

The Idea of Context in Islamic Tradition: Overcoming the Aporia between Text and Meaning

Muslim scriptural text seems to pose contemporary challenges as to how its reader may mitigate tension between what text says and what it means. This tension defines the hermeneutical problem represented in the potential opposition between language and meaning, such opposition which Muslim jurists, and Arabic philologists for that matter, sought to resolve by referring to the idea of 'context'. Particularly in juristic literature, Muslim scholars tend to use the word 'context' in two meanings: 1) 'context' in the sense of the linguistic context of the scriptural text; that is to read a text semantically and thematically according to its language-use and in connection with the surrounding texts which come before and after (aka *sawābiq* and *lawāḥiq*), where syntactical structure and speech arrangement are detrimental in the meaning-making process, and 2) 'context' as referring to the specifics of a given situation, where a text is read in connection with its speaker's (authorial) intent and its surrounding historical and cultural circumstances. Based on these two meanings, 'context' can be classified into two types: context of language and context of situation, to borrow Malinowski's term for the latter type. This paper seeks to demonstrate that the Muslim jurists relegated 'context of situation' to an ancillary but instrumental role in determining meaning, as they do not seem to envisage the possibility of meaning beyond text or outside the context of language-use. It is possible however, I argue, to redeem a space within classical Islamic tradition, where 'context of situation' can be said to play an equally active role in the meaning-making process, hence balancing/reconciling the notion of language with the notion of meaning. Toward that end, the current paper seeks to expand the idea of 'context' to include another type of 'context', i.e., the context of interpreting religious text in connection with concrete reality. That is, a text – to be intelligible – is to be understood in connection with the way the text applies to a concrete situation. With this, the paper shall refer to three types of 'context': context of language, context of situation, and context of application. The paper shall draw on perspectives not only from classical Islamic knowledge but also from the philosophy of language and philosophical hermeneutics that may inform discussions on the attempt to develop such hermeneutics of application from within Islamic tradition. As it proceeds to situate its argument within Islamic tradition and modern knowledge, this paper will make references to 1) classical Islamic scholars such as al-Shāṭibī, Ibn al-Qayyim, and other philologists and jurists from Islamic tradition and 2) modern scholars of language and hermeneutics such as Firth, Wittgenstein, Malinowski, and Gadamer from modern times.



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