

## Stephen Pepper's World Hypotheses: Season 1; Episode 4

In the last episode, we considered two analytic world hypotheses: **Formism** and **Mechanism**. Tonight, our focus is on **contextualism** as a metaphysical system. Next Sunday – in our season finale – we will examine **organicism** and meditate upon Pepper's (rather mysterious) notion of "**postrational eclecticism**".

### Contextualism

The root metaphor for contextualism is the **historical event** in all its richness. However, Pepper does not believe that "synthetic" world hypotheses are as obviously grounded in their root metaphors as are "analytic" world hypotheses. As such, "we are too likely to be misunderstood at the start" (p. 232) if we begin with a simple consideration of the grounding metaphor.

Forewarned by Pepper, let us nevertheless ponder an historical event. We should not focus on a *past* event (such as our high school graduation) because that episode is now "dead" (p. 232). Rather, let us find a living episode – "a dynamic, dramatic, active event" (p. 232) – something that is happening *right now* – in my specious present.

Well, the only thing I can think of is this:

- I'm now trying to write up notes that will clearly communicate Stephen Pepper's ideas about contextualism to an audience unfamiliar with the original text.

So how should I articulate the spirit of this historical event?

Pepper would encourage me to accentuate the *verbs*: e.g.,

- "*making* a boat"
- "*running* a race"
- "*laughing* at a joke"
- "*Persuading* an assembly"
- "*Unraveling* a mystery" (p. 233, emphases added)

In fact, "to give instances of this root metaphor in our language with the minimum risk of misunderstanding, we should use only verbs: It is doing, and enduring, and enjoying" (p. 232).

So, here I am explaining what I'm trying to do in this episode of *Stephen Pepper's World Hypotheses*. I want to find a way to make Pepper's ideas accessible to a general audience. No.

That's not quite right. I want to make Pepper's ideas accessible to me (!), and if I can accomplish this then it should be a relatively easy task to explain his ideas to somebody else.

A scholar with analytic proclivities (i.e., a formist or mechanist) might take this historical event and try to dissect it. For example, a formist might adopt the following scheme:

- Behavior = Person X Situation [B = P x S]
  - **Behavior:** I'm writing out these notes for Chapter 10 of Pepper's "World Hypotheses"
  - **Person:** I can appropriately be considered as a constellation of traits, attitudes, values, etc.
    - For example, I'm a reasonably curious person, and this curiosity has inspired my present quest to understand Pepper.
  - **Situation:** I have limited time to work on these notes. If this were summer vacation, my notes would likely be better organized, more richly developed, etc.

But the contextualist does not begin with any such faith in the revelatory power of analytic dissection. The scheme above [B = P x S] is clearly a formist pretense, and this remains true even if the scholar believes that the "situation" (and/or the interaction term: "x") accounts for the substantial majority of behavioral variance.

In the scheme above, *person* variables are clearly "norms" as formists understand the term (see Episode 3). Less obvious is the formism implicit in the conceptions of "Behavior" and "Situation", neither of which are ever considered in their brute nudity. Rather, both terms are effectively *norm*-alized. For example, I might measure the extent to which a person engages in *talkative* behavior (where "talkative" effectively functions as a norm). Such behavior might be predicted by trait *extraversion* (another norm). Of course, I'm aware of the power of the situation to shape behavior ("talking", in this case). So, I consider the possibility that even introverts might be talkative if, say, they are employed as teachers and are presently "on the job". In sum:

- **Talking Behavior = Personality Traits** (e.g., extraversion) x **Professional Situation**

It appears here that I have acknowledged that both personality *and* the situation have the power to shape my "behavior". I am, it seems, giving due respect to the situational context. **But this is not contextualism.** If we wish to get closer to the spirit of the contextualist world hypothesis, we would be better off collapsing these three terms [B, P, and S] and saying: I *am* my situation – or, perhaps even better, I behave my situation. Or better still: I behave – and our metaphysical challenge is to illuminate the meaning of this behaving.

The historical acts with which Pepper is concerned [e.g. *doing*] are "intrinsically complex, composed of interconnected activities with continuously changing patterns. They are like incidents in the plot of a novel or drama. They are literally the incidents of life" (p. 233).

- The features of the event “interpenetrate” (p. 233), and our analytic proclivity to partial out conceptually distinct elements (or “factors”) does violence to our lived experience.
  - I’m reminded here of the tendency – common among positive psychologists – to consider the Good Life in relation to a constellation of conceptually distinct *virtues* and *character strengths*.
    - For example, “love” is a character strength that allows us to realize the virtue of “humanity”. “Forgiveness” is another character strength that allows us to realize the virtue of “temperance”
    - But is a “love” *without forgiveness* really the same thing as a “love” *with forgiveness*? For a contextualist, love and forgiveness are not conceptually distinct variables that somehow “interact” to produce character. Rather, they **interpenetrate**. Love deprived of forgiveness is not the same thing as love blessed by forgiveness.

If features of an event interpenetrate (e.g., “forgiveness-love”), then the meaning of the event need not ever remain stable. It is always possible to witness new interpenetrations. As such, **“the ineradicable contextualist categories” are “change and novelty” (p. 235).**

This immediately confronts us with a problem: The world does seem to manifest a certain sort of stability (e.g., the sun rises each morning, Eric is a very “disagreeable” person). We do not live in a state of chaos. For this reason, Pepper observes that “contextualism is constantly threatened with evidences for permanent structures in nature” (p. 234-235).

However, contextualism may be able to embrace constancy on its own terms. There may be good historical (contextualist) reasons why certain states of affairs tend to perpetuate themselves. For example, Nietzsche (who might be most appropriately considered as a contextualist) draws attention to cultural dynamics that encourage stability at the level of an individual’s character:

- “Society is pleased to feel that the virtue of this person, the ambition of that one, and the thoughtfulness and passion of the third provide it with a dependable instrument that is always at hand,—it honors this instrumental nature, this way of remaining faithful to oneself, this unchangeability of views, aspirations, and even faults and lavishes its highest honors upon it. Such esteem...breeds “character” and brings all change, all re-learning, all self-transformation into ill repute. (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Section 296)

## Quality and Texture

Still, if change and novelty are the “ineradicable contextualist categories” (p. 235), they may not be very useful in helping us make sense of our shared world, which does “seem to exhibit a structure which may be regarded as relatively uniform” (p. 235). Thus, we need categories appropriate to our present historical epoch. Pepper suggests **quality** and **texture**:

- **Quality:** The total meaning of an event

- **Texture:** The stuff that makes up the event.

According to Pepper, “there is no such thing as a textureless quality or a qualityless texture” (p. 238). So, a consideration of quality must also pay attention to the **texture** of an event. As we look at the event more closely, we may be able to highlight important **strands** of texture:

- **Strand:** “whatever *directly* contributes to the quality of a texture”
- The **context** in which the strand is embedded also contributes to the quality of the texture, though “indirectly”.
  - **Example:** As I contemplate Mueller’s investigation of Russian interference in the 2016 elections, various strands of meaning emerge (e.g., a subpoena). However, these strands must also be considered in relation to an historical context that also shapes the meaning of the events I am witnessing. So *this* subpoena, *this* arrest, directly contribute to the quality of the event I am contemplating (and can thus be considered as strands). Watergate indirectly contributes to the quality of the same event (and can thus be considered as context). Watergate shapes the meaning of present events, without really being the focus of my attention (as are strands). Of course, when I listen to Slate’s “Slow Burn” [a Watergate podcast], Nixon and Watergate emerge as “strands”, and the Mueller investigation functions as “context”.
    - Pepper recognizes that there is “no very sharp line between strands and context” (p. 246)
- Pepper’s example -- Consider the following sentence:
  - “**A period will be placed at the end of this sentence.**” (p. 246).
- The sentence above has four phrases:
  - “A period”
  - “will be placed”
  - “at the end”
  - “of this sentence.”
- Let us focus on one phrase for the moment: “at the end”
  - This phrase constitutes a **texture**.
  - The **context** of this texture is the other three phrases.
  - The **strands** that make up this phrase are the words: “at”, “the”, and “end”
- Of course, it would be possible to consider the *whole sentence* as texture. In this case, “the wider references [presumably other sentences] become context and the phrases of the sentence become strands” (p. 248).

### Textural Fusion

- Significantly, “quality always exhibits some degree of **fusion** of the details of its texture” (p. 243).
- “This feature is perhaps most clearly perceived in savors and musical chords” (p. 243).

- In my previous example of “forgiveness-love”, we have a quality that can be considered as a fusion of the texture. As a quality, it is different in kind from “love-without-mercy”.
- “Contextualism is the only theory that takes **fusion** seriously. In other theories it is interpreted away as vagueness, confusion, failure to discriminate, muddledness. Here it has cosmic dignity. And it takes a certain revenge on the indignity to which it is subjected by other theories, by interpreting all cosmic simplicities as instances of fusion” (p. 245).

#### **Dynamic Features of Contextual Analysis:**

- “The quality of an event is the fused qualities of its strands, and the qualities of its strands come partly out of its context, and there we are outside the event. All contextualist analysis has this sheering effect. As we work down into the constituents of a texture, we presently find ourselves in textures quite different from the one which we started, and somewhere in its context” (p. 249).
- “A bottom is thus never reached. For the support of every texture lies in its context. This support is as extensive as you wish, but you never reach the end of it” (p. 250)
- “[There] are many equally revealing ways of analyzing an event, depending simply on what strands you follow from the event into its context” (p. 250).

#### **A Contextualist Theory of Truth**

- “The question of truth arises when a strand is blocked” (p. 269)
  - “In colloquial terms, a problem arises and we seek a solution of the problem” (p. 269).]
  - The simplest version of this theory of truth is the notion that “**truth is utility or successful functioning**” (p. 270). Pepper dubs this the **successful working theory of truth**.
    - “The successful action is the true one and the unsuccessful actions are false” (p. 270).
  - A more sophisticated variation of contextualism identifies a **verified hypothesis** with the truth.
    - “It is not the successful act that is true, but the hypothesis that leads to the successful act. When there is no hypothesis there is neither truth or falsity, but just successful or unsuccessful activity” (p. 272).
    - The difference between the **successful working** and **verified hypothesis** theories of truth may seem to be slight. After all, both appear to be saying that “the proof is in the pudding” – Truth is *whatever works!*
    - But an important distinction is being made here. With **successful working theory**, simple trial and error is sufficient to establish truth. But with the **verified hypothesis theory**, truth depends on acquiring genuine understanding (i.e., *hypotheses* that can be verified).

- Pepper’s example: “A rat that tried one alley after another in random fashion would have unsuccessful and successful acts. These would be false and true acts according to the ‘successful working’ theory, but not according to the ‘verified hypothesis’ theory. But if the rats showed evidence of anticipatory attitudes which their acts proceeded to verify, then an unsuccessful act would show the falsity of the attitude and a successful act its truth” (p. 273-274).
      - **Verified hypothesis** theory interprets the theoretical model that generated the hypothesis as nothing more than “a tool for the control of nature. It does not mirror nature in the way supposed by correspondence theory...” (p. 275).
    - An enrichment of the verified hypothesis theory – dubbed the **qualitative confirmation** theory – recognizes that a contextualist hypothesis offers a premonition of the “texture” and “quality” of the events modelled by the theory:
      - “A true hypothesis, according, does in its texture and quality give some insight into the texture and quality of the event it refers to for verification” (p. 277).
      - More generally, “the body of hypotheses possessed by science and philosophy gives us a considerable amount of insight into the structure of nature” (p. 277-278).
      - Of course, at this point it is not altogether easy to see how this theory of truth differs from those postulated by other world hypothesis (e.g., the correspondence theory associated with formism).
    - Still, even if there is a sense in which our theories must somehow conform to the texture and quality of the world, the contextualist remains free to ask: **“how can you be so sure that nature is not intrinsically changing and full of novelties?”** (p. 279). In other words, even if our theories must conform to the world, we cannot escape the question: **conform to what?**

### Deleted Scene [Optional]

As an illustration of a contextualist approach to the problem of truth, I offer the following reflections:

- Consider a simple personality trait: “disagreeableness”. Everyone recognizes that it interacts in complex ways with other personality qualities and situations. Still, it seems obvious that some people are quite “disagreeable” while others are much less so.
- Of course, the very meaning of “disagreeableness” is tied to how others react to me. If my antics are off-putting to my so-called friends, they need only change their values and my behavior will appear in a more “agreeable” light. So, it seems that my disagreeableness is somehow fused with my friends’ misguided values.
- It might be said that the “disagreeableness” described above isn’t really a personality trait. A **pure** trait must (by definition) demonstrate consistency across

situations, among raters, and over short periods. So, we can speak meaningfully of a *pure* disagreeableness that is not contingent on what my friends so happen to think about me. In fact, there is general consensus that I am quite disagreeable, and I've even come to believe this myself.

- Here the contextualist need only reply that this very purity is itself fused with other facets of context. Why demand such purity (reliability) in the first place? Much earlier in the book, Pepper observed that the principle of multiplicative corroboration is not “self-evident” (p. 65); its value depends on structural corroboration (p. 67).
- Here it is worth noting that the (formist) demand for reliability across raters, situations, and short periods effectively *purifies* the trait of contextual dynamics to such an extent that it must remain stable – in defiance of everything the contextualist stands for! As McCrae and Costa once observed: “Personality is transcontextual”.
  - If this [formist] link between short-term reliability and eternal stability isn't obvious, I invite the reader to try the following thought experiment:
    - Imagine a trait (e.g., introversion) that must remain perfectly constant for any given three-week period (short-term reliability) but *also* has the power to change over a period of many years. For my part, I'm unable to even imagine such a trait. If the trait *can* change over the course of a year, then it *must be able* to change over a three-week period. Otherwise, how would the process of change even begin?
  - In effect, the unqualified demand for reliability stacks the metaphysical deck against contextualism (and organicism).
- From a contextualist point of view, our quest to achieve authentic personality change may actually require that we *relax the very demand for reliability that guides the work of the modal research psychologist*.
- For now we will limit ourselves to the observation that a pure trait – indeed, *the notion of “reliability” itself* – is always already fused with other facets of the context.