

## Text and Context

### Introduction

There is a stark contradiction between theory and practice. Reality is not the same as appearance and appearance is not reality. This statement is true in the case of books as well. When one reads any book, one must read between the lines and go beyond words and figures. From time to time, scholars and social scientists have raised the question of how to interpret a text. The moot question is whether it is possible to lay down any general or specific rules about how to decipher a text. For this, one must understand what is text and what is its interpretation.

According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, text means 'the main printed part of a book or magazine, not the notes or pictures,' or 'any form of written material, or the written form of a speech, a play and an article'. In other words, any written word, sentence, paragraph, story, novel or any book may be considered as a text. Text is different from the spoken words and covers a wide range of written expressions. However, some postmodernists of the deconstruction strain define text as to encompass not just written words, but also the entire spectrum of symbols and phenomena. The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines interpretation as 'the way in which someone explains or understands an event, information or someone's actions,' or 'the way in which someone performs a play or even a piece of music, and shows what they think and feel about it'. Interpretation varies from person to person, from one scholar to another and from one philosopher to another. Interpretation differs in terms of time and space. Interpretation is also relative. There are many ways of reading a text. The two most popular methods are the textual and the contextual.

1 In the textual method, the reader needs only to read the text in order to understand its meaning. The writer in his/her wisdom makes an all out effort to convey to the reader



whatever he/she wishes to convey and there is, therefore, no need to even identify the writer of the text, or even when and under what social and political circumstances it was written. According to Daniel Chandler, there are three ways in which the textual method is interpreted. According to objectivists, the meaning of the text 'is contained' in the text and must be 'extracted' by the reader. Such a model of communication is 'transmission', i.e., the meaning of a text can be transmitted from the sender to the passive receiver. The second type of textual reading is 'constructivist', where in method, a text is an interaction between writers and readers. This means that a text cannot speak for itself. It needs the reader and writer. The other method of reading text is 'subjectivist', which believes that meaning is entirely in its interpretation by readers, that it is 'recreated'. Andrew Huggan supports the textual approach. According to him, the 'Great Books' are timeless for both causal and ethical theories. First, they can go a long way towards explaining the political situation of today. They do this because of its universal application. For example, Aristotle's writings on the role of middle class, or on the causes of revolution, can tell us much about those phenomena in the Indian society. Second, various classics prescribe norms which are as worthy of attention now as they were never before. For example, J. S. Mill's views on liberty and Plato's ideas of justice have enchanted the people in every age. Textualists highlight the eternal, universal issues and the timeless problems and solutions found in the classic texts. The texts can be and should be studied autonomously without referring to the socio-historical context of their origin. For example, Plamenatz focuses on the text, because in the classic texts the general problems of life of man are discussed in a style which is particular to its author. Leo Strauss emphatically writes that political philosophy is a non-historical endeavour. The classic texts should be interpreted while keeping in mind the eternal and universal principles.

2 In the contextual method, while reading a text, one must keep in mind the social and historical environment in which the text was written. It attempts to understand a philosopher's position in terms of its relation to the intellectual movements of its time and those earlier philosophies that may have influenced its development. The contextual approach leads to the development of transferable skills and stimulus to critical thinking. M. J. Osborne in the article *The History of Philosophy and the History of Philosophy: A Plea for Textual History in Context*, said that contextual studies could be of two types: focusing upon the content of other philosophical ideas surrounding a philosophical argument; and focusing upon the social and historical context within which a philosopher has developed his arguments. The context is important and useful because it helps us in two ways. First it throws light on some hidden meaning in the book which would not otherwise be revealed. Secondly, it is important in so far as it emphasizes the totality of social process in which the world is integrally related to consciousness as a part of this process. In other words, a context has two aspects. First comes the objective and subjective, and second, the intellectual history of the society.

In the succeeding pages, Terence Ball on *Reappraising Political Theory* and Quentin Skinner on *Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas* have discussed the matter in great detail.



## ***Terence Ball on Reappraising Political Theory<sup>1</sup>***

Terence Ball is a leading political theorist who has contributed immensely to the theory of interpretation. Ball, in his work, *Handbook of Political Theory* wrote that 'Interpretation is, so to speak, a kind of triangulation between the text and two (or more) interpretations of it. Hence, we cannot but take others' interpretations into account, reappraising their adequacy and value.' Terence Ball gave his own strategy for interpretation in his prominent work, *Reappraising Political Theory*, published in 1995. An important hypothesis of this book is that if the horizon of knowledge and wisdom is to be expanded ceaselessly, we have to engage ourselves in the task of reappraising, reinterpreting and even reinventing political theory on a continuous basis. His article *Reappraising Political Theory* has been paraphrased below for the readers.

## ***Need and the Way to Study a Classic***

The question arises as to why scholars specializing in political theory continue to write about the classics or the great thinkers, of the past. Why no one had a last word on Plato, Aristotle, Kautilya, Rousseau, Mill, Marx or Gandhi? Why could we not have a definitive work about these classics of politics? Why has there been so much fuss about understanding and/or interpreting these great texts in the right context? Why should we read or bother to revise them or their interpretations instead of going straight to the text and see the articles and books about the great political thinkers in order to survive as academicians in the age of publish or perish?

These were often repeated yet unsettling questions to which one could hardly provide satisfactory answers except for the eternal value of the classics for understanding the most fundamental questions regarding the origin and nature of man, society and state. One would also argue about the perennial fascination of classic works for succeeding generations of scholars, each of which reads them anew and from their own point as well as the world view. Further, these classics comprise political and literary traditions, which one renews and enriches by reading, analyzing and criticizing textually as well as contextually.

However, these answers could never fully satisfy any one. Firstly, scientifically minded political scientists complained that the worship of long-dead thinkers was impeding the development of genuinely scientific theories of political behaviour. Nowadays, however, such criticisms come more often from quarters that one would normally expect to be sympathetic to the historical study of political thought. Among them are advocates and practitioners of analytical political philosophy, some of whom see a sustained and systematic interest in the history of political thought as an antiquarian distraction and an obstacle to our thinking for ourselves in more modern and, presumably, more fruitful ways about the pressing political concerns of our own time. They tend to favour not the historical study and interpretation of old texts, but the application of economic, rational choice and game-theoretic models and theories to questions of freedom, justice, political participation, and other con-



Hobbes became a proto-rational choice theorist and the Hobbesian state of nature a model of decision-making under conditions of perfect rationality and imperfect information; and Kautilya became a guide to a perfect art of statesmanship and administration.

A second set of objections comes from proponents of multiculturalism in the modern curriculum. We should not, they say, be in the thrall of old books by dead white men, since these canonical texts tend to preserve and legitimize the power of living white males, and to marginalize the views of women, blacks, gays and other minorities. The imperative need they feel and argue, first is to deconstruct this canon in order to show how it functions to empower some while disempowering or oppressing others; and then to discard, or at least delegitimize and move to the margins, the very idea that there are classic works in political theory that have made a careful study by both sexes, regardless of race or nationality or sexual preference.

Such sweeping criticism has, usually, provoked protest from defenders of the great books and the timeless truths that they teach to the fortunate few. The disciples of late Leo Strauss have been particularly vocal on this score and have also succeeded in conforming closely to the stereotype or caricature created by postmodern critics of the texts comprising the canon.

### *The Inescapability of Interpretation*

Consider first the matter of method. There is in modern academic discourse much ado about one's method or approach to the interpretation of texts. Being aware of, and attentive to, matters of method is no doubt necessary, and to proceed methodically is surely an admirable trait for a scholar (as indeed it could be for a motor mechanic or a carpenter or anyone who practices a skilled craft). The danger is that these means have a way of becoming ends in themselves: method becomes methodology, and a driving force in its own right. Hence, Terence Ball feels that ours is for better or worse an age in which method precedes matter and sometimes pre-empts substance. If one's enquiries are to be both intelligible and legitimate, one must conform to the norms of one's own age and culture, and ours requires that one to begin by describing and defending one's method or approach.

Any reappraisal or interpretation of a text, theory, philosophy—textual or contextual—has to begin with a belief that interpretation is both inescapable and necessary. Next, several strategies of interpretation compete for attention and even, one might say, allegiance as to be considered and even debated. One may find several of these strategies to be mutually compatible, in as much as each answer to quite different but entirely legitimate interests. Therefore, one may have to look for a problem-centred and multi-method approach to interpretation, leading to reappraisals and, at times, revisionist critiques or interpretations.

Disputes over interpretation are almost certainly as old as the human species itself. Although unwritten, the first 'texts'—omens and portents, animal bones and entrails—had to be 'read' and their meaning made clear. Later still, the singers of tales told and retold stories whose meaning was interpreted and reinterpreted from one generation to another. With the advent of the written word came new and even more intractable problems of