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Context and Intention

Let me begin by saying how happy I am that this conference brings together the notions "knowledge" and "context". In my introduction to the volume *Mobile Communication*, published in 2002, I had to deal with the obligatory distinction between "knowledge" and "information", and sided with those who maintain that knowledge is best regarded as information in context. Also, I could in that introduction point to the standard observation that information sought through mobile phones is, characteristically, location-specific and situation-specific, so that mobile communication tends to engender not just information, but information in context: that is, knowledge *per se*. Of course the word "context" has multiple meanings, and in a moment or so I will list some of them. But let me first explain what the topic of my paper is, and how it came about that I chose it. The topic is *intention*, both in its senses of "meaning" and "purpose", and the view I will adhere to is that, in both these senses, to refer to an intention is to refer to the context into which that intention is embedded.

Now the idea of selecting this topic occurred to me while reading one of the MOBIlearn documents co-authored by Professor Sharples (the version I saw was released on June 10, 2003).¹ The document laid great stress on the notion of context (on "mobile learning contexts", "context of use", "context-dependent knowledge", etc.) but also on the notion of "intentional" and "unintentional" learning. And it is clear that even though the authors did not spell it out, they were entirely aware of the intimate conceptual connection between intention and context. A passage I found particularly telling cited two different interpretations of "learning episodes": according to the first, "a learning episode [is] a well-defined period of time that is held together by the similarity in intent, activity or place of the thoughts and actions that occur during it"; according to the second (quoted from a study again co-authored by Sharples), such episodes are "groups of learning activities, which are formed by virtue of their spatial, temporal, and thematic proximity". The first interpretation comes close, but the second does definitely not, to assuming something like a context-free intent. My paper is intended as a very brief summary of some main philosophical positions on how intention and context relate to each other.

Varieties of Context

The word "context", as you of course all know, comes from the Latin word "contexere", *to weave together*. It did not, originally, refer to anything verbal. The currently still predominant dictionary definition of this word, *the parts which immediately precede or follow any particular passage or text and determine its meaning* (OED), reflects a usage that does not seem to have existed prior to the second half of the sixteenth century. It appears that it was the spread of literacy, following upon the invention of the printing press, that gave rise to this usage – I owe this observation to Zsuzsanna Kondor. And so it appears that it is the loosening grip of the purely verbal that allows us today, once more, to draw freely on the non-verbal connotations of the word

"context". Some eighty years ago, Bronislaw Malinowski, in his essay included in Ogden's and Richards' famous *The Meaning of Meaning*, published in 1923, still had to have recourse to the unwieldy construct "context of situation" to refer to the extra-linguistic environment of spoken language. The same construct is applied in a 1963 paper by Robert Ward Leeper, quoted in Bruner's classic *Studies in Cognitive Growth*. Leeper investigated the "relation of motor activity to underlying representational process" – a fundamental issue when it comes to explaining intentionality – and came to the conclusion that movements often amount to symbols, with their significance determined "by the relations of those movements to a larger context of the situation". A related compound, "situational context", was coined by Werner and Kaplan in their book *Symbol Formation* (1963), in a chapter entertaining the hypothesis that imagery, in combination with gestural configurations, might be the primordial medium in which "*intentionality towards representation* of thought" is realized. By contrast, Merlin Donald in his 1991 book has no problem with using the expression "extralinguistic context" when discussing the significance of small children making a pointing gesture – the archetypal intentional act. And none of us have problems with regarding the expression "context" as belonging to a broad family of expressions – let me list just some of the most prominent members of that family: background, circumstance, concatenation, connection, custom, domain, embedding, environment, framework, horizon, matrix, narrative, network, perspective, sequence, setting, situation, space, technique. We will encounter "background" and "network" as technical terms in John Searle's theory of intentionality; but they have unique, suggestive connotations also as non-technical expressions. To see something against the background of something else is really to posit a secondary, detached context. A network suggests links and nodes and at least two dimensions, a concatenation suggests interlocked links and linearity. Circumstances have something temporal about them: they arise and change. Sequences suggest temporal or spatial order. Narratives create a context of causally connected events in time, customs are a context of norms, domains emphasize borders, matrices emphasize grids. But let me not be exhaustive, lest I exhaust my time.

Meaning, Intention and Embeddedness: From Brentano to Wittgenstein

The medieval concept of intentionality, revived by Franz Brentano in the 1870s, played a central role in the various branches of phenomenology. Many decades later, it even became a topic for philosophers in the analytic tradition. The best way to introduce the concept is perhaps by recalling a famous passage from Brentano's *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt*. This is a passage Bertrand Russell found worth citing in the preparatory notes for his paper "On Propositions"; I am here quoting the text as Russell has it. "Every psychical phenomenon", wrote Brentano, "is characterized by what the scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (also the mental) inexistence of an object, and what we ... would call relation to a content, direction towards an object (which is not here to be understood as a reality), or immanent objectivity." We say the word "raining" and *mean* raining; we think of raining and have an intentional act *directed at* a mental object. The analytic philosopher closest to Brentano was Roderick Chisholm. His classic paper on the topic is "Sentences about Believing", read at a meeting of the Aristotelian Society, in London, 1956, but the most concise formulation of his views can be found in the Chisholm–Sellars correspondence conducted later in the same year. This was the year when Sellars gave the University of London Special Lectures in Philosophy, published under the title "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind", the page proofs of which he had sent Chisholm. In Chisholm's reading of the text, the fundamental difference between the two of them consisted in their attitude towards the following two questions: "(1) Can we explicate the intentional character of believing and of other

psychological attitudes by reference to certain features of language; or (2) must we explicate the intentional characteristics of language by reference to believing and other psychological attitudes?" The first of these questions Chisholm answered in the negative and the second in the affirmative, and he was more or less right in attributing a diametrically opposite view to Sellars. Neither of them explicitly formulates the problem of whether there can be intentions independent of context, but the drift of Sellars' analyses certainly suggests that he at least would not have thought them conceivable.

Generally speaking, any philosopher who is not willing to embed mental acts in an extra-mental context will necessarily end up not being able to create a context for intentions at all. Such was the case with Brentano's student Edmund Husserl. Some thirty-five years ago, I published a lengthy paper in which I argued that Husserl's single-minded efforts to grasp intentional acts in their ultimate purity could only lead to a philosophical impasse. I see no reason today to change my judgement, notwithstanding all the hype about Husserl's notion of "Horizontintentionalität", *intentional horizon*.² Let me just quote two brief passages from Husserl's *Logical Investigations*; both are texts that survived intact the rewriting of volume II between 1901 and 1913. In the first passage, Husserl cuts the tie between language on the one hand, and meanings, the *objects* of intentional acts, on the other: "We have so far preferred to speak of meanings which, as the normal, relational sense of the word suggests, are meanings of expressions. There is, however, no intrinsic connection between the ideal unities which in fact operate as meanings, and the signs to which they are tied, i.e. through which they become real in human mental life."³ In the second passage, Husserl cuts the tie between the intentional *acts* themselves and any kind of real-world action: "In talking of 'acts' ... we must steer clear of the word's original meaning: *all thought of activity must be rigidly excluded*."⁴ That Martin Heidegger turned away from Husserl, clearly had some very fundamental philosophical reasons. Heidegger certainly saw all subjective mental activity as intrinsically embedded in the material world and in real-life human interaction. Searle notes a relationship between his own notion of "background" and Heidegger's notion of "equipment". But the really decisive Heideggerian notion in this connection (and this again is a point I owe to Zsuzsanna Kondor) is that of "referential totality".

Searle's book *Intentionality* is, quite obviously, an attempt at a synthesis of Husserl and the later Wittgenstein. It is a grand attempt; also, I venture to say, it is a grand failure. Searle radically goes beyond Husserl when he takes perception and action to be the primordial forms of intentionality.⁵ And he is halfway between Husserl and Wittgenstein with his main contention: "An Intentional state only determines its condition of satisfaction – and thus only is the state that it is – given its position in a *Network* of other Intentional states and against a *Background* of practices and preintentional assumptions".⁶ But this halfway position is as far as he gets. He refers to Wittgenstein's famous remark, "If God had looked into our minds he would not have been able to see there whom we were speaking of",⁷ a remark epitomizing the view that thinking is an activity involving not just our brain, and not just our body, but also structures and institutions *external* to the human organism. This is the view Searle, too, adheres to; but still he finds Wittgenstein wanting. He insists that we need a theory of intentionality which will "account for the fact that one often has Intentional contents directed at particular objects",⁸ and he feels that Wittgenstein does not provide such a theory.

But the point is, precisely, that according to Wittgenstein the contexts of our overt and covert intendings are, for all practical purposes, quite sufficient to account for their particular directedness. From among the innumerable examples Wittgenstein devises, let me just single out the discussion of the problem " 'What makes a portrait the portrait of so-and-so?' ", in the *Blue Book*.⁹ Wittgenstein concedes that it is of course the *intention* which decides here, goes on to point out however that the intending in question "is nei-

ther a particular state of mind nor a particular mental process", but rather the outcome of an extended narrative, including various actions, verbal exchanges and states of mind. Similarly, to grasp, or to imagine, that someone has the intention to *do* this or that, presupposes an understanding of the setting in which this or that would happen. By way of conclusion, let me come back to our initial issue of learning intentions, or intentions to acquire knowledge: forming such intentions certainly seems to presuppose a grasp of the knowledge environment into which the learning person is about to enter, and of the communications technology within the framework of which the learning intentions shall materialize.

NOTES

¹ "GUIDELINES FOR LEARNING/TEACHING/TUTORING IN A MOBILE ENVIRONMENT", <http://www.mobilearn.org/download/results/guidelines.pdf>.

² The notion is foreshadowed in the expression "thought-horizon", cf. e.g. Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, transl. J. N. Findlay, Investigation I, § 26.

³ Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, transl. J. N. Findlay, Investigation I, § 35.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Investigation V, § 13.

⁵ John R. Searle, *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 36.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958, Part II, p. 217e.

⁸ Searle, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1964, p. 32.