

15. Context and Content

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Explicitly represented human purposes emerge from more primitive levels of purpose and then submerge again, for their final phases are implemented at these more primitive levels. Similarly, conventional language signs emerge from natural signs and never break entirely free of them.

— Ruth Millikan (2004, 103)

The semiotic point of view is the perspective that results from the sustained attempt to live reflectively with and follow out the consequences of one simple realization: the whole of our experience, from its most primitive origins in sensation to its most refined achievements of understanding, is a network or web of sign relations.

— Deely (1990, Chapter 2)

Scriptures and textures

A message or sign made up of interwoven parts may be called a *text*. It may also be part of a larger (more complete) text, called its *context*. If any signs are connected, no matter how, the resulting system constitutes one sign. Every context is a sign, a holarchy of texts.

A text is information stored through time. The stratigraphy of rocks, layers of pollen in a swamp, the outward expanding circles in the trunk of a tree, can be seen as texts. The calligraphy of rivers winding back and forth over the land leaving layer upon layer of traces of previous riverbeds is text. The layers of history of language become a text of language itself.

— Gary Snyder (1990, 66)

The *legibility* of all these texts is the intelligibility of the natural world. You can read about it in the evolutionary history of bodymind and community. Meanwhile your current situation, your life, is context to your reading of this essay, as the author's life was the context of its writing. The biosphere, the earth community, is context to every individual life on this planet – a fact which ought to inform our musing about the meaning of our lives. There is no meaning without context.

The paradigm/prototype of *context* is the larger body of text in which the focal text is embedded, but the concept can easily include any circumstances which affect the reading of the text, including internal states of the reader (see e.g. Sebeok 2001a, 125). And beyond 'states,' it may include what Gendlin (1992a) calls the *situation*, the *crossing* of many implicit action-paths: 'a context is a mesh of implicitly functioning sequences' (Gendlin 1998, 7A.o.2). The *body* in which we find a 'felt sense' is not bounded by its skin; it forms a single system with its environment.

Intent and content

A text is contained in its context as a part is contained in the whole. But the *matter* of a message, its 'content,' is not contained in that way. It emerges from semiosis through the triadic relation of sign, object and interpretant. What emerges depends on the circumstances within which the act of 'reading' or meaning is situated. The circumstances of a typical spoken sentence, for instance, include not only the dialogue or discourse in which it is embedded, but also the habits and intentions of the utterer and the interpreter, the *commens* they share, and the object or objects of

their joint attention. Symbols cannot *contain* those objects, which can only be found by *collateral observation*; but symbols can help us find them by *denoting* them. As Peirce remarked, 'denotation essentially takes a part for its whole' (EP2:322): it directs us to focus on some part of the universe as the text for the time being.

Pronouns are a primary linguistic means of directing attention.

Pronouns are words whose whole object is to indicate what kind of collateral observation must be made in order to determine the significance of some other part of the sentence. "Which" directs us to seek the *quaesitum* in the previous context; the personal pronouns to observe who is the speaker, who the hearer, etc. The demonstrative pronouns usually direct this sort of observation to the circumstances of the utterance (perhaps to the way a finger points) rather than to the words.

— Peirce, EP2:406

Pronouns, and to a lesser extent other words, thus work in concert with context to provide the indexical function of an utterance. In the case of a transmission, there is some difference between the contexts of sender and receiver. 'Message material, or information, comes out of a context into a context' (Bateson 1972, 396). Not only the dialogue but also the external 'circumstances of the utterance' constitute the context out of which the content or meaning emerges; and the interpreting system in its own situation is the context into which the content comes as information.

Only in context can meaning be understood, and context is, initially, supplied by one's own perceptual world and memory. Furthermore, understanding always includes misunderstanding, and if one does not add on presuppositions, the component of misunderstanding becomes so great that the continuation of communication becomes improbable.

— Luhmann 1995, 158

Those 'presuppositions' constitute much of the 'inner world' of the interpreter, and of the *commens* hopefully shared with the utterer.

This context into which information comes is itself a living and growing symbol. But the context out of which the material or information comes is where we look for the *object* of our attention, which is also the real object of the current sign.

Where the sign is only a part of another sign, so that there is a context, it is in that context that the *requaesitum* is likely, in part at least, to be found; though it is not absolutely necessary that it should be found in any part of the sign.

This *requaesitum* I term the *Object* of the sign;— the *immediate* object, if it be the idea which the sign is built upon, the *real* object, if it be that real thing or circumstance upon which that idea is founded, as on bedrock.

— Peirce, EP2:407

The part of the sign which points to the ‘real’ (or ‘dynamic’) Object, by virtue of some actual connection with it, is indexical. In a proposition this part is called the *subject*, which refers to ‘the environment common to speaker and auditor, which is an index of what the speaker is talking about’ (Peirce, BD ‘Universal’). That environment might be called the *external context* of the sign. The other part of a proposition, its *predicate*, is the part that *signifies*, or informs us *about* the subject, by virtue of its *intrinsic* meaning, its role in the meaning space or *Innenwelt* of the system doing the meaning. While pronouns are mainly indexical, and so are ‘proper nouns’ which name individuals, *common* nouns generally *signify* intrinsically (iconically). Predicates of propositions are made of terms which add *depth* to the *breadth* of the proposition, and thus *signify* something about what its subject denotes.

Now a sign is something which functions triadically. ... any common noun, whether substantive or adjective, on the one hand signifies something and on the other hand names something else. All modern logicians have made much of this distinction; and many of them have pointed out that the term of its very essence signifies what it does, while that which it

is intended to name must be ascertained not from the term itself but by observation of the context or other attendant circumstances of its utterance. But we need not restrict the proposition to nouns. It may be generalized, so as to be true of any sign whatsoever.

— EP2:429

The *interpretant* of a sign, as distinguished from its object, 'is all that is explicit in the sign itself apart from its context and circumstances of utterance.... The interpretant of a proposition is its predicate; its object is the things denoted by its subject or subjects (including its grammatical objects, direct and indirect, etc.)' (CP 5.473). A proposition is *true* when its predicate really applies to the object(s) denoted by its subject(s). But a proposition can only be true in its context, because it can only mean what it *now* means in *this* context.

In communication, the utterer's thought-process is immediate context of the utterance, and the interpreter's thought-process is immediate context of the interpretant. But Thought itself is organized holarchically and is ultimately context of both utterer and interpreter. The more intimate and immediate context of a semiotic event is *the time* of occurrence, in Peircean terms an 'actual fragment of what exists and actually happens,' a slice of the happening universe which also includes the existent persons influenced by, or involved in, this actual *Occurrence*. This dynamic context serves as the dynamic (external) object of the sign abstracted from it which we call a *fact*, and which has the structure of a proposition or *dicisign*. The difference between *Fact* and *Occurrence* and is as crucial to semiosis as the difference between *Sign* and *Object*, as Peirce explains:

If from the Universe of the Actual we cut out in thought all that, between two instances of time, influences or involves in any considerable degree certain Existent Persons and Things, this Actual fragment of what exists and actually happens, so cut out, I call an Actual Occurrence[,] which Thought analyzes into Things and Happenings. It is necessarily Real; but it can never be known or even imagined in all its infinite detail. A Fact,

on the other hand[,] is so much of the Real Universe as can be represented in a Proposition, and instead of being, like an Occurrence, a slice of the Universe, it is rather to be compared to a chemical principle extracted therefrom by the power of Thought; and though it is, or may be, Real, yet, in its Real Existence, it is inseparably combined with an infinite swarm of circumstances, which make no part of the Fact itself. It is impossible to thread our way through the Logical intricacies of Being unless we keep these two things, the Occurrence, and the Real Fact, separate in our Thoughts.

— Peirce, MS 647 (“Definition”, 5th draught, 16-18 Feb. 1910), p. 8-11) [Stjernfelt 2014, 74; also quoted by Rosenthal 1994, 4]

The ‘infinite swarm of circumstances’ entangled with the Fact might thus be called the *real context* of the Fact emerging from the Occurrence. The ‘swarm’ is ‘infinite’ because the context of experience is continuous with its content, and the Fact is always qualified by this context.

... continuity governs the whole domain of experience in every element of it. Accordingly, every proposition, except so far as it relates to an unattainable limit of experience (which I call the Absolute), is to be taken with an indefinite qualification; for a proposition which has no relation whatever to experience is devoid of all meaning.

— EP2:1 (1893)

Mattering

For the reader in search of meaning, the *content* of a text is what *matters*; earlier in the history of the English language, it used to be called the ‘matter’ of a text or discourse. The etymology and history of the words ‘matter’ and ‘material’ are thus clues to the nature of *content*. Their single root is the Latin *materia*, which referred to

building material, timber, hence stuff of which a thing is made, subject of discourse or consideration, also (in philosophical use) “matter” in contradistinction to “mind” or to “form.”

— OED

So even in Latin, several senses can be distinguished, all of which persist in English to some degree.

The root sense of it all, it seems to me, is ‘stuff of which a thing is made.’ When we apply this concept to the physical realm, its reference is relative to a scalar hierarchy. The ‘material’ of which a dress is made is called that from a human-scale point of view; if we zoom in on a more microscopic scale, then the ‘material’ (cloth) is seen to be made of another ‘stuff,’ some kind of fiber; so on that finer scale, the fiber is material and the cloth is form. But the fiber itself is made of molecules – and so on. Likewise, a human body is made of flesh and blood and bone; these in turn are made of cells; cells made of molecules; molecules are made of atoms/ions; we can continue the analysis down to a level so microscopic that we can no longer perceive it because our perceptual systems are too coarse-grained. (In physics, the current limit of microscopy is the Planck length, and any smaller entities – strings and such – are strictly theoretical, i.e. abstract and unobservable.) As we zoom back out toward human scale, we move progressively from the abstract to the ‘concrete,’ and whatever appears as ‘form’ at one level is ‘matter’ at the next level up. At any given level, we see the ‘matter’ or ‘stuff’ of something as essentially formless; the *form* of the entity observed is bestowed by what Aristotle called its ‘formal cause.’

Our concept of physical ‘stuff’ easily transfers to (or blends with) a concept of mental ‘stuff.’ The connection is so natural that it does not strike us as a metaphor. In fact, this mental ‘stuff’ was the dominant sense of the words ‘matter’ and ‘material’ in English, at least until Newton’s time. In Shakespeare’s ‘Hamlet,’ for instance, the word ‘matter’ occurs 29 times, and not once in relation to anything physical. The nearest equivalent term for this mental ‘matter’ nowadays would be ‘content.’ Here’s a typical bit of dialog between Hamlet and Polonius:

Pol. What do you read, my lord?

Ham. Words, words, words.

Pol. What is the matter, my lord?

Ham. Between who?

Pol. I mean, the matter that you read, my lord.

We still use the question ‘What’s the matter?’ to put a negative spin on the presence of *significant content* in a dialog, relationship or situation. And, switching to the verb, we still say that something ‘matters’ when it carries significance. ‘Matters’ (as in ‘political matters’) are generally topics or ‘subject matter.’ In law, ‘material’ (as adjective) often means relevant or important to the case. Thus you could say (harking back to Chapter 4) that the body is the material witness in the court of wisdom.

But with the exception of certain limited contexts (such as performance artists talking about their ‘material’), we don’t use the matter/material terms in reference to mental content as much as our ancestors did. I think that’s because these terms have been attracted to a physical sense – one which is somewhat different from the root sense outlined above. I call this new sense ‘Newtonian matter’ because it is connected with Newtonian physics. This sense in turn has attracted (as if by gravity!) the philosophical sense of the term ‘materialism’ toward a view of the physical realm which is peculiarly Newtonian.

Newtonian or N-matter is absolute rather than relative ‘stuff.’ Its particles, solid and pointlike, are the ultimate constituents of the universe; when quantified as ‘mass,’ its movements (powered by ‘energy’) account for all processes. It never resolves into form when we look more closely at it, but rather seems to recede, or even disappear, as we zoom in to microscopic levels. Thus it came as a revelation when 20th-century physics arrived at a model of the atom which was ‘mostly empty space.’ N-matter is also permanent, and here the apocalyptic revelation was Einstein’s insight that mass could be converted into energy (and vice versa).

Being permanent, N-matter is unaffected by the forms it can take: in other words it is inert, devoid of life. Indeed, for the true believer in N-matter, life exists only as a temporary (and therefore illusory) dance that lumps of matter do on their way from dust to dust. This is the essence of the mechanistic view that *the parts are more real than the whole*, or (as reductionism) that all qualities of

the whole are explained by the properties or habits of its parts – that ‘what goes on at the lowest level must account for what goes on at all higher levels’; the contrasting systems view is ‘that autonomous processes are at work at the various levels of biological organization, from genes to organisms to populations’ (Depew and Weber 1995, 364-5).

According to the N-materialist, experience, consciousness and mind are all imaginary. And then there’s Cartesian materialism, which holds that all these things are real *because* they are made of a different (non-material) substance as real as, but entirely distinct from, N-matter. But the current scientific view, as I understand it, is that Newtonian matter itself is a figment of the imagination: in reality it’s form all the way down, appearing as ‘matter’ only when the form is too small to see at a given level of resolution. There are no ‘N-materialists’ among those well acquainted with current physics. In philosophical discourse nowadays, ‘materialism’ is used mostly in one of two ways: either to denigrate people (by accusing them of being N-materialists), or to name a metaphysical position opposed to Cartesian dualism. The latter is what scientists and philosophers usually mean when they call themselves ‘materialists.’

If we can recover the mental senses of the ‘material,’ we could then say that life is the *matter* of experience, and experience the *matter* of meaning, while its *form* is the sign, or text. Polyversity is one implication of this, as genuine *matter* in the sense of *meaning* can always be expressed in more than one way. This is why Hamlet, trying to convince his mother of his sanity, says

Bring me to the test,
And I the matter will reword; which madness
Would gambol from.

Moving and growing

Action-perception cycles are the forms of the generic meaning cycle that most directly affect movement in real time, for any organism. When a percept acts as a sign, the current dynamic of the interpreting habit-system is the context of the *interpretant* sign

within the nervous system that more directly guides bodily movement. Reiteration of these action-perception cycles leads to the development of habit-systems, which grow more 'articulate' as each real-time movement is fine-tuned to the actual environment of the guidance system. A path is made by walking it.

Walking is not only a prototypical activity of the human bodymind but also 'a particularly instructive entry into a dynamic theory of behavior and development,' as Thelen and Smith explain:

Movement is the final common pathway for all human activity. Functional movement is the melding of the mind and the body and all the components thereof. But equally compelling is the complete and intimate relation between the organism and the physical and informational qualities of the world. The animal must sense, adapt to, and integrate the force and informational fields that surround it in order to move effectively and efficiently. There is no such thing as a 'pure' or decontextualized walker. The essence of walking is only in its construction during its execution. Later, we make this claim for all mental activities.

— Thelen and Smith (1994, 77)

Mental activities (such as walking and thinking) are both semiotic and systemic. 'The system must be, to some degree, indeterminate in order to be sculpted by the dynamic movement context, which includes not only internal and external forces but changes in the goals and intentions of the mover' (Thelen and Smith 1994, 77). The system which loses its indeterminacy, its flexibility, will be unable to cope with changes in the environment. Yet its guidance system must be determinate enough to support habitual responses to typical situations, thus saving its energy and attention for dealing with unexpected changes. Habits must be attractors in behavior space, not fixed patterns or programs. The tension between habit and immediacy, between generic and current contexts of behavior, generates *intelligence*. The development of intelligence is continuous, from the infant learning to coordinate its movements, to the child learning the meanings of words, to the furthest reaches of scientific inquiry.

Global structure adapts to the local context because it is manifestation of both the intrinsic dynamics of the system and the local details of the here and now.... Intelligence means the ability to adapt, to fit behavior and cognition to the changing context. A smart system seems unlikely to ever do exactly the same thing twice. Rather, a smart system would shift its behavior slightly to fit the nuances of the particular context or would shift radically—jump to an all-new state—if the situation demanded it. Our dynamic system is inherently smart. Because its activity is *always* dependent on the here and now, the just-previous activity, and the history of the system as a whole, it will always incorporate—always bend—to the demands of both history and immediate experience. ... Such a system could move in and out of *almost* stable states of dramatically different kinds with small amounts of energy—with small forces. The older child's interpretation of novel words in contexts appears to be such a system.

— Thelen and Smith (1994, 244)

This helps to explain how *symbols grow* as dynamic systems. As we saw in Chapter 10, the informational content of a symbol can grow by becoming either broader or deeper. An increase of breadth, or extension, results from learning of previously unknown or unrecognized things to which a concept applies, without any change in what the concept signifies. An increase of depth or intension, on the other hand, is 'an increase of definiteness of the conceptions' applied to things already known (Peirce, CP 2.422n, 1893). In this kind of growth, the symbol gains specificity without losing generality.

In the breadth dimension, the context of a sign is continuous with its *object*. Visual space, for instance, is normally continuous although we can only focus on a small part of it; and the same applies to attentional space. In the depth dimension, on the other hand, the context of a sign is continuous with its *interpreter*, considered as a semiotic system.

The systems we inhabit, and the semiotic processes informing

them, include cultural and biological (as well as physical) dimensions. The biosphere and semiosphere are mutually inclusive: human knowledge of the natural world is part of the human *Lebenswelt*, which in turn is part of the natural world. Insofar as it is well informed, the whole human mind takes the whole planet as its body. Each member of that body has a stake in the integrity of the system, being defined by its role therein; yet the health of the system also depends on the integrity of its individual members. Even though any given member may be redundant in principle, only autonomous persons bearing witness authentically to their experience can actually *inform* the community. In a public symbolic system the truth of any utterance depends intimately on its authenticity, and ultimately on the progress of public inquiry toward its end, its final attractor, the Whole Truth. Likewise the final attractor of Practice – its *entelechy*, as Peirce (following Aristotle) called it – would be an unbroken continuity of fully informed habitation, which is necessarily *interhabitation*.

Interhabitation is the structural coupling of human habits with their living context (the biosphere), guided by mutual interaction and communication between members (instances, manifestations) of the global human bodymind. Any text, message or sign capable of effecting a real change in human habitation (by representing objects of human attention to that bodymind) is genuine *information* in the Peircean sense. Cognitive, biological and physical sciences, along with communication and information technologies, can contribute to this – to the self-organization and self-control of intelligent life on earth – by recognizing their semiotic context and continuing their development accordingly.

Of course, information does not have to grow to be significant. Sometimes the main content of a message is connectivity between community members. Humans often use speech for this purpose instinctively, just as other primates use ‘grooming’ to affirm the bonding between them. Sapir called this the ‘caressing or reassuring quality of speech’ (1949, 17-18). But the will to learn, to break out of the cognitive egg and leave the reassuring nest, is equally instinctive.

To construe is to construct

Theories of communication often refer to the 'content' of a message as being 'conveyed' from a sender to a receiver, but this model can be misleading when applied to communication between living systems. Organically speaking, a message arrives as a *prompt* for the interpretation process, not as a vehicle carrying a ready-made meaning. Where symbols are involved, their meanings cannot be sent or received as messages can; they must be 'constructed,' or *formed*, in the interaction between experiencing and symbols, or between the indexical and the iconic. The receiver's construction (reading, interpretation, decoding,) process both reveals and conceals the *intent* of the utterance or message. Such a construction process cannot be explicitly encoded, for the same reason that DNA does not contain the key to its own interpretation: 'construction' *is* coding, but certainly not in the sense of encryption or deciphering.

It takes more than ears to hear. How do we manage to construct meaning from the tumbling torrent of sound, sight and sign that comes hurtling at us? The feat is astonishing if we suppose that meaning is assembled from scratch. But if we think of language as a device for *modulating our current orientation* toward the world, or even more succinctly as modulating the flow of *intent*, the feat becomes a little more comprehensible.

To read a sign, to determine its meaning, is to find a niche in meaning space for the sign to occupy. But in the short time it takes to commit an act of meaning, mental focus is limited; we never have the whole of a symbolic meaning space 'in mind' at the moment. If we're using language, we 'construct' a temporary mental space on the fly. In the words of Mark Turner (1991, 206), 'expressions do not mean; they are prompts for us to construct meanings by working with processes we already know.' Gilles Fauconnier elaborates on the process:

In order for thinking and communicating to take place, elaborate constructions must occur ... Expressions of language do not in themselves represent or code such constructions – the complexity of the construction is such that the coding, even if it were at all possible, would take very large amounts of time and be

extremely inefficient. Instead, languages are designed, very elegantly it would seem, to prompt us into making the constructions appropriate for a given context with a minimum of grammatical structure.

— Fauconnier (1994, xviii)

Polyversity raises one of its cloudy heads here, as this ‘construction’ process often involves what Fauconnier and Turner call *conceptual blending*. “The reason language can prompt for blends that result in the same word’s being used to pick out different meanings is that language does not represent meaning directly; instead, it systematically prompts the construction of meaning’ (Fauconnier and Turner 2002, 142).

The cognitive operation of conceptual blending, with its mechanisms of selective projection and elaboration, is not restricted to linguistic examples. But a mind that can do blending and that also knows language will inevitably develop meanings for words through blending.... “Polysemy” – the fact that a single word seems to have “many meanings” – is a very common phenomenon, a standard by-product of conceptual blending, but noticed in only a fraction of cases.

— Fauconnier and Turner (2002, 143)

‘Construction’ (like ‘coding’) is a term that is easily misread, because when we construct things deliberately (consciously, formally, explicitly,), we build them ‘sequentially, by accretion, one structure at a time, one function at a time’ (Rosen 2000, 291). But meanings are not assembled from prefabricated parts any more than organisms are. The meaning of an expression is a whole throughout the ‘construction’ process, a whole which grows by integrated differentiation, and the process works implicitly behind the scenes of conscious attention. A meaning or dialog process that works in real time depends not only on a text to be read but also on a felt sense ‘for a given context.’ The implicit intricacy of this felt sense colludes with the explicit text in the immediate construction of meaning.

In logical terms, a proposition is constructed by the conjoining (or copulation) of a subject and predicate; ‘words would be of no

value at all unless they could be connected into sentences by means of a real copula which joins signs of the same thing' (Peirce, EP1:40). More generally, a real act of meaning, one having an actual function within a guidance system, must involve an index with a real connection to its object. But the index must involve an icon, part of which could be the syntax of a sentence, acting as a virtual diagram of the relations among objects denoted by the proposition, thus connecting them into a single complex object. In such a sentence

the main work of construction, the whole work of connexion, is performed by putting the words together. In Latin much is left to the good sense of the interpreter. That is to say, the common stock of knowledge of utterer and interpreter, called to mind by the words, is a part of the sign. That is more or less the case in all conversation, oral and scriptal. It is, thus, clear that the vital spark of every proposition, the peculiar propositional element of the proposition, is an indexical proposition; an index involving an icon.

— Peirce, EP2:310

Semiosis always occurs in a context which includes the text; genetic, biological and cultural information alike come out of a context and into a context where meaning is constructed.

Information is not transmitted from one generation to the next, but is rather reconstructed in development ... Information is what counts as information for some process at some time; hence it changes over time and is context-dependent.

— Thompson 2007, 191 (citing Oyama)

Biosemiotically, context-dependence (with its associated polyversity) applies right down to the molecular level. When hormones operate through the process of signal transduction,

the same hormone may have quite different effects upon different cells, since the effect depends upon the protein profile of the cell – i.e., on how the actual

proteins present in a given cell will interact with the secondary signal evoked at the membrane's inner side by the binding of hormone molecules to surface receptors. Here, as everywhere in living systems, we see the essential principle at work that shows us that *signals do not contain their own message*. Rather, when the concentration of a hormone surpasses a certain threshold value (i.e., when the degree of saturation of specific receptors at the receiving system attains its critical value), the hormone acts as a *sign* that *induces the formation* by the system of an *interpretant*. And the nature of this interpretant depends *exclusively* on the contextual situation of the receiving cell.

— Hoffmeyer (2008, 236)

The same principle applies within the cell, as Deacon (2011, 86) explains:

Each nucleotide sequence that codes for a protein on a DNA molecule has features that can be understood to function as an adaptation that evolved in response to certain demands posed by the conditions of that species' existence. But to attribute to those sequences such properties as being adaptive, or serving a function, or storing information, is to borrow a property from the whole and attribute it to the part. These properties only exist for the nucleotide sequence in question in a particular systemic context, and many even change if that context changes over the course of a lifetime or across generations. What may be functional at one point may become dysfunctional at another point, and vice versa.

As Griffiths and Gray observe, “developmental causes do not have their effects in isolation, but as part of a wider system of causes. Causation in development is thus intrinsically likely to be context-dependent” (in Oyama et al. 2001, 197). This also applies to the growth of meanings.

Context construction

‘After he had said this, he left her as he did the day before.’—Do I understand this sentence? Do I understand it just as I should if I heard it in the course of a narrative? If it were set down in isolation I should say, I don’t know what it’s about. But all the same I should know how this sentence might perhaps be used; I could myself invent a context for it.

(A multitude of familiar paths lead off from these words in every direction.)

— Wittgenstein (PI §525)

Meaning requires a context. A letter of the alphabet means nothing except by taking its place in a word. (Even the ‘hyperliteral’ reading of Kabbalah, where a single letter of Torah can mean the world, requires the infrastructure of the divine Word, a structure diagrammed in the ‘Tree of Life.’) In human languages, a word can only inform us as part of a sentence, and what a sentence can mean is constrained by its context. The guiding function of context in reading language is a special case of the way a large-scale system constrains and guides the interactions among its subsystems.

The work of context is usually carried out unconsciously, but Marvin Minsky (1986) came up with a sentence which brings it to the fore: ‘The astronomer married the star.’ We stumble over this sentence because the context evoked by *astronomer* invites the word *star* to mean something incompatible with the context evoked by *married*. This would not happen if the discourse in which the sentence occurred had been mainly about a movie ‘star.’ Contextual constraints enable us to select among the various niches in meaning space which a given text or sign might occupy. We might say that the ‘quest for meaning’ is actually a quest for context. *In what kind of world will your sign (or your life) make sense?*

Understanding what a speaker intends to communicate requires, among other things, that a listener find a context that provides the best framework for

interpreting what the speaker meant.

— Raymond W. Gibbs (1999, 118)

Where does the listener ‘find’ such a context? In some common meaning space, of course. But since we cannot hold the whole of the *commens* in working memory, we construct temporary mini-contexts at each moment in order to make sense of the bit of text before us. Thus ‘constructing meaning’ means constructing a suitable context around the text – one that makes sense of it without conflicting with any other context that we habitually have ‘in mind.’ Let us call such a mini-context a *mental space*, a term drawn from Gilles Fauconnier’s (1994) work in cognitive linguistics.

We can describe *mental spaces* as temporary micro-worlds, or micro-contexts, constructed on the fly to guide our sense of the relationships among the terms in use at the moment. Fauconnier explains the communication process thus:

Language ... builds up mental spaces, relations between them, and relations between elements within them. To the extent that two of us build up similar space configurations from the same linguistic and pragmatic data, we may ‘communicate’; communication is a possible corollary of the construction process.

— Fauconnier (1994, 2)

Who is the builder of such spaces? We could say it is language (as above), or the utterer and/or interpreter, or the bodymind, or even the brain. Each option both reveals and conceals.

How are we to know that the ‘space configurations’ we construct internally (as opposed to the observable linguistic and pragmatic data) are ‘similar’? Since we can’t compare them directly, we never *know* such a thing ‘objectively’; rather we *assume* it, until the assumption becomes unsustainable. You and I play the game, until it becomes evident that we are not playing by the same rules.

A viable reading of any sentence within a larger text will construct a mental space in which the sentence is significant (makes a difference), and yet is also mutually reinforcing with other meanings already constructed from this text. Sometimes this

is as difficult as it sounds, and how much work the reader is willing to do toward that end may depend on her faith in the text – that is, on her confidence that the effort will bear fruit. The fruit is a newly constructed context which *may* turn out to be a better space to live in. But there is also a dark side to this: if a reader is deeply committed to the belief that every statement in a text (such as the *Gospel of Thomas*) is deeply meaningful, no matter how cryptic it may appear, then he probably *will* be able to construct a meaning around it, out of pure imagination if nothing else. Since meanings are *underdetermined* by texts, we may have more freedom to mean than we can handle, and then the text can become a mirror that reflects our own prejudices instead of informing us. So we need limits on our freedom to mean; and *context* is the first place to look for those limits. For instance, evolutionary psychologists, who try to explain psychological traits by imagining a context in which they would be naturally selected, try to keep that context compatible with what is known about the history of evolution.

Even in non-linguistic or pre-linguistic semiosis, the construction of meaning can involve the construction of a context for the sign. According to Rodolfo Llinás, the ‘sensorimotor image’ (the ‘internal map’ of Chapter 3) is ‘a contextualization of the external world’ (Llinás 2001, 38) – turning it outside in, as it were, by building a meaning space around the object of attention. Over an evolutionary time scale, this ‘contextualization’ is physical as well as mental. Organisms are ‘niche-constructing beings’ (Odling-Smee 1988, cited by Thompson 2007, 95). In constructing their own context in which to live, they participate in an evolutionary process guided by circular causality: ‘the same behavior which is the product of evolution is also a partial cause in the process of evolution’ (Plotkin, quoted in Depew and Weber 1995, 380).

‘It is not that organisms find environments and either adapt themselves to environments or die,’ Lewontin writes. ‘They actually construct their environments out of bits and pieces,’ both by internalizing the information that enables them to deal with their world, and by changing their world to meet their needs and desires (Lewontin 1992, 112).

— Depew and Weber (1995, 378)

Constructing scripture

When we turn back from reading to writing, the process of context construction seems to be exemplified by the growth of the synoptic Gospels, as mentioned already in Chapter 6. Stevan Davies (2002, 54) puts it this way: ‘The evangelists, beginning with Mark, saw it as their duty to bring meaning to sayings by providing narrative biographical contexts for them, and thus a life of Jesus came into being.’ But this is just the normal reading process turned inside out: the *text* of the Gospels was constructed as context for a prior text, a collection of sayings like *Q* or *Thomas*. The evangelists were only doing (more deliberately and explicitly) what we do unconsciously when we read any text, but especially when we read a text that comes to us in a minimally explicit context.

Consider, for instance, *Thomas* 35:

Jesus said, ‘It is not possible for anyone to enter the house of a strong man and take it by force unless he binds his hands; then he will (be able to) ransack his house.’

— (Lambdin)

Since it seems unlikely that Jesus is dispensing advice to aspiring burglars, or even to security-conscious householders, we look for some kind of analogy that will extract spiritual guidance from this saying. An almost identical saying in *Mark* 3:27 is framed by stories about Jesus casting out devils, and the previous verse sets up this saying as a parable referring to Satan as the ‘strong man.’ But there is no mention of Satan or of exorcism in the *Gospel of Thomas*, so it would be presumptuous to import such a context into it. Elsewhere in the Gospels we find other ‘theft’ scenarios: sometimes Jesus is the thief, sometimes the master who has left a servant in charge of a house or field – and you never know when he will return, so *be awake!* Sometimes Jesus even plays *both* of those roles, as in *Luke* 12:37-40.

These parallels are suggestive, but if we trust in the integrity of *Thomas* itself, then that’s the place to look for the most relevant suggestions. One of them is *Thomas* 21:

¹Mary said to Jesus, ‘What are your disciples like?’

²He said, ‘They are like children living in a field which is not theirs. ³When the owners of the field come, they will say, “Give our field back to us.” ⁴They take off their clothes in front of them in order to give it back to them, and they return their field to them.

⁵For this reason I say, if the owner of a house knows that a thief is coming, he will be on guard before the thief arrives and will not let the thief break into the house of his estate and steal his possessions. ⁶As for you, then, be on guard against the world. ⁷Arm yourselves with great strength, or the robbers might find a way to get to you, ⁸for the trouble you expect will come. ⁹Let there be among you a person who understands.

¹⁰When the crop ripened, the person came quickly with sickle in hand and harvested it. ¹¹Whoever has ears to hear should hear.’

— *Thomas 21* (NHS 142)

Perhaps the ‘person who understands’ is the one who *reaps* the ripe wisdom offered by Jesus – who makes it his own rather than live by second-hand wisdom. The ‘disciples’ here (and elsewhere in *Thomas*) appear to be like squatters trying to live ‘in a field which is not theirs,’ i.e. looking to external authority for their code of conduct. The guidance here is not to act like that but to ‘own your own house’ – embody your own experience and the wisdom tried and tested thereby – and ‘be on your guard against the world’: that is, watch out lest conscience be overruled or usurped by social pressure, convention or external authority.

This is a reading of *Thomas 35* constructed with help from the context of other sayings in *Thomas*. Other readings differ because they reconstruct the context differently. For instance DeConick (2007a, 109-114) takes 21.5 and 21.10 to be ‘kernel sayings’ while the rest of 21 consists of ‘accretions’ placing the kernel sayings in a more ‘enclitic’ (ascetic) context – a pattern she finds throughout the whole of this gospel. Both readings illustrate the role of context

construction in both the writing and the reading of any scripture. The four canonical gospels take some of the context-construction work off the reader's hands, but this only means that *Thomas* is a more 'open work' (in the sense of Eco 1984) than the other gospels. Hands on, do-it-yourself readers might value the extra challenge thus provided by *Thomas*. But in any case, no text can furnish itself with enough context to meet the reader's need for meaning. Every text is dessicated until immersed in the reader's internal guidance system, which is where the seeds of meaning germinate.

The experience of word-meaning takes place when a word's history of common usage crosses paths with a body's history – yours, for instance. As Eugene Gendlin might put it: When you 'dip' into the 'felt sense' of the moment your bodymind is now living through, and try to explicate or formulate that sense in language, these two histories *cross*, and the result is a unique utterance. A sentence that looks or sounds the same may have been uttered before, but if it was meaningful then, it *changed* the situation which gave rise to it. A meaningful utterance makes a difference to the history of your bodymind because it can modify your intentions, and it can change the trajectory of the language to some extent. The history of the language is the evolving network of traces left by its actual difference-making uses. The 'same' utterance in a different context cannot mean the same thing.

Usage of a word *implies* all the other types of situations in which the word has been used in its history – or, more directly, in the *user's* history, since prior usage can only affect current usage via the user's memory. A concept, on the other hand, *implies* a whole set of simultaneous (synchronic) relationships with other nodes in meaning space, *and* with associated words. So in actual usage, the word *crosses* with the current context to activate the appropriate concept. When the context changes, so do the implications of the text. The *crossing* of paths is the interaction by which meaning is *formed* or explicated.

With a glance back at the meaning cycle, we could say that symbols, once formed, become meaningful by pointing to practice, which changes the situation, leading to new experiencing, which in turn often triggers a new reformulation. Gendlin calls this process *carrying forward*, because it gives us a sense of *direction* (we are

not just going in circles). Yet the process is also circular (cyclic, recursive), like breathing, like the circuits and revolutions of the earth. Authentic meanings stay where we put them only so long as they both energize and stabilize this dynamic. Since there is no end (or beginning) in sight, we might call this process *unlimited semiosis* (Eco 1976): the ‘final interpretant’ is an ideal that can never be fully realized.

The *final interpretant* (which Peirce also calls the normal or genuine interpretant) Peirce defines as, “the effect the Sign would produce upon any mind upon which circumstances should permit it to work out its full effect” (SS: 111), or as he also puts it “the one Interpretative result to which every Interpreter is destined to come if the Sign is sufficiently considered” (id.). ... it embraces “all that the sign could reveal concerning the Object to a sufficiently penetrating mind, being more than any possible mind, however penetrating, could conclude from it, since there is no end to the distinct conclusions that could be drawn concerning the Object from any Sign” (R339: 276r).

— de Waal 2013 (Kindle Location 1685)

Dynamically though, when the right symbol snaps into place in its niche, the re-formed and renewed guidance system carries on with its work of changing the situation. In referring to the niche in meaning space as attractor of symbols, we need a name for the nameless, a symbol for the formless. Gendlin’s sign for it is ‘.....’ (introduced in Chapter 4; how you pronounce it is up to you). Once its role in our thinking is understood, we can use it to *keep some space open for experiencing* even in the midst of our most logical formulations. ‘.....’ represents that which works implicitly in every act of meaning but cannot be made eternally explicit – because its explication *is* the act of meaning.

Or you could say it represents the *context* turned inside out.

Context and its discontents

The metaphor of *constructing* meaning should not fool us into thinking that meaning is a structure built up from ‘fundamentals’ upon which the whole thing rests. The activity of negotiating meaning is more like a monkey moving through the trees: as we swing from branch to branch in the forest of discourse, we must let go of one mental space in order to grasp another, each one forming and dissolving as needed. You can’t grasp (apprehend) one sign without letting go of another. But then you can’t really *let go* of a thought that you haven’t yet grasped.

The current situation is the *immediate context* of the sign we now read. But the context of the interpretant sign produced by this act of meaning is the implicit *semantic memory* of the mind doing the meaning – that is, the reader’s working model of the semiotic universe in relation to the internal milieu of bodymind. And the reader must assume that the same is (or was) true of the ‘writer’ of the sign we now ‘read.’

We’ve already heard it from Heraclitus, but here it is in another translation:

We should let ourselves be guided by what is common to all. Yet, although the Logos is common to all, most men live as if each of them had a private intelligence of his own.

— (Wheelwright 1959, fr. 2)

Yes, if we’re going to talk, first we have to find or make some common space that we inhabit together, some pattern that connects us, and some common language. But as individuals, each of us *does* have a private intelligence, each bodymind having only her own experience to go by. As Eugene Gendlin puts it, ‘humans have no universal content in common’ (Levin 1997, 33). So what are we talking about?

A word is chosen for use in a given situation because the user’s linguistic habits associate it with a niche in a private meaning space. But those habits, animated by the user’s intent, are subsystems of a larger semiotic system which is the user’s life. The whole of a life, meanwhile, forms a part of encompassing communities and ecosystems, each in turn participating in a wider system, and all involved in the evolving Logos common to all. In the

semiotic holarchy, then, humans (and all sentient beings) do have a universal *context* in common, one beyond any singular understanding.

The natural world is the maternal source of our being as earthlings and the life-giving nourishment of our physical, emotional, aesthetic, moral, and religious existence. The natural world is the larger sacred community to which we belong ... our primary revelation of the divine ...

— (Berry 1988, 81)

Although we have this common matrix, there is considerable variation among cultural meaning spaces, and each culture has its own way of filling them with ‘content.’ For instance, if *prayer* plays a major role in your culture, then you are likely to fit that concept into an essential niche in personal meaning space. This niche can be defined by its location within pragmatic meaning space, and that becomes your working definition of *prayer*. In another culture (or individual mind) that ‘same’ niche might be filled by something else, say *meditation* or *trance* or *wonder* or *silence*. But we have to put ‘same’ in scare-quotes because the correspondence between one meaning space and another is never exact; for instance, we cannot translate from one natural language to another by simple substitution of words or phrases. This does not mean that translation is impossible: in a given situation, the claim that an English sentence means the same thing as a French sentence may be fully justified, despite its unavoidable vagueness. Likewise we can describe a typical conversation as ‘communication,’ as if the partners shared a common understanding – as long as we refrain from analyzing their meanings too minutely. The spirit (as opposed to ‘the letter’) determines what word or sign will convey genuine information in the current context/situation.

Religious doctrines are supposed to work as communal course corrections. Whether a specific practice is the right move depends on the situation (which, seen outside in, is a location in a meaning space). The differences between doctrines may lie in the naming of parts of the models they construct or modify – for every doctrine must imply some model. Or the differences may lie in the

structures of the respective models. Any theoretical or scriptural model, though, is but one explication of an implicit order, and this “Mother Book” is not a scripture for specialists. According to Peirce, a person of

small instruction with corresponding natural breadth ... would have learned that nothing has any kind of value in itself,—whether æsthetic, moral, or scientific,—but only in its place in the whole production to which it appertains; and that an individual soul with its petty agitations and calamities is a zero except as filling its infinitesimal place and accepting its little utility as its entire treasure.

(EP2:445)

Buddhist teaching made a similar turn from the Self (*atman*) venerated in Vedic religion to the doctrine of no-self (*anatta*). The point here was to dissipate the illusion of a *permanent, independent* or *substantial* self. In its place Buddhism pointed to impermanence, co-dependence (Thich Nhat Hanh’s *interbeing*), and emptiness (*sunyata*). So in place of a comprehensive Self we had a *space* in which dynamics and phenomena could play out their cycles of suffering and release from suffering. (This is one way of reading the Buddhist move, which may serve to carry it forward into other readings.) Later on, in Gendlin’s process model, *empty space* appears as the abstract space of mere locations and movements, in contrast with *behavior space* which is filled with actions (abstraction being just one complex move in that space). Explication is continuous, but names do not stick to the same roles even in a given model, nor do the models themselves remain static, at least not while they live.

We commonly refer to the natural and social context of our lives as ‘the world.’ But we also encounter guidance systems, mainly of the religious kind, which try to put “the world” in its place and encourage us to keep our distance from it. The *Gospel of Thomas* clearly represents one of those ascetic and relatively esoteric movements:

‘If you do not abstain from [or *fast against*] the world,

you will not find the kingdom. If you do not make the Sabbath into a Sabbath, you will not see the Father.'

— *Thomas 27* (5G)

Jesus said, 'I took my place in the midst of the world, and I appeared to them in the flesh. I found all of them intoxicated; I found none of them thirsty. And my soul became afflicted for the sons of men, because they are blind in their hearts and do not have sight; for empty they came into the world, and empty too they seek to leave the world. But for the moment they are intoxicated. When they shake off their wine, then they will repent.'

— *Thomas 28* (Lambdin)

No one takes new habits without first shaking off some old ones; a niche in meaning space does not call forth a new expression unless it first *feels* empty. 'The world' in this context is the set of old habits which leave the deepest meaning spaces unfulfilled. But that context calls forth a larger 'world' of *possibilities* – larger because it includes both old and new forms as potential inhabitants.

Just as the ambiguity of a term like 'the world' is resolved by its context, so is the ambiguity of 'intoxication,' which appears in a negative light in *Thomas 28* (above) but in a positive light in *Thomas 13*, where Jesus says to Thomas, 'you have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring that I have tended.' Yet we can construct a context in which the two sayings are not only compatible but mutually reinforcing, where a new and visionary 'intoxication' cures the blindness caused by the old 'wine' of habituation. The ambiguity of 'intoxication' is similar to that of the instruction to 'make the Sabbath into a Sabbath' in *Thomas 27*: you might read it as encouraging the traditional (Jewish) religious observance or ritual, but other sayings in *Thomas* such as 14 seem to discourage such things as – well, *worldly*.

Context construction in semiosis, like niche construction in biological evolution, is but one side of the coin; we could just as well say that the niche evokes its inhabitant.

We could say a food brings a form into existence.

Huckleberries and salmon call for bears, the clouds of

plankton of the North Pacific call for salmon, and salmon call for seals and thus orcas. The sperm whale is sucked into existence by the pulsing, fluctuating pastures of squid, and the open niches of the Galapagos Islands sucked a diversity of bird forms and functions out of the line of finch.

— Gary Snyder (1990, 109)

Semiotically, every text is called forth by a context: empty niches in meaning space suck signs into existence.

Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub;
It is the center hole that makes it useful.
Shape clay into a vessel;
It is the space within that makes it useful.
Cut doors and windows for a room;
It is the holes which make it useful.
Therefore benefit comes from what is there;
Usefulness from what is not there.

— *Tao te ching* 11 (Feng/English)