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HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING AND HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION AS CONTEXTUALIZATION

[ABSTRACT] The paper discusses the theoretical problems pertaining to the relationship between historical contextualization and historical understanding and interpretation. On the one hand, there is the view that documents need to be understood in relation to their historical context; on the other, it is not clear how a historian can get out of his or her own historical context in order to be able to engage with the conceptual frameworks, beliefs or ways of reasoning that are radically different from his or her own. The paper proposes a resolution to this dilemma; its upshot is that historical understanding is constituted by contextualization. [ABSTRACT ENDS]

KEYWORDS: Historical understanding, Historical interpretation, Historical context, Intentionalism, Hermeneutic circle

Aquinas's interpretative principle that *Quicquid recipitur, ad modum recipientis recipitur*—whatever is received, can be received only in accordance with the capacity of the recipient—stands in the center of a major dilemma present in every attempt to understand and interpret historical documents. On the one hand, one needs to interpret them in relation to their historical context, which presumably differs from the historian's own by its conceptual frameworks, fundamental beliefs or reasoning principles. (Why would someone worry about contextualization if other contexts were not genuinely different?) On the other, the content cannot be intelligible to the historian if the conceptual frameworks, fundamental beliefs or reasoning principles they derive from are so different from the historian's own that he or she cannot understand them. (How could a historian grasp ideas based on a conceptual framework that he or she does not share?) But then, how can one claim to be dealing with a *different* conceptual framework or context, if one shares it or participates in it? It follows that it is either pointless to contextualize, or that it is impossible to understand anything outside one's own context.

The aim of this article is to present a resolution of these dilemmas. Its theoretical framework is based on the conception of intentionality argued by John Searle, while the resolution of the dilemma relies on the understanding of languages (and other systems of communication) as sets of beliefs.¹ This latter

¹ Among analytic philosophers, a version of the dilemma was mentioned by Donald Davidson in his "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" in Donald Davidson, *The Essential Davidson* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006), 196-208. However, Davidson does not separate thought and the tools of communication, while in this article I base the solution of the problem precisely on their sharp

idea was originally proposed by Tim Crane and Trevor Pateman. The important advantage of this approach, I argue here, is that it resolves dilemmas pertaining to contextualization described above that normally make it very hard to explain the understanding and interpretation of historical documents.

1. Prologue. History of the problem

The dilemma between the claim that the reasoning capacities of historical figures are relative to their historical context and the need to postulate their trans-historical rationality in order to (claim to) understand historical figures' beliefs, actions and statements, was a major problem for the hermeneutic and historicist traditions.

Wilhelm Dilthey in his *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt* famously argued that the individual is to be understood within the context of his community.² Every action or thought has its meaning through its relationship to the totality of the epoch or time.³ Since the context determines the individual, history can study only the contextualizations of individuals. (228) But if this is so, then it is not clear how to explain the historian's own understanding. If the historian's own social context determines his or her worldview, then how can the historian understand the worldviews of the past? Unexpectedly, Dilthey explains that when interpreting historical past, one relies on that which is immutable in time and has universal human validity.⁴ In other words, some aspects of human experience still turn out to be independent of their historical contexts and they constitute the only possible object of a historian's study.

Ernst Troeltsch in his *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* was prepared to rely on occult forces in order to avoid the same problem.⁵ It is only in the context

separation. (See Donald Davidson, "Thought and Talk," in Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 155-170 and my analysis of his position in Branko Mitrović, "Intentionalism, Intentionality and Reporting Beliefs," *History and Theory* 48, (Oct. 2009), 180-198, note 13.

² Wilhelm Dilthey, *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1981), 186.

³ "Es ist die Aufgabe der historischen Analysis, in den konkreten Zwecken, Werten, Denkart die Übereinstimmung in einem Gemeinsamen aufzufinden, das die Epoche regiert. ... So hat also jede Handlung, jeder Gedanke, jedes gemeinsame Schaffen, kurz jeder Teil dieses historischen Ganzen seine *Bedeutsamkeit* durch sein Verhältnis zu dem Ganzen der Epoche oder des Zeitalters. Und wenn nun der Historiker urteilt, so stellt er fest, was der Einzelne in diesem Zusammenhang geleistet hat, wiefern etwa sein Blick und sein Tun schon hinausreichte über ihn." *Ibid.*, 189. Similarly: "Der Einzelne, die Richtung, die Gemeinschaft haben ihre *Bedeutung* in diesem Ganzen [die Konzentration der ganzen Kultur eines Zeitraums in sich selbst] nach ihrem inneren Verhältnis zum Geist der Zeit. Und da nun jedes Individuum in einen solchen Zeitraum eingeordnet ist, so folgt weiter, daß die Bedeutung desselben für die Geschichte in diesem seinem Bezug zu der Zeit liegt. Diejenige Personen, welche in dem Zeitraum kraftvoll fortschreiten, sind die Führer der Zeit, ihre Repräsentanten." *Ibid.*, 218.

⁴ "Die Auffassung der Wirkungszusammenhanges, den die Geschichte bildet, an denen zusammengehörige Reste der Vergangenheit durch die Beziehung zur Lebenserfahrung im Verstehen miteinander verbunden werden; was uns in der Nähe umgibt, wird uns zum Verständnismittel des Entfernten und Vergangenen. Die Bedingung für diese Interpretation der historischen Reste ist, daß das, was wir in sie hineinragen, den Charakter der Beständigkeit in der Zeit und der allgemein-menschlichen Geltung hat." *Ibid.*, 196.

⁵ Ernst Troeltsch, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme. Erstes Buch: Das logische Problem der Geschichtsphilosophie* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr 1922).

of a greater totality, such as a family, class or nation that human individuals can be understood, he says. (33) These totalities are marked by their own shared spirit (*Gemeingeist*), constituted by a consciousness that is external to participating individuals. (46) Only metaphysics, Troeltsch says, can explain a historian's capacity to comprehend the individuals that belong to the groups in which he does not participate (71): the historian's understanding is enabled by the same Total Consciousness (*Allbewußtsein*) that, he claims, also explains the works of poets and occultist phenomena. (684) Ultimately, there must exist an extra-human spiritual force that enables historians' trans-contextual understanding.

Hans Georg Gadamer in his *Wahrheit und Methode* endeavored to overcome these problems by arguing that texts belonging to one context (horizon) are understood from the perspective of another horizon through "the fusion of horizons."⁶ He emphasized the historicity of the historian by criticizing the historicist assumption that one can simply project oneself into another historical horizon. (302, 304) The understanding of the past must be based on the fusion of the horizons of the historian and the historical figures he or she is writing about. (311) But the notorious problem is that the meaning of Gadamer's phrase "fusion of horizons" remains unclear; he never explains how such "fusion" works nor does he provide its examples.⁷ E. D. Hirsch pointed out that the "fusion of horizons" rather exemplifies the problem than solves it; it remains unclear how an interpreter can fuse his or her own horizon with that of the text without appropriating in some form the latter and abandoning one's own.⁸ In his view, "this intermediate perspective can no longer possess the meaning it pretends to carry."⁹

Modern historians have been equally unsuccessful in avoiding the problem. Martin Jay thus states: "surely, there is no self-evident transcendental version of rationality that can be applied historically and across cultures under all circumstances."¹⁰ The statement seems plausible as long as one does not ask how historians can grasp, interpret or report the content of the statements made in the contexts in which, for instance, such contents did not consist of concepts and propositions. The simple answer is that they cannot—and if one cannot grasp, interpret or report (that is, register) the contents that were motivated by a radically different rationality, then it is also unclear how one can even know that such alternative rationality was operational in some historical contexts.

The aim of this paper is to solve this conundrum. The problem obviously requires careful theoretical positioning. John Searle observed that the philosophy of language is a branch of the philosophy of mind—and if this is so,

⁶ Hans Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: Mohr 1990).

⁷ Gadamer emphasizes that a historian cannot leave by side one's own conceptual framework when thinking historically. (400) At the same time, the description of how one understands these concepts of the past—the nature of *Horizontverschmelzung*—is left notoriously unclear. He says: "Historisch denken heißt in Wahrheit, die Umsetzung vollziehen, die den Begriffen der Vergangenheit geschieht, wenn wir in ihnen zu denken suchen. Historisch denken enthält eben immer schon eine Vermittlung zwischen jenen Begriffen und dem eigenen Denken." (401) But he left the nature of this *Vermittlung* and *Umsetzung* unexplained.

⁸ E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 254.

⁹ E. D. Hirsch, *Aims in Interpretation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976) 49.

¹⁰ Martin Jay, "Historical explanation and the event" *New Literary History* 42, 4 (2011), 557-571.

the same applies to philosophical theories of interpretation as well.¹¹ Let us therefore start from elementary considerations.

2. Concepts

The ability to differentiate between the properties of various items is arguably the most important capacity of the human mind. By an “item” I understand anything that can have some property, such as a thing, a situation or an event; another suitable term could be “property-bearer.” Properties sometimes also have their properties, so they can count as items. Since thoughts have properties (such as being true or false, having a specific content and so on) they count as items as well. “To differentiate” means to grasp whether two properties, clusters of properties or items that bear them are identical or different. The ability to differentiate is also the ability to classify—and when an item has certain properties we are able to classify it in the category of items with these properties. Such classification means that the item satisfies certain classificatory criteria. Our minds thus operate with the sets of classificatory criteria according to which they classify items. I will talk here about such sets of classificatory criteria as “concepts.” The word “concept” can be used in a number of different ways; following the “classical” theory of concepts, I will use it here for sets of classificatory criteria, mental representations that list the properties that something must have in order to be classified as having these properties—in other words, to be *subsumed* under that concept.¹² Various items are subsumed under the same concept if they have the properties that satisfy the same list of classificatory criteria. Subsuming an item under a concept implies realizing that it shares the same properties with other objects subsumed under that concept—those properties that constitute the classificatory criteria of the given concept.

Some concepts define criteria that no object in the real world satisfies—e.g. “Pegasus” or “the President of England”—and although the words that express them thus *refer* to the members of the same (empty) set of objects, they have different *meanings* because the criteria of satisfaction they define are different. At the same time, it is common that an item can be described and classified (i.e. conceptualized) with equal precision in many different ways. Items typically satisfy numerous clusters of classificatory criteria equally well and can be subsumed under various concepts. The oldest bachelor in New Zealand, for instance, may be also the man with the longest mustache in Christchurch. Following discussion in an earlier paper, I assume that if an item can be identified with equal precision in two or more different ways, none of these descriptions (sets of classificatory criteria) has any priority over others. Items thus can have sufficiently precise identifying descriptions, but they do not have essences.¹³

¹¹ John Searle, *Intentionality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, vii.

¹² This is the classical definition of concepts, see Eric Margolis and Stephen Laurence, “Concepts and cognitive Science,” in eadem (eds), *Concepts* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 3-83, 8-14.

¹³ For instance, a circle can be described as “a line whose all points are equidistant from the center” and “the intersection of a sphere and a plane,” but it is impossible to say that one of these descriptions states what a circle really is and another merely an accidental feature.

3. Propositions and inferring

Unlike concepts, propositions are mental representations that are true or false. They are comparable to the lists of criteria that must be satisfied (“satisfaction conditions”) if that proposition is to be true.¹⁴ Since concepts participate in propositions, it is important to ask about relationship between the satisfaction criteria of a proposition and the satisfaction criteria of the concepts that constitute it. In this paper I assume that their relationship is *transparent*: the conditions that need to be satisfied for a certain proposition to be true are fully and exclusively dependent on the satisfaction criteria of the concepts that constitute it and mutual relationship between these concepts that the proposition asserts. If a proposition included different concept(s) or specified different relationship(s) between concepts, it would have different conditions of satisfaction and it would be a different proposition. For instance, a simple proposition may be conceived of as relationship between two concepts so that what is subsumable under one concept is also subsumable under another concept *in all instances* or *in some instances* or *never*. Its satisfaction criteria are fulfilled if that what satisfies the classificatory criteria of one concept satisfies the classificatory criteria of another concept *in all instances* or *in some instances* or *never*. “Peter plays the violin” says that what satisfies the classificatory criteria of the concept expressed using the term “Peter” also satisfies the classificatory criteria expressed using the phrase “plays the violin” in the given instance.¹⁵ A proposition is true for a given item if that item satisfies its satisfaction criteria.

A combination of words can be sometimes understood in different ways, (may be expressing a number of different concepts or propositions) but it makes no sense to say that a *proposition* or a *concept* can be understood in a number of different ways. If their conditions of satisfaction were understood differently than intended, then it was *another* concept or proposition that was understood.

In what follows I assume that it may be possible to infer genuinely new propositions from given ones.¹⁶ Again, for the purposes of an example, one may want to conceive of such inferences in accordance with traditional syllogistics. It is possible to show that the understanding of propositions described here is compatible with traditional syllogistics.¹⁷ (For history writing, modern

¹⁴ For the explanation of *satisfaction* see Searle, *Intentionality*, 8-10, 22.

¹⁵ Obviously, there may be many individuals named Peter, and the wider context of the statement should enable us to determine the person who satisfies the requirements of the proposition expressed by the given sentence. Most words in a language express more than one concept. Consequently the sentences that combine them will express more than one proposition; the context helps establish the right understanding.

¹⁶ This is obviously not always the case: from “this frog is green” and “Jupiter revolves around the Sun” one can only infer that “This frog is green and (or) Jupiter revolves around the Sun” and the satisfaction conditions of this last proposition are either the sum of the satisfaction conditions of both proposition (connective “and”) or at least one proposition (connective “or”).

¹⁷ Concepts are understood to be mental representations that constitute sets of classificatory criteria. This can be formalized by saying that the concept C consists of a set of classificatory criteria $c_1, c_2, c_3, \dots, c_n$:

$$C \{ c_1, c_2, c_3, \dots, c_n \}$$

If something satisfies a specific set of classificatory criteria, it has been said to be *subsumable* under the given concept. For instance, we can say that X is subsumable under the set of classificatory criteria

propositional calculus is a lame tool, since it takes into account the truth values of propositions, but not their content. According to propositional calculus, it is true that a false sentence implies another false sentence, so it follows that it must be true that “Moon is made of blue cheese’ implies ‘2+2=5’.”¹⁸ A logical system that neglects propositional content cannot be of great use for a historian.)

4. Language

For a large part of the twentieth century the view that all thinking is verbal and always in a language dominated the understanding of human mental processes and the humanities in general. The situation has changed in the 1990s, due to the extensive body of research on animal thinking and the mental processes of pre-linguistic infants.¹⁹ For a historian, it is vital to differentiate between thinking and its linguistic expression, otherwise one will face insurmountable problems when it comes to reporting the thought-contents of historical figures who expressed them in languages different from the one in which the historian is writing.²⁰ The fundamental assumption of my account here is, indeed, that thought-contents (concepts and propositions) are language-independent and that one and the same thought-content can be expressed using various words or sentences. It is in fact rare that a word or a sentence cannot express more than one thought-content. I also assume that in order to express a thought-content using a certain phrase, sentence, picture or a sign of any kind, one needs the additional beliefs that that specific phrase or sentence, picture or sign can be used to express and convey that thought-content. This important point has been made by Tim Crane and Trevor Pateman.²¹ Similarly, in order to understand that

$X \text{ sub } \{ c_1, c_2, c_3, \dots c_n \}$

Simple propositions are then mental structures with the form “What is subsumable under $\{ c_1, c_2, c_3, \dots c_n \}$ is also subsumable under $\{ d_1, d_2, d_3, \dots d_m \}$.”

What sub $\{ c_1, c_2, c_3, \dots c_n \}$ is sub $\{ d_1, d_2, d_3, \dots d_m \}$

A proposition may also state that no object satisfies a certain concept satisfies another or that only some objects that satisfy one concept satisfy another:

Nothing that is sub $\{ c_1, c_2, c_3, \dots c_n \}$ is sub $\{ d_1, d_2, d_3, \dots d_m \}$

Some sub $\{ c_1, c_2, c_3, \dots c_n \}$ is sub $\{ d_1, d_2, d_3, \dots d_m \}$

Syllogism *Barbara* in that case has the form:

What is sub $\{ m_1, m_2, m_3, \dots m_i \}$ is sub $\{ p_1, p_2, p_3, \dots p_j \}$.

Everything that is sub $\{ s_1, s_2, 3, \dots s_k \}$ is sub $\{ m_1, m_2, m_3, \dots m_i \}$.

—*Ergo*, What is sub $\{ s_1, s_2, 3, \dots s_k \}$ is sub $\{ p_1, p_2, p_3, \dots p_j \}$.

Expressing other types of syllogism this way is trivial.

¹⁸ Stephen Cole Kleene, *Mathematical Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1967),9.

¹⁹ José Luis Bermudez, *Thinking without words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

²⁰ See Mitrović, “Intentionalism.”

²¹ “For beliefs to be expressed in words, they have to go via second order beliefs about which words are the right ones, for expressing which beliefs: sentences do not, as it were just ‘squirt out’ beliefs.” Tim Crane: “All the Difference in the World”, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 41, No. 162 (Jan., 1991), 1-25, 18. Noam Chomsky, “Internalist Explorations,” in Martin Hahn and Bjørn

a certain concept or proposition is expressed using a given phrase, sentence, picture or sign, one must believe that this sentence was used by the author to express/convey that proposition. Both the author and the interpreter must share the belief that a certain sign, sentence or phrase conveys specific thought-contents.²² If an author would not believe that a certain sentence can be used to convey a certain content, he or she would not use it to convey that content. Also, it is meaningless to say that one understands that a sentence conveys a certain content without believing that it conveys that content. A thought-content itself can be sometimes a means to convey another thought-content. This happens, for instance, in the ironical or metaphorical use of language, when the standard meaning of a sentence itself conveys some completely different meaning. The meaning of a sentence (the proposition it expresses) then becomes the bearer of another meaning (proposition).

Understanding and interpretation may pertain to linguistic or non-linguistic artifacts and the word “document” conveniently covers both kinds of objects of interpretation. I shall use the term “sign” for any item (words, pictures, and similar) used or believed to be able to convey a certain content. I call the belief that an item is (can be) used as a sign a *de signis* belief. If such a belief pertains to verbal items (words, phrases, sentences) I will call it a *de verbis* belief. The knowledge of a language is the capacity to form *de verbis* beliefs. If recipients are to understand properly a document, they must possess the necessary *de verbis* beliefs (have the capacity to form them). If the meaning of a group of words is used to convey another meaning (irony, metaphor), then *this meaning* is used as a sign and one then needs to have the necessary *de signis* belief in order to understand it.

A translation is needed when recipients cannot form the *de verbis* beliefs that are necessary in order to understand a combination of words and when their available *de verbis* beliefs are not sufficient to understand a document.²³ The translator needs the following *de verbis* beliefs:

Ramberg (eds.), *Reflections and Replies. Essays on the Philosophy of Tyler Burge* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 259-288, 263 similarly cites Trevor Pateman, *Language in Mind and Language in Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 73 that language is “an (intentional) object of (mutual) belief, appropriately studied hermeneutically within a sociology of language.”

²² Sometimes there is no author, but a sentence may still be generated by a computer or a parrot. On the account I present here, such a sentence is understood on the basis of the interpreter’s belief that had it been generated by a human subject (or some other subject capable of intentionality) it would have had a certain meaning; it thus has fictional meaning. See Stephen Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels: “Against Theory” in W. J. T. Mitchell (ed.), *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985), 732-733 for the claim that such sentences are not language. However, when a parrot pronounces a sentence “It is raining,” the bird is obviously not saying that it is raining, but the sentence is recognized as a sentence that would have a certain meaning if produced by a present-day English speaker.

²³ The need for translation is often thought to coincide with the use of different languages, so it is important to point out that this is not necessarily the case. A native Italian speaker will often not need a translation in order to understand a text in Spanish; a native English speaker will need a translation in order to understand a text by Chaucer. There are no definite criteria to decide when two similar idioms count as different languages, which leads to the endless debates about whether Dutch and Flemish or Serbian and Croatian are different languages or mere dialects of one and the same language. Since English evolved on an island, English speakers often overlook that boundary lines between many related European languages (especially Slavic and Romance) are impossible to draw—travelling slowly from one village to another one can notice that a dialect gradually becomes another language.

- That a certain content resides in the original set of sentences;
- That that same content can be expressed (can be conveyed to a different public) using a different set of sentences.

Insofar as a translation conveys the same propositions, it conveys the same set of satisfaction conditions; if it does not, it is simply not accurate. A translation whose sentences can be true when those of the original are not and vice-versa is inaccurate. It states that the original contains propositions that it does not contain. (Even Gadamer, with his insistence that to understand is to understand differently, admitted that meaning must be conveyed in a translation.²⁴) In some situations, the original text is ambiguous or unclear. The demand that the translation must convey the same propositions as the original text and have the same conditions of satisfaction, means that in the optimal situation the translation will have the same, and only the same, ambiguities as the original—and given constraints present in different languages, this is not always easy to achieve.

5. Intentionalism and anti-intentionalism

When it comes to the understanding of historical documents, *intentionalism* is the view that their meaning is their authors' intentional (thought) content that they express. Through this paper I often talk about "thought contents" the way one commonly talks about "intentional contents" in order to avoid some common misunderstandings that derive from confusing the philosophical concept of intentionality with the meaning of "intending" in everyday English. Such misunderstandings have often marred debates about intentionalism in the philosophy of history. The nature of intentional (thought) contents is understood here following John Searle's account in his book *Intentionality*.²⁵ As Searle put it, the specification of the content is the specification of the content's conditions of

One way to look at so-called linguistic communities would be to assume that they are largely conventional; to talk about "linguistic communities" is merely a not well-differentiated way of talking about large groups of individuals who share substantial bodies of *de verbis* beliefs. Sometimes a large number of individuals share a large number of the same *de verbis* beliefs and can communicate efficiently even though they are said to speak different languages (as it is often the case with Slavic speakers). Sometimes the differences in *de verbis* beliefs between two groups of *de verbis* believers are so great that they cannot communicate, even though they may be said to speak the same language—many English speakers do not understand the Glasgow dialect. The decision to declare a set of *de verbis* beliefs into a language is a result of social (cultural, political, religious etc.) processes and interests. There is nothing to say that two different sets of *de verbis* beliefs will be classified as the same language or different languages by everyone. While English speakers typically assume that they speak one language, German publishers differentiate between translations from "English" or "American" (*not* "American English"). At the same time, these same publishers' encyclopedias postulate the unity of German language—although German dialects often differ more significantly than these two standard versions of English. Calling a certain set of *de verbis* beliefs, shared by a large group of individuals, a (separate) language often depends on what is common in a given context or may even reflect specific political or similar agendas.

²⁴ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 387. But then he continues: „Sinn muß erhalten bleiben, aber...auf neue Weise zur Geltung kommen.“ (388)

²⁵ Searle, *Intentionality*, 11-16.

satisfaction; the intentional (thought) content determines the conditions that must obtain if the intentional state (such as a belief) is to be satisfied, which is not necessarily the case. It is important not to confuse the specific intentional (thought) content expressed in a document with other intentional (thought) contents associated with it or used to describe it. Consider an architect who wanted to draw the front façade of the Parthenon but drew, instead, the portico of the Pantheon. Imagine that an architectural historian finds the drawing some years later and recognizes it as a drawing of the Pantheon. It may be argued that the portico of the Pantheon is indeed the meaning of the drawing, although the architect intended to draw the Parthenon; the conclusion will be that the intention of the author has nothing to do with the meaning of the drawing. This argument against intentionalism confuses *intentionality* (in the philosophical sense) with *intending* (in the sense of everyday English usage). The intentional (thought) content that the drawing expresses in this case is actually a certain system of shapes that the drawing specifies and that the architect has drawn. The drawing is the expression of the intentional (thought) content in the sense that it expresses a certain set of conditions of satisfaction; *any* building, stage-set or a disposition of shapes in the real world that looks the same way would satisfy it.²⁶ It is merely an accident that the architect falsely believed that this intentional content was satisfied by the Parthenon; in fact it is satisfied by the Pantheon and because of this it may happen that some people even refer to the drawing as a “drawing of the Pantheon.” One should not confuse an expression of the intentional (thought) content with the expression of other contents that the author may have associated with it such as his or her intentions. I may write an article with the intention to submit it for publication to *History and Theory*, but this intention is not the intentional content expressed in the article.

The debate between the opponents and proponents of intentionalism has a long history and its implications affect a number of the positions that I discuss in this paper. Intentionalism is sometimes dismissed as a traditional view, or (as Foucault claimed) a view that has come about only in modern times.²⁷ However, when medieval philosophers read Aristotle, they believed to comment on what the Philosopher said. Vice-versa, E. D. Hirsch argued that disregarding the author’s intention means treating the author as a means, which is contrary to

²⁶ As long as the object depicted is not specified (e.g. no caption has been added to the drawing) a drawing functions as a visual expression of a concept; it describes a set of classificatory criteria. Had the author in this example stated that the drawing represents the Parthenon (e.g. by adding a caption) that drawing with a caption would be an expression of a false proposition., an equivalent of “This is what the Parthenon looks like.”

²⁷ Michel Foucault, “Qu’est-ce Qu’un Auteur,” *Bulletin de la Société Française de Philosophie*, 63 (1969), 75-95, 84. Idem, “What is an Author,” Josué V. Harari trans., in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 101-120, 109. For a summary see the opening section of Alexander Nehamas, “What an Author is,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 83 No. 11 (Nov. 1986) 685-691. Nehamas also denies Foucault’s claim that the concept of author came about only in the Enlightenment. For a philosophical analysis of Foucault’s and Barthes’ theses about authorship see Peter Lamarque, “The Death of the Author: An Analytical Autopsy,” *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 30 No. 4 (Oct. 1990), 319-331. As Lamarque pointed out, “*Écriture* is in effect stipulated to be author-less, to be lacking in determinate meaning, to be free of interpretative constraints. ... It is a non-starter—pointless if not impossible—to conceive of scientific or historical or philosophical discourse as *écriture*.” Lamarque, “The Death of the Author,” 330-331.

Kantian ethics.²⁸ This may be true, but few people will base their approach to reading on Kantian ethics. Through this paper will try to present the implications of both positions. As we shall soon see, both positions must postulate that the recipient must be able to grasp the rational structure of the content of the document. The proponents of intentionalism may point out that once the author's role has been suppressed, it is hard to see how some types of content, such as irony or understatement, can be grasped.²⁹ In fact, since Quine, analytic philosophers have often struggled with explaining irony or understatement anyhow. Many historians are also likely to argue that standard interpretative practices in historical scholarship are precisely built around the assumption that the meaning of a document are the thought-contents that the author expressed in it—that the author's meaning determines the meaning of the document.³⁰ What these two criticisms actually mean is that in many situations a historian who approaches a document from the intentionalist point of view is likely to understand the meaning of the document differently than a historian who opposes intentionalism. Arguments about intentionalism affect many of the arguments discussed in this paper, and I will try to follow the implications of both intentionalist and anti-intentionalist positions.

One important argument regarding intentionalism pertains to the *source of the coherence* of the document.³¹ This "coherence" has two levels. *First*, the content consists of concepts combined into propositions and propositions combined into inferences in a way that is not random; it needs to be organized in a way that is recognizable as the meaning of the document. This intentional structure of the document does not exist separately from its content—it is identical with the totality of the satisfaction conditions that define the content of

²⁸ Hirsch, *Aims*, 90-91. It has been pointed out that Hirsch's major problem is that he does not state a definitive argument that would justify his demand to base the meaning of a text on the author's intention. See William Cain, "Authority, 'Cognitive Atheism' and the Aims of Interpretation: the Literary Theory of E. D. Hirsch," *College English*, 39 No. 3 (Nov. 1977), 333-345, 337.

²⁹ As pointed out by Stephen Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, the approaches to interpretation that reject authorial intention cannot deal with some forms of communication, such as irony: "the utterance only counts as ironic if the speaker's meaning is not simply the conventional one." Stephen Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, "Against Theory 2: Hermeneutics and Deconstruction," *Critical Inquiry*, 14 No. 1 (Autumn 1987), 49-68, 54.

³⁰ Consider, for instance, the well-known situation when an author introduced a technical term, failed to define it and thus generated an industry of interpretative efforts to establish the meaning of the term—this was the case with Alois Riegl's *Kunstwollen* or Leon Battista Alberti's *lineamenta*. The most one can do in such situations is to survey all the occurrences of the term and try to find a meaning that would fit all the contexts. (For instance, Alberti consistently used *lineamenta* to talk about shapes.) Imagine thus a situation in which an author used a technical term without defining it, and that a survey shows that there are two possible meanings that cover, equally well, all its occurrences in a document. It is reasonable to expect that there would exist a substantial scholarly debate between the proponents of the two meanings. Now imagine that at one moment someone finds in an archive, a letter written by this author in which he or she endorses one of the two meanings. It is fair to expect that for most historians this finding would decide the debate and that few of them would still consider the alternative understanding credible. If this is so, then one should say that most historians identify the meaning of a text with the author's intention, but this does not resolve the question of whether meaning is the author's intention. At most, one can say that the author's intention (or what they believe to be the author's intention) is what many (most) historians call "the meaning of a text."

³¹ See P. D. Juhl, "The Appeal to the Text: What are we Appealing To?" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 36 No. 3 (Spring 1978), 277-287, 280-281.

the document. *Second*, the document itself has to be structured in a systematic way in order to express this content—for instance, in the case the document is a text, the use of language is a highly organized and systematic use of signs without which the document could not convey the content.

If a hamster runs over a computer keyboard, we get something like 1§35t90='kdmv;g/\. Maybe there is some meaning to it, but its satisfaction conditions are not comprehensible. “Jupiter serendipity concatenation skunks depleted” is a set of words each of which expresses a concept with clear satisfaction conditions, though their combination does not express a proposition. “Juno was Jupiter’s wife” combines concepts with satisfaction criteria into a proposition with its own satisfaction criteria and then combines words in a systematic way to express it. The intentionalist argument is that these two levels of coherence cannot come from nowhere. Insofar as a document is intelligible, it must have been organized as intelligible. As Jorge Gracia put it, “It does not make any more sense to hold that texts can exist without causes than that there is rain without something that produces it.”³² Intentionalists will insist that the author is the source of the intelligibility of the document and the coherence that enables it. The alternatives would be to assume that the text was made intelligible by some non-human agent, or that it has come about as intelligible from nothing. It does not help to argue that the author may have provided the text with its coherence, but that once the text is coherent, the meaning resides in this coherence and not in the intentional states of the author: the author had to organize the document to convey its specific content and to achieve this, the content needed to reside originally in his or her mind. The argument will be that all coherence (the totality of relationships between the conditions of satisfaction of concepts, propositions, inferences and the tools of communication employed to express them) has to come from the mind that organized the text, and this coherence is precisely the meaning of the text. There can be no other content but the one the author intended—unless it come from some non-human intellect.

The argument depends on the assumption that the source of such coherence has to be the human intellect. This has been often denied in the past. Historically, it has been often argued that various non-human or collective entities (understood as irreducible to the sets of individual humans) are the source of the content, its coherence and the coherence of the document that conveys it. In his “Death of the Author” Roland Barthes thus replaced the author with *language*, conceived as an abstract force that “speaks” while individual authors are mere “scriptors.”³³ For Oswald Spengler culture determines both the content and the form of expression of an artifact; an author, he says, has no choice but to think and write the way his culture dictates.³⁴ For the art historian Dagobert Frey, Hogarth’s celtic ethnic background determines both the content of his drawings and his use of line.³⁵ The difference between the views of the proponents and opponents of intentionalism has been often articulated as a

³² Jorge Gracia, “Can there be texts without historical authors,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 31 No. 3 (July 1994), 248-253, 247

³³ Roland Barthes, “La mort de l’Auteur,” in idem, *Le bruissement de la langue* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), 61-67.

³⁴ Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes. Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte* (Munich: DTV 2003), vii.

³⁵ Dagobert Frey, *Englisches Wesen im Spiegel seiner Kunst* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1942).

version of the well-known dilemma between individualism and holism in the understanding of social entities and the position one takes on this dilemma therefore significantly affects the understanding of historical contexts.

6. Understanding and interpretation

It is important to differentiate between understanding and interpretation. In order to *understand* a document one needs to form the thought-contents that have the same and only the same satisfaction conditions as the content of the document.³⁶ It is fair to say that if the content of a document contains a certain number of concepts, propositions or inferences, while one does not understand the document as stating (some of) these concepts, propositions or inferences, then one does not (fully) understand the content of the document. It is also fair to say that a person who attributes to the content of the document concepts or propositions that are not there misunderstands the document. The conditions of satisfaction that the document states must be identical with the conditions of satisfaction that it is understood to state. Gadamer famously claimed that one understands differently if one understands at all.³⁷ We shall soon see that this is indeed true when it comes to *interpretation*. But in the case of understanding the claim is not only wrong—it simply cannot be made. If it were true, it would apply to Gadamer's own statement, and we would be required to understand it *differently* from what it states. We would be consequently required to understand the statement as saying that one understands the same way, if one understands at all.

The proponents and opponents of intentionalism both assume that understanding relies on the possession of the necessary *de verbis* and *de signis* beliefs that certain elements of a document convey specific contents. The intentionalist position identifies this meaning with the author's thought-content that the document expresses; we can understand it because (insofar as) we share the same *de verbis* and *de signis* beliefs with the author. When it comes to the rejection of intentionalism, the point is not so much that in some cases we may be interested in the meaning the document had for some other human subjects apart from the author—in such situations we merely transfer our interest to the meaning the document had for them.³⁸ Rather, the important assumption is that one can understand historical documents by assuming that their meaning

³⁶ The distinction between understanding and interpretation presented in this paper formalizes the important distinction made by E. D. Hirsch in *The Aims of Interpretation*, 79-81. He defines significance as "meaning-as-related-to-something-else." (80) See also similarly William Irwin, *Intentionalist Interpretation. A Philosophical Explanation and Defense* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 61.

³⁷ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 301-302. I take that he nevertheless does not deny the possibility of understanding the author's intention. When he says: "Der wirkliche Sinn eines Textes, wie er den Interpreten anspricht, hängt eben nicht von dem Okkasionellen ab, das der Verfasser und sein ursprüngliches Publikum darstellen. Er geht zum mindestens nicht darin auf." (301) I take that "occasional" pertains to the author's intention as intended for the public he or she was writing. Similarly, at 378 he talks about the task of the reconstruction of the author's intention—but he clearly differentiates it from interpretation, or sees in it a "reduced task". This latter qualification is ultimately accurate from the point of view of this paper as well.

³⁸ For instance, translations are typically made in order to convey the meaning of a text in another language; however, sometimes they are done in a way that does not render the author's meaning, but the way it was grasped by a certain public or a reader.

resides in them independently of individual human subjects and that we can understand them independently of (what we know about) their authors. The idea is that such understanding can be based purely on specific social conventions, such as language. An example is the situation when one understands a text purely on the basis of the knowledge of the language and when nothing is known about the author except that he or she produced the given piece of writing—let us call such situations *zero-external-information-about-the-author-reading*. If I come across a piece of text in Attic Greek, I may not know whether it was written by an ancient Greek, or by a nineteenth century Russian aristocrat who trained himself to write Attic Greek. All I may know about the author may be that he or she wrote the piece of text in question. Zero external author information reading is possible because the author used certain communication conventions (wrote in a specific language) that I understand. According to the opponents of intentionalism, all understanding of documents is like that; what one knows about the author as an individual human being makes no contribution to understanding.³⁹ In this case too, understanding depends on the application of the historically appropriate *de verbis* and *de signis* beliefs about the meanings the elements of the document convey.

An important step towards responding to the dilemma about contextualization described in the opening section of this article is to recognize that on both accounts, *understanding is actually contextualization*. One cannot perform an act of understanding a document without making claims (employing beliefs) about contexts. From the intentionalist point of view, I come to understand a document by applying to it what I know or believe about the author's *de verbis* and *de signis* beliefs. From the anti-intentionalist point of view, I come to understand a document by applying to it what I know or believe about

³⁹ Obviously, the proponents of intentionalism may also rely on such zero-external-information-about-the-author-reading, while additional information about the author may be used additionally—for instance, to remove interpretative ambiguities. Nevertheless, even when additional information about the author and its interpretative implications are known, one may decide to revert to zero author information reading. This answers Knapp and Michaels' ("Against Theory") criticism of Juhl and Hirsch (see also George Wilson, "Again, Theory: On Speaker's Meaning, Linguistic Meaning and the Meaning of a Text," *Critical Inquiry*, 19 No. 1 (Autumn 1992) 164-185 as well as answer by E. D. Hirsch, "Against Theory?," *Critical Inquiry*, 9 No. 4 (June 1983), 743-747. All these authors agree that meaning is to be identified with the author's intention, but Knapp and Michaels criticize Juhl and Hirsch for postulating, at the same time, linguistic meaning parallel to the author's intention. They attribute them the understanding that a text has multiple linguistic meanings whereby the right one is only to be chosen on the basis of the author's intention. "...Hirsch is imagining a moment of interpretation before intention is present. This is the moment at which the text's meaning 'remains indeterminate,' before such indeterminacy is cleared up by the addition of authorial intention. But if meaning and intention really are inseparable, then it makes no sense to think of intention as an ingredient that needs to be added; it must be present from the start. The issue of determinacy or indeterminacy is irrelevant." (Knapp and Michaels, "Against Theory," 726.) As a result (see Wilson, "Against Theory," 171) Knapp and Michaels seem to be forced to reject the commonsense belief that English words, phrases and sentences have meanings—because they believe that this would lead them to postulate language *in abstracto*. The "zero information about the author" interpretation described here resolves these problems: there are certain social, linguistic, conventions of communication and authors use them to communicate. They enable certain levels of the interpretation of texts while the possibility of such interpretation indicates the presence of an author.

the historically appropriate use of *de verbis* and *de signis* beliefs in its understanding.

Interpretation establishes the implications of the content of the document. It infers those propositions that can be inferred when one's own beliefs and knowledge (including that what one believes about the author's beliefs and knowledge) are combined with the content of the document. Understanding provides us with the concepts, propositions (including propositions combined in inferences) that have the same satisfaction conditions as those that constitute the content of the document (in intentionalist terms, that were expressed by the author). In interpretation, one considers the propositions that fall outside the content of the document and combines them with those expressed in the text in order to make further inferences. (It is in this wider sense, I assume, that authors like Gadamer state that we understand differently if we understand at all.) Understanding provides a set of propositions that were expressed in a document; interpretation consists of the propositions inferred from the propositions that one grasps from the content and other propositions (including our beliefs, and our beliefs about the context, the author and the author's beliefs).

Like understanding, interpretation leaves no space for relativism. It is valid if it logically follows from the content and the interpreter's assumptions and beliefs. It is true if it is valid and these assumptions and beliefs are true assumptions and beliefs. But it varies according to the propositions that are combined with the propositions that one understands to compose the content—as these propositions are often motivated by the questions an individual historian asks about the text. Understanding and interpretation are thus different procedures that can be clearly differentiated by their aims, but are interdependent and cannot be easily separated. Interpretation certainly depends on understanding, but the opposite is true as well. We may need to rely on interpretation in order to establish *de verbis* or *de signis* beliefs that are necessary in order to understand the text—for instance, we may have to take into account the period in which the document was composed in order to resolve a dilemma about the use of a specific word. It often happens that there are a few possible, textually consistent ways to understand a text—whereby wide interpretation can decide about their credibility (in intentionalist terms, tell us which one is was the author's intention).

7. Shared rationality

Understanding may fail because of the use of language or for reasons that are not language-based. If the language of a historical document is incomprehensible, the document will be too; the inconsistent or partly incomprehensible use of language will result in the inconsistent or partial comprehensibility of the document. Communication will also fail if one does not have the capacity to grasp the concepts, combinations of concepts or inferences that constitute the content of the document. Consider what would be necessary in order to understand a Renaissance painter's recipe for the preparation of a certain paint.

First, it must be possible, *in principle*, to grasp the conceptual framework of the content of the document. The content may contain concepts that are unknown to us—for instance, it may rely on a classification of stones that is very

different from anything known to us today. Insofar as we assume that we would grasp these concepts if we were provided with the necessary information, we are still assuming that we possess the necessary rationality to understand the document. For instance, if the additional study of various contemporary sources may enable us to grasp the content, then our conceptual framework is not incommensurable with that of the content. However, if we assume that we are constitutionally (cognitively) incapacitated to form the necessary concepts, then no effort will enable us to understand the segments of the text that rely on such concepts.

Second, if we are to understand the content of a document, it must consist of propositions made using the conceptual relationships that we can grasp. In the example presented previously, a proposition states that what satisfies classificatory criteria of one concept satisfies the criteria of another concept in all instances, or in no instances, or in some instances. But if the content of the document relied on some fourth kind of relationship between concepts when combining them into propositions, we would not be able to grasp what the author meant.

Third, the way new propositions are derived from given ones must be based on the logical operations that we know how to operate with. This requirement also applies to the inferences that are implicitly present between (can be made from) the various segments of the text. This includes the capacity to grasp contradictions in the content. The fact that we are able to recognize contradictions in the content of a document precludes the possibility that the principle of non-contradiction could be presupposed in order to understand the meaning of what someone says.

Fourth, while these requirements define the first level of coherence, they also need to be satisfied for the second: one needs to be able to think logically about the elements of the document such as words or signs in order to understand them. This implies the ability to think conceptually and form propositions about the elements of the document, such as signs, words or sentences in order to form the necessary *de verbis* and *de signis* beliefs. If the use of language is inaccessible to our reasoning (for instance, if we cannot recognize consistency in the use of terms) we will not understand the document even if its content has appropriate logical structure. This logical structure (mutual logical correlation between parts, concepts, propositions, inferences and linguistic elements that make it up) of the document is not reducible to the logical structure of the content, but also includes the logical structure that provides the second level of coherence—it relies on a consistently employed system of *de verbis* and *de signis* beliefs and the capacity to form it.

These are the four levels of the postulate of *shared rationality*.⁴⁰ The idea is that in order to understand the content of the document one must be able to understand its logical structure, its coherence—its concepts, propositions and inferences. The proponents of intentionalism will add that this happens when we are able to employ the same reasoning capacities as those employed by the author when creating the document. Consider a seventeenth-century refutation of Galileo cited by Charles Taylor:

⁴⁰ For the proponents of intentionalism, shared rationality is the rationality one needs to share with the author; for their opponents, this is the rationality our understanding has to share with the document and its content.

There are seven windows given to animals in the domicile of head, through which the air is admitted to the tabernacle of the body, to enlighten, to warm and to nourish it. What are these part of the microcosmos: Two nostrils, two eyes, two ears and a mouth. So in the heavens, as in a macrocosmos, there are two favourable stars, two unpropitious, two luminaries, and Mercury undecided and indifferent. From this and from many other similarities in nature, such as the seven metals, etc., which it were tedious to enumerate, we gather that the number of planets is necessarily seven.⁴¹

Taylor observes that “[t]he argument seems ludicrous to us today”—but one should note that this is because of its premises, not because of the logical procedure on which the argument relies.⁴² The logical procedure is an ordinary syllogism:

All objects of a certain importance in macro- and microcosm are seven.
Planets are objects of such importance in macrocosm.
Ergo, there are seven planets.

What makes the argument ludicrous to us today is the analogy that was used to generate the major premise. We do not regard analogy as a valid ground for generalization. The argument would be incomprehensible, rather than ludicrous, if we were not be able to grasp its logical structure. It would also be incomprehensible if we did not share with the author the capacity to classify (conceptualize) objects as metals or planets or if the author combined concepts into propositions using some conceptual relationships that we cannot grasp (for instance, did not rely on the principle of non-contradiction).

Standard philological practices in the analysis of documents have been built around the assumption of shared rationality. Consider, for instance, the procedures developed in order to deal with errors created in transmission in various manuscript traditions. A good example are the efforts of scholars to reconstruct numbers in the original text of Vitruvius’ *De architectura*. The medieval manuscript tradition introduced many errors when it comes to numbers, originally written in Roman numerals in the treatise. Since the Renaissance, efforts to reconstruct Vitruvius’ original numbers often relied on the arithmetic analysis of what number would be correct in the context of Vitruvius’ text. Such an analysis would make no sense without the assumption that the text must make sense arithmetically, and that it is based on a mathematical reasoning equivalent to ours.

Historians working in various fields of intellectual history (history of music or architecture, for instance) often interpret various non-linguistic artifacts (scores, drawings) whose interpretation may require necessary assumptions about shared reasoning capacities that go beyond shared rationality described here. The interpretation of architectural drawings, for

⁴¹ Sidney Warhaft (ed.), *Francis Bacon: A Selection of his Works* (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1965), 17. Cited according to Charles Taylor, “Rationality,” in Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (eds), *Rationality and Relativism* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1982), 87-105, 94.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 95.

instance, requires that the author and the interpreter share to a certain degree understanding of the properties of three-dimensional space. Erwin Panofsky's famous thesis that the newly acquired understanding of space as homogenous enabled the discovery of perspective at the beginning of *quattrocento* failed, among other reasons, because it implied that before the 1400s people could not grasp that a distance (for instance, the length of a wall) is the same regardless from what end it is measured.⁴³ If Panofsky were right, we could not understand any architectural drawings that were made before the early 1400s.

It can be asked whether shared rationality is sufficient for the understanding of a document, or whether one should assume that the possession of certain beliefs is necessary too. It should be clear that understanding the content of the document does not mean believing that the content is true—and insofar as one assumes that the content is an expression of the author's thought-contents (i.e. subscribes to the intentionalist position), understanding the statements of an author does not mean necessarily sharing his or her beliefs expressed in the document. A modern historian of science who reads a treatise based on Ptolemaic astronomy will grasp the conditions that need to be satisfied if propositions about epicycles are going to be true, but need not believe that they will ever be true.⁴⁴ What is necessary is *the capacity* to form certain thought-contents that correspond to those that make up the content, while one may or may not believe them to be true. Searle in his *Intentionality* develops a theory of *background* as a bedrock of mental capacities that do not themselves consist of intentional states but nonetheless form the preconditions for the functioning of intentional states and that underwrite our ability to form beliefs. (141-160) In other words, in order to understand the *Almagest* one needs to be able to read Greek and in order to understand its theory of epicycles one needs to know about the retrograde movements of planets. In a certain sense, such skills and knowledge are indeed beliefs that are necessary in order to understand the meaning of the text—however, not having them at a given moment will not prevent one from understanding the text in general: such skills and knowledge can be acquired. What one needs to have is the capacity to acquire the necessary beliefs. At the same time, understanding is impossible without shared rationality.

8. Contextualization⁴⁵

A historical interpretation strives to grasp the implications of a document in the context of the available information related to the document (for instance, the context in which the document was produced, its author and so on); its sophistication is evaluated by the complexity of questions about the document that the interpretation can respond to and the tools used to achieve this. There is

⁴³ Branko Mitrović, "Leon Battista Alberti and the Homogeneity of Space," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 63 No. 4 (Dec. 2004), 424-440.

⁴⁴ For a discussion of this example see Branko Mitrović, "Attribution of Concepts and Problems with Anachronism," *History and Theory*, 50 No. 3 (2011), 303-327, 326-327.

⁴⁵ "Contextualization" can be also understood as a procedure that checks whether a proposed interpretation of a part of a text fits the rest of the same text. This simple and fundamental procedure is applicable even in the case of zero-information-about-the-author reading. The discussion of contextualization in this section, however, pertains to the social, cultural and intellectual contextualization of the author's beliefs as expressed in a document (text or artifact).

an important distinction between the understanding of contexts in the intentionalist approach and in the approaches that reject intentionalism. Contexts can be understood following the *individualist* approach as mere sums of participating individuals or following the *holist* approach that assumes that the human collectives that constitute interpretative contexts—cultures, ethnicities or similar—cannot be analyzed as the sets of human individuals and their interactions.⁴⁶ Typically, the latter position assumes that individuals are mere manifestations of their contexts, which are conceived as the primary historical explanatory entities. Insofar as the holist position allows for individual authors, their activity is understood as a manifestation of their membership of a collective. The context is said to determine and explain the author's views; it is assumed that the author could not have thought differently *because* of his or her participation in the context, not merely because the author could not have acquired the knowledge necessary to form different beliefs through individual communication within the given context.⁴⁷ The opposing, individualist, position denies that contexts have such causal powers over the views and beliefs of individuals; rather, contextualization is merely taken to describe how a certain context enabled, limited or motivated the beliefs and creativity of an author. Intentionalism directly correlates with individualism: it is the individual author (or a set of individual authors) that is postulated as the source of the content of the document and its coherence. Vice versa, we have seen that the rejection of intentionalism requires one to postulate some other source of the content of the document and its coherence. The alternative would be to assume that coherence comes from nowhere. One may thus assume that a collective entity (such as culture) is the source of the content of the document and its coherence. In that case this collective entity needs to be understood holistically as irreducible to a set of individuals, otherwise the source of coherence will be merely a group of authors. Alternatively, the opponents of intentionalism may claim that the source of cohesion is a non-human entity such as *Geist* or Providence.

The understanding of a historical document (such as a text) will be unproblematic as long as one can rely on (one feels confident in) one's *de verbis* and *de signis* beliefs, as long as these beliefs are sufficient for a zero-external-information-about-the-author-reading. Problems start when this is not the case—for instance, when one encounters an unknown technical term in a text and one needs to place the text in the wider context in order to solve the problem. Context, and contextualization, can be understood individualistically or holistically.

From the individualist point of view, the contribution of contextualization to interpretation is clear: it provides the contextual information necessary to reconstruct the specific *de verbis* or *de signis* beliefs that an author relied on. From this point of view, we understand when we share the same *de verbis* and

⁴⁶ See Branko Mitrović, "Intellectual History, Inconceivability and Methodological Holism", *History and Theory*, 46 No. 1 (Feb. 2007), 29-47 for a detailed discussion of these positions when it comes to interpretation and attribution of beliefs.

⁴⁷ For instance, Erwin Panofsky claimed that Polygnotus, was constitutionally incapable to conceive of a naturalistic landscape because his mental capacities were predetermined that way. Panofsky could not state the specific skills or knowledge that Polygnotus lacked in order to paint a naturalistic landscape but merely assumed that as an ancient Greek painter Polygnotus was incapable of conceiving of a naturalistic landscape. Panofsky, "Der Begriff des Kunstvollens," in idem, *Deutschsprachige Aufsätze*, vol.2, 1019-1034, 1023.

de signis beliefs with the author. The context is conceived of as a finite set of the author's interactions (for instance with other sources or contemporaries) that need to be known in order to understand a document. Contextualization may encounter *limited regress*: the understanding of a term in one text may require the ability to interpret another text and this may require the interpretation of a yet another text. Interpretation and understanding are possible if a finite number of such steps is possible and if such a regress is sufficient in order to understand a document, otherwise the document will be (partly) incomprehensible.

From the holist point of view, knowledge about a definite set of the author's documented interactions contemporaries, sources, materials and so on is not enough to grasp the context that needs to be known in order to understand a document. Consequently, it becomes a problem to explain the possibility of historical contextualization, since a historian never encounters contexts as such ("Renaissance" or "Antiquity") but only individual documents produced in these contexts. In his efforts to articulate a holist *Kulturgeschichte* Karl Lamprecht argued that generalization based on the impression the historian gets from sources is a legitimate equivalent of statistical induction, even though it uses no numerical descriptions; in his view, this impression is sufficient to understand the context.⁴⁸ The critics were quick to point out that such non-numerical statistics would amount to free-for-all scholarship.⁴⁹ If one assumes that contextualization necessarily deals with abstract entities that are more than and cannot be analyzed as the sums of interactions between individuals, then some superior form of intellection, such as Troeltsch's occult phenomena, will be necessary in order to explain the possibility of contextualization. In Friedrich Ast's 1808 *Grundlinien* the totality of Antiquity is *Geist* from which all internal and external life derived; historical understanding consists in deducing everything, including the most individual aspects of Antiquity, from this higher unity.⁵⁰ The force that enables the cognition of this context from individual instances is also called *Geist*: our understanding of Antiquity, says Ast, is possible because our *Geist* and the *Geist* of Antiquity are originally one *Geist*. (164)

9. Hermeneutic "circle"

The distinction between the individualist and the holist understanding of the interpretative context presents a difficult dilemma for the theories of interpretation that rely on the hermeneutic circle, understood as the procedure whereby a document is to be understood in its relevant context, while the necessary knowledge of the context derives from the understanding of other

⁴⁸ He talks about "die den Quellen zu entnehmende Erfahrung von der Allgemeinheit des Vorganges." Karl Lamprecht, "Was ist Kulturgeschichte? Beitrag zu einer empirischen Historik", *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 1 (1896/7) 75-150, 259.

⁴⁹ Georg von Below, "Die neue historische Methode," *Historische Zeitschrift*, 81 (1898), 193-273, 250. More importantly statistics (with numbers or not) can only pertain to what we already know. It cannot help with the interpretation of documents, since the fact that a certain term was used with a specific meaning 70% of times by the authors of a certain era is of little use if in the document under consideration this meaning makes no sense.

⁵⁰ Friedrich Ast, *Grundlinien der Grammatik, Hermeneutik und Kritik* (Landshut: Jos. Thomann, 1808), 175.

documents.⁵¹ The views of the proponents of the hermeneutic tradition were traditionally aligned with the holist understanding of human collectives. However, if the context is understood holistically, then no finite amount of specific knowledge about other documents that belong to the context will be enough to understand the context—and since the context will be unknown, interpretation will be impossible. Interpretation in this case can be possible only if one claims the support of a supra-human intellect such as *Geist*—and without it, holist contextualization is a dead-end street.

Vice-versa, if the context is understood individualistically (i.e. if the meaning is the individual author's thought-content), the understanding of a document will relate it to the specific information about other aspects of the context that enable such understanding. In this case, the interpretative procedure will have the form of a series of specific attempts to grasp the document (or its part) as consistent with the specific aspects of the wider context. It will be an iterative procedure that formulates a series of interpretative hypotheses and tries to confirm them, but it will not have a circular form. Following this approach, both Dilthey and Gadamer drop their holistic assumptions about the nature of interpretative contexts when they have to explain the functioning of the hermeneutic circle. Dilthey's holist commitments have been described in the Prologue; in his view, historical analysis strives to find how specific purposes and views conform to the totality that rules the epoch. (189) However, when he comes to discuss the explanation of historical effects, he does not say that one should explore the totality of a context but specific relevant causes. The examination of the context that produced certain effects (*Wirkungszusammenhang*) starts from one single effect and seeks to establish the limited set of causes that are relevant for that effect, he says. When one tries to find the causes of changes in German literature of a certain era, one looks for the specific groups of causes and evaluates their significance. (192) It is thus not the totality of the context, but specific causes that provide a historical explanation. Gadamer similarly avoids problems with the circularity of the hermeneutic circle by explaining it in individualistic terms. Following Schleiermacher, his model for the understanding of a text in the context of the works of an author, literary genre or the intellectual life of the author is that of a part of the text to the whole.⁵² Interpretation of a text starts from an expectation about the context that needs to be confirmed, he says, and if this does not work, then we approach the text with a new expectation, until we

⁵¹ One also encounters the formulation that the individual (author or document) is to be understood in its context, while the understanding of the context derives from the interpretation of that very same individual. (Friedrich Schleiermacher: *Hermeneutik und Kritik mit besonderer Beziehung auf das Neue Testament* herausgegeben und eingeleitet von Manfred Frank (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), 95; Johann Gustav Droysen: *Historik. Text Ausgabe von Peter Leyh*. (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1977), 28 and 398.) It would be an uncharitable interpretation if one assumed that these authors are advocating that contextualization does not require the consideration of other individuals belonging to the same context; Droysen's claim that "the totality becomes comprehensible to us in this individual as an example" might be even construed to mean that one can grasp the totality of a language by contemplating its single word. Rather, these authors seem to be suggesting that the understanding of the individual that one derives from contextualization further enhances our understanding of the context and enables the fine-tuning of the original understanding.

⁵² Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 296-297.

achieve the unity of meaning. (296) This procedure works because there is nothing circular about it (even though Gadamer insists on calling it the “hermeneutic circle”): it consists in making iterative interpretative attempts until one comes up with an interpretative hypothesis that is satisfied by the context—and the context in this case is a set of specific situations that can prove or disprove the individual interpretation.⁵³

10. Conclusion. The constitution of historicity

The result of this discussion—and the answer to the dilemma about contextualization described at the beginning—is that there is no un-contextual understanding or interpretation, because understanding (and interpretation based on it) *is* contextualization. Certainly, contextualization can be more or less competent and sophisticated, but one cannot escape the fact that understanding is based on one’s *de verbis* and *de signis* beliefs.⁵⁴ For the intentionalist position, understanding derives from what one knows and believes about the author’s *de verbis* and *de signis* beliefs; for the opponents of intentionalism, it is based on what one knows or believes about the historically appropriate *de verbis* or *de signis* beliefs that are to be employed in understanding. On both accounts, a medieval document needs to be read with the awareness that its Latin is different from that used in a document from the first century BCE. While the *de verbis* and *de signis* beliefs that we employ in understanding need to be historically appropriate, our understanding either shares the same rationality with the content of the document (according to intentionalists: mind that structured it) or the document is going to be fundamentally incomprehensible.

A similar reasoning applies to the contextual validity of interpretation. Interpretation infers new propositions by combining those derived from the understanding of the document with some other propositions that the original author did or did not know about. Understanding anyhow has to be contextually appropriate, but in the latter case the contextual validity of the propositions additionally employed is of no relevance: since Dante wrote about the baptistry of Florence, we can say that the building he wrote about stands today next to the building with Brunelleschi’s dome without implying that Dante knew about Brunelleschi. Contextualization is only relevant in order to understand what building Dante was talking about. Alternatively, interpretation may infer propositions we derive from the understanding of the document and other propositions we believe that the author believed or knew about. Such an interpretation is historically appropriate insofar as it does not attribute to the text or the author the ideas, beliefs or knowledge that he or she historically could not have had.

Both in the case of understanding and interpretation, contextualization can be based only on what we know and what we believe and, also, there can be

⁵³ See Dagfinn Føllesdal, “Hermeneutics and Hypothetico-Deductive Method,” in M. Martin and L. McIntyre (eds), *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), 233-245 for a comparison between the hermeneutic circle and hypothetico-deductive method.

⁵⁴ Obviously, this “competence” or “sophistication” are not absolutes. One can judge them only on the basis of the comparison of the *de verbis* and *de signis* beliefs that were employed in understanding (interpretation) of a document and the *de verbis* and *de signis* beliefs that should have been employed in its understanding (interpretation).

no understanding (or interpretation) that would require the interpreter to have reasoning capacities that he or she does not have. *Quicquid recipitur*, says Aquinas, *recipitur ad modum recipientis*.