

Contextualism¹

The best term out of common sense to suggest the point of origin of contextualism is probably the historical event. And this we shall accordingly call the root metaphor of this theory.

By historic event, however, the contextualist does not mean primarily a past event, one that is, so to speak, dead and has to be exhumed. He means the event alive in its present. What we ordinarily mean by history, he says, is an attempt to *re-present* events, to make them in some way alive again. The real historic event, the event in its actuality, is when it is going on *now*, the dynamic dramatic active event.

We may call it an “act,” if we like, and if we take care of our use of the term. But it is not an act conceived as alone or cut off that we mean; it is an act in and with its setting, an act in its context.

To give instances of this root metaphor in our language with the minimum risk of misunderstanding, we should use only verbs. It is doing, and enduring, and enjoying:

- vigorously asserting the reality of the structure of the given event, the historic event as it actually goes on. The whole universe, it asserts, is such as this event is, whatever this is.

The ineradicable contextualistic categories may thus be said to be *change* and *novelty*. When these, however, are further specified in terms of given events of the sort with which we are acquainted in the present epoch of our universe, these ineradicable categories are exhibited as details within other categories which it is convenient to place first. I shall call these other categories *quality* and *texture*. Every given event in our present epoch has quality and texture. Whether events of other epochs will lack these categories we cannot say, but if they do they will have *changed* into something *novel* we know not of. We can describe only the events we have and know, and for these quality and texture are basic.

- We cannot appreciate quality without contrasting it with texture. We shall start, then, by exhibiting these two categories and showing their close relation to each other. This will be actually a showing². They cannot be explained, since they are categorial. They can only be pointed at. We need for this an illustration, some present given event.

Let us take one out of what we are doing. I am writing sentences. Let my writing of the next sentence be our illustration, *A period will be placed at the end of this sentence*. This is my illustration. Let yours be your writing this sentence. Reading it would be the same sort of thing, but writing it makes the event a little more intimate, more temporal, and active, and less likely to be interpreted in other than contextualistic ways. We might equally well have taken a trip downtown for a loaf of bread. Then we should have had a succession of acts in pursuit of the bread. Here we are in pursuit of a period.

There is a certain object lesson in seeing if we cannot enter our universe through so trivial a thing as a trivial sentence.

Now what is quality and what texture in this event? Its quality is roughly its total meaning, its texture roughly the words and grammatical relations making it up. Generalizing, the quality of a given event is its intuited wholeness or total character; the texture is the details and relations which make up that character or quality. The two are not separable.

There is no such thing as a textureless quality or a qualityless texture. It follows that contextualism denies that these are absolute elements. It denies that a whole is nothing but the sum of its parts.

¹ Selections from Stephen Pepper *World Hypotheses* pp232-279.

² The selections were aimed at relating as many as possible of Pepper's observations around this one “showing” – “example”.

A whole is something immanent in an event and is so intuited, intuited as the quality of that very event.

We intuit the character of a face as Jim's, Mary's, Eliza's, and later discriminate the features. We intuit the character of a melody as "Old Black Joe", "Tipperary", "Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes", and afterward discriminate the tones and intervals.

These intuitions are of the qualities of these textures, and the textures are rarely noticed except when we do notice intently, and then it is the qualities that are not noticed. Qualities are most commonly in the focus of our attention but never (except for philosophic or aesthetic purposes) in the focus of analysis.

If now we are aware of what quality is, we can study it more closely and examine what we may call its subcategories.

The quality of a given event has a *spread*, or, as it is sometimes called, a *specious present*. As I am writing, *A period will be placed at the...*, my act is rather thick in its duration and spreads, as we say, forward and back. I lift my pen at "the" and am just about to put down "end". The word "end" is not yet down, but it is being reached for and its meaning is already largely taken up in what has preceded. This forward reach in the quality of an event is the feeling of futurity.

There is a corresponding feeling of pastness which draws into the quality all the preceding words of the sentence. Even if I am saying the sentence and not writing it, so that I have not the assistance of the spatial line of words, still the word "period" is drawn from the past as I utter "the". That is to say, the word "period" is active now in the quality of this event, even though it is mathematically past.

The word "end", though not yet written, is already active in the quality of the event, and the word "period", though previously written, is still active in the event at the moment that I am writing the word "the". Moreover, the contributions to the quality of the event made by "end" and "period" are obviously much greater than that made by the "the", even though "the" is the word being written.

Now, this is what is meant by the *spread* of an event, or, as it has been paradoxically called, the *specious present*. For a contextualist there is nothing specious about it. It is part of the basic structure of all fact. What is present in an event is whatever contributes directly to its quality. Since "period" and "end" so contribute, they are present in the event, even though one comes quite a little after the other and neither happens to be the word I am writing.

The contextualist is careful to distinguish between qualitative time (often called "duration") and schematic time. For him the former is categorial and the latter derivative. He does not deny the utility of the latter, but he denies its adequacy to reveal the nature of an actual event. In an actual event the present is the whole texture which directly contributes to the quality of the event. The present therefore spreads over the whole texture of the quality, and for any given event can only be determined by intuiting the quality of that event.

Beyond the intuited present quality we have evidence for events that are past and for events to come. The great function of schematic time is to order these nonactual events. But actual time is the forward-and-back spread of the quality of an event. It is the tensional spread of that quality.

Change. – If we write out our sentence again, we shall see that its quality is continuously changing. As I write "the", the focus of the quality balances (for me, of course) between the schematically past "period" and the coming "end". As soon as I have written "end", this word occupies the focus of the quality, and "period" takes on a modifying role, and the immanence of the last phrase is acquiring prominence. With the writing of each word the tensions of the previous words are redistributed, the configuration of the total meaning is altered, and the quality is accordingly changed. This change goes on

continuously and never stops. It is a categorical feature of all events; and, since on this world theory, all the world is events, all the world is continuously changing in this manner. Absolute permanence or immutability in any sense is, on this theory, a fiction, and its appearance is interpreted in terms of historical continuities which are not changeless.

Returning to our sentence, and taking it this time as completed, we may find that the event of writing it was almost completely fused. This will be the result if our attention was completely concentrated on the meaning, which would entail that the writing was entirely mechanical and that the separate words were not separately noticed. The words and the writing of them and whatever else was involved would then have been completely fused in the quality of the total meaning. This is not an uncommon experience. It is our commonest way of reading. We tend not to notice the experience, however, because when we begin to notice it we begin to analyze and to break down fusion. As soon as individual words are noticed, the event quality of the sentence becomes integrated into the qualities of the details, which are more or less fused into the total event quality. But some fusion must remain in the quality of the event; otherwise the event would break apart and we should have not a single event, but two quite unconnected events.

Whatever is simple and unified in experience, therefore, is the result of fusion. It is not a mere psychological affair. It reflects the active structures of textures,

(Contextualism is the only theory that takes fusion seriously. In other theories, it is interpreted away as vagueness, confusion, failure to discriminate, muddledness.)

A texture is made up of strands and it lies in a context. There is, moreover, no very sharp line between strands and context, because it is the connections of the strands which determine the context, and in large proportion the context determines the qualities of the strands. But by way of definition we may say that whatever directly contributes to the quality of a texture may be regarded as a strand, whereas whatever indirectly contributes to it will be regarded as context.

Let us write out our sentence once more: *A period will be placed at the end of this sentence*. Let us keep the event quality somewhat diffused so that the articulations of the sentence into phrases and words will be felt. Then let us take the phrase “at the end” for consideration. This phrase with the other three (“A period”, “will be placed”, “of this sentence”) are details of the total sentence with integrated meanings or relatively fused qualities of their own and as such are textures in their own right. They are textures defined by the fused meanings of the phrases.

Now, with the phrase “at the end” taken as a texture, we may roughly say that its strands are “at”, “the”, and “end”, and that its context is the other three phrases of the sentence. The meanings of “at”, “the”, and “end” contribute directly to the total meaning of the phrase. But the total meaning of the phrase depends also on the connections of these strands with outlying words and phrases which indirectly enter into the meaning of the phrase and constitute its context. The particular meaning of “end”, for instance, in this phrase is determined by connections, partly grammatical and partly of other sorts, with the already written “period” on the one side and the about-to-be written “sentence” on the other. These contextual connections are gathered up into the word “end”, which contributes them as a group to the meaning of the whole phrase. Even the little word “the” has a strong forward reference to a definite point in the near future, a point which reciprocally has a backward reference as part of the context to the meaning of the total phrase. Change “the” to “some” and notice what happens to the meaning of the phrase. It implies that *this* sentence may not have a period. It demands that the coming “this” in the phrase “of this sentence” should also be changed to “some”, showing up a close connection between “the” and “this”. It threatens to change the quality of the meaning of the phrase from what we call sense into what we call nonsense.

This sort of experimentation shows the sort of thing a strand is. It is a contributing detail in a texture, but it also reaches out into a context and brings some of the quality of the

context into the texture. It shows that too sharp a line cannot be drawn between texture, strand, and context. It constitutes incidentally a running demonstrative criticism of the method of element analysis, and of the analytical theories generally. For contextualism, element analysis is intrinsically distortive.

We see also, what has come out in another way earlier, that context, texture, and strand are relative to one another. If the phrase “at the end” is taken as a texture, the surrounding phrases are context and the included words are strands. But if the whole sentence is taken as a texture, then the still wider references become context and the phrases of the sentence become strands. If a single word like “the” becomes a texture, then the words “at” and “end” become its context and its letters and phonetic and grammatical constituents become its strands. And so on.

What is the actual structure of an event, however, is ultimately determined by its qualitative structure. If the quality of the event of writing the sentence is taken up in the meanings of the sentence as a whole and the articulated meanings of its phrases, which seems to have been the case when I last wrote it, then in that given event a single word would not function as a texture at all, and the word’s potential alphabetical and phonetic constituents would function only as context. This point has important analytical consequences, which we shall immediately consider. Here I am merely indicating that the relativity of context, texture, and strand is itself relative to the actual qualitative structure of a given event. The qualitative structure of an event is for that event final, whatever potentialities for the qualities of other events it may have within it.

Let us proceed, now, to the important analytical consequences of the things we have just been saying. The implications here are revolutionary from the standpoint of the analytical theories, formism and mechanism. In these theories it is assumed that any object or event can be analyzed completely and finally into its constituents.

This assumption is categorially denied by contextualism; for according to its categories there is no final or complete analysis of anything. The reason for this is that what is analyzed is categorially an event, and the analysis of an event consists in the exhibition of its texture, and the exhibition of its texture is the discrimination of its strands, and the full discrimination of its strands is the exhibition of other textures in the context of the one being analyzed – textures from which the strands of the texture being analyzed gain part of their quality. In the extended analysis of any event we presently find ourselves in the context of that event, and so on from event to event as long as we wish to go, which would be forever or until we got tired. The quality of an event is the fused qualities of its strands, and the qualities of its strands come partly out of its context, and there we are outside the event. All contextualistic analysis has this sheering effect. As we work down into the constituents of a texture, we presently find ourselves in textures quite different from the one from which we started, and somewhere in its context.

We start to analyze our sentence, and we exhibit the articulation of its phrases; and then we analyze the words into their sounds and letters; then the sounds into their timbre constituents; then their timbre constituents into vibration correlates; then vibrations into the characters of waves; then waves into mathematical coordinate systems. And so on. Each of these steps does have a bearing on our original sentence. But long ago our analysis has come out from under the immediate texture of the original event and even from under the textures of its immediate context. And so with the analysis of any event. As we analyze a texture, we move down into a structure of strands and at the same time sheer out into its context. A bottom is thus never reached. For the support of every texture lies in its context. This support is as extensive as you wish, but you never reach the end of it.

It follows, moreover, that there are many equally revealing ways of analyzing an event, depending simply on what strands you follow from the event into its context. At each stage of your analysis (that is, in each new texture into which you have been led), this choice of what strand to follow comes up again, and every strand is more or less relevant. Hence, the contextualist rather disparages analysis for analysis’ sake. What is the good of it, except as the mere fun of paddling about in the ocean of things? Serious analysis for him is always either directly or indirectly practical (whence the term “pragmatism”). If

from one texture you wish to get to another, then analysis has an end, and a direction, and some strands have relevancy to this end and others not, and the selections of strands to follow are determined from stage to stage, and the enterprise becomes important in reference to the end. But there is no importance in analysis just for analysis.

Contextualism is accordingly sometimes said to have a horizontal cosmology in contrast to other views, which have a vertical cosmology. There is no top nor bottom to the contextualistic world. In formism or mechanism or organicism one has only to analyze in certain specified ways and one is bound, so it is believed, ultimately to get to the bottom of things or to the top of things. Contextualism justifies no such faith. There is no cosmological mode of analysis that guarantees the whole truth or an arrival at the ultimate nature of things. On the other hand, one does not need to hunt for a distant cosmological truth, since every present event gives it as fully as it can be given. All one has to do to get at the sort of thing the world is, is to realize, intuit, get the quality of whatever happens to be going on. The quality of blowing your nose is just as cosmic and ultimate as Newton's writing down his gravitational formula.

The fact that his formula is much more useful to many more people doesn't make it any more real.

References of strands. – So now we come to the third category of texture, references. These references consist simply of the strands more intimately considered.

- i. The simplest and basic reference may be called *linear*. All the references of strands so far talked about have been of this sort. A linear reference has a point of *initiation*, a transitive *direction*, and achieves an ending or *satisfaction*. Every word in our sentence is a bundle of such references. We have already followed out some of these in the words “end” and “the”. For instance, one of these linear references initiated by “end” (in “at the end of this sentence”) reached forward and achieved satisfaction in “sentence”. It was the reference answering to the implied question, “End of what?” With the completion of “sentence”, we knew “of what” and the reference was satisfied, and that strand terminated. And note the transitive direction with the implied doubleheadedness or before-and-afterness of the reference. From “end” this reference pointed forward to a satisfaction, from “sentence” backward to an initiation, but at any intervening stage such as the writing of the word “this” it pointed both ways.

The linear reference is intrinsically a forward-and-back, future-and-past, initiation-and-satisfaction activity. This doubleheadedness is contained in the very category of the specious present, for it is just this polarity that affords the spread of texture, just this that spreads immediacy. Let the backward reference go, and a texture shrinks to a mere cross section and threatens to disappear in a temporal slice that is not even clearly definable.

A linear reference is a transition from an initiation to a satisfaction with a continuous intervening spread pointing both forward and back.

A *convergent* reference is a complex linear reference in which there are either several initiations converging upon one satisfaction or several satisfactions derived from one initiation. This is the contextualists' description of the common experience of similarity.

(The principle that nothing can come from nothing is not accepted by contextualism.)

Return to our sentence. The letter “e” was there repeated seven times. We probably had not noticed it. If now we notice it, we shall see that these seven letters stand out and gather together. They may do so in two ways. If we are looking for them, we have an initiated reference from which we derive seven satisfactions. But if they spontaneously impress us with their identity, then we have seven initiations converging upon one satisfaction.

The important thing to notice is that for the contextualist these letters are not intrinsically

identical or similar, but only as they are made so, or become so, through the activity of convergent reference. When they were not noticed, they were not similar because no convergent action (presumably) was present. If we have written the sentence longhand and now look at the shapes of the seven letters more carefully, we shall see that they cease to be similar because their shapes vary so. If we are asked to count *all* the letters in the sentence, then not only do these seven letters become similar again, but they become similar to all the other letters in the sentence, for all the letters then converge upon a reaction which all can satisfy.

Similarities emerge only when convergent references occur. In the absence of the convergent references there are no similarities. No two things in the world are, in other words, inherently similar, but only become so when they initiate convergent references. Such references may, indeed, be predicted, but the objects are literally similar only when the strands converge. Before the convergence, they can only be said to be potentially similar. Two five-pound lead weights are not inherently similar, but when they react upon scales to produce the identical reading they are similar. And, of course, a five-pound bag of feathers is exactly similar to the weights under these conditions. But what makes all of these similar is their convergence of action on a single effect.

Since what we call physical properties are all of them convergent references of this sort – weights, dimensions, temperature changes – it follows that for the contextualist none of these is a permanent inherent property of natural objects. Physical properties are simply predictable convergences of references in physical textures.

This interpenetration of textures in any act of social cooperation is clear enough from the contextualistic categories. But the same is true in any act of ordinary perception. When I perceive a table, there is, according to the contextualist, an interlocking of two or more continuous textures. There is a good deal of evidence for an individual textural continuity which we call the physical table in constant causal interaction with its environment. We would hardly assume that a table which burst upon our vision was a naive novelty. We have even better evidence of a textural continuity which I call my physical organism and which is ever in the context of my given events. In what we analyze as certain conditions of light and spatial proximity, references are set up between these two physical continuities fusing into a given texture of considerable complexity. The qualities of this texture include what we call color and shape. As these are perceived, they are textural and qualitative emergents.

But the important point to note is that the qualities arise in the integration of the texture and belong neither to me alone nor to the table alone, but to the common texture. In seeing a table I am interacting with my environment and am so far out in it.

[Ed FE Emery, March 1983, Emphasis added.]