

Constructive thoughts on Pierre Menard

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Abstract

Interpretational monists and pluralists most often accept contextualism. At the same time, most of them resist constructivism, which takes all interpretations of artworks to be separate artworks. However, one of the central arguments to establish contextualism, based on Borges' story of Pierre Menard, is so formulated that using it can force all contextualists into accepting constructivism. This paper points out the under-specification present in the philosophical use of the Pierre Menard example to then combine it with arguments presented by contextualists themselves and show that without a more careful look at the example discussed, accepting all those arguments entails constructivism.

Keywords: contextualism, constructivism, interpretation

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Contextualism underlies a large part of the modern discussion of interpretation of art. It is often accepted by both interpretational monists, who claim that there is always one correct interpretation of every given artwork, and pluralists, who argue that there can be many justified interpretations. It is also often accepted by constructivists who claim that the interpretative effort of the audience is a part of the creative process which has influence not only on the interpretation, but on the artwork itself – i.e. artworks are partially constructed by the audience. Notably, a large number of contextualists actively resist constructivism and endorse one of the other options (cf. Levinson 1996: 197; Stecker 2003: 126f.; and others).

In this paper I will not try to take a stance in the discussion between monists, pluralists and constructivists, but focus on pointing out an issue present within the contextualists' argumentation, and specifically the often-used Pierre Menard example. I argue that the current use of this example is underspecified and can make constructivism an inevitable conclusion for all contextualists, even those who argue most fiercely against it. At the very least, this article shows that the popular example should be thoroughly re-thought if it is to be useful for contextualists.

1 Pierre and independence

Contextualists hold that the aesthetic properties of an artwork are partially determined by the history of its production, cultural setting, and other contextual properties. One of the most prominent arguments for this view rests on the case presented in the famously quoted 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*' by Borges. As various authors argued (Levinson 1990, 1996; Davies 2004; Walton 2008: etc.), a text word-by-word identical to Cervantes' *Don Quixote* written in the 20th Century would have different contextual and therefore different aesthetic properties to the original. Following this, interpretations of these works

would have to be different even though both would have identical non-contextual properties. This implies that contextual properties of artworks should be included in the interpretation.

To abstract from the Menard case, the above argument establishes that an object x ¹, which is structurally and/or materially identical to y can have a different set of aesthetic properties in virtue of being produced in a cultural and historical context Cx rather than Cy , and by artist Ax rather than Ay . What it does not say, however, is whether the creation of x is in any way related to y , and most importantly, if Ax was aware of the existence of y when creating x – i.e. it does not determine whether the two works were created independently or not. While this might seem irrelevant to the matter at hand, the argument which I am about to present shows that this distinction can be vital.

The pluralists seem to have paid little attention to this issue. Borges' story explicitly states that Pierre Menard not only knew the original *Don Quixote* by Cervantes – he read it when he was twelve and reread it later – but also studied the text and its context in much detail and was even familiar with its modern interpretations (Borges 1970: 55-6). There are no changes introduced to the example when it is used in philosophical discussion, and thus it would seem that philosophers also think that Menard (or any Ax) can be aware and thus not independent of Cervantes (or any Ay). In fact, the arguments offered by the pluralists often similarly implicitly assume that such connections are permissible.

Levinson in his 'Intention and Interpretation in Literature' uses the Menard example without change. After quoting it he adds that a similar case can be made for one person writing the same thing twice in two contexts – it seems obvious that such a person would know his or her own previous writing, and thus although no explicit point is made regarding the issue, it looks like there is no requirement set regarding the independence of the creation of the second work (Levinson 1996: 196). Moreover, in 'What a Musical Work Is' Levinson explicitly says that were two separate composers to create identical sound structures twice in different contexts, the two sound structures would constitute different works – and he

¹The argument is ontologically neutral and I use the word 'object' for convenience only.

compares this case to the case of the same composer creating the same structure at two separate times (Levinson 1990: 68; footnote on p. 73 also mentions this specifically). The other examples used in his arguments, esp. the famous Brahms/Beethoven sonata, are somewhat indeterminate – because more often than not they concern the possibility that a work created at a certain time (e.g. by Brahms) could have been created earlier (e.g. by Beethoven), the discussed issue does not arise. But Levinson provides more examples some of which introduce possible works created later than they were actually created (the *Midsummer's Night Dream* Overture and the Stamitz's symphonies examples), and there are no indications in the text that they should be treated any differently – i.e. no further requirements regarding the independent creation of the later pieces are even mentioned. Still, none of the examples are clear on whether the possible work is created *instead of*, or *in addition to* the actual one. However, since the examples are quoted just after the discussion of the Pierre Menard argument, it seems sensible to assume they are parallel to it and concern situations in which both works exist in one world. If this reading is wrong, Levinson is at least guilty of a dangerous underspecification of his examples, while my point is supported by places where he explicitly writes about 'a given individual [who] on a given day could write two [identical] poems' (Levinson 1996: 196).

A similar case can be made for arguments presented by other authors. In his *Marvelous Images. On values and the arts* Walton quotes the Menard argument and uses it in a similar fashion (Walton 2008: 235). While he does point out that Menard did not copy the original work, this does not seem to exclude the fact that he knew the original – here 'copy' should be rather understood as 'mindlessly multiplied', not 'wrote while knowing the original' (which would be compliant with Borges).

Another treatment of the issue can be found in David Davies' *Art as Performance*. He seems more strict in writing of Cervantes' and Menard's versions of *Don Quixote* as *separately* instantiated (Davies 2004: 40). However, no case is really made there, as Davies follows to simply restating the original story as offered by Borges – thus while 'separately'

could point at the requirement for the works to be created independently of one another, it seems more probable that it merely suggests that Menard's work with its properties and meaning is not dependant or parasitic on Cervantes' version. This is confirmed by the discussion which follows this example, where Davies focuses on distinguishing the texts (i.e. treating them as separate) only on the basis of differing art-historical contexts in which they were created (Davies 2004: 65).

The above is only a brief selection of cases which shows that the Menard example is used in the philosophical literature in a way which does not require two identical but contextually differing objects to be created independently of one another for them to be treated as two separate artworks. In the following argument I want to show that it only makes sense for contextualists to use this example if such or a similar requirement is introduced, as skipping over this issue is likely to lead to constructivism.

2 Pierre into constructivism²

My first premise concerns the Pierre Menard example as it is set by Borges, i.e. assuming that x does not have to be created independently of y to count as a separate work.

The second premise is derived from Stephen Davies' 'The Aesthetic Relevance of Authors' and Painters' Intentions'. Davies considers intentionalism and possibilities of pluralist interpretations of artworks by noting that there are a number of ways in which an artwork can be interpreted if the original intentions of its author are unknown (Davies 1982: 66-8). Varying interpretations may result from a misprint, from the fact that words change meaning over time, from the fact that an unintended interpretation might make the work better than interpreting it in the conventional way, and finally – and this will interest me most – from the fact that an audience may ascribe a work contextual properties, e.g.

²This argument is mainly directed at contextualists who are pluralists – an argument concerning monism would in fact be much simpler as it would not have to consider treating various re-writings as mere interpretations rather than separate artworks.

alluding to some other works or events in the world, which it was not intended to have. All these examples try to establish pluralism. Most importantly, however, it is claimed that an interpretation of a work which is given as a result of ascribing unintended contextual properties is in fact a separate work, one not authored by whoever wrote or painted the original, but by the person interpreting it.

My third premise follows from Iseminger's argument for actual intentionalism (Iseminger 1992) and Levinson's critique of it (Levinson 1996). Iseminger claims that for any work only one of two interpretative statements of the form p and $\neg p$ can be true. He goes on to argue that the statement which is true is the one conforming with the author's intentions. Levinson, however, argues that a reference to actual intentions is not necessary and in many cases not even possible as these intentions are simply unknown. What we should do is substitute the actual intentions with hypothetical ones and base our decision whether p or $\neg p$ is true of the artwork on what an informed reader would be justified in thinking the author's intentions were.

I would like to follow each of these lines of thought and join them into a single argument showing that if they are accepted in this form, constructivism must be true. Firstly, let me agree with Levinson and take his argument further – actual intentions play no role in the process of interpretation: instead subjects interpreting artworks form their judgments on the basis of the intentions they are justified in believing the author had. As Levinson suggests, even if it were the case that what a competent reader is justified in thinking the author's intentions were in fact were the author's real intentions, i.e. the hypothetical intentions perfectly matched the actual ones, the two categories remain separate and any judgment on the work will be given basing solely on the hypothetical intentions (ibid.: 179). This claim can be expressed by a counterfactual: were it the case that the actual intentions of the author and the hypothetical intentions were different, any judgment about the work would be based on the latter. However, accepting hypothetical intentionalism does not suffice to resolve the problem, because in practice it often happens, as Levinson himself

seems to agree (cf Levinson 1996: 194), that even the best informed audience cannot decide whether p or $\neg p$ is true of a given work, or in other words – given the evidence it is equally justified to follow either interpretation.

To back this claim with an example, Bach's fugues have long been thought to be a prime example of absolute music, an exercise in form completely devoid of representation or any reference to the external world. A close reading of Johann Mattheson's treatises on Baroque music and its connections with rhetoric revealed, however, that there existed a complex musical language at the time which included very well defined rhythmical or melodic patterns that had a customarily established reference to certain concepts or words (e.g. musical figures expressive of sudden pain, the Cross, etc.). It turns out that Bach's fugues are full of such figures, and in some cases interpreting them according to the rhetorical rules described by Mattheson reveals new meanings – the Fugue in C-sharp Minor from *Das Wohltemperierte Klavier I* for example is interpreted to represent a lament, Christ's passion, the sign of the Cross, a crown, Bach's name, etc.³. Since similar figures appear in other works thought to be prime examples of absolute music, it is indeed hard to determine whether they were placed there intentionally, or are they just a random or unintentional addition resulting from the development of the fugue subjects. Alternative interpretations exist, all offering good support for their claims, and while some entail that a given work has extra-musical meaning (p), others deny that ($\neg p$) – yet there is no reason to prefer some of them over the others (not unless one of the actual intentionalists is a medium and can ask Bach himself).

Thus my first conclusion is: there can be two, and even two mutually exclusive interpretations of one work, one of which cannot be proven more correct than the other.

My second move is to combine the above conclusion with Davies' claim. In a case in which two, and especially two mutually exclusive interpretations of a given work exist, it

³I follow Timothy Smith's interpretation available at <http://www2.nau.edu/tas3/wtc/i04.html>

is clear that only one of those could be compliant with the author's actual intentions.⁴ Regardless now which one it is, it follows that only, say, Bach's-fugue-as-absolute-music was written by Bach, while Bach's-fugue-as-'programmatically'-music (if I may call it in this anachronistic way) is not – it is instead, as Davies claims, a work by whoever interpreted Bach's work as having extra-musical content (say 'being an allusion to the story of New Testament'). In fact if it is indeed undetermined which one is truly Bach's intended version, both interpretations should be considered artworks not by Bach, but by the people who offered respective interpretations. This is to assert constructivism.

It is quite justified at this point to stop and ask – it might be the case that there can be equally justified interpretations of one work, but why should they be treated as separate works? Cannot we just say that there is one work, however it is not fully known and competing interpretations of it simply do not entirely capture it? This way we agree that sometimes it is undetermined how a given work should be interpreted, but interpretations are just interpretations, not separate artworks, i.e. we are still dealing with interpretational pluralism, not constructivism.

This would be true if not for Pierre Menard. We have no problems treating his *Don Quixote* as a separate artwork, because it clearly has different contextual properties. All that Menard supposedly did, was write (parts of) the same text and add to it a cotextual property 'as created in the context of the 20th Century'. However, his creation was not mechanical or thoughtless - on the contrary, he spent considerable amount of time thinking what exactly a 20th Century *Don Quixote* would be. In fact, he was actively thinking about the meaning of the text he was producing, and about how different it is to the original. At some point Borges even quotes Menard's letter: 'My solitary game is governed by two polar laws. The first permits me to essay variations of a formal or psychological type; the second obliges me to sacrifice these variations to the "original" text' (Borges 1970: 67).

⁴Assuming here with Iseminger that an author is permitted to have an inconsistent intention for x to mean p and $\neg p$, but not to have an intention for it to mean p and another intention to mean $\neg p$ – the difference is in the scope.

All this shows that by writing his text Menard was at least partially providing a modern interpretation of *Don Quixote*, consciously giving it a new meaning resulting from placing the same string of letters in a new context.⁵

However, according to the above argument, any reader is free to interpret a text in any context she wishes. It seems that the only thing in which Menard's text differs from any reader's own interpretation is the fact that Menard wrote it down while an average reader does not do that. The question is – is this a good enough reason to treat Menard's written interpretation as a separate artwork while another reader's unwritten interpretation as simply an interpretation?

Cervantes' *Don Quixote* consisted of the text as interpreted and written by Cervantes in the 17th Century, Menard's work would consist of the text as interpreted and written by Menard in the 20th Century, and a present reader's assumed work would consist of the text as interpreted by this reader in the 21th Century. There are three elements which enter the definition: being a text, being written down, and having certain contextual properties (simplified here to the temporal context). The first element is identical in all cases. All differ in the contextual properties and as a result – interpretations, and first two differ from the third in the fact that they are written down. However, imagine now a fourth case: a copyist or even a printer who blindly following Menard's interpretation produces copies of *Don Quixote* – he creates something which consists of the text as written by the copyist but interpreted by Menard in the context of the 20th Century. If it were the writing which made all the difference between being a work and being a mere interpretation, one would have to admit that the copyist is an author of an artwork, one which differs from Menard's only by the property: 'being written by person *X*'. This, however, seems quite absurd – how can we give something a status of an artwork just because it has a very contingent property of being written down? Every reader of *Don Quixote* could do as Menard – write

⁵It is somewhat intuitive that all artists always interpret their own work – after all, if our interpretation is to be based on what the artist intended a given piece to mean, we are essentially asking how the artist interpreted his own piece himself.

the text down and claim that together with their interpretation it is a separate artwork; it is not impossible, they simply have no time to do it, see no point in it, etc. In fact it may soon be quite plausible that every single reader *will* write every book they read – if books are read in an electronic format, downloading them to obtain a copy *is* technically writing them, simply using a tool slightly more complex than a pen. Engaging in a discussion on what exactly counts as writing seems quite hopeless and thus I argue that interpretations should not be given the status of works depending on whether they are written down.

If this argument is accepted, then the only way in which works which consist of the same text and different interpretations can be distinguished is by the differences in interpretations. Now if one does agree that Menard's *Don Quixote* is a separate work from Cervantes' original, one should also agree that any reader's interpretation of the same text is a separate artwork. What follows, the stance of those contextualists who are pluralists becomes manifestly false as they slip into constructivism – there cannot be many interpretations of an artwork as they would all be new artworks – and the claims of the monists become tautologically true, in practice also asserting constructivism – of course there is only one interpretation of every artwork, because if there were more, they would be separate artworks.

3 Pierre needs a retouche

Let me now return to the important distinction made in the first part of the paper. The last point of my argument rests on the assumption discussed above – that two identical objects x and y can be treated as separate artworks in virtue of differing contexts of creation regardless of whether their authors were aware of one another's work or not. Were an additional qualification introduced that the author of the posterior artwork should create it independently, requiring his work to be an original effort, my argument would not succeed. Clearly the interpretations offered by the members of the audience are not independent

of the works they concern, and thus their interpretations could not be treated as separate artworks. However, as I was pointing out in the first section, such a requirement is not present in the literature.

This solution requires a modification of the Pierre Menard case. It is fair enough to say that as an example used in a philosophical argument it does not have to assume the story described by Borges in its entirety, and arguably similar problems do not arise if other examples are used to the same conclusion – but even if contextualists can achieve their conclusions through other examples, they cannot just ignore the issue I pointed out, and their arguments should still account for our intuitions concerning the Pierre Menard case as it is described. However, as the argument is used now, there is no indication that they actually noticed the need to introduce any such distinctions. Thus the first conclusion of this paper is: if contextualists want to retain their arguments and not risk falling into constructivism, changes have to be made to their views on what constitutes a separate artwork.

However, it is not clear whether simply introducing an additional requirement: ‘has to be created independently’ for ascribing the status of a separate artwork rather than just an interpretation to objects of the discussed type, is what is needed. It seems that in some cases at least, for example the case of Pierre Menard as it is described by Borges, we *do* want to talk about the two works as separate even though the latter was not created independently from the former. After all, it is quite intuitive that Menard did create a separate artwork, and perhaps other similar examples can be given (imagine Duchamp producing *L.H.O.O.Q. Shaved* by actually repainting it). If in these cases a contextualist wants to say that objects created are separate artworks, he should better provide a reason why these cases differ from interpretative efforts by any member of the audience – and a reason better than the contingent fact of being actually painted or written down.

While the argument presented in this paper is clearly insufficient as a criticism of contextualism or a proof that it inevitably has to slip into constructivism, it exposes an important issue in the contextualist's reasoning which cannot be resolved by arguments used in the current discussion. It shows that the basic concept of what constitutes a separate artwork, essentially based on the Leibniz law applied to both physical and contextual properties of objects, is insufficient as it leads to a conclusion most contextualists want to resist - that all interpretations of artworks are separate works. It is true that conclusions needed to establish contextualism can be obtained in other ways (e.g. using Levinson's Beethoven/Brahms example, or even the *Brillo Boxes* example used by Danto), but other parallel examples, like the Menard case, can actually be too much, forcing contextualists to take one more step which would lead to constructivism. Since in the literature those two types of examples are used virtually interchangeably, or at least are not distinguished between, it is fair to ask the contextualists who are monists or pluralists for a further specification of their view, which will ensure that it is clearly separated from constructivism.

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