

“Context is all” (Margaret Atwood). Does this mean that there is no such thing as truth?

Tracing the quote “context is all” from Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, to its predecessor would lead to a quote from one of William Shakespeare’s plays. A paraphrase from Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, states, “Ripeness is all”. This was a request for a kiss, which was normal under normal circumstances. However, under the circumstances it was said in, the saying was rather perverted and racy.

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“Context is all”, when Margaret Atwood wrote this, she was probably speaking of literature, owing to the fact that she was a novelist. When applied to literature context IS all. When applied to other areas of knowledge, the answer may not be so clear.

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What is the meaning of “truth”? “The criterion of truth is that it works even if nobody is prepared to acknowledge it”, Ludwig von Mises. Truth is a term used very loosely for a word mankind has been striving to define accurately. Truth has various meanings in various situations. There is no single definition of truth about which the majority of philosophers agree. Various theories of truth, commonly involving different definitions of "truth", continue to be debated.

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Different contexts and situations have different truths. Decades ago, the earth being flat was accepted as a truth, now, the truth is that the earth is a

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sphere (stretched outwards at the center). The difference in time and situation, between which many technological advances took place, created the different truths.

In literature (or language), the context forms the characters, world, time and place of the scene. The context also gives us the truths of the scene. We can choose not to accept the truths as our own, but in novels, no one is asking us to. In a novel, where the writer has created another world that one may never understand, context is all a person has to find truth.

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Peoples' own truth may not be the same as the truth within the context read. Herbert Spencer said "How often misused words generate misleading thoughts". This implies that different truths can be interpreted in different ways through the same language.

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Truth in math for a mathematician may be the fact that $2 + 2$ will always give us 4. This agrees with Ludwig von Mises' definition for truth. No matter where you do this calculation or who you are, the answer to $2 + 2$ should be 4. The answer is there; one just has to find it.

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Math is an area of knowledge where context is limited, not by lack of words or numbers but by freedom. To say that context is all in math is to say that 2 people can have 2 different answers to $2 + 2$, which there cannot or should not be. Different mathematical context can give you the same mathematical truth (the answer), but the same context must result in the same answer.

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Math is based on rational formulas which give us specific answers, but the truths in rationalism may be different from the truths of math.

If one thinks that we can ascertain truth by thinking and by the process of reflection only, you may be a rationalist. Rationalism uses reason to come a conclusion, if A and B are true, one is inclined to accepting C, here's an example: 45

A) All humans are mortal

B) I am human

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C) I am mortal

Therefore the truth in reasoning is based upon the validity of the argument. Context in the reasoning leads us to the conclusion, so the application of "context is all" in reasoning is relatively accurate.

No emperors are dentists

All children fear dentists

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No children fear emperors

The context of the argument led to the conclusion. These rationalisms may be as absurd as a person wants them to be. The natural sciences are not all that different as they were created by humans and their lack of accuracy leads to different outcomes and possibilities. 60

In my opinion the natural sciences are one of humankind's greatest achievements. Many things are said to be "scientifically proven". However, Albert Einstein once said, "Science does not give us the taste of the soup". I believe he was absolutely correct in saying this.

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In a sense, context can provide one with the "taste" of the soup. Never the less, context used in natural sciences is limited so as not to perceive a different truth. The limitation placed on the truths in science is such that the word used in a different context cannot mean a different thing. The definitions are as rigid as possible to lessen misconceptions. The natural sciences are based upon fact.

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Theories can be demonstrated and repeated time and time again. They may be accepted as truth. Centuries ago, it was accepted as truth that the world was flat, though it wasn't. If context was all in science, a brilliantly written thesis about how humans evolved from trees may be accepted as truth. The words truth and fact are not as interchangeable as they may seem.

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Some quotes do a fine job defining the human sciences:-

"Trying to define yourself is like trying to bite your own teeth", Allan Watts.

"Economics is extremely useful as a form of employment for economists", John Kenneth Galbraith.

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The human sciences are sets of rules that try to predict accurately what cannot be predicted. Human sciences can only provide us with suggestions

of what may be the effect of a certain cause. Human sciences provide averages or educated guesses based upon historical facts. In law, which is a human science, the aim is to make context as controlled as possible so as not to obtain a different meaning. Law is written to have only one meaning, but many words have more than one meaning, therefore, laws can be bent without being broken.

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The truth in human sciences is based largely upon opinions or opinions we accept as facts. Any statements in science are either positive or normative. Positive statements provide facts and normative statements go beyond fact and have a certain value. Context is therefore a factor which human sciences depended on to reach a certain truth.

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The arts are not just limited to paintings. It is difficult to say that everything is art but the line that separates what art is or is not, may not be so obvious.

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Truth is too simple a term for the arts, if a certain truth is set for the arts, then the arts become less artistic by having defining boundaries placed around it. Artistic context are the colors of a painting, the words of a poem or the clay of a sculpture. Context is what makes art... art. I believe that truth is not expected in art. Art allows a lot of freedom to the artist, but historians must work with facts and artifacts to put together a story that is supported by evidence.

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“What is history but a fable agreed upon”, Napoleon Bonaparte. History is not as different from a story as people might think. The difference is that novels are expected to be false and may have no proof while history has some evidence which it has to create a story around. History cannot be one hundred percent accurate.

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The recent history of some shop may be perfectly recalled with the use of a camera, but it is insignificant. When written, historians must have a certain amount of imaginative abilities to be able to link clues together. Historical context contains some truth that may be backed up by evidence or artifacts, as to whether the links are true or not is a debatable matter. Context in history is all we have to believe or not believe a certain truth.

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Feelings, emotion and intuition are all, more or less, “in your head”. We know how something feels through sensory receptors that link up to our brains.

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Emotions are also a mental function, though many like to think they are in the heart. Intuition, or “following your gut” is also purely mental. Emotions are not as easily classified or defined.

T'oegye (A Korean philosopher), once said that the seven emotions were

1. Pleasure
2. Anger
3. Sorrow
4. Joy
5. Love
6. Hate

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7. Desire

Hsun Tzu, a Chinese philosopher, defined six emotions

1. Fondness
2. Dislike
3. Delight
4. Anger
5. Sadness
6. Joy

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This immediately notifies us of a language barrier and difference. When, written, different emotion or feelings can mean different things. Is there any truth in feelings, emotions or intuition?

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Therefore, truth is found in context. This includes the fact that it changes as contexts change, and a different truth is perceived. "Context is all", (Margaret Atwood) is true only in one case, that of literature. However, by no means does it mean that there is no such thing as truth.

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