

BEN-AMI SCHARFSTEIN

THE DILEMMA OF CONTEXT



NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS
NEW YORK & LONDON

CONTENTS

PREFACE xi

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS xv

1 · CONTEXTUAL PROBLEMS AND TENSIONS 1

- The term *context* is characterized and *contextuality*, *relativism*, and *skepticism* are distinguished from one another. 1
- We have no theory for dealing with context as such. 3
- The discussion of context that follows rests on an empirical attitude toward philosophy. 5
- Among recent social scientists, the followers of Franz Boas were particularly concerned to avoid prejudice and were therefore contextual and relativistic in judging alien cultures. Contemporary anthropologists, such as those concerned with symbolic forms, continue to argue for relativism. 7
- The problem of context is illustrated by the example of an intelligent criminal. 12
- The problem of context is illustrated from anthropology. For the sake of coherence and consistency, the examples are drawn from the life of the American Indians, beginning with the life of the Eastern Woodlands' Indians. 17
- Another Indian example is taken from the ideals and effects of *Black Elk Speaks*. 22
- *Ritual of the Wind* exemplifies a renascent Indian pride. 26
- Difficulties in the translation of American Indian Poetry furnish still another instructive example. 27
- Apache criticism of *The Whiteman* exemplifies how different cultural expectations create misunderstanding. 31

CONTENTS

- Anthropological informants and other cultural intermediaries are subjected to strains usually too sharp to withstand. 33
- Anthropologists themselves face great strains and are apt to show great ambivalence. 36
- The problems of contextual understanding on a larger scale are illustrated by meetings between representatives of the 'high cultures,' in the person, for example, of al-Biruni, who observed and judged Hindu culture, and of the Abbé Dubois, who played the role of a Hindu. 40
- The twentieth-century Viennese Agehananda Bharati becomes a Hindu, an anthropologist, and a 'cultural critic' of India. 43
- Both those who judge and are judged claim that mere objectivity fails to reach understanding, which requires actual practice and a genuine merger of identities. 47

2 • CONTEXTUAL DILEMMAS AND LIMITATIONS 51

- Anthropologists and their like do not succeed as well as they may hope in abolishing cultural barriers. 51
- An imagined meeting between contemporary Western and African social scientists fails to produce a meeting of minds. 54
- The desire to understand everything in context leads to increasing scrupulousness and increasing insistence upon uniqueness. 59
- Close attention to context also leads us to differentiate it in terms of disciplines and levels. 62
- The result is an indefinite multitude of possibilities that ends by requiring a total contextualization or a total relativity. 67
- Total relativity is illustrated by both Eastern and Western philosophies, which, though striking, are unlikely to serve us well enough here and now. 69
- In practice, context shows things to be local and individual and is therefore related to the debate in Europe and India between nominalists and realists. 72
- The contrast between the identical and the individual or different resembles that between mathematics and theoretical physics on the one hand and, on the other, everything biological. 78
- Yet both philosophical and scientific reasoning show that individuality or difference must be limited. 82
- The basic principle of philosophical relativism—the absence of an absolute criterion—has been argued in ancient Greece, China, and India. 86
- Contemporary relativists have accentuated relativism in individual ways, but each of them has acknowledged that relativism cannot be total. 92
- Relativism is limited by the perceptual, cognitive, and other kinds of

CONTENTS

- constancy that are necessary for us to live and learn. 101
- The relativistic contention that languages are unique and therefore incommensurable is neither convincing nor quite wrong. 110
- Relativism and absolutism, like difference and identity, are complementary and mutually necessary in both fact and thought. 131

3 • CONTEXTUAL HESITATIONS AND SOLUTIONS 139

- The problems of context and of relativism are accentuated by our dependence on two-valued logic, which is inevitable but often inadequate or misleading. All things considered, it is unhelpful to try to resolve the problem of context in a simply logical way. 139
- Chinese, Indian, and European thinkers, such as Chuang-tzu, Montaigne, Nietzsche, Derrida, Siddhasena, and Gadamer, have cast doubt on formal logic and fixed concepts. Though often intemperate, their thought is likely to be helpful to us. 150
- Comparative philosophy and the social sciences may be improved by the use of more adequate and stimulating models for thought. Bicultural experience is very helpful, and creative imagination essential. The lives of three scholars are offered in evidence. 166
- By pressing for solution but always resisting it, the problem of context continues to polarize thinkers. The choice of context depends on one's aim, which is never simply neutral. Its use to deny or affirm likeness is therefore a subjective act with its own context and consequences, which are anything but trivial for human relations. 185

REFERENCES 195

INDEX 211