

Teaching Subtlety of Thought: The Lessons of 'Contextualism'

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The physicist P.M.S. Blackett was one of the founders of operations research, and made an enormous contribution to the conduct of the war by Britain. One of his success stories involved the use of Beaufighter aircraft to deal with Focke-Wolf 200 aircraft, which were taking a heavy toll of shipping west of Ireland. The practice before Blackett was to use the Beaufighters when all ten were serviceable, so that the entire sea lane of 200 miles could be 'swept clean' (Lovell, 1975, p. 59). The reasoning was that if fewer than the total number of Beaufighters were used some of the enemy aircraft would be missed. Blackett, using the concept of Poisson's distribution, showed that the probability of 'not sighting' was relatively small, and that, therefore, the Beaufighters should be flown whenever any were available.

This style of reasoning was applied to a great many topics. The idea was to subject existing dogmas and rules to critical analysis. Blackett said that 'in nine cases out of ten, the rules or dogmas were found to be soundly based; in the tenth, sometimes, changed circumstances made the rules out of date' (Lovell, 1975, p. 58). As in this case, the strategy was to take the rule and put it in mathematical form, so that one could see whether the practical implications 'really' followed. In this case they did not – the problem was with mistaken intuitions about probabilities of relatively rare events, the events of 'not sighting,' that mislead the air officers about the real consequences of the rule they were following.

In an odd way, critical thinking, as it is often taught, mirrors the kinds of successes and failures of operations research, and indeed, in a sense, operations research is a paradigm case of critical thinking. The basic strategy of operations research is to abstract a series of key inferential elements and clarifying the logic (and in these cases, which happen to involve numbers, doing so involves mathematics) of the relations between these elements as they actually function and as they might ideally function if different results or outputs are desired. The case for operations research is very much the case for other sorts of critical thinking exercises, such as translating arguments into standard logical forms. The process of abstraction or translation in each case serves to 'reveal assumptions.'



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There are failures, however. On the basis of another analysis Blackett proposed the diversion of 190 heavy bombers to duty attacking U-boats in the Bay of Biscay, where the U-boats docked. He was opposed by the air officer, Slessor, who wanted 'aircraft of the right type, with the right sort of radar equipment and crews trained in the right way – and . . . quickly' (Lovell, 1975, p. 63). In the records of the anti-U-boat Committee, after Blackett's presentation, the following ministerial aside is recorded: '*c'est magnifique, mais n'est pas la guerre*' (Lovell, 1975, p. 63). Slessor had perhaps read his Clausewitz on the uses of friction in war, or knew intuitively that for this kind of work better training and equipment would get better results. In any event, the battle was won with 70 aircraft – significantly fewer than Blackett had proposed. So, the strategy *can* misfire, and when it does, as the case of Blackett's second suggestion, it is typically because the process of abstraction has left on the cutting room floor some detail or aspect of the problem that shouldn't have been left there – such as the practicalities of training and using inappropriate equipment. Critical thinking, as it is taught, generally involves abstracting in ways that might go wrong. It is not subtle, in the sense that it does not preserve all the complexity and richness of the thinking it supplants and 'improves' on. But there is a form of analysis, 'contextualism,' also known as 'the new historicism,' that does concern itself with conceptual subtlety, and that in some ways bears on the 'going wrong' that occurs in the course of abstraction. It was originally motivated by a desire to counter the historical errors that arise in a particular kind of abstraction very similar to the kind taught in critical thinking courses, namely the kind of abstraction of arguments and positions that philosophers and authors of textbooks of political thought perform on classical political texts.

This form of abstraction leaves on the floor the things that are deemed irrelevant to a contemporary, or as the term of abuse goes, 'presentist' account of a thinker. 'Presentism' is a term that covers a multitude of not very well defined sins, but its main meaning is this: texts may be read in a variety of ways, and a text that is read as though it were a text written in the present and responding to present day concerns and present day distinctions is 'presentist.' Authors of these classic texts, as historical agents, of course did not intend to say these things, and indeed may not have been in a position, owing to the lack of the network of relevant concepts, to have even formed intentions of the kind necessary to hold the views that presentist readings attribute to them. Very often the classic text is primarily an attempt to persuade certain contemporaries, in pursuit of particular tactical ends. So the question of what they actually intended and what, in this 'historical' sense, the text meant is a separate question from the question of what can be made out of the text in the way of a present-day argument, problem, or position.

CONTEXTUALISM

Without being very subtle about this, let me abstract the key ideas of contextualism, all of which I myself have disagreed with for various reasons (1983). The first idea is that in all historical periods, discourse occurs within the framework of conventions of discourse, conventions that limit what can be intelligibly said and understood. The second idea is that great texts of political theory characteristically rest both on these conventions, as by definition they would have to, and also innovate by making unconventional conceptual moves, but unconventional conceptual moves of a particular kind – moves that appear innocuous, or at least entirely intelligible within a given tradition, but which nevertheless lead to drastically novel conclusions. Conceptual innovation which is understandable only in relation to these preexisting conventions is the subject of contextual analysis. It is often subtle, because the changes are necessarily subtle – they are necessarily so because these are texts, and this is the third key idea, meant to persuade rather than simply to innovate, and necessarily meant to persuade people schooled in a particular set of distinctions and ways of thought and expression. The great innovations, to put it simply, are actually *subtle* innovations. They are small changes in relation to existing conventions, small enough not to be unintelligible, with large consequences in which certain kinds of novel circumstances create conditions under which these subtle-in-origin but radical-in-consequence innovations are likely to take place.

So the meanings of texts of interest to contextual analysts are those of the author and the contemporaries of the author, that is to say their historical meaning. The meanings that can be attributed to these texts by later thinkers are of no interest. They reflect the fact that old texts can be read according to new conventions, a fact of undoubted importance in connection with such matters as the reception and reuse of classic texts but of no importance in accounting for the intended meanings of the authors of the classic texts themselves. This is an insight of undoubted importance. It brings the notion of anachronism into the world of thought, and particularly into the textual analysis of aspects of texts that are concerned with reasoning and with concepts in connection with their inferential roles.

A typical historical setting for an innovation of the kind that these analyses focus on is a novel political or moral situation to which the old conventional categories no longer apply very successfully. In this situation there is new scope for conceptual change of the kind in which distinctions which formerly made little practical difference may come to seem to make a great deal of difference, and the innovative thinker is characteristically in the position of revising and expanding conceptual differences to deal with the new situation. But the perspective of the authors and readers at the time is quite different from ours as later readers. We tend to misidentify what is distributive to the author, because we do not realize how much

of the 'argument' we have abstracted from the text was simply the conventional wisdom of the day.

There are two senses of 'context' at work here, though they are not always distinguished, and perhaps, I will hint in the second half of this paper, ought not to be distinguished. The sense involved when categories no longer apply is a practical or 'sociological' sense of the term. A quite typical example is found in MacIntyre's *A Short History of Ethics*, which is one of the founding texts of contextualism. In explaining what it was that made Stoicism and Epicurianism different from the ethical thinking of Socrates, even when it sounded similar, MacIntyre notes that

In Greek society the focus of the moral life was the city-state; in the Hellenistic kingdoms and the Roman empire the sharp antithesis between the individual and the state is inescapable. The question now is not In what forms of social life can justice express itself? or, What virtues have to be practiced to produce a communal life in which certain ends can be accepted and achieved? but, What must I do to be happy? or What goods can I achieve as a private person? The human situation is such that the individual finds his moral environment in his place in the universe rather than in any social or political framework. (1966, p. 100)

This is the human situation of the individual. But there is also, so to speak, the conceptual situation, which MacIntyre goes on to explain:

The individual who is situated in a well-organized and complex community, and who cannot but think of himself in terms of the life of that community, will have a rich stock of descriptions available to characterize himself, his wants, and his deprivations. The individual who asks, What do I desire, as a man, apart from all social ties, in the frame of the universe? is necessarily working with a meager stock of descriptions, with an impoverished view of his own nature, for he has had to strip away from himself all the attributes that belong to his social existence. (1966, p. 100)

The conceptual situation, the availability of a stock of distinctions, is related to the social one, but it is not the same. One can't very well have – in the sense of having access to and use of as part of lived experience – a rich stock of descriptions if one is living in a community, or rather state, in which the descriptions have no use, and are therefore not part of our lived experience. So the conceptual 'context,' though it is not the same as the 'sociological one,' is conditioned on the sociological one.

Thus MacIntyre argues that the characteristic concerns of Stoicism and Epicurianism make sense if one sees that these are really the Socratic concerns applied in a setting in which all that these concerns can mean is a matter of the individual's happiness. Doing anything about the social order, or even having any sense of obligation to it is now meaningless, because nothing can be done about it.

These two senses of the term 'context' are in this case quite close, because the concepts that are used, or the descriptions that are available, are closely connected to the sociological circumstances, the human situation, of the authors. But there are some other senses of the term context that are not so close, such as the sense which refers to literary conven-

tions. This, however, shades into ‘conventional wisdom,’ and conventional wisdom in turn shades into what an author’s near predecessors said. Each of these senses are relevant to the historians’ task. Much of the time contextual analysis comes very close to simply identifying the proximate textual sources for great thinkers’ ideas in the writings of lesser thinkers and showing how modest were the adaptations made by these thinkers.¹ A famous example of this is the historian Lawrence Dickey’s description of the Protestantism of Old Wurttemberg and the ways in which it and the political history of the area reappear in Hegel’s philosophy. From a ‘presentist’ perspective, these writings resemble things in Aristotle; from the point of view of Hegel himself, they are part of recent history and present sensibilities (Dickey, 1987, p. 135).

AN EXAMPLE: WEBER ON THE STATE

In what follows I would like to discuss a very brief and simple example of the kind of difference a contextual reading might make. The text is Weber’s famous definition of the state:

A compulsory political association will be called a state insofar as its administrative staff successfully upholds the claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of force. (1978, p. 54)

A reasonable guess at the contextual origin of this definition is that it is adapted from a text in jurisprudential theory which was influential when Weber was a law student. Weber himself cites the text, though not in connection with this definition. The probable source is Rudolph von Ihering, who says the following:

The state is the only competent as well as the sole owner of social coercive force – the right to coerce forms the *absolute monopoly* of the state. ([1877]1913, p. 238)

If we compare the two definitions the similarities are striking, but so is the small difference. Ihering uses the phrase social coercive force and Weber uses the term legitimate force.

The historical background to Ihering’s usage is actually rather intriguing. Ihering was thought to be the great German follower of Bentham, but he was also known for a critique of utilitarianism with respect to its arguments for the prohibition of the act of selling oneself into slavery. Ihering’s point was essentially that in selling our labor we routinely engage in miniature acts of selling oneself into slavery and the distinction between the miniature acts and selling oneself into slavery as such is impossible to give a theoretical account of that is not obviously *ad hoc*.

Ihering’s solution to this and other infirmities of utilitarianism was to argue that there was such a thing as a social interest in addition to and commensurate with individual interests. The supposed social interest was

congenial to his German audience and also enabled him to do away with such problems as justifying the prohibition of slavery, which could now be claimed to be the fulfillment of the social interests. The state too, in this definition, could be seen as the representative of the social interest, and the history of the state and the law could then be interpreted in terms of the successively greater fulfillment of a wider range of interests, including social interests. This reasoning led to Ihering's use of the phrase in this definition. The perspective is evolutionistic and teleological: the state fulfills interests, and advances by doing more of this and doing it better.

Weber simply tweaks the definition in a way that strips it of its teleological significance. There is no social interest in Weber's definition. There is only the monopoly on the legitimate use of force. In a sense the definition is a retrogression, in that the notion of legitimacy, employed in this way, is even more mysterious than the relatively well developed notion of interest and social interest employed by Ihering. It is apparently unhelpful in accounting for the evolution of legal systems. Indeed what seems to be required is a theory of legitimation. Weber of course supplies such a theory in the form of a tripartite classification of types of legitimating bases, including traditional, charismatic, and rational legal beliefs about the legitimacy of a given authority. This classification is only quasi-historical and determinedly non-teleological and non-evolutionistic. Traditional bases for legitimacy mostly lie in the past; rational legal bases in the future, and charisma erupts now and then, but in its purest form is largely in the past, or that occurs in association with one of the other forms of legitimacy.

It is often argued that interesting as these little snippets of fact might be for the intellectual historian, they essentially lack interest or value for the contemporary student of politics or political theory. What is of interest about Hobbes, to put it bluntly, is what thinkers like David Gauthier abstract out the great mish-mash of Hobbesian arguments (1986). Understanding the subtleties of Hobbes' massaging of available ideas is of no use to the person who wishes to solve these modern problems. The big questions, so to speak, are untouched by the little distinctions that contextualists concern themselves with. The big questions, this seems to say, are the abstracted questions, and by definition the stuff that's left over after abstraction is irrelevant.

If one looks at the reception history of Weber's argument, one would find a great deal that appeared to bear out the thought that this historical snippet is of no importance except for historians. Nozick, for example, refers to 'the tradition of Max Weber' and uses the phrase 'having a monopoly on the use of force in a geographical area, a monopoly incompatible with the private enforcement of rights, as crucial to the existence of a state' (1974, p. 23). Nozick ignores the whole business of legitimacy because he thinks it just leads in a circle in which legitimacy is explained

in terms of the attitudes and beliefs of subjects, and in which the notion of legitimacy is re-introduced 'when it comes time to explain the precise content of the subjects' attitudes and beliefs' yielding 'a legitimate government is one that most of its subjects view as legitimately ruling' (1974, p. 134). This doesn't help as a morally informative definition of the state, since one still wants to know whether the beliefs are justified.

Talcott Parsons, for example, simply reincorporated the notion of legitimacy back into the problematic from which Weber was liberating it:

The fact that an order is legitimate in the eyes of a large proportion of the community makes it *ipso facto* an element of the *Interessenslage* of any one individual, whether *he* himself holds it to be legitimate or not. ([1937]1968, p. 636)

Parsons, no less than Gauthier, had his eye on what he took to be the main problem, namely the problem of how do you get a social contract, or, as he puts it, solve the Hobbesian problem. So he makes Weber into a solver of this problem.

But the subtlety of Weber's revision of Ihering is missed in both Nozick's and Parsons' accounts, and along with it the innovation with large consequences that Weber makes. Weber by defining the state in this way shows that there is no necessary connection between the state and 'social utilities'. The thing the state is, namely a successfully asserted claim to a monopoly of legitimate violence within a territory, is not 'essentially' based on the concert of interests, or any other external fact. Interests, Weber later goes on to argue, may indeed be one motive for accepting a claim of legitimacy, but it is typically not the only motive and need not be a motive at all. The radical consequence is that the problem of the social contract simply disappears. What one needs to explain is the origin of legitimating beliefs. And whether this is an easier task or not, it is clearly a different task. In a sense, what is revealed by Weber's little definitional innovation is that the traditional problem of social contract theory is largely circular and hinges on the assumption that explaining the state is fundamentally a matter of explaining the role of the state in relation to interests, when this is at most an ancillary feature of this state. The very fact that we can very nicely define the state without reference to interest concepts shows that the statement of the problem is the problem. Similarly for the problem of justification. No fact about the state secures its justification, and, by the same token, there is no general fact about states as such that serve the justification of the state as such. One needs to put the moral information into one's account of the state to get it out of it, because it isn't there in the sociological phenomenon of the state itself. Consequently any morally informative definition of the state is really a concealed sort of special pleading, which is what he took Ihering's account of the state to be. Weber's point is that we can have a perfectly useful definition of the state without asking the question of whether the beliefs are justified.

I don't mean to hold this discussion out as a model of subtle reasoning,

for indeed it is not all that subtle. But it does represent a kind of thinking that ordinarily is not thought of as part of critical thinking. What contextualist historical analyses search for is not a history that consists of successive approximations to the solution of reconstructed and abstracted problems, such as the problem of the social contract. It looks instead to the way in which 'problems' are problems within some set of givens, including tacit conventions. The approach relativizes problems and solutions to a richer 'context' of conventions, literary models, and what not. It is this relativization that appears to doom contextual analysis to irrelevance. But the same strategy of relativizing to a richer context can be a tool of critical thinking as well, if we use it to identify the less obvious features of a doctrine or a problem or a thesis that we can work with, that we can vary or replace, just as Weber replaced the term social utility, which is at the core of the problem of the social contract as it was conceived throughout social contract tradition. One doesn't really grasp how Weber has innovated until one sees his definition against the contrasting background of the conventional wisdom. And this puts one in a position to assess the conventional wisdom, or at least talk about it.

The charge against contextualism is that it estranges the classical political thinkers from us by stressing the dependence of their meaning on local circumstances and motives and dead traditions of discourse and dead conventions. What I have suggested here is that estranging ourselves in this self-conscious way allows us to see things that we can alter and replace. Distinctions that were, for them, distinctions without a difference, may well be, for us, very useful distinctions indeed. And if contextualism does not provide a formula for discovering which distinctions do make a difference in our context, it nevertheless encourages us and in a way trains us to look for these distinctions, and, in this way, to look past the abstracted forms of argument that make up such things as social contract theory that otherwise appear to be constitutive of the problem itself. We gain, in other words, a new ability to redefine what the problem is and this is what frees us to deal with it in new ways.

CONTEXTUALISM AND LOGIC

Since much of what is taught as critical thinking is logic, it is not surprising that discussions about teaching run into fundamental questions about the nature of logic. In this case the issues arise pretty directly. Contextual analysis employs a good deal of logical vocabulary, though not in an especially technical way. Notions like 'presupposition' are of course part of the 'old' historicism that persist in the 'new historicism,' and the idea behind their use is that in a particular historical era there are in fact shared presuppositions. In a sense, the program of contextualism, by the use of these bridge concepts, fits neatly into the program of the teaching of critical

thinking and especially that aspect of teaching critical thinking that suggests that critical thinking requires identifying hidden assumptions.

But a conflict of a kind arises between the normative and 'historical' uses of logic. If we teach that, in part at least, good reasoning is a matter of conformity with formal principles, or more simply a matter of formulation into valid formal schemes, it may appear to students that we are setting standards that a good many texts in the history of ideas cannot meet. Where this kind of hint is likely to cause trouble is where students naively think that they have detected fallacies or suppressed premises. There are, clearly, invalid arguments in these classical texts. The temptation to think that the normative standards of good thinking that one attempts to abide by are the appropriate standards for the rest of the thinkers in history is obviously a natural one; and indeed if critical thinking teaching is not about timeless standards of reason it is a bit of a problem to know what exactly it is about. But reading historically also requires reading charitably. Many of Weber's readers thought, as Nozick intimates, that appeals to legitimacy were circular arguments, and from a certain point of view they are. But to learn something from Weber we need to understand ourselves and our desire to abstract Weber in a certain way by taking the validity of Weber's reasoning for granted, and seeing what that implies about our own reasoning. This is of course what I have tried to do here: to problematize the problem situation of social contract theory. The standard tools of critical thinking, such as fallacy hunting and suppressed premise identifying, are unhelpful here: they would suggest that Weber has failed to solve a problem he was intent on undermining.

Another, simpler, example might clarify this. The idea that, for example, Plato reasons according to suppressed premises about the inferiority of barbarians that are racist, and, therefore, that his comments on the subject are instances of defective reasoning would be quite natural conclusion from a critical thinking course. But it is quite a strange conclusion if our purpose is to analyze the actual reasoning of the texts. In a sense, it is helpful to say that Plato's reasoning can be reconstructed as a formally valid argument if we include some suppressed premises about barbarians which happen to be false, which establishes that Plato was not a bad reasoner but a racist. But this is also potentially misleading, especially when we start freely attributing the contents of these suppressed premises to the historical Plato or to the shared mentality of the Athenians.

Contextualism serves to provide a little bit of distance by using the term 'convention,' and thus making the missing premises into analogues of literary conventions. This helps us avoid saying that Plato was a racist or Athenians were racists and allows us to focus not on the form of argument itself but on the question of what Plato was trying to do with the argument. It is here where the whole question of innovation becomes central. If Plato is read as trying to persuade people of something within the literary conventions of Athenian discourse he might very well employ 'racist' modes

of inference that we would regard as based on suppressed false premises to make points which are not themselves racist. The same kinds of points may be made about Machiavelli, and indeed here is where the value of contextual analysis is most obviously apparent. Machiavelli employs various quite different literary forms, the 'mirror of princes' in *The Prince* and the praise of classical authors in *The Discourses on Livy*, and says things that may be thought to conflict with one another, or to point to some sort of deeply evil underlying intent. But Machiavelli was writing for people who were not only familiar with these literary forms but treated them as more or less transparent and unproblematic, so in employing them he was simply avoiding the necessity of giving arguments for all kinds of things that in context not only didn't need to be established but indeed didn't matter because Machiavelli is simply reasoning in the way that we reason with people whose beliefs we take to be false but who would be persuaded of the conclusions we would like them to be persuaded of if they reasoned in accordance with their false beliefs. There is nothing terribly mysterious about this kind of persuasion and indeed we do it all the time.

So despite the congeniality in general between contextualism and the kind of discussion about reasoning one finds in critical thinking there is a somewhat different approach to the question of the character of what we may loosely call suppressed premises. The point of the reasoning for the contextualist and, more generally the point of some particular political utterance, has little to do with the contents of the 'presuppositions' that make it valid if these contents are 'conventional.' What makes Machiavelli and Plato good or bad or important or innovative is not the conventions they employ but the innovations they introduce with the new things they do with those conventions. This is quite explicitly understood as a historical matter, and asserting things about the intentions of a historical writer requires one to identify those intentions in light of the existing conventions at the time of the utterance. In a sense what contextualism does is extend the notion of anachronism to the world of thought. To fail to acknowledge the conventionality of a form of reasoning is to import anachronisms, and from this point of view claims about Plato's racism are simply anachronisms.

In a sense it is a nice exercise in critical thinking to make these distinctions between premises in a psychological sense, premises in a conventional sense that might be merely employed, premises that are assumed to be accepted by the person being persuaded, and so forth, for it is clearly an error to mix up these things. Nevertheless there are some difficulties in doing this that are revealing about the project of teaching people how to infer and to evaluate inferences that deserve some reflection. One aspect of this problem is pointed to by the form of the terms themselves. 'Hidden assumption,' 'suppressed premises,' 'literary conventions,' and the like, all have a peculiar elusiveness (cf. Turner, 1994). They are each analogical. There is no delicatessen from which a writer chooses 'descriptions' from the available 'stock.' This is an interpreters notion. Similarly, as I have sug-

gested, for the suppression and hiding of premises, they are not so much 'hidden' as attributed by us, and for our interpretive purposes, in the course of the minimally charitable interpretation necessary for us to make any sense out of what we read in these texts. Literary conventions sound like something much more solid. Romance novels, after all, are written according to an explicit formula. But the formulae that contextualists and literary theorists mean are only analogous to such explicit rules, and are thus themselves just analogies. There is a sense in which the main defect of the old historicism was its reliance on notions like 'world view.' The vocabulary of contextualism, which in large part is shared with 'critical thinking,' is perhaps equally dubious.

It is simple to grant that it is misleading to attribute racism as a personal intention to Plato or racism as a kind of collective presupposition of the Greeks. We can stop at this and say that what we're doing when we interpret Plato is to supply the premises that are necessary to make his reasoning intelligible to us, without making any psychological claims. For us, something might not follow from the term barbarian that follows 'naturally' for Plato or for fifth century Athenians. Supplying the premise makes it follow for us. Once we make this separation between the psychological content of Plato's mind and our standards of inference it becomes clear that all of this talk about suppressed premises is actually part of the machinery of *translation*. The inferences are part and parcel of the concept 'barbarian' for the Athenians rather than some complicated set of beliefs that are 'tacitly adhered to' by these Athenians. Our only evidence of their beliefs is in the uses to which they put these concepts in making what we take to be inferences, and the only reality that these premises has is in the necessity for us of attributing them in order to make sense of the inferences that we think they actually made, or appear to have made, in texts involving these concepts.

But what sorts of things are these conventions? In a sense the conventions and their associated concepts are more or less autonomous facts or procedures with a kind of life of their own. The fact that they can be translated into, or analyzed into, conventional logical form seems in some obscure way to secure this status as autonomous fact. The temptation is to think that the conventional logical form is in some sense the fundamental or primitive fact; and that lurking behind all of this complicated literary machinery of such things as literary conventions being manipulated by or used by Machiavelli, are something like hidden or suppressed premises, linked together with the standard logical operators to produce the outcomes that one actually observes in discourse. The complicated literary forms that Machiavelli relies on are a bit like the appearance of the Wizard of Oz, and the actual wizard is hidden inside him doing conventional logical inferences (and with) a lot of claims that are not really accessible from the surface except through analysis. The analysis consists of translating the things that are accepted on the surface as inference into the formalism and

then augmenting the formalism with whatever beliefs and additional premises are necessary to make the inferences valid. This picture is certainly not completely foreign to Quine and Davidson, where you get the picture of an individual possessing a theory of the world in terms of which she interprets the claims and sayings of others, adjusting hidden premises here and there in order to make interpretations come out, and so forth. It is even more congenial to the idea that there is a common human 'mentalese,' which is a bit like the Wizard, which supplies something analogous to the computer code in which all 'applications' as they appear differently to users, are written.

An alternative to this is to take the 'surface' inferences as primitive, and to see the step of translating this into some formal locution as one in which the structure of inferences surrounding the concept linking the concepts, such as 'barbarians,' is made explicit. This style of thinking about the problem derives from Sellars and has been powerfully revived by Robert Brandom. As the title of Brandom's book, *Making it Explicit*, shows, Brandom is committed to something like the idea that there is an 'it' to be made explicit, that is to say that there is some structure-like thing to be analyzed.²

What Brandom argues is that a strategy of making inferences explicit by first making explicit those connectives whose inferential structure we can make fully clear and rule-governed, the connectives of logic, we can then proceed to make more and more things fully clear, though this may well be a process that is interminable. Logic for Brandom is both a means of making the inexplicit explicit, and a kind of model of explicitness about inferential structure that can be applied to all of the actual material inferences people make using concepts which have particular powers. In a sense what logic amounts to is a part of a game like chess – Sellars' analogy – in which the powers of all the pieces are clear, though in the case of the inferences that we're actually attempting to analyze the powers are not clear, and they need to be discovered and made clear. So the model, which supplies the goal, is capturing all inferential moves that can be performed with a conception and completely explicit rules. This way of thinking about material inference comports even better with contextualism than the model of logic somehow providing the normative standard of valid inference. It allows us to dispense with the whole business about the Wizard of Oz hiding in the machine using the logical operators and patching inferences together with a lot of complicated hidden presuppositions. From an explanatory or naturalistic point of view, there are plenty of good reasons for skepticism about the necessity for all this machinery (cf. Turner, 1994).

But if we grant this view of inference, that is, if we take material inference to be primitive, and we grant this view of logic, namely that logic provides us with some refined concepts whose inferential role is completely explicit, then it is obviously something of a problem to explain what critical thinking as a subject of instruction can amount to. Inference on this view

is the correct use of concepts, and there is no logical check on the inferential validity of uses of concepts or indeed any sort of external logical standard to which inferences may be held. We may discover that certain material inferences, such as those involving barbarians, get us into trouble and our troubles force us to refine our concepts, or what is the same thing, rearrange the powers that we give to these concepts so that we don't have those troubles. But that is largely a matter of discovering how things work out, and a pragmatic notion of inference.

The idea of getting into trouble, then making one's troubles more explicit and accessible to solution through conceptual revision, does sound a bit like the kind of 'making explicit' that Brandom is talking about. And this activity, in turn, looks a lot like the kind of interpretive analysis that contextualists do when faced with a text whose surface meaning is problematic, when the problematic character is made unavoidable for us by the problem of discerning the intentions of the author. This is of course a famous aspect, perhaps the core, of the problem of interpreting Machiavelli. But it is no less a problem when we look at some later figure such as Weber. The problem of discerning a coherent intention of an author is in a sense insoluble as a purely textual matter, since texts taken by themselves allow for a quite incredible range of intentional attributions. What the contextualist does is to radically narrow this range by supplying conventions against which changes can be seen as intentional, and therefore limiting what it is that can be attributed as part of a distinctive intention of the author.

The kind of trouble that we can teach about to people who we are instructing in the art of critical thinking is on the basis of our contextual knowledge is trouble that arises when the changes or difference between two formulations are subtle! One common case is when the conditions of applications are pretty much the same, or precisely the same, but the uses differ, that is the inferential uses differ. To take a very familiar example, the conditions for application of 'rabbit' and 'undetached rabbit' are identical. Their inferential uses are not identical. One could ask questions about the number of undetached rabbit parts in a whole rabbit, for example, and do things like count the number of undetached rabbit parts. The contextualists, as I have said, concentrate particularly heavily on these kinds of changes. MacIntyre's discussion of Stoicism, for example, has as its point the idea that moral concepts that worked a certain way, that is in our terms supported or allowed for certain kinds of inferences in one society, did not support those inferences in another, and therefore amounted to and evolved as into entirely different kinds of moral systems. Machiavelli, on one interpretation, was making the point that in his time there was no difference between greatness and successful criminality, though obviously the two notions are connected up to quite different concepts and support quite different inferences. I think one can do little more than to exhibit this kind of thinking and hope that students who learn to apply it in one setting can apply it in novel settings. But applying it requires a good command of a

lot of concepts, which is to say of their uses or inferential powers. No method or course in critical thinking can teach that. The grasping of the distinctions is mostly a matter of local knowledge, so to speak, and in a sense this is what contextualists' historical studies strive to obtain, and present to readers in the form of 'conventions of discourse.'

AGAINST THE 'IT'

I said earlier that had some objections to contextualism. Now it would perhaps be fair if I said what they were. They apply to Brandom as well. I have been hinting at a kind of risk involved in talking about 'suppressed premises.' To explain my concerns let me tell a kind of shaggy dog story. I once had a Chinese department chair. When we would meet, there would be a lot of what in the radio business is called dead air, that is to say long silences. This irritated me intensely, and typically when this gentleman did not respond to something I was saying I would fill the dead air by politely making more explicit whatever I was saying, or by elaborating on what I had just said which, it seemed to me, inferring from his silence, he had not quite grasped. I interpreted his silences, in short, as the silence of incomprehension. And I attempted to correct the problem of comprehension by telling him more. After several frustrating conversations of this sort I read an airline magazine which had an article on business etiquette in the Far East. The article explained that among the Chinese silence meant that the auditor did not like what was being said and, consequently, was waiting until something was said that he or she wanted to respond to.

I think this is a model instrumental rule of translation. It tells someone with one kind of expectation to construe some sign, in this case silence, as having a different meaning. Whether this is a scientifically warranted interpretation or whether an anthropologist would have come up with this characterization does not really matter. It is a quite practical rule for dealing with a situation in which one simply needs to know what people are acting as if they mean. This rule is an 'as if' rule in two senses. When a Chinese is silent it is 'as if' he is telling me he doesn't like what he hears, and it is an 'as if' rule in the sense that it does not depend on the sort of claim that the Chinese actually have 'in their heads' something corresponding to this rule. It is enough to know that they behave 'as if' they were following this rule, and that one can interpret what they are saying by keeping this 'as if' rule in mind, and not get into trouble.

I think it is reasonable to say the Chinese have to learn something in order to 'play' in accordance with this little language game of silence. Pretty obviously the Chinese do not learn the rule that *I* use, which is a translation rule. Indeed there may be no particular reason to think the Chinese 'learn a rule' at all, though this is a question of a different kind. There is no particular reason that everyone would have to have the exact same inter-

pretive hypothesis in order to understand one another, if understand means to get by in interacting with other people. I don't think one needs to be terribly fancy here. The Chinese learn something that makes them behave in a tolerably predictable way in connection with these silences and, given this behavior, it is possible to formulate this 'as if' rule in such a way that one can more or less successfully deal with the Chinese. But there is no 'it' to be made explicit. There is a job of translation, which is governed by our imperatives or my imperatives in explaining them to you, and all of this machinery such as talk about presuppositions is misleading, at least potentially, if we think of it as out there, as having independent reality and structure, and as being a domain to be described.

Where does this leave logic? Let me quote from Serres and Wood's standard text on diplomatic protocol on the reasons for the use of French as the language of diplomacy: 'that it has qualities of clarity, precision and firmness not found in English, the latter being too often elliptic and its construction and vocabulary lacking conciseness, thus resulting in a looser version of the same text' (1970, pp. 178, 712). Whether this is true or not, it seems true to somebody, so there is for someone a kind of pragmatic value of translating at least diplomatic exchanges and treaties into French. Presumably one can detect the unclarity in one's own formulations by translating them into French. Logic still has this utility even if one accepts my view that there's no 'it' to be made explicit, and goes on to say that logic, no more than French, is a uniquely valid detector of unclarity.³ If we dispense with the idea that Latin or French or logic are the standards against which other formulations are judged and found wanting and concentrate on the differences that are revealed, we have a kind of mirror on our own material inferences and concepts that is non-arbitrary, but like the mirror of Dorian Gray, reveals something about them.

Of course Brandom also has the idea that our knowledge of the complete rules governing the inferences of the logical connectives is a goal toward which analysis aspires, while conceding that we are not likely to reach it in many of the philosophically interesting cases. If we compare this with the Quinean view that, for the most part, philosophy happens in the course of translating into a formal idiom rather than in reasoning within it, we get the hint that many of these 'translation' questions are not univocally decidable. If this is so, perhaps there is no point to engaging in an infinite task and more of a point to the tactical use of translation into and out of whatever idiom serves our purposes, that is to say the larger purposes previously thought to be served by making 'assumptions' explicit, without committing ourselves either to the univocal superiority of kind of comparison, or to the existence, in some netherworld, of an 'it' to be made explicit. Subtlety, in this way of looking at the problem, is a matter of recognizing our failure to adequately translate, and then of employing distinctions and elaborating our concepts to overcome at least some of these inadequacies.

WHAT CAN BE TAUGHT ABOUT PROBLEMS OF ABSTRACTION?

In teaching students to read texts contextually, we teach students something about thinking subtly that they may themselves deploy. Perhaps a good deal of this teaching can be done in fairly unobtrusive way by showing students that formulations they thought of as identical, or virtually identical, support different kinds of inferences. If the examples are from a domain that is familiar to them, we can rely on the knowledge of how concepts work that they already possess, without immersing them in Renaissance texts and the study of Renaissance literary conventions.

I began this chapter by talking about the kinds of abstraction that is done in operations research, and how it sometimes goes wrong. Contextualism as a kind of historical enterprise is an exposé of one kind of abstraction that goes wrong when one interprets texts. The abstracting that non-contextual interpreters do when they extract the argument of Hobbes or the argument of Machiavelli is not so different from what Blackett did in abstracting the principles of military operations. They manufacture an alternative object on which to operate. Sometimes reasoning in terms of this alternative object is pragmatically better. Sometimes it is not. It usually is clearer, at least for us, and perhaps having certain kinds of clarity about inferential structure is, in particular circumstances, an important desideratum. But sometimes we need to be able to make distinctions and recognize distinctions between concepts that are embedded in uses other than the particular task at hand for which the abstraction has been produced. This is, so to speak, the negative lesson of contextualism, and it is worth teaching.

Is there a simple teachable *positive* lesson that could reasonably be made into a unit of a critical thinking course deriving from all this? Perhaps. Another lesson of contextualism is that a distinction may be without a difference in one context but make a significant difference in another, so that the inferences one would make in one context quite reasonably would be quite unreasonable in another. A simple example of this is found in MacIntyre's discussion of the uses of Greek ethics in the large scale political world of the Romans. Where ordinary individuals had little power, and no one had civic power, questions like 'can a good man be harmed?' take on a quite different significance, and to hold this view consistently requires one to go much farther than Socrates did in the direction of elevating the self and distinguishing the self from the community over which individuals have no control. In analyzing the political utterances of present day writers, their morals, or for that matter their epistemology, this is perhaps a lesson that is good to keep in mind. The consequences of an assertion, and the way in which it can go wrong, depend very much on the setting in which it is used and on the other inferences that in that setting are connected to it. One is well advised to inquire into the setting and to ask whether the inferences work in the same way in a new setting.

Writers like MacIntyre tend to employ the term 'intelligible' in cases of changed circumstances, and suggest that doctrine X or Y is no longer intelligible or fully intelligible in a changed setting. The paradigm case of this is his early article on religion, in which he argued that 'understanding Christianity is incompatible with believing in it, not because Christianity is vulnerable to skeptical objections, but because its peculiar invulnerability belongs to it as a form of belief which has lost the social context which once made it comprehensible. It is now too late to be mediaeval and it is too empty and too easy to be Kierkegaardian. Thus skeptic and believer do not share a common grasp of the relevant concepts any more than anthropologist and Azande do' (1970, pp. 76–77). This makes 'a common grasp' of the relevant concepts into an all or nothing affair.

One of the virtues of Brandom's treatment of the inferential character of concepts, and his stress on the distinction between conditions of application and conditions of use, is that we are permitted to understand specifically which particular material inferential powers of a concept become problematic in a new setting. The usual problem is that the new use, or the use in a different context, is *not* 'unintelligible,' but rather *is* intelligible but its use leads to the wrong conclusions, conclusions whose wrongness one cannot grasp if one simply looks at the formal structure of arguments and looks out for informal fallacies.

This returns us to the place at which this article began, to Blackett. If Blackett's calculations about the number of fighters necessary to secure the Bay of Biscay from submarines was wrong, as indeed it was, there would have been no way for him to have known this. If the strategy had failed, of course, he could have gone back and re-done the calculations until he got the results that he wanted and needed. But, if he had simply failed to grasp one of the relevant distinctions, such as the role of friction in war, and the difficulty of training, no amount of revision would have allowed him to discover his omission, at least if he was restricted to the mathematical manipulation of his original scheme of abstraction. The problem arose when he put those things on the cutting room floor in the course of abstracting.

Perhaps the analogous mistake in critical thinking is an uncommon one. Perhaps people recognize without instruction that they are employing distinctions that no longer work in the way that they expect them to because the setting in which they are applied has changed and thus changed their implications. But I suspect otherwise: that this is the most common of mistakes, and indeed not really a mistake but a product of our inevitable blindness as we stumble through the world with concepts whose material inferential uses derive from past settings which we apply *faute de mieux* in new settings. Teaching people not to make this 'mistake' is of course an impossibility. But showing them what sort of problem it is, and equipping them to recognize it when it arises, is not impossible. And doing so

is as inevitable a part of 'critical thinking' as the problem is itself an appropriate part of thinking.

NOTES

¹ There are many examples of the application of this method, and indeed these ideas are enshrined though not always followed in the Cambridge ideas and context series.

² This was discussed by Brandom (1994, pp. 98–99), and earlier by Sellars (1963, pp. 321–358), commenting on Wittgenstein. The issue about the 'it' was formulated nicely for me by the political scientist Richard Ashcraft ten years ago, when he asked me a question about Karl Mannheim: if the frames within which historical thinkers interpreted the world are relative to their time, what about the claims about frames that we, as historically situated figures, make? Sellars argues that material inferences are real and primitive. Brandom argues in the same way. My argument, in contrast, follows the lines of my 'Translating Ritual Beliefs' (1979).

³ Consider a story Golo Mann told about Rickert: "Er zitierte dann einen Satz Heideggers und fragte: 'Kann man das ins Lateinische übersetzen? Was man nicht ins Lateinische kann, das existiert für mich nicht!'" (1986, p. 289). Heidegger would of course have expected it to fail, because Latin, in his view, was not a language in which one can philosophize.

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