

The Importance of Context: Revisiting the Enlightenment's Bathwater

The Enlightenment Shift

The Enlightenment was a period characterized by an emphasis on reason, science, and individualism. While it laid the foundation for many modern advancements, it also sidelined certain forms of wisdom and ways of knowing that didn't fit its rationalist paradigm.

The Baby Thrown Out

1. **Holistic Wisdom:** Philosophical and spiritual traditions often emphasized the interconnectedness of all things, a worldview that is being validated by modern theories of physics and complexity science.
2. **Contextual Understanding:** The Enlightenment favored reductionism, breaking down complex phenomena into their constituent parts for easier study. However, this approach often ignores the importance of context, both in human interactions and in natural phenomena.

Iain McGilchrist and Left-Brain Dominance

The work of Iain McGilchrist sheds light on how our neurological setup influences our perception of the world. McGilchrist argues that the left hemisphere of the brain, responsible for analytic thinking, has become dominant in Western societies. This dominance has sidelined the right hemisphere, which is more attuned to context, empathy, and holistic thinking. The result? A society that excels at detail but often misses the broader picture.

Mind in Context: Lisa Feldman Barrett and Others

Recent research in psychology and neuroscience, such as the work by Lisa Feldman Barrett, emphasizes the role of context in shaping human cognition and emotion. This 'Mind in Context' view argues that our thoughts, feelings, and actions cannot be fully understood without considering the environmental and social context in which they occur.

Why Context Matters Now

1. **Complex Systems:** As we grapple with complex global challenges, from climate change to social inequality, a holistic and contextual understanding becomes crucial.
2. **Human Relations:** In an interconnected, globalized world, understanding the context in which interactions occur can lead to more empathetic and effective solutions.

Conclusion

As we reassess the Enlightenment's legacy, it becomes clear that some of what was discarded—holistic thinking, the importance of context—may hold the keys to addressing today's complex challenges. By integrating these lost forms of wisdom, we may be better equipped to navigate the complexities of the modern world.