongoing affairs in the face of diverse novel, precarious, uncertain, contingent, unstable, incomplete courses of events. Perhaps the best way of summarizing this method is to do so in terms of John Dewey's steps in a complete act of reflective thinking. He presents his version in a variety of different books: for example, in *How We Think*, 1910, 1933, and in *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, 1938. According to his general account, critical thinking often begins with more or less vague senses of something having gone wrong, clarifies and defines these difficulties in terms of observation and analysis, seeks hypotheses for solving the problems, reasons out the implications of these suggested solutions, and verifies through observation and experimentation the most promising possibilities. We determine which proposed solution is most promising by studying the conditions and consequences of accepting a particular hypothesis rather than one or more of its alternatives. Because something on the order of this experimental method, as Dewey saw it, had been used with conspicuous success over a prolonged period by natural scientists, he often referred to it as the scientific method. But since the method has been used effectively also in other areas of investigation not commonly called scientific, I prefer the term "critical thinking." In any event, contextualists are convinced that this method can be applied to any problematic situation, whatever the field, and they have emphasized the importance of applying it to values, both individual and social. Contextualists, however, do not think that this method is infallible or that it arrives at absolute truths or indubitable certainties. But, they maintain, it is a self-correcting method which provides highly probable conclusions and a better guide for conduct.
- ¶12. 3) Thirdly, as to contextualistic analysis, contrary to the dominant Western procedure from Democritus or Plato to Bertrand Russell which makes analysis an affair of breaking down wholes into permanent elements or irreducible constituents of some sort and assumes that any whole can be analyzed completely and finally into these elements, contextualists deny this assumption and hold that analysis is an affair of distinguishing temporal patterns rather than unveiling timeless distinctions.

- ¶13. Analysis is one way to understand or interpret a whole; and to understand a situation we place it in an appropriate context by patterning its relations to other relevant textures. We disentangle or sort strands, remembering that the latter are relative to textures and contexts. We exhibit the structure of an event by discriminating both constituent strands and relevant contextual references, for, as we have seen, strands derive part of their quality from envioning textures and have a way of leading off into them. Just how far we follow them or which ones we trace depends on the purpose or problem occasioning our analytic inquiry. But we never reach ultimate units immune to further analysis and with no variation from one context to another. Accordingly, there is no such thing as *the* analysis of any event, and each situation, depending on the purpose or context, is open to many analyses.
- ¶14. Also, analysis for contextualists may take various forms, of which I shall mention only two. For example, we may trace strands of a given texture into convenient control textures (schemes) such as the color cone or a musical scale, and these in turn may be traced into schemes of light wave or air vibrations, which tie in with the system of schemes constituting physics. For example, we may locate any color as to hue, saturation, and brightness on the color cone and thus have a basis for reproducing it. A second important form is genetic analysis, a form favored by John Dewey and apparently used much earlier by Confucius in treating problems of moral guidance and comparing different educational patterns in training people for leadership. In genetic analysis we exhibit the texture and quality of an event by tracing its career from its beginnings through the various phases of its history to its completion or ending, noting its conditions and consequences.
- ¶15. Perhaps, however, one of my favorite examples, analyzing the death of JB, may further clarify contextualistic analysis, especially if some of you share my liking for detective stories. More than timeless distinctions are needed to exhibit the texture of an act of dying, an event which takes some time, sometimes very little and sometimes a fairly long time. And what happens within that span varies with the cause of death. Which attendant circumstances are relevant, of course, may well depend on the purpose of the analysis. If it happens that homicide is suspected, the analysis made by the police will differ in significant ways depending on whether the cause is food poisoning, suffocation, a blow on the head, a bullet to the heart, or something else. Death from any one of these causes will lead into different envioning textures from another cause and will involve different control textures, observations, laboratory reports, and so on. And an adequate analysis of JB's death for the purpose cited needs to exhibit the distinctive features of the total texture stemming from whatever cause or complex of causes may be involved, along with, to be sure, pertinent ramifications in more or less distant envioning textures; for a different genetic pattern is involved in each of these cases. So whether we analyze the death of JB or something more pleasant like the flavor of lemonade, there are as many analyses of these items as there are problems or purposes associated with them.

- ¶16. 4) Turning now to our fourth set of implications, persons as histories rather than immutable substances, we contextualists maintain that experience shows that (a) persons are never found in isolation but rather are always parts of a situation; and they function differently as members of a family from what they do as members of a church, a political party, or a business organization; (b) they change, and our knowledge of them is fallible; (c) though they are immensely complex, each of them has a pattern or structure; and (d) they are continuous.^[7] In saying that experience shows these things, obviously I do not have in mind experience as interpreted by the traditional introspective psychology of Descartes and Locke, for on their interpretation experience seems to be constituted by relatively distinct impressions and ideas somehow brought together by association, and people and their world are set apart in opposed inner and outer ontological realms. But if one adopts, as I do, a psychology like that presented in E. C. Tolman's *Purposive Behavior in Animals and Men* and supplements it with social, linguistic, and cultural considerations of the type suggested by George Herbert Mead, John Dewey, Stephen C. Pepper, James J. Gibson's ecological approach, and Diane Gillespie's *The Mind's We*, experience is seen to be the entire range of our relations, interactions, and commerces with our natural, social, and cultural environment. It includes our enjoyments, sufferings, appreciations, consummations, and frustrations, as well as our reconstructive or adjustive activities. Such a behaviorism, moreover, is broad enough to include both the usual observational material and that which is open primarily to the individual acting.
- ¶17. I shall close with a few comments on the identity and continuity of a person. David Hume, as is well known, recognized the complexity of persons but professed to find in no one of them any simplicity at a time nor any identity in different times. A person for him is "nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in perpetual flux and movement."^[8] Accordingly, the mind is only the successive perceptions. As he put it, when he looked for himself, "I never catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception."^[9] Although Hume's view of both persons and experience seems to me inadequate, he is nonetheless correct in holding that no immutable substantial self or person is either given in or established by experience. His basic error, however, as Risieri Frondizi makes clear in his *The Nature of the Self: A Functional Interpretation*, consists in holding that because he sought but could not find a simple, immutable, substantial self, that therefore no self could be found. Since his atomism postulates that elements are more real than wholes, he did not try to comprehend wholes but rushed to chop them up into simple impressions and ideas. Then he complained that look as hard as he could, he never found functioning wholes.

- ¶18. Evidences of a continuous person are abundant if only one's world-view and method allow one to seek them. One of the merits of contextualism is that its categories provide a place for such continuity. For contextualists, however, the continuous person is no bare or pure ego but rather one with its own qualitative structure, its own history and plot, its own life style, and distinctive movement from its beginning to its close. For example, some continuity is manifested in the carrying out of any purposive act, each of which involves references to the past and anticipations of the future; and this constancy carries over to one between acts, so much so that detectives seeking to solve a crime may seize upon a distinctive manner of working as a clue to the perpetrator of the deed.
- ¶19. The fact of funding, learning from previous experiences, suggests the continuity of the learner. The further fact that I may recognize someone I have not seen for ten or more years affords evidence of the continuity of at least two persons. Or even more remarkably, if on the fiftieth anniversary of my graduation from a high school no longer in existence, I return to my home county in Texas and am fortunate enough to see a few former classmates I have not seen in decades, they may look more like my recollection of one of their long deceased parents than they do the persons who graduated with me some fifty years ago and who are shown in the class photograph. And yet we may recognize each other. Precisely what the memory and other associated processes are we may be unsure about, but in daily life we do not doubt but what the same persons are having a reunion, and the hypothesis of continuity is far more plausible than alternative hypotheses which deny it.
- ¶20. If, as Dewey maintains, "every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after," [\[10\]](#) in principle continuity can be traced between any two experiences of a person, and depending on the problem, any one of a number of antecedent experiences may shed particularly helpful light on it.

END NOTES

1. A fuller statement on contextualism and its categories may be found in my essay Lewis E. Hahn, [Contextualism and Cosmic Evolution-Revolution](#) in R. Gotesky and E.Laszlo (Eds.), *Patterns of Development in Nature, Society, Man and Knowledge* New York: Gordon and Breach, Science Publishers (1971). Also in *Philosophy Forum*, 11 (March 1972) and reprinted as Chapter 1 in Lewis E. Hahn, [A Contextualist World View](#), Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press (2001).

- [2.](#) [ibid.](#). Also in *Philosophy Forum*, 11 (March 1972) and reprinted as Chapter 1 in Lewis E. Hahn, *A Contextualist World View*, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press (2001).
- [3.](#) Thomé H. Fang, *The Chinese Philosophy: Its Spirit and Its Development* , Taipei: Linking Publishing Co. (1981), 18-19.
- [4.](#) [ibid.](#), 19.
- [5.](#) Thomé H. Fang, *The Chinese View of Life: The Philosophy of Comprehensive Harmony* , Taipei: Linking Publishing Co. (1986), 21.
- [6.](#) Lewis E. Hahn, *Contextualism and Chinese Philosophy*, a keynote speech, Paper presented at the International Symposium on Comparative Studies of Eastern and Western Philosophy, Chinese Culture University, Taipei, Taiwan on August 18, 1989.
- [7.](#) This is a topic I have been concerned with for some time. In 1979 I presented "A Contextualistic View of the Self" at the Ninth Interamerican Congress of Philosophy in Caracas. See also Lewis E. Hahn, [A Contextualistic Interpretation of the Self](#) in J. J. Garcia (Ed.), *Man and His Conduct: Philosophical Essays in Honor of Risieri Frondizi* Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico: University of Puerto Rico Press (1980).
- [8.](#) David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1896), Book I, Part IV, Sect. 6, 252.
- [9.](#) [ibid.](#), Book I, Part IV, Sect. 6, 252.
- [10.](#) John Dewey, [Experience and Education](#) in P. . Baysinger and B.Levine (Eds.), *The Collected Works of John Dewey: Later Works* Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press (1939).

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