

Contextualism and Anachronism in Early Modern Philosophy: The Two Contexts View

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Historians of early modern philosophy have recently debated the merits of a contextualist approach, which says that we can only understand the works of historical philosophers by taking their historical context into account.¹ This contextualist approach is standardly taken to oppose anachronistic interpretations, which rely on later philosophical developments in order to understand an earlier thinker. I argue that this inference is misguided. A contextualist methodology does not support the wholesale rejection of anachronism; in fact, I argue that under normal conditions, a rigorous application of contextualism *requires* historical scholars to attend to later philosophical developments when interpreting earlier thinkers. This is because the historian must also apply the contextualist principle to their own work: understanding the historian's interpretation of a past thinker requires attention to the historian's context as well. A contextualist method therefore requires the historian to analyze the influences that have shaped their own understanding of philosophical problems and concepts, even if these influences depend on events that post-date the historical figure they are studying. Failure to attend to this anachronistic data constitutes a violation of the same methodological norm that urges us to attend to the historical developments that influenced the philosophers we study.

To illustrate the point, I consider Michael Della Rocca's appeal to the philosophical views of Donald Davidson in his 1996 *Representation and the Mind-Body Problem in Spinoza* (Della Rocca 1996). Della Rocca argues that Spinoza's views on the mind-body relation can be understood in terms of Davidson's anomalous monism (Davidson 2002). Schmaltz has pointed out that this appears inconsistent with certain prominent accounts of the tenets of contextualism (Schmaltz 2022). For example, Mercer's description of contextualism says that the historian's reading must be one that the historical figure could 'recognize as their own' (Mercer 2019). This seems to rule out Della Rocca's attribution, as Davidson's view involves concepts that would not have been available in Spinoza's time.

On the Two Contexts view I propose, making room for anachronistic readings like Della Rocca's does not require a tempering of our contextualist methodology, but rather a more rigorous application of it. I argue that this view is supported by *semantic contextualism*, which says the meaning of a text depends on the context in which it was written. On this view, the meaning of Della Rocca's claims – including his claims *about what Spinoza believed* – must be understood in the context in which they were written.² As a result, if Della Rocca had simply referred to Spinoza's position as 'mind-body monism', it would have been ambiguous whether he was attributing to Spinoza a mind-body identity theory (such as that of U.T. Place), an anomalous monism (like Davidson's), or a neutral monism (like Bertrand Russell's).³ Della Rocca's exposition of Davidson's anomalous monism should therefore be understood as a disambiguation that is demanded by the methods of contextualist historical reconstruction.

¹ (Garber 2003, 2015); (Mercer 2019); (Lenz 2022); (Schmaltz 2022).

² Martin Lenz raises this consideration as part of his rejection of a contextualist methodology in favor of a 'synthetic' approach (Lenz 2022). According to Lenz, 'the historian opposes anachronism' (9), and aims to read 'past texts only in terms of their own temporal context.' Yet this turns out to be an impossible aim, because it ignores the anachronism inherent in 'the very acts of reading and writing' (Lenz 13). I agree with Lenz that avoiding anachronism is impossible, but disagree that this is demanded by a contextualist historical methodology.

³ (Place 1956; Davidson 2002; Russell 1927: Ch. XX). Of course, it is possible to attribute to Spinoza a *sui generis* type of monism which is distinct from all of these; but to disambiguate in that direction, the historian would need to explicitly state in what ways this *sui generis* monism differs from views that have been stated already. So even this interpretation would require the historian to consider the alternate (anachronistic) views, if only to discard them for textual or contextual reasons.

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