

Chapter X : Contextualism

§1. *The contextualistic root metaphor.*—When we come to contextualism, we pass from an analytical into a synthetic type of theory. It is characteristic of the synthetic theories that their root metaphors cannot satisfactorily be denoted even to a first approximation by well-known common-sense concepts such as similarity, the artifact, or the machine. We are too likely to be misunderstood at the start, even though the basic synthetic concepts do originate in common sense or are, at least, discoverable there. The best term out of common sense to suggest the point of origin of contextualism is probably the historic event. And this we shall accordingly call the root metaphor of this theory.

No simple root-metaphor

Context = Historic Event

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.



Act

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:

Only verbs suggest this

My hypothesis → with
it is an act in action

Incidents in the plot of a novel
or incidents of life.

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making a boat, running a race, laughing at a joke, persuading an assembly, unraveling a mystery, solving a problem, removing an obstacle, exploring a country, communicating with a friend, creating a poem, re-creating a poem. These acts or events are all intrinsically complex, composed of interconnected activities with continuously changing patterns. They are like incidents in the plot of a novel or drama. They are literally the incidents of life.

Complex
context

incidents
of
life

The contextualist finds that everything in the world consists of such incidents. When we catch the idea, it seems very obvious. For this reason, it is sometimes easy to confuse the historic event of contextualism with common-sense fact, and some contextualists have encouraged the confusion. But there are lots of things in common sense that are not events. Common sense is full of animistic, formistic, and mechanistic substances. But contextualism holds tight to the changing present event. This event itself, once we note it, is obvious enough, but the tightness of the contextualists' hold upon it is not usual. It is this hold that makes contextualism a distinctive philosophic attitude and a world theory. For the tightness of this grip is obtained through the set of categories derivative from the historic event as a root metaphor.

No subtle
ance

the changing
present

§2. *Derivation of the contextualistic categories.*—The contextualistic categories are derived from what we may call the total given event. Since any event is a rich concrete thing, in which features interpenetrate, there is a degree of arbitrariness in selecting one feature rather than another, or so much of one feature against so little of another. To complicate matters, novelty is a not uncommon

There is
some
subtle
ness in
directing

the event, in selecting