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## TEXTE EST UN CON

*Gajah sama gajah berjuang, pelandok mati di tengah-tengah.*  
When elephants fight, a mouse-deer in the middle will be killed.

THE stimulus for this collection of essays was, I understand, a difference of views between Needham (1973) and Dumont (1979) over the significance of context and conceptual levels in classification. With the sage advice of the Malay proverb in mind, rather than stand between elephants, this mouse-deer proposes to view matters from a nearby clump of little-penetrated intellectual undergrowth. From this vantage-ground it looks as if the battle-ground is as often used as it is odd. So, from the (somewhat spurious) safety of my chosen thicket, I shall feel free to cast aspersions far and wide. It is a little reminiscent of the apocryphal story about Jean Genet. When, after the intervention of leading French intellectuals, he was released from 'perpetual preventive detention' for burglary, he was asked what he felt about the nation's celebrated philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, having devoted a book to him (*Saint Genet, comédien et martyr*). He is said to have replied simply: '*Sartre est un con!*'—so preserving his existential purity. For more humdrum reasons the brunt of my paper might be summed up as *texte est un con*.

A serious difficulty in much anthropological argument is that there is no satisfactory theory of context.<sup>1</sup> This is the more awkward as a major

1. My focus is a little different from the other essays in this collection, as one of the editors, Dr Barnes, asked me specifically to comment on some of the theoretical issues of context and levels. I hope the result will not be entirely irrelevant. The paper I originally presented at the Oxford conference on 'Context and Levels' (8–11 March 1983) was too long for inclusion here, and so has been split into three. The first section on problems of text and context is given here. The second, on truth-conditional semantic alternatives to a contextual account, will appear separately. The final

contribution of anthropology—popularly known from the work of Malinowski—has been to show the importance of context in almost any aspect of culture. A reason for the difficulty, I shall suggest, is the curious relationship of context to a text. Text requires context, but appeal to context involves a kind of confidence trick—for everyone invokes it but no one knows quite what it is. This, rightly, makes critics suspicious that the whole business is a ‘con’. So it may be worthwhile to consider why the concept of context is problematic.

What then is context? Etymologically ‘text’ is usually traced to the Latin for ‘tissue’, and so ‘context’ to what is woven together (Onions 1966: 913, 209), *contextus* being a ‘connexion, order, construction’ (Skeat 1963: 132) and *textus* being something woven, as the structure of a narrative, so giving the modern ‘text’ (Partridge 1966: 698). Put this way various questions arise: what kind of web or tissue is being woven? About what is it woven? And what connections, or order, is being constructed? At each turn context appears as incomplete and hinting at something else as its focus: activities, ideas, speech, texts or whatever. In some sense, almost anything can serve as a context for something else. The problems start, however, if we try to classify such relationships to find out what is ‘essential’ to them. For context is just an analytical convenience designed for a particular purpose, but there is a danger of it being seen as somehow substantive, or complementing something substantive. Now, if we treat context as a kind of thing, we run into difficulties when we try, so to speak, to pick it up only to find, as the Balinese put it, that it is

*sekadi ngambel segara*  
like grasping the sea.

There are other perils. It should be clear, from the etymology if nothing else, that context has metaphorical roots. How dead are these? If context is merely a synonym for relationship, order or structure, why use a term with connotations of weaving, encompassing and other, often confused, images? There is (at least) one interesting ambiguity in the metaphor of weaving together. Are we to take it as a confluence, or connection, and stress that parts cannot fully be distinguished from the whole (*both one thing and another*)? Or is it a conjunction, or complementarity, which needs disentangling (*either one thing or another*)? Our Hellenic intellectual tradition is comfortable with dichotomies—the apotheosis being perhaps the Aristotelian laws of thought—even if the world does not always divide up neatly. The study of context is torn between recognizing a range of possible metaphors on the one hand, and submitting to the dictates of classification and logic on the other. In this battle, context often lands up as the left-overs at the table of text, with a curiously left-footed status of its own.

Sadly, this is not yet all. If it is unhelpful to view context as a discriminable class of phenomena, let alone as neatly opposed, or contrasted, to something else, is this latter set at least exclusive? Unfortunately what is ‘not *a*’ is not necessarily *b*. Such pseudo-dichotomies are regrettably popular ways of making an analysis

seem to work. Consider, for instance, how often 'emotion' is defined by contrast to 'intellect', instead of a negatively defined ragbag (Rorty 1980; Needham 1981). Likewise, Lévi-Strauss lumps together almost every figure of speech not subsumed under metaphor as metonymy, as if it were a coherent, or even homogeneous, class (cf. Hobart 1982a: 53). Such stuff are edifices made on, if fleetingly, for also

We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep. (*The Tempest*, IV.i.146–8)

While some wait prostrate for a revelation at the altar of context, others have been busily rubbing their lamps to summon up the more co-operative, if promiscuous, spirit of text. Indeed, culture itself has recently been treated as a meaningful text, capable of spawning its own context (Geertz 1973, borrowing from Ricoeur, e.g. 1970 and 1971). This kind of approach is of interest, not least because in the Ricoeurian version the relation of text and context is treated as the dialectical aspect of the hermeneutic circle and promises a solution to the problem. The argument is also able to draw upon the lively debate in recent French 'post-structuralism'. Unfortunately this is also the point at which it starts to emerge that different protagonists use the same key concepts, like text, discourse and meaning, at times apparently unwittingly in quite different ways. To the extent that the debate itself is a text, it is one into which everyone reads something different or even incompatible with other views. Perhaps a better metaphor than waiting for a god to appear is building a tower to the heavens only to discover Babel.

This talk of metaphor touches on an important point. Culture is not a text (however understood), nor a set of rules, nor even a discourse. It may be useful for a specific purpose to regard culture, for a moment, *as if* it were a text, a discourse or whatever; and members of particular cultures may write texts, hold discourse and act according to rules. But culture is complex and cannot be captured in any single metaphor. Such metaphors may prove more or less illuminating: 'structure' has faded in favour of 'text', itself often—and I think wrongly—confused with 'discourse'.<sup>2</sup> Now the creators of these metaphors may be clear as to what they are doing—Ricoeur and Foucault write elegantly on figures of speech—but one suspects that not only are their acolytes often less discriminating, but that the masters, if for no other reason than that committing oneself to develop one view of culture precludes other possibilities, end up being mastered by their own metaphors.

2. Except to the most disciplined intellectual ascetic, who can detach the technical use of terms entirely from natural language (in which case why bother to borrow 'pre-constrained' images at all?), the choice of words has implications. To me, at least, text has connotations of fixity, coherence and meaning, whereas discourse suggests divergence of opinions, negotiability and argument and so is a question of power. These implications of metaphors are, of course, discussed in Kuhn (1962), where they are referred to as 'paradigms' (Masterman 1970). Kuhn has since rephrased his usage for the history of science (see Barnes 1982).

What I am leading up to is the serious problem of translating between cultures, not unakin to the historian's problem of inferring the significance (in Hirsch's sense, 1967) of ideas in different epochs. Without, I think, begging the question, our own theoretical constructs have their own contexts, in the sense that our concepts and permissible logical moves are products of a particular cultural tradition. It cannot be assumed *a priori* that all cultures construe notions like culture, text, discourse, rule and so forth, in the same way. The obvious retort to this is that these theoretical tools are the expensive products of reflections and of tested efficacy, which do not depend upon the ways any culture may structure, coherently or not, such explicit notions as they may happen to have. Unfortunately, this argument is more convenient to the armchair philosopher than it is convincing to the necessarily more empirical ethnographer. It is not so much a question of wielding costly forged intellectual tools, as it is (as even the most hardened Popperian might admit) of considering how universally valid are the assumptions which inform our complex, articulated theoretical models. Notions like text and discourse can, on a little probing, be seen to presuppose a theory of the relation of thought, word and object, ideas about meaning, a theory of action and intention, canons of rationality, and even a view of the relation of man and society. To each age these might appear as self-evident, but one of the few certainties in this world is that at some future date present theories will be seen to hide some pretty shaky assumptions. As I shall try to show, theories of text and discourse are shot through with presuppositions more glaringly ethnocentric than their protagonists would ever dare admit. Reflecting on one's navel may be great fun, but how much does it tell one about what an Amerindian makes of a shaman's chant?

Lastly, let me briefly contextualize the problem of context, as this will be relevant later. There are two traditional theories of truth which may also, as the question of how language fits the world, be rephrased as theories of meaning. Now, such well-worn dichotomies as nature and culture, *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften*, cause and meaning are not unconnected with theories of truth. To put it simplistically for present purposes, Correspondence Theory, which stems from at least as far back as Plato, argues that truth consists in some form of correspondence between belief, or language, and fact. By contrast, Coherence Theory, more popular with the rationalists, holds that a statement is true or false depending upon whether it coheres or not with a system of other statements. The latter underwrites many of the brands of contextualism in anthropology and elsewhere. Much of the complaint of hermeneutics, that the human sciences involve understanding (*Verstehen*), not just explanation (*Erklären*), may be seen as the objection of coherence theorists to the narrow stricture that truth must be found solely in some fit between the world and its formal representation in statements, formulæ or whatever. The counter to the correspondence view (espoused, for instance, for scientific theories by Popper) is a more holistic approach which stresses the need for analysis of the fit between statements, so involving some theory of rationality or logic (argued for science

by Duhem and more recently Quine). Thus the problem of context is linked to the wider debate about the nature of truth and meaning in different philosophical traditions.

With these general remarks out of the way, we can turn to look in more detail at some of the problems in formulating a theory of context in culture.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the most thorough discussion is to be found in 'post-structuralist' writings on the nature of 'text' and its relation to society and the individual. A suitable starting-point is Ricoeur's argument for treating culture as a text, which can be contrasted with the different views of Barthes, Foucault and Derrida in particular, in order to show some of the drawbacks of a focus on text, or even discourse, and—despite their avowed reflexivity—the difficulty in escaping certain presuppositions of Western metaphysics. I conclude with remarks on why a theory of context is so hard to formulate and suggest one possible solution.

Theories of text, like canned foods, come in many varieties. Of especial interest to anthropologists, however, is the view of 'meaningful action considered as a text' (the sub-title of the original publication [1971] of Ricoeur 1979). His point is to show the relevance of hermeneutics as a general method for the human sciences. To do so, he sets out to show that action has similar features to text and that they are tractable to the same methodology of interpretation.

The connection between text and action briefly is as follows. Discourse consists of speech events, but what is important is

...the *meaning* of the speech event, not the event as event (Ricoeur 1979: 76; emphasis added).

It is this meaning which is inscribed, and so 'fixed', in writing or text. This 'objectification' of discourse as text is also true of action by virtue of its 'inner traits', which are similar in structure (*ibid.*: 81). There are four critical parallels between text and action:

1. The units of discourse, and so text, are sentences which have propositional content. In decreasing measure they also have, in speech act terminology, illocutionary and perlocutionary force. Actions have a similar form (here Ricoeur [*ibid.*: 81–3] relies upon Kenny 1963). The content and forces together constitute the meaning of the text or action.
2. Text is distanced from the author's original intention and develops consequences of its own (Hirsch's 'significance', 1967: 8), just as action does, history being its 'sedimentation' in institutions (Ricoeur 1979: 83–5).
3. Meaning further surpasses events by virtue of the power of reference. Texts refer originally to situations (an *Umwelt*) in which they are produced, but have the capability of referring to other (possible) worlds in which future readers live. In fact 'the world is the ensemble of references opened up by the texts' (*ibid.*: 79; this is

3. Not all the approaches can be dealt with here, for instance speech act theories or the Bateson-Wilden ecological view, which I discuss in the paper on truth-conditional semantics referred to in footnote 1 above. Some of my comments below have, however, an obvious bearing on these arguments.

the encompassing *Welt*). Analogously, the meaning of an important action transcends 'the social conditions of its production and may be reenacted in new social contexts' (ibid.: 85–6).

4. Discourse also refers back to the speaker, as well as to a putative listener. In text this becomes partly detached, so 'the verbal intention of the text' takes over from the author's intention (ibid.: 90; cf. 1976: 12–22), while a plethora of possible readers are created. Likewise, the meaning of an action becomes detached from the actor and becomes 'the sense of its forthcoming interpretations' through time (1979: 86).

The objectivity of meaning, independent of its original vehicle, is the vital link between text and action.

The free-standing nature of meaning is central to Ricoeur's argument that hermeneutics is the appropriate method for the human sciences. Dilthey's difficulty in distinguishing explanation, as the proper aim of natural science, from understanding in human science was that the latter required special recognition of the psyche as an irreducible element in the analysis. Ricoeur proposes overcoming the dichotomy between causal explanation and understanding meaning by recourse to a dialectic in which the meanings, once understood, can be tested objectively for relative validity by a logic of probability (ibid.: 90–2; borrowing from Hirsch 1967), which he holds can meet Popper's criterion of potential falsifiability (1959). The reverse process moves from the scientific validation of meaning to the possibility of new understandings. Once again reference is the key. When the text is distanced from its original setting, it may either be treated as a worldless entity—this is the comfortable world of structuralism—or (and Ricoeur implies such an option is incomplete) it may be shown to disclose a new world, remote from that of its inception, in which the sense of the text (in Frege's idiom) implies a new set of references (Ricoeur 1979: 94–8). The goal, then, is the discovery of the 'depth-semantics' of the text, which is its sense detached from its author (ibid.: 97–8). Finally, there is something similar in action and social phenomena to this sense, for equally,

...social structures are also attempts to cope with existential perplexities, human predicaments, and deep-rooted conflicts (ibid.: 100).

Text, action and social structure ultimately speak of the human condition.

Ricoeur offers a fascinating synthesis of culture-as-text. As I remarked earlier, however, we must enquire further into what this model presupposes and entails, at which point nasty drawbacks and grave inconsistencies come to light. There are several obvious issues which invite investigation. How alike are text and action? Which theory of meaning, and of the relation between word and object, is invoked, and what are its implications? How far is Ricoeur committed to a view of truth and human nature? How transparent are the metaphors in the model? What is his theory of context? And what is the dialectic through which Ricoeurian hermeneutics works? Such questions draw out uncomfortable, and even ethnocentric, assumptions behind the argument.

How alike are text and action? There is one simple difference. Actions, as events, arguably have effects in the world in one sense independent of a mediating 'mind'. Obviously the relationship between events is relevant in

respect to some framework, or paradigm (see Goodman 1978: 1–22, 91–140), but would one wish to go so far as to say that the consequences of actions do not exist in any sense prior to being recognized? Are, for instance, the effects (immediate or long-term) of the *Blitzkrieg* on London entirely on a par with the text of *Mein Kampf*? Secondly, if all actions are like bits of text, then most of them are mammothly boring and repetitive, life taking on the baldness of Ionesco's *Prima Donna*. Anyway, the sentences of text are not isolated entities but are linked by logic (in a fairly strict sense), narrative conventions, structure and so on, a matter about which Ricoeur says little but, for instance, Foucault regards as critical (see especially 1972). Even if we were to allow actions propositional content, how far are they linked logically, or can be said to have truth value?<sup>4</sup>

In Ricoeur's scheme what makes an event, be it utterance or action, relevant is that it has 'meaning'. Whatever may happen later, this meaning derives from intention. Unfortunately intention is an awkward animal, which has long been the bugbear of hermeneutics and the philosophy of action. Apart from the problems of establishing what an author's intentions are (Hirsch 1967), is it to be treated as an inner state or inferred from public behaviour? Must it be conscious? Can one have conflicting intentions? In short, as Wittgenstein has pointed out (1958: 214–19; 1959: 32, 147), is it a coherent notion at all? All this pales beside the problem of how different cultures might construe intention differently, and how its analogues, if they exist, are distinguished from wishing, willing, deciding, or even accepting fate, or whatever. It would look a bit silly if hermeneutics, in trying to understand other cultures, had to import the current battle in Western philosophy about intention as a *deus ex machina*. Some cultures do have differing notions of action and intention (Marriott 1976; Hobart 1982b, 1983). So are we not committing a category mistake if we substitute what we choose to regard as intention for what they understand by the ideas they use? A hermeneut's lot, to paraphrase W.S. Gilbert, is not a happy one!

The nub of Ricoeur's link of text and action is that both have 'propositional content' (1979: 81, 82). This view is as traditional as it is questionable. For a start, it is far from clear that it is useful to posit such abstract entities, bearers of an even more abstract 'meaning', as propositions (Quine 1953a; 1970).<sup>5</sup> The more interesting truth-conditional theories of meaning do not, in fact, deal with propositions as their object but with sentences (Davidson 1967a; 1967b). Nor, as Ricoeur notes, does the study of propositions include all that is relevant for an analysis of culture. It is becoming increasingly clear that language alone is sufficiently heterogeneous that not even speech-act theory exhausts the subject. Jakobson, as one example, isolated six functions of language, combinations of which can be distinguished analytically in any sentence (1960). Language—as

4. Rejecting a correspondence theory of truth does not necessarily salvage Ricoeur's argument. It just requires us to consider the criteria of coherence, warranted assertability, and so on, in whatever theory is used instead. As we shall see, such an option is not easily open anyway.

5. It is not necessary here to consider the debate between Strawson (1950; 1952) and Quine (1953b) on how formal logical systems should be. It is enough to note that both reject the stress upon propositions, and point to the need for context, albeit in different ways.

indeed art and other forms omitted by Ricoeur—may exemplify, express or represent, typically, commonly and so on, something as something else, in a way which does not fit easily in a propositional, or speech-act, theory (Goodman 1978: 12ff.; see also Lyons 1977). To reduce language and action to propositions is rather like entering a wrestling contest in a straight-jacket.

If the stress on propositions is questionable, the idea that text or action 'contains' something is dangerous. This is a beautiful illustration of what Reddy calls the 'conduit metaphor', where language is treated as a vehicle which must therefore contain something, be it meaning, sense, propositions or other similar contents (1979). As he notes, there is nothing intrinsic to language which requires it to be viewed in this way, and there are serious objections to doing so. Regardless of whether one chooses to regard such metaphors as 'constitutive', in that the subject-matter is ineluctably constituted in part by the image, or ideally dispensable as part of 'clearing tropes away' (Quine 1979: 160) to make room for knowledge, implicit reliance on a 'conduit metaphor' is at best perilous, at worst nonsense. It is one thing to say that, for a given purpose, it is useful to regard language as a container. It is quite another to assume that some ontologically 'objective' entity is necessarily contained in text, let alone hold that this is in fact the perduring reality behind culture.<sup>6</sup>

In one sense, the foregoing is ancillary to Ricoeur's central concern with meaning, which is what, in the last analysis, links text and action. So what kind of theory of meaning does his argument use? It is not, in fact, easy to say. At different stages theories of propositions, reference, intentions, speech acts, context and use—otherwise considered incompatible contenders—all feature. The aim of this synthesis appears to be not so much to reflect on the contradictions, as to argue for the generality and many-facedness of meaning. Unfortunately there is bitter disagreement among schools of hermeneutics, which stress meaning, as to how it is to be understood (Hobart 1982a; 1982c). The difficulty is neatly highlighted by one of Ricoeur's main exponents, Geertz, for whom symbols are the vehicles of meanings, a symbol being

...anything that denotes, describes, represents, exemplifies, labels, indicates, evokes, depicts, expresses—anything that somehow signifies (1980: 135).

This looks a little like the Charge of the Hermeneutic Light Brigade. Meaning is prepared to leap the obstacles that worry the more pedantic. As it is hard to see how almost anything does not, on some reading, fulfil at least one of Geertz's verbs, presumably everything is symbolic and therefore meaningful. This does rather deprive meaning of any meaning. Such a broad definition happily makes

6. Ricoeur also makes great play on other sets of metaphors. Ideas are given an impression of substance they would otherwise lack in the use of spatial metaphors (inside:outside; interiorization:exteriorization; distanciated; open up the world). These verge towards the substantive at times (discourse is fixed, or inscribed; actions sediment), until the text becomes a mock human (the intention of the text, what a text says). Finally, it comes to life (possessing force; having power to disclose) and is even charmingly bourgeois in its interest in property (and appropriating). This might be harmless were it not that the reality of text, and the corresponding unreality of context, is more the result of the writer's imagination than of the 'properties' of text. Texts, after all, do not speak; men in culture read them.

meaning seem to occur almost everywhere and so, intuitively, it emerges as a pervading feeling in the landscape, so to speak. This is, of course, by virtue of the sweeping definition in the first place. Perhaps there are rewards for so hard-worked an intellectual factotum.

'When I make a word do a lot of work like that,' said Humpty-Dumpty, 'I always pay it extra'. (*Through the Looking-Glass*)

Behind Ricoeur's concern with carving out a broad domain for meaning, there lies the specific problem of how meaning relates to the world. Simple as it might seem, this is one of the thorniest issues as, at the least, it involves a triangular relationship of word (name), concept (sense) and reality (thing).<sup>7</sup> Now the French Saussurean tradition concentrates on the relationship of words (here as text) and sense, which leaves the difficult problem of how either of these relates to the world. More than most post-structuralists, Ricoeur faces the latter question in order to account for the peculiar capacity of text to apply in different situations. For reasons we shall see, he grounds himself in Frege's famous, but difficult and disputed distinction between sense and reference. As Ricoeur interprets it,

The 'what' of discourse is its 'sense', the 'about what' is its 'reference' (1976: 19). Sense is the meaning immanent in discourse, and thus in text; whereas 'reference relates language to the world' (ibid.: 20). It is exactly how language relates to the world which has proven so difficult to specify fully.

There are two aspects of this problem which are worth brief mention because they bear on context. Ricoeur produces a modified version of Frege to cope with Strawson's (1950) criticisms of the Russellian interpretation:

...the same sentence, i.e., the same sense, may or may not refer depending on the circumstances or situation of an act of discourse. No inner mark, *independent of the use of a sentence*, constitutes a reliable criterion of denotation (1976: 20; emphasis added).

As Geach remarks, there has been 'a sad tale of confusion' (1980: 83) 'between the relations of a name to the thing named and of a predicate to what it is true of' (ibid.: 29). Ricoeur's emphasis is not on denotation ('the relationship that holds between [a] lexeme and persons, things, places, properties, processes and activities external to the language-system' [Lyons 1977: 207]), but on reference which is 'the relationship which holds between an expression and what that expression stands for on particular occasions of its utterance' (ibid.: 174). On the one hand, this commits one to some version of what Parret has called 'the Augustinian-Fregean picture theory of language' (1980: 80), which raises all the problems of the status of imaginary objects, logical connectives and so forth (see Hobart 1982a). On the other hand, reference involves some notion of context in which utterances are made. It has been finding a suitable theory of context which has proved hard (see Parret 1980: 73-96). Unfortunately, because it

7. The terms in parentheses refer to Ullman's usage (1962: 57) drawing on Ogden and Richards 1936: 11. See also Lyons 1977: 96ff. for another of the many formulations.

looks much easier to handle, there is a widespread tendency to focus upon text and its sense rather than upon the range of social contexts in which text is used. As Harris has pointed out (1983), theoretical linguists (and one might add philosophers) deal with a highly idealized view of language, the homogeneity of speech communities and the ability of speakers, and by decontextualizing discourse ignore issues of power and the conditions in which language is actually used.

The second issue is about truth and human nature. Ricoeur requires that texts have meaning, or sense, by virtue of being true of the world in which the author, and the potential reader, lives—in other words some version of a Correspondence Theory. At the same time, the intention of the author, and later the verbal intention of the text, are crucial, so he leans towards Grice's theory of meaning as recognized intention. As this has been developed, the stress is upon understanding being linked to a particular utterance in a particular context, depending upon the presumption of shared standards of communication and a degree of mutual knowledge (Grice 1975, 1978; see Sperber and Wilson 1982 for an interesting development of this approach). Such a stress on context is likely to be uncongenial to Ricoeur in several ways. It circumvents, and indeed questions, the relevance of truth and reference in favour of convention, but in such a way as to de-centre text and emphasise the complexities of context. To what extent is embracing both Frege and Grice like trying to have one's cake and eat it?

It is for these reasons among others, I suspect, that Ricoeur grounds himself on a particular view of human nature and truth. If there is a constancy in the human condition, it may be argued that the diversity of cultural conventions and individual circumstances do not affect the capacity of text to address itself to the humanity of the reader. In a sympathetic reading of Ricoeur, Donoghue points out that in this view of text,

...the reader wants to restore the words to a source, a human situation involving speech, character, personality, and destiny construed as having a personal form (1981: 99).

This tradition he designates 'epireading' (from the Greek *epos*, speech) by which one moves back from text to persons and shared experience, through which we 'verify the axiom of presence' (*ibid.*) of common humanity, and reach through words towards 'the aboriginal situation' (*ibid.*: 151). The alternative, 'graphireading' (from *graphos*, writing), to which we shall come shortly, prefers to focus on discourse rather than the self, and questions the search for true intentions in men, or meaning in texts.

The single, true interpretation is an autocrat's dream of power (*ibid.*: 199).

Leaving aside the questions of the two traditions of reading for a moment, it is necessary to ask to what Ricoeur is committing himself. What are the implications of grounding an approach in a theory of truth, and a view of human nature? It is one thing for mathematically-minded philosophers like Frege and Russell to wish to fix meaning to truth about the world; but if one wishes to inquire how men in different cultures, or historical periods, understand the

culture or world about them, such a theory becomes distinctly uncomfortable. For among the main questions men may wish to ask is: what is human nature? And what constitutes truth? To the extent that Ricoeur bases his theory of meaning upon a theory of truth and human nature, it becomes impossible for his brand of hermeneutics to inquire about these, because they are already assumed. Should such an approach attempt to comment on, let alone argue that life confirms the value of these theories, it runs the danger of begging the question.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, on this view what is the relationship between explanation in the human sciences and the dialectic? For, as Hirsch puts it,

The special problem of interpretation is that it very often *appears* to be necessary and inevitable when in fact it never is (1967: 164; emphasis in the original).

The danger is ever-present that the interpreter

...has been trapped in the hermeneutic circle and has fallen victim to the self-confirmability of interpretations (ibid.: 165).

Ricoeur's reply is that the hermeneutic circle is the 'first figure of a unique dialectic' (1979: 88) in which

Guess and validation are in a sense circularly related as subjective and objective approaches to the text (ibid.: 91).

What is suggested is two different ways of looking at text.

Now in its classical formulation, the hermeneutic circle

...has been described as the interdependence of part and whole: the whole can be understood only through its parts, but the parts can only be understood through the whole (Hirsch 1967: 76).

In other words, and this is what is relevant for the Ricoeurian version, to understand (part of) a text one must understand the context, but to understand the context one must understand the text. In terms of our earlier distinction of popular theories of meaning, on the one hand the analysis of text *per se* deals with its correspondence with something outside, while on the other it deals with its coherence with other texts. From one point of view the advance of hermeneutics is that meaning cannot be squeezed entirely into *either* correspondence *or* coherence theory. The problem is, how are the two related? Ricoeur's answer is through a dialectic, treated as an oscillation. This is not so much a rational step from a thesis to an antithesis, as a stress on different ways of looking at things. The shift from dialectic as logical to a metaphor for perspective, raises immediately the question of whether there are necessarily only two views, and whether they must be related by formal logic. Part of the persuasiveness of the image of the dialectic, I suspect, is that it is the simplest form of an alternative metaphor. Rather than look for the whole truth from a single perspective, or

8. The problem may be put another way. If we require a theory of human nature to account for the 'nature' of culture, which in turn illuminates the perennial problem of humans—by virtue of their natures—are we not caught in a circularity?

two, there may be many points of view, the relations between which will depend on one's interests at the time.

At the start of this paper I suggested that ideas like text, or discourse, rest upon assumptions about the nature of language and the world, rationality, truth and others. The focus on text tends to de-centre context, and encourage the search for something essential rather than a plurality of perspectives. The value of Ricoeur's argument is that, unlike many authors, he has been at pains to spell out the assumptions upon which his argument is based—as indeed anyone must, in the last resort. In this last section I wish briefly to bring in three other approaches to text and discourse to point to the different ways such concepts are used, and to see what light they shed on the problem of context. Gradually it should become clear why context is such an elusive animal, and why 'logical levels' are tarred with the same brush as context.

There is a school of thought which questions how possible it is to find a true meaning in a text. Instead, one does not look beyond text and context for ultimate human verities, but recognizes that one is trapped within an endless web of past significations. Text, and by extension culture, is studied best by distancing oneself and watching the play of possibility as one meaning immediately gives way to another. In his later phase, Barthes has dismissed structuralism as half-hearted and has embraced what Donoghue (in a hybrid neologism) calls 'graphireading'. To Barthes, hermeneutic interpretation of a text is inadequate because

This conception of the text (the classical, institutional, and the current conception) is obviously linked to a metaphysics, that of truth (1981: 33).

For, in fact,

Any text is a tissue of past citations. Bits of codes, formulae, rhythmic models, fragments of social languages, etc. pass into the text and are redistributed within it, for there is always language before and around the text.... Epistemologically, the concept of intertext (that is the texts of the previous and surrounding culture) is what brings to the theory of the text the volume of sociality... (ibid.: 39).

Text, in this sense, has two aspects:

The phenotext is 'the verbal phenomenon as it presents itself in the structure of the concrete statement'...whereas the genotext 'sets out the grounds for the logical operations proper to the constitution of the subject of the enunciation'; it is 'the place of structuration of the phenotext'... (ibid.: 38, citing Kristeva 1972: 335–6).

All culture is treated as a set of texts, context merely being the other texts. Behind this surface are the logical rules according to which texts in any system are structured. The structuralist legacy is clear. As we shall see, however, the study of text is not the dispassionate science it often claims to be, but a dank, private orifice into which it is convenient to crawl to ignore the complexities of context.

Granted this definition, Barthes' focus is accordingly on the text not as a fixed entity but as a methodological field. The differences between the 'classical' and

Barthean views can be represented as:

thing → process  
product → productivity  
truth → play

Where Barthes differs from Lévi-Straussian structuralism is in the refusal to step beyond play to ground text in any definite structure (of which play makes a mockery). Language has free play and is not to be rooted in a Kantian view of being reducible to the innate operations of the human mind. The implicit metaphysics of much theory is rejected in favour of metaphor. For

...text can be approached by definitions, but also (and perhaps above all) by metaphors (1981: 35–6).

With the positivist search for truth undermined by metaphor, we are cast free at last on the sea of language.

Perhaps the most extreme critic of 'logocentrism' (the stress on the original, meaningful word or reason behind text) is Derrida. The brunt of his attack is against what he sees as the Western obsession with 'the metaphysics of presence'. This puts primacy on the search for an original truth, reachable by consciousness and subjectivity, an ideal voice speaking behind the web of signification, hinting at what is truly so as being present to a person. We are caught in an endless play between the signifier (words) and the signified (ideas) as we seek the unattainable.

Pure presence or self-proximity is impossible, and therefore we desire it. Giving up this desire, we should engage in the play of presence and absence, play that cannot be comprehended within a metaphysics or an ontology (Donoghue 1981: 161, on Derrida).

To date Nietzsche has offered the most radical critique of being and truth, Heidegger of metaphysics, and Freud of consciousness and identity (Derrida 1972: 250). But these critical discourses are trapped in a kind of circle. For

*There is no sense* in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to attack metaphysics. We have no language—no syntax and no lexicon—which is alien to this history... (ibid.; emphasis in the original).

Anthropology does not, as one might think, offer a way out.

...the ethnologist accepts into his discourse the premises of ethnocentrism at the very moment when he is employed in denouncing them. This necessity is irreducible; it is not a historical contingency (ibid.: 252).

Derrida offers us a Kafkaesque world in which we must shunt around for ever in the prison of our metaphysics. Our attempts to escape require us to use what we are trying to escape from. So we must shuttle back and forth between signifier and signified, constantly being redirected as we search for an answer.

The alternative, it seems, is a despondent world where text and context weave into a closed tissue. Before considering whether the fate of the anthropologist is as glum as Derrida paints it, it is useful to stand back and reflect on the problem from the point of view of a historian such as Foucault. Starting also from our own

philosophical tradition, Foucault points out that it limits the possibilities of knowledge

...by proposing an ideal truth as the law of discourse and an immanent rationality as the principle of their unfolding... (1981: 65).

But this rationality, which underpins the Ricoeurian relation of thought, word and object, and of text and reader

...is only a discourse that has already been held, or rather it is things themselves, and events, which imperceptibly turn themselves into discourse as they unfold the secret of their own *essence* (ibid.: 66; emphasis added).

It may not be language which is the trap but the assumption that there is an essence behind discourse. Derrida tends to presuppose that words can only be used in one way. As Donoghue is at pains to point out, the styles of different authors express their different attitudes to language and its possibilities.<sup>9</sup> There is more than one way to skin a cat—or a text.

What complicates the issue is that different authors have rather different ideas of what it is they are talking about. All react against the structuralist, and ultimately Saussurean, formalism. Derrida questions the superiority which is accorded to concepts (the signified) over signs (signifiers); Barthes focusses on the play of text and intertext. Ricoeur, in particular, points to the preoccupation with signification at the expense of the far more complex relation of predication which operates at the level of the sentence as the unit of discourse and text. For Foucault, however, discourse is not at the 'level' of speech (*parole*) at all.

A statement belongs to a discursive formation as a sentence belongs to a text, and a proposition to a deductive whole. But whereas the regularity of a sentence is defined by the laws of a language (*langue*), and that of a proposition by the laws of logic, the regularity of statements is defined by the discursive formation itself (1972: 116).

Against Ricoeur, Foucault sees discourse as not frozen into text,

...a mere intersection of things and words...a slender surface of contact, or confrontation, between a reality and a language (*langue*), the intrication of a lexicon and an experience... (ibid.: 48).

It is an empirically identifiable domain between language and speech. Against Derrida, Foucault argues that discourse

...is not an ideal, timeless form that also possesses a history...it is, from beginning to end, historical—a fragment of history, a unity and a discontinuity in history itself, posing the problem of its own limits, its divisions, its transformations... (ibid.: 117).

Discursive formations frame the ways in which knowledge, language, texts and so forth can be understood in any historical period. Discourse is not stable. It is transformed by virtue of a complex play between its contradictions and internal logic on the one hand, and processes of power on the other, which are in turn rephrased in the transformation.

9. 'Truth, far from being a solemn and severe master, is a docile and obedient servant' (Goodman 1978: 18). As, on at least one reading, language gains meaning by reference to truth, I find it interesting to see how Goodman's observation looks if one substitutes 'language' for 'truth'.

Foucault is concerned not to lose sight of the contextual wood for the textual trees. In his later works especially, he stresses the conditions of discourse and the relation of discursive freedom and power. On this overview, *pace* Derrida,

Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it (1978: 101).

Among the ways in which discourse is tamed and its kaleidoscopic possibilities held in check are the search for the 'truth' behind the words (often identified with the author's intention), and the exclusion of some discourses as the product of madness, and of others as being improper (sexuality or violence, for instance), sacred, esoteric, etc. Finally, there are internal procedures which serve to classify, order and so limit what is admissible, such as the 'discipline' imposed on what is acceptable in academic discourse at any time (1981: 56). Discourse is not our prison. Rather

We must conceive discourse as a violence which we do to things, or in any case as a practice which we impose on them; and it is in this practice that the events of discourse find their regularity (ibid.: 67).

Instead of depending on terms like signification, originality, unity and creation, we can locate the reality of discourse as an epistemological entity by substituting respectively: condition of possibility, regularity, series (sequentiality) and event (ibid.: 67–8). The key analytical concepts are

...no longer those of consciousness and continuity (with their correlative problems of freedom and causality), nor any longer those of sign and structure. They are those of the event and the series, along with the play of the notions which are linked to them: regularity, dimensions of chance (*aléa*), discontinuity, dependence, transformation... (ibid.: 68).

Ricoeur and Foucault both use the notions of discourse and text, but they understand quite different things by them.

To pull the strands together: what progress, if any, has been made in clarifying what are text and context? To Foucault, Derrida is trapped in the Saussurean view of language and the metaphysics of truth and presence he himself has gone to such lengths to condemn. Ricoeur's escape from semiotics into semantics ends up equally in reifying, at times deifying, text with its link to truth through a constancy in human nature, which ignores history and cultural difference—in short, context. Even the desire in which Barthes and Derrida wish to ground discourse is itself historically constituted—a point Girard has made against a Freudian fundamentalism by pointing out that desire itself is learned by imitation (1977; 1978). One is reminded at this stage of Collingwood's shift from the tradition of Dilthey and Croce he shared with Ricoeur to a historicism in which text must be interpreted in its historical context (1946). Context, as perspective, is critical to Collingwood in another way. A narrow framework of space and time are typical of science and arguably a sense of the reality of text. In a broad frame the opposition of text and reader, or culture and the individual, is

transformed so that society and the individual no longer appear as ontological entities, but are seen to be constituted together, mutually defined, and changing (Collingwood 1945; see also Rorty 1976). A narrow frame stresses the apparent reality of that dangerous Durkheimian dichotomy of individual and society. The difference between epireading and graphireading boils down to which one puts first. It is rather like a child at breakfast wondering whether to open his boiled egg at the pointed end, or turn it upside down and crack the base.

A remark might be made in passing on metaphysics. Derrida has commented on the limitations of an anthropology which exports its own metaphysics. As we have seen, these include culturally specific notions of being (presence), rationality and truth. How unavoidable are these constraints, so we cannot but view other cultures in our own terms? There is a historical approach—represented here by Collingwood and Foucault—which argues for the possibility of distancing and reflexivity (of a kind quite different from the phenomenologists' man thinking about his own origins and nature). It is an empirical question how far other cultures have different metaphysical schemes. The anthropologist's parallel to the problem of historical understanding is the grossly underestimated one of translation. There is, however, no ground for thinking we can never escape the metaphor of the prison-house of our own ideas. Only in the short term do these seem stable. After all, one of the few certainties is that our ideas change, in part as we reflect on our discourse. Is there any reason they cannot change by reflecting on the discourse of others?

Oddly enough, we can conclude quickly. As early as 1940 Evans-Pritchard noted that anthropology deals in crude concepts which denote relationships. Any advance must include 'relations between these relations' (1940: 266). Text, let alone context, is not an object but sets of relations, the relationships between which are complex. The weakness of semantic theories of implicature is in managing to define relevant context, be it linguistic, social or interactional. On one side the subject under discussion constrains the likely range of what is pertinent. Against this, differences in roles, interest, power and perspective make the potential contexts different for those involved. Text provides apparent continuity; context the possibility of difference. The claim that there is a truth, in text or whatever, implies a kind of essentialism of great convenience to political élites. So a stress on text, as against context, involves questions of power and preference. The alternative does not entail social life collapsing into a nominalist nightmare, because for most purposes rough expectations exist of what are the 'normal' (see Cavell 1969) kinds of relationships likely to be brought into play. Situations may, however, always yield new possibilities as they are viewed from fresh or unusual perspectives 'in a new context'. This possible creativity and openness make context negotiable. Spheres traditionally as different as politics, religion or art may become the field for, or means to, the play of different views. To define context substantively is to ignore the human imagination.

How does this discussion bear on the question of levels? Dumont's insight was that, in India, the opposition between ideas and institutions of power and of ritual purity are encompassed at a higher logical level, or position in a

classificatory hierarchy, by purity as a core concept. The difficulty of dual classifications, he suggests, is that they ignore possible asymmetry between members of a class, and also the wider hierarchical context of classification (Dumont 1979).

What has context, as understood here, to do with levels? For a start, encompassing is a contextualizing move. It seeks to structure material in a hierarchical classification, so that a species at one level may be also the classifying genus at another. This presupposes that reality has levels, or that cultures work by hierarchical taxonomy, or that language contains logical levels. The first is rankly essentialist and overlooks the role of the observer. The second raises questions about whether taxonomies are necessarily hierarchical (Conklin 1964; Needham 1975), whether a culture can have only one taxonomic principle at work, and whether all cultures share identical principles. The last involves a dubious view of language and ontology (see Russell 1903; Wilden 1980: 117–24; cf. Gödel 1965). We must also be careful as to exactly what is involved in that loose notion 'opposition'. Croce criticized Hegel for confusing what is opposite and what is distinct (1915). Ideas which are logically opposite can be synthesized; ideas which are distinct cannot be assimilated to the same scheme. Before purity can encompass power we require evidence that they are opposite, not just distinct. So it is one thing for Dumont to argue that hierarchical taxonomy is empirically evident in Indian ideas of caste—or that purity and power are for some reason of the same logical order in India—and quite another to argue that confusions or contradictions can be resolved in any culture in these ways without begging the question (cf. Dumont 1979).

Foucault's point is that classifying is a notorious means for controlling discourse and knowledge. So is classificatory encompassing an objective process dealing with fixed facts? Or is it a possibility, or a strategy, permitted by the system? Classification is a special kind of contextualizing move, for it enunciates which are the essential features and how they are related. So it is a strategic, indeed political, interpretation of discourse. One can see why the Brahmanical élite should espouse such a view. Are we to assume that all groups agree and that there is no other possible perspective? Ethnographic evidence suggests there are, in fact, others (Derrett 1976; Inden forthcoming). On broader theoretical grounds, it is unlikely that there is only one possible classification. As Quine has argued, any theory is under-determined by the facts, which may support several alternative interpretations (1960). A classification is not so much a description or structure as an assertion or challenge, and part of the argument about, and attempt to legitimate, power. Just like the promotion of text, the focus on hierarchical taxonomies involves an attempt at closure, by virtue of unrecognized metaphors—here, of encompassing and levels. Reality does not come in tiers, nor is it neatly packaged. Different groups may believe, or choose to argue, that it does. But then again others may not.

To conclude, I have suggested that the difficulties in formulating a theory of context are linked to certain predilections in Western thought. These include what have been called 'the metaphysics of truth', or 'of presence', by which relationships become viewed as pseudo-objects, and as the observers', or indeed

participants', relationships to what they see de-emphasised and translated into 'objective' facts in the world. The concomitant danger is of spawning spuriously substantive dichotomies in which overlapping possibilities ('both/and') become exclusive ('either/or'). The consequence is that text and context are not part of a connected tissue, but opposed, and skewed so that text attains a reality at the expense of context. Similar remarks might be made of the not unrelated opposition of individual and society. Looking for the true 'essence' of something disguises the extent to which knowledge is built up from a plurality of perspectives (a point made by Burke about irony, 1969). What is conveniently dismissed is the play of the imagination (see also Donoghue 1981: 171–2, on Barthes). Among the more powerful ploys of essentialism is a stress on order and classification, whether by seeking to define context, or by classifying reality in some determinate way. Society is not a thing, nor a language, nor a text, nor yet a discourse. These are metaphors which may be useful in looking at a problem for a particular purpose. To treat metaphors as substantive is one of the sins Dante forgot to include in his vision of hell. Those who do so in the end run the risk of being mugged by their own metaphors. One wonders if Jean Genet might not have approved their fate.

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