

Reply to Rockmore
Ilya Kasavin, Russian Academy of Sciences

I appreciate very much the comments Tom Rockmore provided on my paper, putting its main problem into a historical/philosophical context. I will address three claims Rockmore makes that seem not entirely correct in describing my position. Hopefully, my examination will help make the rest of my reply more transparent.

Rockmore (2013) asserts:

1. "I agree with Kasavin that context is indeed problematic" (11).
2. "Kasavin depicts philosophy as relying on science, hence as interdisciplinary" (8).
3. "... [H]e claims that the result, or so-called discourse, is not bounded, hence is not contextual in principle" (9).

Clarifications

Replying to (1), my intention was not to problematize context as it is, but to confront the oversimplified concept of context and its naïve epistemological application. For instance, the context of science is *the whole scope* of its current sociality and its cultural history — a kind of independent reality accompanying science during its temporal existence. It is usually conceptualized as *a limited scope* of socio-cultural phenomena that can be analyzed empirically by sociologists, historians, psychologists, anthropologists etc. So, philosophically speaking, science exists in, and is essentially determined by, context. But, interdisciplinarily speaking, a part of science is always partially determined by a part of context. A philosophical view of science can hardly replace an interdisciplinary one and vice versa. They are complementary.

My negation of (2) follows from my above comments. Philosophy *does not* rely on science in the sense that philosophical problems can be solved by scientific means. Philosophy *does* rely on science to provide empirical material for philosophical analysis and offer a counterpart in an exchange of views. An interdisciplinary epistemology means epistemology that takes seriously scientific facts and carries on a dialogue with science (and with other cognitive practices as well), rather than epistemology naturalized and reduced to various concrete sciences.

Evidently I cannot accept (3) as far as any discourse, i.e., vivid cognitive process, non-stop language game, or speech is regarded only in terms of, and in interrelation to, context as relatively stable cognitive results laying outside the research focus and taken for granted (e.g., presuppositions, natural attitudes, spheres of evidence). Discourse is also opposed to text. Text is a system of knowledge linguistically constituted, relatively finished and expressing, therefore, a certain intellectual culture. I use the term

“discourse” to dub a process of scientific discovery as opposed to justification; philosophical inquiry or reflexion as contrasted to a philosophical system.

Underdetermination

I insist on a slightly different understanding, than Rockmore’s, of the underdetermination principle as an interdisciplinary methodological tool. If a theory is underdetermined by facts, it means neither an independence from facts nor determination by them. It means solely that the isomorphism between an isolated factual, and an isolated theoretical, statement can hardly be established by logical or empirical means. The similar conclusion is true for the relation between knowledge claims and context elements. No knowledge claim can be formulated and understood without context, for context provides meaning. But the attribution of every singular meaning to the particular sentence or word also proceeds into the context. Every meaning is connected to another one and all of them build a semantic net that produce and disseminate meanings within a linguistic context as a whole. At the same time the latter, as a semantic unit, is situated within a broader socio-cultural context — a net of meanings that are mostly vaguely formulated and defined though highly relevant in regard to the human mind, activity and communication.

“Underdetermination” means the complexity of determination as it concerns the process of knowing. A typology of contexts can be constructed and the forms of their determination can be singled out. The linguistic context being determined by the cultural context, though without immediate influence of the social one, still prescribes rather strongly the syntax and semantics of utterances. The social context imposes certain limitations upon the cultural context and introduces meanings into it, albeit the latter keeps its relative independence. So, the social context fundamentally influences language and mind through cultural mediation, while the cultural impact upon social and linguistic behavior takes place in a direct, but soft, manner.

Explanatory value of context

An historical reconstruction of an epistemic situation may support this point regarding the explanatory value of context. For instance, there are cases in which different epistemic agents work in the area and achieve closely related results. Thus, Rainer Maria Rilke, Marina Zvetaeva and Boris Pasternak wrote poems on Maria Magdalena correspondingly in 1907, 1926 and 1949. Keeping close friendships with one another until the death of Rilke (1926), the poets evidently resembled their mutual relations in their lyrics and provided a common thematic field. Roughly speaking, we may say that the linguistic context provides the peculiarity of Rilke’s verse in comparison with two Russian poems and the style similarity of the latter. The romantic and realist attitudes (cultural context) were responsible for the difference of Magdalena’s image in Zvetaeva and Pasternak. And the time bias between Zvetaeva’s and Pasternak’s verses is due to the social circumstances of their lives. Joseph Brodsky (1992) himself, who underlines the impact of linguistic context in this situation, plays a role in the cultural context, which actualizes and legitimizes the significance of the poetical dialogue in question by transforming the latter into a social fact.

The parallel discovery of non-Euclidean geometry by Karl Gauss (1818, unpublished), Nikolai Lobachevski (1829) and János Bolyai (1832) has similar features. These three mathematicians shared the linguistic context of German mathematics (Martin Bartels taught both Gauss and Lobachevski, and Bolyai, whose father was an old friend of Gauss, studied in Vienna). An adherence to the speculative (non-positivist) culture of thought was at those times typical for the university circles standing under German influence (including the Habsburg and the Russian Empires). Insofar as geometry based on another version of the fifth Euclidean postulate was regarded as disconnected from the real qualities of space, i.e., "imaginative", it could be developed only within the speculative *cultural context* (German idealism, German romanticism etc.). But it is solely the *social context* that explains why the mathematicians behave themselves differently. The making of a new disciplinary matrix of university teachers in Germany, after Napoleon's defeat, made scholars (warring above all about their noble patron's support) rather careful and conservative. Gauss left his results in non-Euclidean geometry unpublished — clarifying his position only in private correspondence. Bolyai, in turn, inspired by nationalist feelings against Turkish invaders and Habsburgs, risked expressing his originality even appearing a heretic. The same happened with Lobachevski, a Russian scholar who tried to promote his position confronting with the dominance of the invited German professors. And yet the low level of academic freedom did not allow both the Russian and the Hungarian to succeed in their enterprise and to justify their discovery within their scientific community.

Freedom and Determination

The idea of freedom certainly deserves much more attention, especially in terms of the relation between the process of knowing and its context, between philosophical reflexion and its interdisciplinary surroundings. Rockmore makes the hard to reject claim: "I believe we are never wholly free, nor ever wholly determined" (11). I would take a risk of endorsing another and positively formulated thesis. My own position runs as follows: we are doomed to be completely free and at the same time wholly determined.

We are completely free because of the human ability and necessity *to choose* between alternatives whatever the given situation. And we are wholly determined because the quantity of alternatives is *limited* at a given moment. Every alternative is chosen not arbitrarily, but on *certain grounds* — even if the arbitrary choice is declared. We can follow an intellectual tradition or break with it, but in both cases certain reasons can be discovered *post hoc* to demonstrate either adaptivity and conformism, or creativity and independence of our choice. Many contexts allow interpreting our actions in this or that manner and a great many of interpretations can be rationally justified. Yet, no one can be regarded as inevitable as it concerns our choice.

A certain message for scientists follows from our considerations. Scientists used to feel themselves heavily bounded by "the stubborn facts" that symbolize, for them, an independent reality. At the same time, they often lack the broader perspective paying nearly no attention to the social and cultural contexts of their research. And it is exactly

the latter that constitutes the reality of their existence. Scientists try to work *as if* they are immortal, impassionate and disinterested beings who praise rationality and reduce subjectivity. This attitude is indeed a heroic, but all heroes are doomed to a tragic destiny. Scientists, pretending to be free by ignoring the context, indulge in taking it for granted with all naïve illusions and banal prejudices. The idea of underdetermination of knowledge by context is, above all, a philosophical appeal to scientists that is seemingly more normative than descriptive. It requires establishing the proper relations to the context by scrutinizing its cognitive relevance here and now. Doesn't this mean a significance of context that allows the knowing agent achieving freedom from the context only through the acknowledgement of another one?

Contact details: itkasavin@gmail.com

References

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