

Seminar 14.00 Thursday 24th March 2022

Institute of Philosophy, Jiliska 1, Meeting Room 124a

## Feeling for a Context: Bernard Bolzano and his Contexts

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### Extended Abstract

After describing briefly the emergence and development of the history of science as an academic discipline, at least in Europe, the rather curious position of its 'cousin' the history of mathematics will be sketched. These are stories of how the writing of the histories (their historiography) itself slowly changed over the second half of the twentieth century from being largely *internalist* (focussed narrowly on a supposed technical 'core') towards embracing a much wider range of influences and viewpoints, an *externalist* approach. In other words, there was a major change in *context*: the social, political, economic, institutional, cultural, and many other factors, began to be taken into account seriously when describing changes.

[Surely this does not mean that early (internalist) histories – such as those of George Sarton - were 'context-free'? What had happened to the context?]

But a merely sequential treatment of contextual factors does no justice to how they work in practice. They are inevitably *experienced* by individuals together, as a whole. So we propose a concurrent series of levels of experiential context - not independent of the usual factors - but operating in ways unique to an individual and ranging from the private, through an array of social communities, to the public context. Such experiential contexts intersect with the conventional abstractions (economic, conceptual, etc) at nodes which themselves will change through time. To be historical these nodes need attachment to source material in the form of texts or other artefacts. As a further elaboration of context the private experience of an individual could be opened up into their emotional life. It's widely recognised that motivation is a vital (and emotional) element of successful research. But what about the hopes and fears of the researcher, their confidence or lack of it, the drive of curiosity, the discomfort, suspense, confusion of the (inevitable) state of 'not-knowing', the ambition, the euphoria and satisfactions of 'progress'? Are these not all worthy of inclusion into a proper account of how change takes place? It will be argued that far from being an 'extension' of context, the emotional life of individuals is fundamental. It is to this that the title of the seminar refers.

[Why is this so often ignored? Is it essentially unknowable and 'subjective'?]

Some examples will be given of the ways in which mathematics, and the judgements we make about it, are also affected by the context in which it is developed. Consequently the context needs to be taken into account sufficiently in making sound judgments about cases of anticipation and 'rational reconstruction'.

[Do you find the examples convincing? Can you think of others, or other kinds?]

Context also affects the way we live in a much wider, practical and social sense. It may determine, or influence, whether we grow up to believe people are inherently unequal (master and slave, noble and serf, priest and lay person etc) or rather, fundamentally of equal value as human beings. The difference is profound, affecting our values and behaviour: what we regard as right or wrong, our ethics or morality.

Bolzano, as a priest and teacher, philosopher and mathematician, made one decision in taking up the post of Professor of *Religionslehre* (1805–1820) and another in living with the Hoffmanns (1823–1841). In each situation he had to confront, and live out, the tension between following his talents in mathematics and his moral mission of promoting the well-being (*Gemeinwohl*) of the community. We discuss how this tension might differ for him then, from what it is, or might be, for us now. And we consider some examples of Bolzano's own words on the matter in letters to friends.

[The degree of the tension referred to here depends in part on the degree and extent of the local distress, the lack of well-being, as a result of war, violence, poverty, disease, famine, inequalities, etc. Correction, information and sources are invited.]

Morality, for Bolzano, was a matter lived out in every hour of every day, it was inseparable from living. A good understanding of what it meant in Bolzano's times therefore needs a good sense of everyday life then, albeit an everyday life differing within, and between, those of different social status. He himself gives some examples in his publications and *Nachlass* and so, no doubt, do many other people. Our own research on this using contemporary records, newspapers, biography, travel journals, etc is at an elementary stage.

[Participants are invited to contribute information on good sources for this *Alltagsleben*, or about other research on similar, or related, issues.]

It is possible that there is not time during the event to include from those interested all the comments, questions, suggestions for information and potential sources, that could be of great interest. Please send items **before or after**, the event by email to: [russ.steve@gmail.com](mailto:russ.steve@gmail.com). This is in addition to feedback in person at the event.

**Thank you very much for your feedback!**

Steve Russ, 10<sup>th</sup> March 2022