

The Idea of Interdisciplinary Approach in Contemporary Epistemology

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Contemporary (or non-classical) epistemology is qualified by a number of key words. The most important of these are: 'constructivism', 'contextualism', 'naturalism', 'discourse' and 'interdisciplinarity'. The understanding of the last of these terms and the methodology relating to it constitute the subject of this paper, which discusses the ways and forms of interaction between epistemology and social humanities.

1. Regarding the specifics of social epistemology

The central subject of social epistemology – as a non-classical branch in the study of cognitive process – is knowledge in the socio-cultural context analyzed on the basis of some of the humanities and cognitive sciences. 'Non-classical' means opposed to the accepted complex of ideas that, despite their fairly heterogeneous nature (for instance, this complex might incorporate epistemological ideas of such thinkers as Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Engels and Rudolf Carnap), have a certain common ground. This consists in the following. Knowledge is determined by three factors: the object, the subject (together with the cognitive abilities proper to it) and, finally, the socio-cultural conditions of cognition. Each of these factors acts as a source of knowledge. From among them, classical epistemology singles out the object, placing it in the focus of research interest. It is with the object that the positive, true contents of knowledge are primarily associated. That is why classical epistemology regards knowledge (at large) as the true knowledge – these two notions practically coincide. That which comes from the subject is regarded as either an obstruction (distortion of the truth) or, quite the reverse, its foundation (Kant's a priori forms, Descartes' inborn ideas). It may also be regarded as a product of creative activity (imagination, intuition, etc.) whose content and structure are not quite clear. As for social conditions of cognition, until the second third of the twentieth century they were mostly treated as an unambiguously negative factor, a source of illusions and false beliefs.

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SAGE: Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore, <http://dio.sagepub.com>

DOI: 10.1177/0392192109339683

The history of the problem of knowledge as a socially determined phenomenon – with all its stages of discussion, gradual recognition of the possibility of considering positive implications of social determinedness of knowledge not only for the humanities but also for natural sciences, etc. – is well-known. We only wish to remind the reader of the following. Four models of the existence of knowledge in the socio-cultural context have gradually been developed. Each of these is determined by the method of analysis proper to it, and thus by the influence of a certain philosophical school or academic approach. These are: the communicative-semiotic, the cultural-anthropological, the socio-institutional and the cognitive-naturalistic models. The differences between them are sometimes relative – like, nowadays, the borderlines between the respective fields of study used for the construction of those models by epistemologists (linguistics, social anthropology, sociology, neurophysiology). The difference between the ways of representing the essential ‘thingness’ in each of the models – in language structures, in the sum total of live communication, in institutional activities or in the brain processes – is equally relative. The first model, whose sources include the ideas of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Mikhail M. Bakhtin and Yuri M. Lotman, focuses in its research on language as a specific system that covers exhaustively social relations and culture. The exponents of the second model – George Herbert Mead, Alfred Schütz, Clifford J. Geertz and Harold Garfinkel – emphasize the importance of studying non-formal and non-verbal communication, the processes of comprehension that hide within them the secret of human social nature. The model created by Edward Evans-Pritchard, Robert K. Merton, Niklas Luhmann and David Bloor lays the main stress on the analysis of cognition as a sub-system of society whose content boils down to expressing the main parameters of a *socium*. Lastly, the fourth model describes social relations and culture as mechanisms of psychic inhibition introducing the otherwise inexplicable dissonances into the functioning of neural structures, or as ways of instrumental interpretation of human behavior, or as a form of the natural-evolutional determinedness of knowledge (Richard Rorty, Daniel Dennett, Teun van Dijk, Richard Dawkins).

For all their differences, these models have something in common. The very problem of knowledge’s existence in the social context and of the possibility of its study becomes somewhat blurred, sometimes losing its clear-cut shape altogether. The researching epistemologist has to deal neither with the subject (object), nor with social conditions, but with various intermediaries or texts (both artificial and natural), which, in this or that manner, preserve this knowledge and from which this knowledge is to be extracted. The Neopositivists have not yet been able to develop such a broad interpretation of the notion of text; they used to speak of statements, sentences, individual elements of the universal language they searched for – a language mostly described through the logic of statements and predicates of the first order. Today, however, the problem of interrelations between the three classical determinants in cognition boils down essentially to the question of relation between various types of texts.

Firstly, these are texts by means of which authors put down the results of their studies. Secondly, these are biographical texts that tell us about the subject of cognition and about the forms of his/her activity and interaction with the surrounding world. Thirdly, these are texts of scholars specializing in the humanities – social

science, psychology, ethnology – who provide information on the properties of the subject of cognition and the academic community within which the cognitive process is going on. Fourth, these are texts recording laboratory results of the study of the brain, logical and mathematical calculations, computer models of cognitive processes. Lastly, these are philosophers' texts expounding general notions of cognition and the ways to study it typical of this or that culture. Therefore the problem of existence of knowledge in the socio-cultural context is in fact being reduced to the problem of intertextual interaction – a situation when a philosopher studying cognition would have had nothing but various texts at his disposal. Personally, I consider such a situation a 'dead end,' though, of course, I have somewhat exaggerated it to make polemics sharper. To get out of the 'dead end' one has to go beyond the framework of intertextualism. The relation between knowledge, text and society is not a relation of equality but rather of a fruitful interaction between adjacent, albeit distinct, domains which is not restricted to symbolical communication.

It is also clear that social epistemology cannot avoid being involved in interdisciplinary studies which, on the other hand, must not constitute its sole field of research. The task of epistemology is to study knowledge in diverse cultural and social contexts, though it would be a mistake to set too much store by contextualism. A social epistemologist does not study objective reality as such; he analyzes cultural artifacts presented mostly in the form of texts, although philosophy does differ from cultural studies, linguistics and literary research. Social epistemology is a version of the non-classical cognition theory; however, we cannot just reject certain fundamental classical notions which require reinterpretation.

Against the background of such an 'ambivalent agreement' on these and some other basic points, the 'Kantian question' loses all of its urgency. After all, how is 'social epistemology' possible: as a theory or as a method, as a philosophy or as interdisciplinary reflection? These are not idle questions. I believe that the branch of epistemology under discussion is not a sum total of theories or concepts, but rather a set of solutions of specific problems from which general inferences are sometimes drawn. Quite often, these inferences are produced by the critics of the solutions rather than by their authors. At the same time, the critics justly point out that the leitmotiv of this methodological approach is ... methodological sloppiness. It manifests itself in the shape of pluralism, relativism, inconsistency, lack of conceptual reflection inherent in all of the so-called 'qualitative studies' of the non-classical humanities (psychology, linguistics, ethnology). We should not, of course, slavishly accept this spontaneous 'qualitative' transformation at its face value; it is motivated by the conviction that the humanities possess some 'insurmountable specifics'. However, this needs further consideration.

Solving the problem of how social epistemology can possibly exist is, in all likelihood, to be understood as a metaphilosophical choice of philosophy's destiny at large. The social epistemologist is engaged in the contemporary 'academic wars' – discussions concerning the status and nature of science and its position in society. Despite that, he is pointedly uninterested in the 'demarcation lines' between sciences, disciplines, types of knowledge. Is philosophy of cognition to be isolated – as a discipline – from the social humanities? And, if not, what would be its distinction from them? From the standpoint of our social epistemologist, these questions

acquire a nearly rhetorical nature. If we take a look at the processes going on in the sphere of epistemology and philosophy of science in the West, we would observe no opposition between philosophy and science. Philosophers eagerly participate in discussions about scientific and socio-humanitarian issues, never pleading ignorance on the grounds that they lack specialist knowledge. Nowadays a 'pure' philosopher is viewed as an exception, if not as an anachronism. On the other hand, we know that the philosopher alone is capable of posing such general problems as the object and the subject of knowledge, the forms of its representation, the nature of scientific methods, the distinctive features of various kinds of knowledge, their relationship with culture, society, and the like. It is the philosopher who delineates horizons, draws vistas, questions the status quo, contextualizes problems. All this prevents us from restricting ourselves to posing general problems in a general form and from shunning timidly the discussion of methodological problems of concrete sciences. A theory of swimming is a nice thing but, to demonstrate how it works, you will be obliged, willy-nilly, to take a dip. The social epistemologist is just the person for this kind of risk; it is also he (or she) who, metaphorically speaking, may well catch a cold, i.e., has to take responsibility for the sometimes excessive infatuation with the socio-cultural structure of knowledge.

2. The 'case studies' method

As we have seen, social epistemology avoids restricting itself to conceptual analysis, but strives to use a wide range of available resources to comprehend knowledge as a form of human activity and communication. To this end, a special technique of interpretation and reconstruction, described as situational research or 'case studies', is used. This concept has certain similarities with what some philosophers of science used to call 'historical reconstruction', though it has its own specific traits. Historically, situational research has been taking its shape as an interdisciplinary methodology aimed at analysis of individual subjects, local, group-related systems of worldview and situations, which was used in clinical psychology, social science, ethnology, and in the so-called qualitative studies at large. Subsequently, it became transferred to certain epistemological trends of today (social epistemology, cognitive sociology, anthropology of knowledge).

The term 'case studies' itself must have emerged in legal and clinical practice, since certain meanings of the English word 'case' stress the individuality of the object, its personification ('precedent', 'person under surveillance', etc.). In its general form, the idea of situational methodology derives from the 'ideographical method' of the Baden school of Neo-Kantianism and the hermeneutics of Wilhelm Dilthey, as well as from the biographical studies of creative process by Cesare Lombroso, Francis Galton and Lewis Terman. This idea contains the conviction that any cultural object is unique and impossible to explain on the basis of general laws; that comprehension and phenomenological description are the optimum methods of analysis; that the determination of events is situational (i.e., changeable and local). Karl Mannheim, the founder of the sociology of knowledge, stated: 'We shall have to take into account situational determination as an inalienable factor of cognition – in the same manner

as we shall have to accept the relationistic theory and the theory of the changing basis of thinking, ... we have to reject the notion of the existence of the "sphere of the truth in itself" as a harmful and unprovable hypothesis' (Mannheim, 1936: 305).

It seems reasonable to distinguish two types of 'case studies' – the textual and the field ones, though in reality these are often combined. The former are exemplified by the works of the historian Alexandre Koyré, the latter, by those of the anthropologist Mary Douglas. They all contain elements of the microsociological approach, as long as local determination and 'inner social quality' are given high priority. The latter of these phenomena is understood as a self-sufficient system of inconspicuous prerequisites of knowledge that emerge under the influence of group- and situation-specific forms of activity and communication; that system acts as a 'conceptual framework' and socio-cultural context defining the meaning and sense of individual words and actions. Diversity and mutual non-reducibility are regarded as fundamental properties of situations and subjects, hence the preference of descriptive analysis of knowledge over normative analysis. In this, the non-classical nature of this method (among other things) is manifested, which makes it similar to the quantum-mechanical and synergetic methods of description.

The interdisciplinary trends bridging the divide between epistemology, history and sociology force many researchers (David Bloor, Harry Collins, Michael Mulkay, Karin Knorr Cetina, Bruno Latour, Stephen Woolgar, among others) to turn to situational research as an alternative to the method of rational reconstruction of the history of science proposed by Karl Popper. A sample may be found in an analysis of Ludwig Wittgenstein's linguistic games. According to the latter, the meaning of a language's terms emerges in the situations of their use. Imitating Wittgensteinian analysis of various language situations as various forms of life, situational studies reveal the content of a certain knowledge system in the context of a definitive set of conditions, proceeding from what socio-cultural functions that system must perform. In this, cognitive sociologists refer to the ethnographic functionalism of Bronislaw Malinowski, to the 'full description' idea of Gilbert Ryle, to the concept of ontological relativity of Willard V. O. Quine, to Gestalt psychology, to the 'grid and group analysis' method developed by the anthropologist Mary Douglas, to the 'thick description' technique by the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, and to the 'applied sociology' of Alfred Schütz, which provides artistic descriptions of the images of an 'alien', a 'novice', etc.

The methodology of situational studies overturns the traditional correlation between epistemology, on the one hand, and history and sociology of knowledge, on the other, as between the general and the specific. Today, historical and sociological examples not so much substantiate or illustrate cognition theory as 'demonstrate' (according to Wittgenstein) the diversity of types and forms of knowledge that constitutes the actual process of cognition. Thereby an influence on the theoretical status of epistemology as a whole is exerted. In this sense, the question of sphere and boundaries of situational methodology and of its relation to the philosophical theory of cognition merges with the subject of an interdisciplinary approach in epistemology.

3. On the notion of 'interdisciplinary'

The notion of 'interdisciplinary', as applied to the exact sciences, differs substantially from the same notion as used in philosophy. Thus, Eduard Mihailovich Mirsky (2001: 518) writes that, in an interdisciplinary study, its object ought to be formulated so as to be available for examination, modification, translation and practical utilization of the study's results by means of all disciplines involved. This presupposes that the subject areas and methodological apparatuses of the interacting disciplines are defined with a sufficient precision. We would like to point out here that this condition is perhaps observed in certain natural and exact sciences, but, as regards a large number of the humanities (whose very academic status seems problematic) it looks like a gross idealization. Besides, the 'scientific results proper' obtained via this research should be, in Mirsky's opinion, handed over to the systems of disciplinary knowledge for expert analysis. In that case, interdisciplinary dialogue loses the function of control examination with regard to fundamental knowledge: its participants may achieve results but not assess their academic significance, since the latter is equated with the results' significance for a specific discipline. Although, somewhat later, the author discusses the formation, within the framework of interdisciplinary knowledge, of a 'structure functionally analogous to the subject construction of the discipline (in question)', this could hardly be applied, in its general form, to knowledge proper for the humanities.

These misconceptions derive from the choice of the main object of methodological reflection. If this object is presented by exact sciences, like physics and mathematics, they have however somewhat 'forgotten' the process of their historical formation. But other sciences (chemistry, biology, geography, history, economics, law – the list can be continued) mostly preserve within themselves their diverse sources, and therefore exemplify interdisciplinary interaction rather than strictly defined subject areas. The theoretical basis of such interaction, of its language and technical equipment, is normally formed by a participant science possessing a relatively higher level of disciplinary apparatus. As regards sciences like psychology, sociology, archaeology, ethnology and linguistics, they find themselves in a special situation: they were all formed almost simultaneously in the course of interaction between a number of spheres of knowledge; moreover, some of them had initially no status as an academic discipline whatsoever.

The idea that the subject-area division of sciences is a natural norm, whereas interdisciplinary interaction is a deviation from that norm and a transitory stage of science on its way to a new kind of disciplinary structure, presents the inconspicuous prerequisite of the misconceptions in question. It seems that, on the contrary, it is interdisciplinary interaction (with no strict boundaries between disciplines involved) that presents the normal state of science, whereas its opposite state is exemplified by relatively strict disciplinary boundaries between which are defined not so much by their respective knowledge systems as by institutional forms. This standpoint affords a more exact picture of the processes that had been taking place during the twentieth century in epistemology and the philosophy of science.

The different approaches to consciousness and cognition – informational, systemic, activity-related, evolutionary, synergistic – have led to substantial innova-

tions even within the framework of dialectical materialism, to say nothing of other trends in philosophy. Interdisciplinary interaction between physics, biology, cybernetics, psychology and philosophy forms a number of methodological approaches and programs on the borderland between emerging disciplines, which gives new impulses to epistemology and philosophy of science and opens up new vistas. This sometimes leads to global shifts (the so-called turns) – anthropological, linguistic, cognitive, etc. – a process happening against the background of the shaping of new, cognitive-oriented disciplines beyond the sphere of philosophy; it also leads to the adoption by philosophy of some of their results and methods. However, it is too early (even today) to expect ready-made philosophical theories matching the above processes or, still less likely, individual disciplines having well-defined names. It is highly improbable that the developments discussed could be presented as a solution to philosophical problems by the medium of individual sciences. Therefore interdisciplinary interaction of the kind really significant for epistemology and philosophy of science is not, as a rule, a mere borrowing of fully formed disciplinary results of the more advanced sciences – a practice we encounter in the history of natural science. Quite the reverse, philosophy assimilates more readily those matters which complicate the state of affairs both in philosophy and natural science at one and the same time, and which show no likelihood of emerging as stable disciplinary structures in the future. This applies, among other things, to scientific results forming the empirical basis of epistemological research.

Contemporary philosophy defines itself as a discipline and an activity that are not, on the whole, aimed at the empirical research of reality, but still base their study on the material of specialized sciences. The time when epistemologists had to strengthen, first and foremost, ‘the union of philosophy and natural science’, is now past: historical materialism has, after a fashion, already solved that problem in its own domain – it was regarded as a *de facto* scientific synthesis of the social humanities in their entirety. Today, even though philosophy of cognition does not equally align itself with natural and social sciences, the former asymmetry is no longer the norm and can largely be neutralized as a matter of course. At the same time, having adopted a more critical stance on philosophical empiricism, the philosopher is now entitled to pose the question, ‘Why is this science (group of sciences, group of problems, etc.), and no other, to be incorporated into the research process?’ And, equally, why do we have to restrict ourselves to science at all, when we deal with epistemological discourse? For it is common knowledge that every specialized science considers any multifaceted phenomenon (earthquake, biocenosis, political system, speech act, computer program, religious cult, etc.) not in its entirety, but from a specific angle, in accordance with its aims and methodological means. At the same time, philosophy – when it focuses on a certain object – necessarily produces interdisciplinary and even common cultural synthesis. Purely epistemological reflection becomes absolutely indispensable here: it differentiates approaches to different sciences, it articulates the integral cognitive interest, it creates a picture of the overall cognitive process, it integrates every phenomenon studied into a broader socio-cultural context. When epistemology is viewed in this light, its empirical basis is formed not so much by a set of scientific theories and data essential for the comprehension of a specific group of problems as by the virtual critical discussion (started

by the epistemologist) between the different disciplines that study the process of cognition – logic, history, sociology and psychology of science, creativity psychology, biographical analysis. Empiricism, which forms the basis of epistemology, is by no means a mere borrowing of facts and ideas of individual sciences. It is rather a communication space of exchange and competition between various types of knowledge, with interdisciplinary interaction being but one instance of this. The degree to which the epistemologist is involved in the dialogue between different types of knowledge and scientific disciplines, and is able to create such a dialogue, is the degree of the empirical validity of his philosophical concept.

The non-classical approach modifies the function of epistemology in interdisciplinary interaction. This manifests itself, among other things, in the tendency to historicize and sociologize epistemology that started more than a quarter of a century ago. The theoretical status of epistemology has been diverging from the natural-science ideal of theory, nearing its prototype of Classical Antiquity: theories become replaced with scenarios and approaches, method with discourse, notion with metaphor, truth with a consensus. And still, non-classical epistemology has a chance to retain its status of philosophy. No matter that it is empirical in its methods, seemingly restricting itself to research into concrete situations – ‘case study’. No matter that its method is based on the priority of a socio-humanitarian picture of the world over an epistemological image of knowledge, when the original conceptual model is borrowed from extra-epistemological scenarios and becomes modified to be superimposed onto the reality of knowledge. Transferring patterns and notions from social science, cultural studies, social psychology, ethnology, history, law, extra-academic spheres of knowledge to cognition theory is a typical technique of non-classical epistemology. However, non-classical epistemology resorts to extra-philosophical and extra-epistemological resources mostly at the stage of discovery; when it comes to the stage of substantiation, it criticizes and selects them from the standpoint of philosophical reflection. It is in this that the transcendental-metaphysical intention of epistemology is expressed – the intention that requires us to see in any individual instance the realization of an archetypal scenario of cultural history, in an individual method an echo of the global cosmological pattern.

Non-classical cognition theory no longer proceeds from general philosophical tenets, using afterwards ‘the data of the sciences’ to substantiate its conclusions. The process becomes reversed: ideas and imagery are borrowed from individual sciences and *then* are put to the test of philosophy. This method implies the premise that all purely philosophical ideas have long been formulated and theoretical philosophy *per se* is nowadays objectless – unless it makes itself its object (metaphilosophy). Something like this was suggested by Immanuel Kant when he stated that one could teach philosophizing, not philosophy, and that the very figure of the philosopher becomes ephemeral. ‘The mathematician, the natural philosopher, and the logician, however successful the two former may have been in their advances in the field of rational knowledge, and the two latter more especially in philosophical knowledge, are yet only artificers in the field of reason. There is a teacher, [conceived] in the ideal, who sets them their tasks, and employs them as instruments, to further the essential ends of human reason. Him alone we must call philosopher; but as he nowhere exists, while the idea of his legislation is to be found in that reason with which every

human being is endowed, we shall keep entirely to the latter' (KrV A838/B866; Kant, 2003: 659).

And still the aimlessness of philosophy proves to be a form of its freedom. It acquires a 'methodological object quality' that enables it to absorb the results of other types of knowledge (science, mythology, literature, religion, practical daily experience) in the form of philosophical interpretation, using them as pieces for putting together jigsaw puzzles, drawing new vistas, constructing mazes. It thereby poses philosophical problems before the participants of the interdisciplinary discourse, using their own metaphors and analogies. From the theoretical nucleus of interdisciplinary knowledge, epistemology changes into a form of methodological communication: the philosopher turns from a generator of ideas into a mediator or moderator of the discourse. It is mostly owing to him that the process of cultural synthesis continues under the conditions of competition between cognitive and discourse practices.

Epistemological empiricism is shaped by the mutually additive, though competing, results of sciences studying cognition and also by extra-academic resources (religion, mythology, art, daily life). Subsequently, the patterns and notions are transferred from specialized sciences and extra-academic approaches to epistemology. However, this not so much guarantees the scientific nature of philosophy as imposes certain scientific metaphors on it. Under such conditions, the interdisciplinary approach assumes the form of two distinct – though equally dangerous for philosophy – challenges: the 'naturalistic ideology' that requires supplanting epistemology with specialized sciences and the 'new eclecticism' that enables one to have recourse equally to rationalism and Tao, to the truth and PR, to a scientific method and mystic rapture. Substantially expanding the sphere and boundaries of epistemology, interdisciplinary approaches at the same time focus our attention on those boundaries: the latter drift before our very eyes, passing beyond any conceivable horizon (Kasavin, 2004a). Philosophy will be able to play a significant role in interdisciplinary interaction only if it retains the intrinsic properties that define it – a philosophy under the guise of one of the sciences would be of little value for philosophers and scientists alike. Let us remind the reader that the diverse intellectual resources of philosophy are incomparably richer than those at the disposal of any other academic discipline. Real philosophers handle those resources creatively and with care: the inner interaction between philosophy and history of philosophy constitutes an integral part of philosophy as such. So beyond the sphere of philosophy, in the context of interdisciplinary interaction, in the collision of science and non-science, philosophy turns out to be a matchless form of communication – albeit not the only one. The method of philosophical reflection, which immerses every problem into a context and calls any context into question, is a unique means of understanding the very diverse types of knowledge and consciousness. No one, apart from the philosopher, takes such a long-term and profound interest in the complex, dynamic, human-sized objects that science discovered only recently. No one, apart from the philosopher, cultivates openly the endeavor to achieve universal synthesis, even though the latter might manifest itself in distorted forms. None other than the philosopher is able to experience the full horror and wonder of the infinite starry sky above his head and the mystery of the moral law within us, of the actual limitations and the limitless capacity of human cognition.

As we have seen, the phenomenon of interdisciplinary approach emerges as one of the most important epistemological situations, which is pregnant with all sorts of consequences. One of these is a total abandonment of philosophical epistemology. Another involves preserving those goals and values which epistemology formulates and towards which it is oriented. Those very goals and values imply the development of a theoretical nucleus of a philosophical world-view as a reflective, critical, rational and creative discourse – a discourse that is at once specialized, borderline and transgressive as regards all boundaries.

4. Contextualism as an interdisciplinary methodological program

The method of philosophical contextualization is based on the notion of context, which is widely used in the humanities, philosophy and everyday language. For instance, the methodological program of philosophical hermeneutics, which became an expression of the linguistic turn in epistemology, is organized around the notions of comprehension and interpretation that are clarified by addressing the notion of 'context'. The program in question is not restricted to hermeneutics, showing a pronounced trend towards interdisciplinary approach. The notion of context became the stock-in-trade of epistemology, linguistics, social anthropology, psychology, history of science, cognitive science, history of philosophy and even theology. We may, accordingly, speak of various types of contextualism that correlate and interact with each other. However, their analysis shows that the notion of context is far from being clarified completely. The inconspicuousness of the notion of 'context' becomes the focus of theoretical attention only when we draw a distinction between the specifically scientific theories of context and the philosophical problematization of that notion. The object of context theories is constituted by various types of integrity and relations of the phenomenon studied, its inclusion in language, in the current activity and communication situation, in local cultures and the universal culture. But when the notion of 'context' is handled by philosophy, it encounters the following questions.

Firstly, the correct understanding of a word involves taking into account its various contexts. If so, its meaning, at the most, is in fact a conglomerate of loosely interconnected sense elements. How then can we preserve the meaning's identity, when the word in question turns out to be so vague and multivalent? How can we ensure the validity and coherence of comprehension and mutual understanding?

Besides, the genesis and functioning of a certain cultural phenomenon (in art, religion, science, etc.) is defined by a number of determinants, or contexts. However, the phenomenon in question is also characterized by its own identity, by its difference from its contexts. What then are the boundaries of reductionism in a contextual explanation? Can we reduce the expounded phenomenon to a sum of contexts – e.g., can science be reduced to the historical conditions of its formation?

Finally, let us assume that every theory depends on the academic, social and cultural context proper to it. Are different theories, including ones widely distant historically and culturally, then comparable? Is their independent, true appraisal, their rational choice at all possible?

Discussion of these questions enhances our understanding of eternal philosophi-

cal problems hidden behind such terms as 'sense', 'explanation' or 'truth'; it is also conducive to the elucidation of concrete methodological dilemmas confronting individual sciences.

Context in hermeneutics

The notion of context receives no explicit thematization within the framework of hermeneutics. However, the problems of the individuality of the speaking and comprehending subject (F. Schleiermacher), the history, tradition and language of hermeneutical experience (H.-G. Gadamer) and all similar concepts articulate the contexts of the hermeneutical subject; despite all their differences, they are analogous to certain concepts of theoretical linguistics.

According to Schleiermacher, every act of understanding is a reversal of speech act. The aim of hermeneutics is to demonstrate how various senses of words, given at the level of a language, are being concretized in the process of their use in speech, turning into meanings. Schleiermacher distinguishes two processes of interpretation. The 'grammatical' (or 'objective') interpretation consists of linguistic analysis of the language form of a text, of the correct use of a word; it involves revealing the author's true meaning. The 'technical' ('psychological', 'subjective') interpretation is aimed at uncovering the author's personality, with all its specifics, at explaining his style as a wholeness of his language and his ideas; it seeks to 'transform' the interpreter into the author. Depending on the interpreter's standpoint, the contexts of the first order are specific conditions and prerequisites proper to him (his personal knowledge, language abilities, his talent for understanding human character). The contexts of the second order become uncovered in the very process of interpretation, which is aimed at understanding the elemental force of language in the vortex of the whole and its parts through the study of the external relations of language – and vice versa. It is in language that the immediate contexts of a text are constructed, and it is by means of language that its indirect prerequisites and contexts are reconstructed. Contexts alone, creating the meaning of a text, reveal the text as such.

Gadamer formulates the notion of a hermeneutical situation and the principle of the influence of history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*); these express the historicity of contexts which makes understanding possible. He defines his *Wirkungsgeschichte* as a clash between the traditions of the object and the interpreter's individual historicity. A situation appears as a location that restricts one's vision. That which can be seen is a horizon, a range of sight that includes and delimits everything visible from this specific vantage point. Language, according to Gadamer, is the basis of all experience. The historicity and finality of language determine more than just our access to the universe: in language, traditions (in which we encounter historicity of any kind) and hermeneutical situations (in which we are 'built-in') are given a well thought-out image. 'Existence open to understanding is language' (Gadamer, 1965: 450; *GW*, I: 478). To sum up: tradition, the influence of history, horizon, hermeneutical situation, language are those contexts in which meanings are produced and hermeneutical experience (or the process of cognition of cultural phenomena) takes place.

Context in analytical tradition

While a hermeneutical one, the problem of context is not restricted to the continental (German-language) hermeneutical tradition. Interpreted as philosophy of language, hermeneutics also becomes widespread in analytical (linguistic) philosophy, for which the notion of context turns out to be equally significant. Contemporary analytical discussions of the problem of context derive from the competition between three extremely influential concepts. These latter are normally associated with David Hume (skepticism), George Moore (common sense) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (context). Contextualism stresses the dependence of sense and meaning of language units on their inclusion in syntactical, semantic and pragmatic systems, on usage, cultural and historical situations. Skepticism tends to carry the program of conceptualism to the extremes of relativism. The philosophy of common sense, on the contrary, denies the necessity of contextual approach. Thus, contemporary epistemological contextualism emerged as an answer both to the skeptical denial of the possibility of knowing the universe around us, and to the simplistic substantiation of such knowledge. In its contemporary analytical version, contextualism attempts to find some common ground with skepticism, while demonstrating the validity of conventional cognition. It is achieved by means of singling out different contexts of reasoning and distinguishing epistemological criteria (stronger and weaker ones) corresponding to them. Thus, the conflict between the three standpoints in question is imaginary – to be more exact, it is a product of the dynamics of our knowledge.

Context in psychology

Karl Bühler was one of the first psychologists to have grasped the significance of context in cognition. He formulated the ‘theory of surroundings’, or of linguistic milieu (*Umfeldtheorie*): ‘One does not have to be an expert to understand that the most important and the most significant environment of a linguistic symbol is represented by its context; the individual manifests itself in a relationship with its other counterparts, and this relationship functions in the capacity of surroundings, full of dynamics and influence’ (Bühler, 1965: 155). Here Bühler proclaims his adherence to the Gestalt-theoretical paradigm, according to which individual elements tend to form mutable whole entities and are experienced in the context of these latter. The transfer of Gestalt theory from psychology to language theory (e.g., the notion of *Feld*, ‘field’, was borrowed from the theory of color) signified that individual linguistic phenomena came to be regarded not in isolation from one another but only in relation to the whole entities that dominate them.

A similar point of view was being defended, roughly during the same period, by Lev Semionovich Vygotsky: ‘A word takes in, absorbs from the entire context, with which it is interwoven, intellectual and affective contents; it begins to mean more and less than its meaning contains when considered by itself and outside its context: more, because the range of its meanings expands, acquiring a large number of new spheres filled with new contents; less, because the abstract meaning of the word becomes limited and narrowed down by that which the word signifies exclusively in

this context ... In this respect, the sense of a word is inexhaustible ... A word acquires its sense only in a sentence, the sentence itself acquires its sense only in the context of a paragraph, the paragraph, in the context of a book, and the book, in the context of the author's work in its entirety' (Vygotsky, 1956: 370).

Context in social anthropology and linguistics

Contemporary social anthropology endeavors to explain and realize the entire social and cultural diversity in existence. Its principal method is to locate individual social phenomena in the framework of a broader comparative context. The following dimensions of that context can be distinguished:

- setting: the social and spatial limits within which various kinds of interaction take place;
- behavioral environment: the way in which the participants in the interaction use their bodies and behavior as resources for the 'framing' and organization of conversation (gesticulation, posture, look);
- language as context: the way in which the conversation (or text) itself voices or produces a context for another conversation or text;
- extra-situational context: understanding a verbal exchange requires a background knowledge which goes far beyond the limits of a topical conversation and immediate setting.

During the 1990s, social sciences experienced an ethnological turn. The so-called 'qualitative methodology' is a special anthropological innovation in the inventory of socio-humanitarian knowledge. The purpose of this methodology is to provide new possibilities for the understanding of cognitive, emotional and behavioral development, as well as of those problems that characterize contemporary society at large. Qualitative methods offer a wide choice of means ranging from included observation to the hermeneutical processing of text. Positioning qualitative ethnological research at the center of socio-scientific knowledge, anthropologists pointedly demonstrate the epistemological importance of the notion of context (as well as of the notions of meaning and subjectivity) in behavioral sciences.

However, in its ideas of context, contemporary social anthropology proceeds from time-honored traditions of the British school of 'contextualism' that emerged in the works of Bronislaw Malinowski and John R. Firth in the 1930s. That school summed up certain ideas which had already been expressed by Wilhelm von Humboldt and Ferdinand de Saussure, and foreshadowed the object that later became the focus of special attention of interpretative anthropology and sociolinguistics (functional linguistics).

At first, Malinowski believed that the dependence of a language on the sphere of its use is a feature peculiar to primitive or prehistoric languages. However, he later changed his standpoint: 'the true understanding of words is always, in the long run, derived from the experience of activity in those aspects of reality to which these words refer' (Malinowski, 1935: 58). This is what may be termed 'context of situation'. Beyond it lies that which may be called 'cultural context'; a word's defini-

tion partly consists in attributing it to the context of culture. Language, as a system of lexicon and grammar, refers to the context of culture; instances of language use – specific texts and their elements – refer to the context of situation. Both contexts are beyond the boundaries of language.

Linguists, though never giving a clear-cut formulation of ‘situational context’, have been gradually shifting to an understanding of its necessity, since the term ‘text’ ceased to be confined to the written word and no longer described primarily the results of work of long-dead authors; so they turned to oral language, to the study of dialects. Here they had to take into account such factors as the relation of speech to the speaker’s personality, objects and events within his sphere of attention (the linguistic definition of an extra-linguistic situation is ‘exophoric deixis’). Thus, to quote Halliday (1999: 4), a notable British linguist, ‘situation was likened to a text surrounding the span of the discourse being spoken’. This quotation from the famous linguist contains important analytical differentiation between text and context, between live speech (connected to its contexts and the process of its creation directly and obviously, and independently of the observer) and text (existing only within its media, separately from extra-linguistic contexts and from the process of its creation). (On the distinctions between the terms ‘discourse’ and ‘text,’ see also Kasavin, 2004b.)

The notion of the cultural context of language as a system was, on the other hand, articulated much more completely by Sapir and Whorf. Without using the actual expression ‘context of culture’, Sapir effectively interpreted language as an expression of the speaker’s mental life. Proceeding from this, he and Whorf developed their concept of interaction between language and culture (the ‘Sapir-Whorf hypothesis’). According to that hypothesis, language (since it developed as part of any human culture) functioned as a primary means by which the basic perceptions and inter-subjective experience of individuals were being confirmed and translated into social reality. In this sense, culture offers a linguistic context in which words and grammatical systems are interpreted. The systems of meanings that hide deep beneath the surface of grammatical structures and can be discovered only by means of a thorough grammatical analysis were called by Whorf ‘cryptotypes’.

The two principal traditions of the contextual study of language – the British and the American – complement one another substantially. The former focuses on situation as a context of language in the capacity of text; language is regarded here as a form of activity, as the realization of social relations and processes. The latter focuses on culture as a context of language in the capacity of system; language is understood here as a form of reflection, as the incorporation of experience into theory or into a model of reality.

Context theories, as presented in a number of humanities, are bound to fail on account of contexts and situations being countless. This is typical of Clifford Geertz’s interpretive anthropology. It offers no more than a typological frame that, in the process of textual analysis, demands of the interpreter concretization defined by the specifics of contextual relations. This means that no theory of context as a closed system is possible. Because of this, contemporary linguists often declare the notion of context trivial and even meaningless, since (as they reason) there is no single sentence that can be endowed with meaning outside its context. There remains only

the construction of models of the process of interpretation, in which context plays a major part, and the consequent deduction of some results for the theory of language acts. This is the skeptical conclusion reached by the critically minded linguists who realize the limits of theorizing in their domain. Maintaining a balance between science and art remains, therefore, the inevitable strategy of contextual reconstruction. Its methodology is far from being algorithmic: rather, it is situational.

For a meaningful epistemological use of the term 'context', we have to create its typological definition based on the various forms in which language manifests itself and on the various forms of social relations. This is a special task which is still far from completion. It is probable that a philosophical notion of context might be formulated not so much through summing up the linguistic, anthropological and psychological meanings of that term as by means of its contextual definition in the system of such notions as text, discourse, knowledge, culture and sociality.

While engaged in socio-cultural interpretation of a certain element of knowledge, the epistemologist is inspired by those diverse meanings with which that element becomes intertwined, being transformed from an epistemological abstraction into a cultural object. However, he forgets that any contextualization is a localization, a transition from the potential diversity of senses to their actual limitedness, a transition from the general to the specific. Applied by itself, this method leads one from philosophical generalization to specialized academic, interdisciplinary description – namely, to that which is, in theory, to be the point of departure of philosophical reflection and which becomes its involuntary, albeit not final, result. The glamour of contextualism needs a philosophical context, the latter being an appeal to the absolute. Philosophy as such is a thought against the background of the absolute. Attention to context, in its turn, makes it possible for us to demonstrate that the absolute is more than just a spirit moving 'upon the face' of 'the mind' – it is filled with human, cultural and historical content which always seeks to go beyond its own borders, into the interdisciplinary space of philosophical discourse.

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Translated from the Russian into English by A. Kovalev

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