Facing epistemic uncertainty: characteristics, possibilities, and limitations of a discursive contextualist approach to philosophy of education
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1. Introduction
To date, antifoundationalism plays a significant role in discussions about the future of philosophy of education. However, it certainly is not the only voice in the debate. It is indeed one of the most outspoken voices and does, perhaps the most radically, advocate the epistemic uncertainty that has affected philosophy of education over the past decades. On the other hand, it has been repudiated from the very beginning by a large group of, in an epistemological sense, more temperate philosophers of education. According to these authors, the current epistemological discussions do not at all have to lead to, what they regard as apocalyptic, ideas as proposed by antifoundationalists (cf. Carr, 1998a). This does, however, in no way imply that these authors are blind to epistemic uncertainty. It is just the way they interpret, and deal with, epistemic uncertainty that differs in principle from the antifoundationalists’ position. It is important to also make the voice of this group of authors clearly heard when it comes to my search for a better understanding of the epistemic uncertainty we seem to be confronted with. In this chapter, I will work my way towards doing so by first briefly touching upon the central question of epistemology, and why it is of importance to education. I will subsequently go into the background of the epistemic uncertainty with which we are faced, as a basis for showing how this uncertainty is dealt with by a vast amount of non-antifoundationalist philosophers of education. This should eventually lead to an assessment of both the fruitful and more problematic issues regarding the different ways of dealing with epistemic uncertainty that will have passed in review, based on which I will be able to continue my search for my own position in the debate.

Epistemology revolves around knowledge. It is especially about the question of what ‘knowledge’ is, and when one may speak of it. For various reasons, these questions have always played a key role in Western philosophy (cf. Elgin 1996, p. 22). The possession of knowledge has been regarded as valuable to individual life ever since antiquity. A life directed by knowledge reflects an ideal of self-control, as opposed to a life that runs as a matter-of-course in line with traditions and customs or ill-considered, everyday ideas. Socrates’ statement that an unexplored life is not worth living can also be understood in these terms. There are also other considerations, which are more related to the role that knowledge
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plays in the public domain. Knowledge is deemed to fulfill an important instrumental value, for instance. Efficient actions based on knowledge are attributed a higher success rate than actions that are based on one's own discretion or trial and error. Partly for these reasons, ‘having’ knowledge is also considered an honorary title from which status and authority may be derived (cf. Williams 2001, p. 11). In the public debate, someone who is considered to be knowledgeable will be heard sooner than someone who is regarded as ignorant, for example.

The attribution of knowledge thus generates status and clearly has practical implications. This makes the question of who possesses knowledge directly relevant to a subject area like education. We expect teachers to transfer knowledge to their pupils, for example. From professional educational practitioners, it is often demanded that their teaching practices are in line with current scientific knowledge of education. Lastly, chapter one reveals that, since ancient times, it has also been deemed important to ascertain to what extent philosophers of education can lay claim to making statements about knowledge, because these had consequences for the potential practical relevance of the philosophy of education. The fact that the possession, or lack, of knowledge has direct practical implications also makes the attribution of that knowledge a normative affair that should be handled carefully. Pivotal is the question under which circumstances we tend to recognize someone’s statements as statements of knowledge. It is primarily this epistemological issue that will be central to the rest of this chapter. In other words, I will focus on the question of when we deem someone justified to lay claim to knowledge or – to use Williams’ terminology – when we may refer to 'epistemic entitlement' (Williams 2001, p. 21).

2. The fruitless search for infallible knowledge

According to classic foundationalism, which for a long time has been the dominant epistemological position within Western philosophy, ‘epistemic entitlement’ can only be spoken of when basically there is no chance that the claim to knowledge at hand is unjustified (cf. Elgin 1999, p. 22). Here, unjustified means that the claim is not in accordance with external reality. In such cases, knowledge is by definition considered as infallible and universally valid. In itself, the ambition that classic foundationalism sets itself is very noble, particularly in light of the previously mentioned normative effect of the attribution of knowledge. Nowadays, however, there will scarcely be a philosopher who thinks this to be a feasible ambition, since hardly anyone will believe that the requirements set within the

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6 I borrow this term from Jonathan Dancy (cf. 1985, p. 53).
The question of 'epistemic entitlement' is always dependent on the degree to which a certain belief seems acceptable, or justified, in the light of something else. To a foundationalist, the proper justification of a belief is only the case if it is supported by a belief or authority that itself is also justified. It also applies to foundationalism that statements that are used for justification have to be epistemologically more certain than the statements they support. As such, they should be at a deeper, more fundamental level. To foundationalists, knowledge justification necessarily implies a hierarchical order of levels of beliefs, where deeper layers should be gradually more certain than those above. This vertical order of the justification chain makes foundationalists susceptible to the pitfall of infinite regression. After all, each statement is for its own justification dependent on a deeper lying statement, which in turn needs justification on an even deeper level. In order to avoid this pitfall, the justification chain eventually needs a stopper. According to classic foundationalism, a proper justification chain can only be brought to a halt by beliefs or authorities that can serve as support for other statements, but that are not dependent on other beliefs for their own justification - the so-called basic beliefs, or foundations. The characteristic of these foundations, therefore, is that they are justified in themselves. Since these foundations need no further justification, they are in epistemological perspective one up. I have typified them in that sense as 'epistemologically privileged' in chapter two.

Precisely regarding the issue of presupposing justified foundations that themselves need no further justification, classic foundationalism has been heavily criticized. Several philosophers have pointed out that the most important mental events that have traditionally been designated as possible candidates for supplying an epistemological foundation, to wit human reason, the sensory experience, and language, have been found to be unsuitable (cf. Baynes 1996; Rorty 1989). This criticism of classic foundationalism is not voiced by merely a small faction in philosophy, but is now widely shared. In chapter two, it became clear that the same criticism can also be heard among philosophers of education. Within the philosophy of education it is not just a small group of more postmodern inclined authors either, who have departed from strict classic foundationalism, like the antifoundationalists in chapter two. The notion that there are no authorities to be found that we can rely upon to arrive at infallible, universally valid knowledge, is in fact shared in contemporary philosophy of education (see also Adler 2003; Blake et al. 1998; Carr 1998a).

Thus, at second glance, the essential candidates for supplying the foundations for infallible knowledge do not seem to be equipped for the
task. Against the background of the classic foundationalist idea that we can only speak of a justified claim to knowledge when there is no possibility of that claim being unjustified, it seems that we can only draw the conclusion that it is beyond human capacity to ever arrive at 'real' knowledge. In other words, if we have to let go of the notion of foundations that are justified in themselves, we also have to let go of the idea of eternally guaranteed, accurate - or infallible - knowledge. This makes it clear as to why epistemology will have to reconcile with the notion that the justification of claims inevitably entails a certain degree of uncertainty. The subsequent questions are: how to interpret that uncertainty and how to deal with it epistemologically.

3. General validity without infallibility
To many philosophers, this epistemic uncertainty does not at all imply that we may no longer refer to ‘real’ knowledge, or that we are no longer able to defend certain beliefs over others. On the contrary, a great number of philosophers share the conviction that, even without epistemological foundations that are justified in themselves, it is still possible to arrive at objective knowledge. The idea is that, even though no single belief may be infallible, in certain cases we may have sufficient reasons to classify some beliefs as in any case the best possible of those currently available to us and, therefore, may regard them – at least for now – as ultimate, generally valid basic beliefs that can be used to ground our knowledge claims. Due to the recognition of the fallibility of such an epistemological ground, this position is also referred to as fallibilist. Within this approach we have to take into account that the basic beliefs we rely upon for justification may over time become outdated. Against this background, fallibilist authors stress that we will constantly have to be critical of the beliefs we adhere to, so as to check their current tenability. This so-called fallibilism is something we often come across within the philosophy of education. In order to examine what this position would actually entail, I am presenting two educational philosophical examples that are relevant: 1) because it concerns influential philosophers of education; and 2) because they focus on different domains of the judgment; and 3) because their interpretation of fallibilism differs.

The first example can be found in the work by Harvey Siegel, who extensively discussed the relationship between epistemology and (philosophy of ) education (cf. Siegel 1990; 1997; 1998). To Siegel, the ultimate ground for epistemological justification of knowledge is the absolute validity of rationality. This basic belief is, in his view, inevitable, since rationality is presupposed in the practice of inter-human communication. According to Siegel, by bringing the validity of rationality up for
discussion we unavoidably end up in a pragmatic contradiction, because we appeal to rational considerations by bringing it up for discussion in the first place (cf. Siegel 1996, pp. 81-82). Despite his claim to absolute validity of rationality, Siegel may be regarded as a fallibilist, for in his eyes we should recognize that the actual criteria that we use for the rational evaluation of judgments, are fallible (ibid., pp. 176-178). These criteria are actually the formal and informal logical standards that we apply in, what Siegel refers to as, critical thinking; whether, for instance, we base our arguments as much as possible on relevant and correct information, or whether we do not draw conclusions that cannot be directly deduced from premises (cf. ibid., p. 95). Although such standards are deemed fallible, according to Siegel we may suppose that they are the best possible available to us at this moment, so that an objective validity may also be attributed to them. We may do so, because these criteria themselves are also continually subject to critical assessment. After all, according to Siegel, critical thinking obliges us to critically assess not only our own judgments, but also the standards that we use for that critical assessment, precisely because of our recognition of their fallibility (cf. ibid.). This makes it clear as to how we, according to Siegel, can safeguard the general validity of our epistemological basic beliefs even if we assume their potential fallibility, whereby the objectivity of knowledge claims would also be safeguarded.

The second example is specifically focused on the justification of moral judgments and can be found in the work by David Carr on the objectivity of values (cf. Carr 1998b; Carr 2000). According to Carr, moral judgment always revolves around the improvement of human well-being, avoiding sorrow, or battling evil. Carr submits that we must acknowledge that the way in which we interpret this at this moment, will probably not prove to be correct once and for all. In his view, our moral judgments are fallible in this regard. This, Carr stresses, does not at all mean that we would not be able to arrive at moral objectivity or even the truth and that we should acknowledge, for example, that morality is relative to the community in which we happen to live – which he believes is argued by postmodern communitarianist oriented philosophers. He opines that we are most certainly able, for instance, to objectively determine that issues, like slavery, the burning of women, and child murder are morally reprehensible. We can so determine, Carr continues, on the basis of moral investigation, in which we focus, among other things, on concrete, perceptible facts that concretely show which well-being or sorrow is induced by certain actions (ibid., p. 24). With this very statement Carr also opposes modern liberalist philosophers who believe that moral objectivity might be realized on the basis of the strict, rational
inference of prescriptive, moral basic beliefs. In this light, we will morally condemn slavery, not so much because it goes against a rationally inferred principle of human self-determination, but rather because we have simply been able to determine which sorrow it has caused, both on an individual and collective level. Partly due to matters like scientific progress and open (e.g. cross-cultural) communication, it would be possible to gain increasingly nuanced insight into the reality of what is morally correct, or incorrect, in the way we practice. According to Carr, this also implies that in the course of time we will have to adapt our current moral judgments. “[J]ust as we know – in the light of what human progress there has been – that past personal and social moral sensibilities seriously failed to register real human needs and interests, so we can be sure that other moral needs, currently beyond our present ken, await discernment through further sensitive reflection and interpersonal engagement” (ibid., p. 125). However, for the moment we do not doubt our basic moral beliefs. We do know, Carr continues, which cases are morally valuable. If we continue to carefully examine whether these values are met, we will also realize when it is necessary to adapt our insights.

These examples have shown how fallibilism, which many philosophers of education regard as a acceptable and constructive way of dealing with the inevitable epistemic uncertainty we face, may be interpreted. We should take some time to further explore fallibilism as an approach in order to also determine its potential value for the philosophy of education. First of all, I would like to address two clearly powerful aspects of fallibilism. The first strength of fallibilism lies in the fact that it urges to constantly look for arguments or examples that might lead to adapt, or even replace, current basic epistemological grounds in order to raise the level of judgment increasingly higher. The most renown example of this practice may be found in the Popperian scientist who realizes that his theory is a provisional theory and accepts the responsibility to continue to search for contradicting observations, so as to eventually be able to contribute to the expansion and refinement of the body of knowledge. This self-searching and self-correcting intention also shows that fallibilists - as do classic foundationalists - are trying very hard to forestall the attribution of unjustified claims. 'Epistemic entitlement’ only applies once a claim is supported by grounds for justification for which we have sufficient reasons to state that they are correct, or that they are at least the best ones available. A criticaster could now argue that this vigilance does not alter the fact that the fallibilist's principles are uncertain and that, therefore, we still cannot know for sure whether our knowledge attributions are indeed correct. A fallibilist will probably not lose any sleep over this criticism.
They would assert that there are simply no more definite principles, and that we all appeal to some basic beliefs sooner or later. Against that background, it seems most reasonable to at least acknowledge the uncertainty of those principles, before reviewing them critically and continually.

I believe the second strength of fallibilism concerns the possibilities it offers for positive theoretical judgment or, to put it in other words, the capability to take a firm stance. Fallibilists differ in principle on this specific subject from the antifoundationalists in chapter two who suggest that philosophers of education's primary concern should not be the defending of a certain position, since every defense is bound by restrictions and, as such, would have an excluding effect. The notion that we have access to basic beliefs that are reliable enough to be attributed a general validity to, immediately generates the possibility to more or less objectively defend, or indeed discard, certain insights. This is not only relevant in an epistemological sense, but also has consequences for the practical relevance of the philosophy of education. This can also be found in both Siegel’s and Carr's fallibilism. Siegel asserts that based on the application of rationality criteria, we may for instance objectively defend critical thinking as an educational goal (1996, pp. 23-25), or expose our prejudices as irrational (ibid., p. 95). In this light, Siegel believes that the rationality criteria “also function as criteria for the evaluation of social organization and of procedures for the establishment of social and public policy” (ibid., p. 97). Carr shows us how, based on the idea of objectivity of values, a specific interpretation of moral education can be defended, or how it helps us to morally discard, or actually defend, specific practices (cf. Carr 1998b; 2000). As such, fallibilism fits in with a long-standing tradition in which educational philosophical insights are regarded as directives for educational practice (see chapter one).

Thus, fallibilism reveals itself to be a fruitful, and in that sense defendable, epistemological position for philosophy of education. However, if we zoom in on fallibilism as an epistemological stance, the approach raises some questions relevant to my inquiry into the possible merits of an acceptable contemporary epistemological approach. These questions concern, among other things, the relationship between the beliefs that justification is grounded in and the beliefs that need justification, as proposed by fallibilists. In fallibilism, justificatory grounds derive their status from the assumption that they are more reliable, or more certain, than the beliefs they are to support. We can thus make a distinction between more certain, justifying beliefs and less certain beliefs that need justification. Therefore, fallibilism has a vertical, or hierarchical, justification structure. We have already seen that such a justification
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structure is susceptible to the pitfall of infinite regression. To prevent this, the chain of justification needs a stopper. In fallibilism, this stopper is supplied by beliefs that are regarded as more certain and have been designated as epistemologically basic. As such, the epistemological principles of fallibilism fulfill the same role as the foundations of classic foundationalism, albeit that the requirements set for whatever should eventually serve as a foundation, are not as strict. That is why fallibilism is also described as mild, or lenient, foundationalism (Elgin 1996), or as foundationalism without infallibility (Dancy 1989). Be it as it may, both epistemological approaches have in common that they are based on ultimate, deeper lying justificatory grounds, that - for now, at least - need no further justification, hence the reason for regarding them as 'epistemologically privileged'. The advantage of fallibilism over classic foundationalism lies in the fact that it does not need to appeal to the notion of foundations that are justified in themselves, which emerged as unattainable. Still, even this notion raises questions.

Firstly, we may ask ourselves what the epistemological value may be of beliefs that are underpinned by ultimate basic beliefs that we recognize as fallible. Beliefs that function as a stopper in the justification chain are not under debate - at least not at the moment. Fallibilists argue that these more basic beliefs have been critically reviewed at other times. We thus have well-founded reasons to accept them as such. However, this does not take away the fact that they are now regarded as ‘true’, while at the same time recognized as fallible. This means that such epistemological basic beliefs actually appear as prejudiced. This does not necessarily have to be a problem. After all, we must accept that all our beliefs are fallible. Hence, this also applies to the basic beliefs that we use to justify our claims. The point here, however, is that the idea of fallible basic beliefs simply does not go together with the fallibilist pretence that we can still arrive at generally valid, or even objective, claims to knowledge. This may be clarified by looking into the beliefs that were once earmarked as epistemological principles, but lost that qualification later, when better alternatives became available. An example: we may readily accept that Ptolemy and his followers had good reasons to belief that the earth is the centre of the universe as their starting point in their study of celestial bodies. With this idea as the point of departure, various important discoveries were made, making it extremely influential from a scientific point of view. However, in light of later understandings, such as Copernicus' heliocentric view of the universe, or Einstein's theory of general relativity, it seems absurd to say that people in those days would have been justified – in epistemological sense – to claim general validity of the idea (for instance, it would imply that Galileo's claims, in an
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epipistemological sense, were less correct). On second thought, the idea was really not as reliable or even as certain as people once believed, so that in retrospect we can say that a claim to general validity would have been unjustified.

In connection with moral principles, which Carr focuses on, we may be able to understand, considering the circumstances and insights at the time, why the ancient Greek defended the idea that certain members of society – such as slaves or women – were simply less valuable than others. However, it does seem strange to accept that they would have been allowed to claim the general validity of that claim in those days. However, it is quite plausible that they had no doubts about the idea whatsoever when it came to the arrangement of their society, and thus regarded it as the best possible idea available to them. What it boils down to is, if we now recognise that our principles are fallible, we also recognise they could be different (and most likely will change again in the future). This implies that we can hardly defend that anyone at this moment should reasonably embrace these principles as generally valid, even though there are quite good reasons to take them for granted, and even though we cannot imagine now that there could be a better alternative. The problem, therefore, does not necessarily lie in the defensibility of the justification model that is characteristic to fallibilism, but primarily in the epistemological status connected with this model. If you want to embed justification in ultimate beliefs whilst recognising their fallibility, then it seems inevitable that the pretence of general validity should be abandoned - if only because we will always have to take into account that there might be a better candidate that could serve as ultimate justificatory ground.

The notion of alternative candidates that could possibly serve as epistemological principles raises another question: How can we actually establish the status of a certain belief as the best possible alternative for serving as the ultimate ground for the justification of knowledge? To put it differently, how do we actually come to the attribution of epistemological privilege? This does not appear to be an easy task. If epistemologically privileged beliefs are the ultimate stopper in the chain of justification, how do we infer the criterion for the attribution of the privilege? If we regard the judgment that needs to be passed in order to clinch that attribution as a knowledge statement, this judgment must at least be supported in an epistemological sense. In line with fallibilist reasoning, this requires that we appeal to the best possible epistemological principles available to us at this moment. This would in fact mean that we evaluate the tenability of our current basic beliefs in light of those very same beliefs. Let us again turn to Siegel, who uses critical thinking to scrutinise the criteria for
critical thinking itself in order to make sure it concerns the best possible grounds for the justification of knowledge. Whatever the case, it does seem impossible here to apply all the criteria for critical thinking in the evaluation of critical thinking as a whole. It may remind us of the well-known metaphor of dragging yourself out of the swamp by pulling your own hair. We must accept that a critical evaluation of critical thinking based on that very same critical thinking will never be able to lead to the discarding of critical thinking as a whole. After all, in such an evaluation we are continually forced to call upon our critical thinking itself, making it a presupposed epistemological principle. We could, however, imagine that we evaluate certain aspects of critical thinking on the basis of other aspects of critical thinking – holding certain rationality criteria in the light of other rationality criteria, for instance. Those aspects should in turn be evaluated on the basis of others, et cetera. Such an evaluation may lead to an adaptation, or honing, of the logical-argumentative criteria applied within critical thinking. However, it again applies that this form of justification rests on fallible principles, so that no general validity may be ascribed to these conclusions, even if we have good reasons to use them to justify our beliefs. This line of argumentation shows that it is difficult to understand how we could ever arrive at a replacement of our basic epistemological beliefs, simply because we will have to appeal to the basic beliefs that we currently apply in order to do so. On the other hand, we did see that this does not mean that we cannot arrive at an adaptation of beliefs. Epistemologically, however, such an adaptation or honing cannot lead to a claim of general validity, since the adaptation is grounded in fallible beliefs.

Fallibilism, so it shows, offers us a model for the justification of beliefs that allows room for epistemic uncertainty. Without appealing to infallible foundations, fallibilism offers us the possibility of defending certain claims and discarding others. It is the fallibilist claim to general validity, or even objectivity, that seems to be difficult to defend in an epistemological sense. This puts fallibilism in a difficult position. As a fallibilist, I might accept that the pretence of general validity is indefensible, but still would like to hold on to the fallibilist justification model – because of the practical relevance connected with it, for instance. This acception, however, immediately transforms the fallibilist into a relativist, because he – since he abandons the claim to general validity – must accept that alternative justificatory systems (might) exist, with other epistemological beliefs as their supportive basis. This option will be utterly unacceptable to most fallibilists, as from the very beginning the entire fallibilist project was an attempt to uphold the notion of general validity, despite the inevitability of epistemic uncertainty. This leaves the
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fallibilist with one other option. In spite of the impossibility of defending general validity in epistemological sense, he might hold on to his beliefs. In that case, the fallibilist – quite bluntly – declares some beliefs to be generally valid, for instance because he sees no reason as to why it should not be the best possible beliefs available. This fallibilist probably assumes that if a better alternative were available, people would recognize it as such, and subsequently acknowledge it as the new best possible alternative. The problem of this position, however, is that it might rest upon an overestimation of humans' abilities to be inspired by new ideas. We can well imagine that, for the assessment of beliefs, we are far more dependent on the beliefs we are already familiar with – because we were brought up with them, for instance – so that we are never able to actually seriously consider any other, substantially different beliefs. Furthermore, the present and past have shown that people reaching agreement on the acknowledgement of epistemological beliefs is exceptional rather than common. In this respect, this fallibilist runs the risk of ethnocentrism, because beliefs in line with the basic belief he is more familiar with will sooner appear to be valuable and acceptable, whereas deviating beliefs will sooner appear to be unacceptable, or even abject; which may lead to a structural exclusion of whatever is ‘unfamiliar’. It seems the fallibilist, therefore, is facing a choice: relativism or the risk of ethnocentrism, neither of which seems very appealing, especially in light of their epistemological ambitions.

4. The search for a possible alternative

Although fallibilism offers solutions on some points to the problems that ensued from a traditional, classic foundationalist approach to epistemology, this approach itself also raises a number of questions. At this point in my research, I am led to the conclusion that it seems difficult to reconcile the acknowledgement of the inevitable uncertainty that goes hand in hand with the justification of knowledge claims, with the general validity of knowledge claims on the one hand, and the attribution of epistemological privilege to justificatory grounds, on the other hand. Attempts to nevertheless hold on to it, run the risk of structurally excluding any conflicting perspectives. In my search for the possibilities of an epistemological approach that leaves room for uncertainty, it appears to be necessary to look further. Against the background of the questions raised in my account of fallibilism, I might now be inclined to put back on the track of the radical contextualist epistemological approach as proposed by the authors in chapter two. After all, this approach abandons the claim to general validity, resists the explicit attribution of epistemological privilege and, finally, offers a possibility to deal with the threat of barring the
unfamiliar. However, at this point in my research, it is far too early to choose this road. Given the problems arising from the attribution of epistemological privilege and the ensuing concept of a vertically ordered body of knowledge, it does, however, seem interesting to at least explore the notion of a horizontally structured justification model, which is also suggested in antifoundationalism.

Let me first examine what it actually means to say that justification should be regarded as horizontally structured. Generally, it means that claims and their underlying arguments are part of a network of mutually related claims, referred to as the justification context. Regarding this network as horizontal stems from the conviction that it is epistemologically impossible to arrive at a hierarchical order of beliefs within this network. That is to say: none of the claims within this network are epistemologically privileged, so that any claim may be used to justify another claim, but may itself be in need of justification at any other moment. Justification is still possible in such a concept, but it will take on a different nature. The claim that slavery is reprehensible, for instance, can still be used to condemn incidents of people being forced to work with limited freedom. However, the functioning of the argument is now not ascribed to its greater certainty or objective, or general validity, but can be accredited to the position of both beliefs (‘slavery is reprehensible’ and ‘the incident is morally incorrect’) within a more extensive network of claims that reinforce one another. The arguments, therefore, serve to clarify that the condemnation of this incident fits in a wider network of beliefs. One of the implications is that a claim may be regarded as justified within the one justification context, whereas it may be labeled as nonsensical in another. We can illustrate this by means of an example borrowed from Elgin (1996, p. 213). At first glance, the statement that ‘the moon ate the sun’ seems irrational to me. On second glance, however, the statement made by someone from a different cultural background, is found to be embedded in a network of beliefs, presuppositions and implications that make it appear rational after all. This – unfamiliar – network apparently does not include our usual presupposition that an eater – in this case, the moon – should be a living organism.

The functioning of arguments does, so it seems, not necessarily have to be derived from the greater ‘certainty’ or general validity that we ascribe to them, and that, instead of a vertical justification model, we can also use a horizontal model to clarify what it means to be justified to make a claim. However, to many, the picture of a horizontal model that I have painted thus far will be far from persuasive. Since we still seem to be dependent on justification if we want to make a claim, the threat of complete arbitrariness appears to be diverted. However, does this solution
not push us directly towards a form of relativism? Do we have to accept
the explanation of someone from a different cultural background, because
that explanation fits one’s ‘network’, like 'our' statements fit ours? In that
case, a horizontal, contextualist approach to justification only seems to
cause perhaps even bigger problems. Indeed, we might be better off with
fallibilism, for fallibilists at least do not take the beliefs that substantiate
their claims for granted. They continue to ask critical questions. There-
fore, the task remains for me to find out in the next chapters whether a
contextualist approach to justification is able to outweigh the problems
discussed here. To do so, it is important to first gain insight into our exact
understanding of the nature and functioning of justification contexts.

Rorty is an author who epistemologically explores the notion of a
horizontal justificatory scheme, or of the contextuality of knowledge,
without lapsing into relativism, and who moreover discusses the related
topic of 'exclusion'. They come together in Rorty’s views on ‘irony’, a
concept that is relevant anyway, because philosophy uses it to understand
how the inevitable dubitability of our basic beliefs can be dealt with
constructively. This is the reason for further investigating the philoso-
phical usability of the concept of irony, and also to extensively discuss the
elaboration of that concept by Rorty in the next chapter.

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