Facing epistemic uncertainty: characteristics, possibilities, and limitations of a discursive contextualist approach to philosophy of education
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1. Introduction
The impossibility of redeeming the original ambitions of metaphysics and epistemology is hardly contested these days, which led Hilary Putnam to the conclusion that "philosophical problems are unsolvable" (Putnam, 1990, P. 19). Awareness of this ultimate insolvability is reflected in recent discussions in philosophy of education, which pay a great deal of attention to the resulting necessity of reformulating the ambitions and pretensions of this discipline. Against this background, philosophy of education demonstrates a tendency to accept the ultimate uncertainty of philosophical knowledge, and to replace the primacy of epistemology - including its traditional promises of certainty - with the primacy of engagement, thus severely restricting the pretensions of philosophical claims (cf. Van Goor et al., 2004). However, to accept that one is not able to solve the problem of what the world is really like does not dissuade philosophers from trying to increase their understanding of how we come to know it and make sense of it.

Throughout the history of philosophy, one remarkable way of dealing with various kinds of uncertainty has been to take refuge in 'irony' as a way to continue philosophical research in conditions of insolvability. As Claire Colebrook (2002, pp. 2-3) formulates it: "Irony can be seen as a particular technique that reflects on our conditions of making meaning of the world ... Irony takes those terms that seem to be foundational and opens them up for question". Not giving up on the ambition of making progress in philosophy, these irony-based approaches try to exploit the very uncertainty of philosophical issues to further philosophical understanding. In doing so, the use of irony aspires to convert philosophy's seeming powerlessness into its opposite. Through the ages, the interpretation of irony as a philosophical tool has taken different shapes. Against the background of philosophical insolvability as it is perceived today, I will investigate what gains various philosophers have expected from the use of irony, and I will consider the potential relevance of these gains for philosophy of education. To that end, I will first briefly discuss a few influential historical interpretations of irony as a philosophical tool, before concentrating on two recent efforts to make productive use of irony to gain insight into how we make meaning of the world. These recent

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interpretations share the idea that no conclusive insights are to be expected, because they all deny the possibility of knowing what the world is apart from any meaning we put on it. However, in other respects these interpretations of irony are based on different theories of meaning-making. Against this background, I develop a third interpretation of irony using yet another theory of meaning-making. I will subsequently discuss the philosophical merits of these three interpretations and the different kinds of insight they can lead to in philosophy of education.

2. Irony as a philosophical tool
According to Gregory Vlastos, all uses of irony in philosophy ultimately seem inspired by Socrates, whose use of the concept has been entrenched in every language of the Western world since Cicero. This meaning reads: "expressing what we mean by saying something contrary to it" (Vlastos, 1991, p. 43). In its most simple and banal forms, ironic expressions are used for humor or mockery. Vlastos mentions the example of a visitor who, arriving in the midst of a downpour, remarks: "What fine weather you are having here". In this example, listeners won't have any trouble understanding that the visitor means the contrary of what he says (Vlastos, 1991, p. 21). In other cases, it does not seem so easy. For example, a teacher who says to a blundering student: "you are brilliant today", may convey his intention to criticize the student for poor performance effectively, but the student will remain in the dark about the nature of his mistakes. As Vlastos (1991, p. 22) expresses it: "He has been handed a riddle and left to solve it for himself". It is this 'riddling' effect that is characteristic of philosophical uses of irony. It furthers insight by evoking questions rather than producing answers.

Socrates was the first to use this kind of irony as a tool in philosophy. Though the question to what ends Socrates introduced this method is much disputed, most authors agree that one of those ends was educational (cf. Gulley, 1968; Vasiliou, 2002; Vlastos, 1991). In his predominant use of irony, "Socrates never directly tells an interlocutor that the interlocutor does not know something. Rather, he operates on the standing assumption that the interlocutor's avowal is correct, and he proceeds to draw out its ramifications" (Vasiliou, 2002, p. 220). In doing so, Socrates lures his interlocutor into a position where he has to reconsider his 'conceit of knowledge' (ibid.), without suggesting any answers. This does not mean Socrates does not care whether people have answers, but, as Vlastos (1991, p. 44) puts it: "he cares more for something else: that if you are to come to the truth, it must be by yourself for yourself".

In his discussion of the educational relevance of Socratic irony, Alven Neiman stresses the importance of recognizing uncertainty, making
irony "a means of thinking, of inquiry, in a world freed of absolutes" (Neiman, 1991, pp. 372-373). Paul Smeyers adds another dimension by suggesting that Plato also made use of irony on a more abstract level. By his specific way of presenting Socrates' way of manipulating his interlocutors, Plato effectively advocated an idea of the art of living: "of developing one's own self and that there are, insofar as virtue is concerned, no teachers", while at the same time suggesting that there are no answers (Smeyers, 2005, p. 176). Vlastos (1991, p. 44) implies a similar intention saying: "The concept of moral autonomy never surfaces in Plato's Socratic dialogues - which does not keep it from being the deepest thing in their Socrates, the strongest of his moral concerns". This educational interpretation of Socrates' irony, in which refraining from any answers is considered crucial for developing an authentic, questioning attitude, does not necessarily imply that Socrates did not have any answers or that he thought no answers were possible. In practicing his elenchus - his technique of questioning a position by deriving doubt-inducing consequences from it - he could have feigned ignorance just to motivate his interlocutor to think for himself. Opinions differ on this issue, which makes it hard to determine in what sense Socrates intended to use irony as a philosophical method for gaining insight under conditions of uncertainty. Norman Gulley mentions some reasons for understanding Socrates' irony as an indication that his ignorance was not feigned but sincere. First, Plato presents "the elenchus as such a dominant feature of Socrates' arguments that it triumphs over all attempts to reach a positive conclusion". And discussions are not only inconclusive, in addition "we find Socrates declaring his despair of ever reaching any definite truth", complaining "that all propositions seem to be shifting and transitory, so that they 'run away' from any systematic attempt to substantiate their truth" (Gulley, 1968, p. 67). Nevertheless, Gulley concludes that all this does not bespeak skepticism on Socrates' side, but rather reflects a specific attitude of Plato towards the thinking of Socrates (an attitude characteristic of the early dialogues but changing in the later ones) (Gulley, 1968, p. 72 ff.). Vlastos (1991, p. 42), on the other hand, denies that Socrates allows himself "deceit as a debating tactic", whether educationally inspired or not. He designates Socrates as the one who initiated the meaning of 'irony' as a sincere method for evoking insight - an interpretation that Iakovos Vasiliou (2002, p. 221) in turn denies.

It may not be a foregone conclusion exactly to what uses Socrates put his irony, but more recent supporters of the method leave less room for doubt. For example, Friedrich von Schlegel (1772-1829) considers irony a method for confronting the limits of what can be represented, without any promise of ever getting a grip on it. In his view, the 'essence' can only be
understood as lying beyond what can be said in words. Consequently, the yields of irony in Schlegel's interpretation should be understood not as "a position, form of life, or personality, but ... in what lay beyond any specific position" (Colebrook, 2002, p. 128). Schlegel's irony was meant to gain insight while being aware that the philosophical problem at hand would not be solved. Unlike Immanuel Kant, Schlegel held the opinion that the preconditions for what can be said in words cannot be formulated, because such transcendental preconditions would only induce an infinite regression of asking for preconditions for identifying preconditions as such, et cetera - resulting in what he called a 'transcendental buffoonery' (Comstock, 1987). Therefore, irony leads to an alternating process of saying one thing and recognizing its thorough and necessary banality (Colebrook, 2002, p. 132). In this way Schlegel's interpretation of irony offers a way of developing understanding while relativizing the temptation to answer all questions (cf. Bransen, 1991, p. 172).

Schlegel's conception of irony is reminiscent of Socrates' in that it questions every proposition while at the same time being unable to avoid adducing one - and vice versa. Søren Kierkegaard's interpretation of irony as a philosophical tool seems similar but is more reminiscent of the educational interpretation of Socrates' irony in some respects. In Kierkegaard's interpretation, irony refers to the insurmountable opposition between 'essence' and 'phenomenon'. According to him, the use of irony makes that "the movement is continually in the opposite direction" (Kierkegaard, 1989, p. 257), - an idea also used by Schlegel. In Kierkegaard's discussion of the meaning he attaches to this movement, he especially stresses the "subjective pleasure as the subject frees himself by means of irony from the restraint in which the continuity of life's conditions holds him" (Kierkegaard, 1989, pp. 255-256).

Both dimensions of irony - one pertaining to the self, the other to the claims one is able to substantiate - resurface as a tool in philosophy in the two recent interpretations of irony discuss below. Both interpretations were introduced as a way to tackle the problem of how people give meaning to the world while sharing a contemporary perception of philosophical insolvability as the condition that we are not able to separate 'the world' from the meanings we give to it. The first was formulated by Jan Bransen (1991), who was inspired by Schlegel, and the second by Richard Rorty (1989). Rorty's interpretation of irony is reminiscent of Kierkegaard to the extent that he attaches great importance to the creation and recreation of the self. Though both authors share the view of insolvability as mentioned above, they tackle the problem along different lines. This becomes visible in the specific opposites their respective interpretations of irony imply. They define the opposites between which the ironist philoso-
3. Irony and the opposition of conceptual perspective and presupposed reality

Bransen approaches the insoluble problem of how we make meaning of the world most directly from the perspective of the two parties that seem primarily involved in the process: the meaning-making human on the one hand, and the world he makes meaning of on the other. Consequently, Bransen's interpretation of irony involves an alternating process between the opposites of understanding statements as resulting from meaning-making by identifying a presupposed object in external reality, and understanding statements as resulting from meaning-making as expressing the conceptual perspective of the meaning-making subject. He illustrates this opposition with everyday words like 'parent' or 'child'. Though we assume that these concepts refer to certain persons who are supposed to exist independent of our conceptual constructions, we cannot avoid the conclusion that parents and children "are what they are because of the way we think about them" (Bransen, 2004, p. 13, trans. authors).

To be able to understand any statement as meaningful - as an informative and not arbitrary enunciation - we have to assume that it is not purely the product of a construction that can be reduced to the conceptual frame of the meaning-making subject. In order to be understood as meaningful, a statement must at the same time be understood as related to a possible reality of an object outside of our constructions about which the statement says something (Bransen, 1991, p. 108). The central problem - that is also responsible for the insolvability of philosophical problems - is that we are unable to separate these 'conceptual' and 'objective' components of meaning-making. As a consequence, it will be impossible to get a grip on either component. The unavoidability of these two components combined with the fact that it is impossible to separate them constitutes the basic principle of Bransen's use of irony. As Bransen formulates it, any process of meaning-making that lies at the basis of making a statement can be characterised in terms of finding (the supposed objective component) and at the same time in terms of making (the subjective, conceptual component). Any attempt to fathom this process will inevitably confront us with the "antinomy of thought" (Bransen, 1991, p. 95), because we can only understand the objects of thought as simultaneously determined by thinking itself and by something outside thinking. Bransen develops this idea building on Salomon Maimon, who introduced it in his critique of Kant. Kant thought he had managed to isolate the subjective component
by formulating his so-called 'pure concepts of the understanding'. In his critique, Maimon drew attention to the circularity of Kant's argumentation by maintaining that one could only say something about the human faculty of cognition - including the pure concepts of the understanding - by simultaneously making use of this very faculty (cf. Nelson, 1971, p. 30 ff.). This also implies that the separation of the object- and subject-related dimensions of any statement will keep slipping through our fingers, as Bransen explains, leaving the process of meaning-making itself in the dark. According to Bransen, meaning-making cannot be understood purely empirically - as if it were a product of 'reality' alone - nor can it be understood solely as a product of a conceptual perspective - as constructivists sometimes claim. Rejecting both empiricism and constructivism seems to leave only the option of skepticism (the position Maimon chose), and accepting the unfathomableness of all making meaning of the world. Bransen recognizes the problem but he does not see it as the defeat of philosophy. On the contrary, he considers this antinomy a main source of insight for philosophy: even if the process of trying to understand meaning-making does not result in any final answers, the typical course of this effort - which he calls 'irony' - still offers a kind of understanding that can motivate the philosopher to keep asking questions and continue his investigations (Bransen, 1991, p. 175).

Though neither empiricism nor constructivism suffices to understand any instance of meaning-making, Bransen's use of irony incorporates both. If we take a dogmatic constructivist view, acting as if claiming that meaning were only the result of making, we will inevitably be confronted with the object-related component of meaning-making - if only because the resulting statement will not fully coincide with whatever it describes - and we will inevitably be forced into the negation of this claim. For example, if we consider the statement 'this is a child' as purely the result of making, it would be almost impossible to explain what is meant by 'this' without assuming something outside this statement to which this statement refers and about which it says something. In addition, the question whether the statement 'this is a child' should be considered 'right' in the sense of 'corresponding to the world' is highly unlikely to arise as long as we see it purely as a result of making. The statement would simply reflect the conceptual perspective of its maker. Any difference of opinion on this issue would either be pointless - reducing the statement to a mere expression - or require an appeal to some external reality to settle it - thus abandoning the constructivist position. Consequently, if we consider any informative statement from a 'pure' constructivist perspective, the idea that there must be something 'out there' to which the statement refers, will force itself upon us. In short, taking a
dogmatic-constructivist position will evoke its empiricist opposite according to Bransen.

Starting from the alternative dogmatic-empiricist position and acting as if meaning were only the result of finding, we will equally inevitably be confronted with its constructivist opposite, with the dimension of the meaning that is made, i.e. the conceptual perspective of the subject. To consider the statement 'this is a child' as purely the result of finding would in fact exclude all differences of opinion, and certainly all discussion about alternative definitions. Acting as if meaning were only the result of finding would essentially mean that alternative definitions of 'child' are erroneous, because finding alone cannot offer any instruments for solving the problem of a variety of definitions contending for the designation 'right'. Even if we define explicitly what to look for in 'finding' a child, we would be confronted with the necessity of conceptually mediated access to reality. Consequently, acting as if meaning were the result of finding inevitably confronts us with the indispensability of a conceptual perspective, i.e. with the dimension of making. This use of irony, then, owes its effectiveness to the phenomenon that taking one position inescapably leads to its opposite. Bransen's interpretation of irony causes an alternating movement between dogmatic empiricism and dogmatic constructivism; it is the inconclusive nature of this very movement which furthers insight into the phenomenon of meaning-making - without ever reaching a conclusive insight. Bransen does not claim to separate both components of meaning-making, and he explicitly rejects the idea that his approach, however indirectly, promises any view of external reality 'as it is', or isolates the subjective contribution to meaning. Rather, his use of irony induces "a consciousness in motion, such that a deliberate support for either one of the convictions uncovers an unintended support for the other one" (Bransen, 1991, p. 171). The gain of this approach consists in an insight into the unfathomable nature of meaning-making that results from this 'consciousness in motion'. The moment of irony "uncovers, via an absurdity (i.e. through irony) the plausibility of the opposing account- (Bransen, 1991, p. 182). As a consequence, this use of irony does not result in solutions, but stimulates further questions. The insight that results from this procedure will neither reveal the 'real' nature of what a child 'is', nor the 'right' perspective to conceptualize it. In this interpretation irony implies bringing our insight in motion, urging us to alternately concentrate on the conceptual frames that model our statements and on the presupposed reality about which these statements are meant to inform us. In Bransen's words: "The point is, in other words, that, in order to ask the right questions, we have to be sensitive to what is beyond our grasp" (Bransen, 1991, p. 31n). To be clear: Bransen does not
claim that each statement is the result of a conceptual perspective and a supposed reality, but he does maintain that his theory - including his conception of irony as a philosophical tool - can provide the most plausible explanation of our meaning-making practice to date. Though we have no means to achieve a decisive view of the 'real' object or even of its 'existence' we have to presuppose it in order to be able to explain the informative nature of statements, according to Bransen. We act "as if there was a 'transcendent object' we try to make sense of", as he puts it (Bransen, 1991, p. 3 In). However, this explanation of making meaning of the world also raises questions that will affect the interpretation of the philosophical use of irony.

4. Irony and the opposition between vocabularies and aims
Bransen's interpretation of irony as a philosophical tool presupposes the distinction between conceptual perspectives and supposed external reality as the basic poles of meaning-making. However, not all philosophers think such a distinction can be meaningfully made. According to Nelson Goodman, for example, all we have at our disposal are 'versions' and "all that can be done to comply with the demand to say what the versions are versions of is to give another version" (Goodman, 1989, p. 83). In other words: introducing (the supposition of) an external object actually means introducing another 'version', another statement from another perspective and nothing else. However, if we abandon the view that the distinction between conceptual frame and presupposed reality is necessary for understanding any statement as meaningful, we must also abandon Bransen's interpretation of irony and its yield for philosophy. Rorty's interpretation of irony - which does not utilize the disputed distinction - might offer a suitable alternative; it would imply an alternative way of furthering insight into the process of making meaning of the world.

Just like Goodman, Rorty argues that introducing the presupposition of an 'external' reality will not help us understand the nature of meaning-making, because "the world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not" (Rorty, 1989, p. 5). Consequently, assuming the 'world' causes statements does not help to explain how those statements are made. Rorty suggests the role of vocabularies or language games as an alternative. According to Rorty, we are inclined to forget that single statements belong to vocabularies that imply criteria for formulating and accepting statements. When making a statement, we implicitly accept the criteria of the vocabulary in which the statement is embedded. Against this background it becomes difficult to think of the world in terms of deciding between vocabularies (Rorty, 1989, p. 5). Vocabularies as Rorty understands them, do not depict the world or even selected parts of it, nor do
they express the state of the subject. If they did, we could combine them to form a more complete picture of the world or the subject - but trying to do so will only result in absurd questions like "What is the place of consciousness in a world of molecules?" (Rorty, 1989, p. 11).

If it is meaningless to separate the world from what we say about it, and if vocabularies are all we have access to, we will have to concentrate on the use of vocabularies to understand the process of making meaning. As Rorty sees it, vocabularies do not 'represent' the world, and they are not instruments for pure subjective expression either. Rather, he considers vocabularies as tools for coping. For example, using a mentalistic vocabulary, e.g. by saying that people have a 'mind' "is just to say that, for some purposes, it will pay to think of them as having beliefs and desires" (Rorty, 1989, p. 15). However, according to Rorty this analogy between vocabularies and tools falls short in one respect: whereas the craftsman knows "what job he needs to do before picking or inventing tools with which to do it", we do not know in advance what aims we want our vocabularies to be used or designed for (Rorty, 1989, p. 12-13). Inspired by Donald Davidson, Rorty develops his theory of vocabularies in the basis of this amended Wittgensteinian view of language as a coping tool (Rorty, 1989, p. 13-15). This conception of vocabularies - between which the ironist philosopher can alternate without ever identifying the 'one and only right' vocabulary - lies at the basis of Rorty's interpretation of irony and how it can further insight into the process of making meaning of the world. Rorty presents his interpretation of the fruits of irony primarily with respect to persons and their 'final vocabularies', in which they justify their actions and beliefs and formulate their deepest doubts and highest hopes. When asked for further justification, "their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse" (Rorty, 1989, p. 73), which means that at this point a user is possibly aware of being in a vocabulary with its characteristic limitations and possibilities. In Rorty's view, an ironist is someone who is inclined to doubt his or her current final vocabulary because (s)he knows of the existence of alternative ones, while also being aware of the impossibility of confirming or dissolving these doubts in any of those vocabularies (ibid.). In this sense an ironist is aware of the 'contingency of the self (Rorty, 1989, p. 74). Here Rorty's interpretation reminds us of Kierkegaard, who also stressed the perspective of the subject who frees himself from conventional restraints.

Though introduced with respect to the self and the 'final' vocabulary that is used to present it, this interpretation of the philosophical use of irony can be applied to any vocabulary and whatever it is meant to accomplish. Rorty challenges the tendency to think of the world and of the self as possessing an intrinsic nature that can be caught in language. He
contests that "there is some relation called 'fitting the world' or 'expressing the real nature of the self' which can be possessed or lacked by vocabularies-as-wholes", and the "temptation to privilege some one among the many languages in which we habitually describe the world or ourselves" (Rorty, 1989, p. 6). In other words, irony not only furthers insight into the vocabulary-bound process of making meaning of the self, but it also furthers insight into the vocabulary-bound process of making meaning of the world. In both cases, the irony consists in the moment where the analysis of the tenability of a statement - understood as an instrument for coping - gives cause to a confrontation with the vocabulary that made this statement possible in the first place, as well as with the criteria for its acceptability. Irony as Rorty sees it involves radical doubts about the use of any vocabulary, because of the awareness that it will favour certain aims while excluding others. At the same time Rorty's interpretation of irony implies "seeing the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old" (Rorty, 1989, p. 73). This kind of irony will result in a never-ending process of re-description, of re-orientation in the world by using or creating alternative vocabularies, while never being able to prove one of them 'best'. Like Bransen's approach of irony, Rorty's does not result in any kind of certainty. Instead, both approaches enhance sensitivity to the inabilities and restrictions of our practices of meaning-making, sensitivity to what keeps escaping our grip. However, both authors have different interpretations of what it is exactly that is presumed to escape. In Bransen's interpretation it is the intangible interplay between conceptual perspective and the world; in Rorty's interpretation it is the irreducible interplay between vocabularies and the immanent aims they appear to favor in the process of coping. For example, with respect to explanations of what a child 'is', Rorty's interpretation of irony as a philosophical tool will draw attention to the specific vocabulary each explanation was embedded in, and to the specific coping-related descriptions it allows for, resulting in an awareness of the contingency of each. Thinking of the oppositional conceptions of the child propagated by 'care-takers' and 'liberationists' (Archard, 1993), the care-takers' conception of the child as vulnerable and dependent will reveal a vocabulary primarily aimed at protection and guidance, whereas the 'liberationists' conception of the child as an active agent will reveal a vocabulary that primarily allows for dealing with children in terms of stimulation and facilitation. To some extent this approach is reminiscent of the prominent attention for 'counternarratives' (Peters & Lankshear, 1996) and 'counterpractices' (Biesta, 1998) in current critical educational theory.
In order to draw attention to the idea that views of educational issues do exclude certain groups and viewpoints, these approaches point out alternative views and descriptions, without claiming to offer a perspective that will not exclude any people or viewpoints. While excluding effects - or at least restrictions - can be brought to light and made a subject of discussion, they cannot be avoided. Biesta (1998, p. 507): "A counter-practice should not be designed out of an arrogance that it will be better ... than what exists. A counter-practice is only different". In a similar way Rorty's view of irony causes uncertainty and divergence instead of certainty and convergence. Though this may seem a loss to some, in Rorty's perspective - as in that of his abovementioned educational colleagues - it is quite the opposite, again, because it stimulates sensitivity to the unfamiliar, a process which entails the realization of an ideal in itself.

Rorty's interpretation of the use of irony draws attention to the impossibility of conclusively deciding what is 'objectively' the 'best' vocabulary; it only results in a proliferation of vocabularies. This proliferation represents its main proceeds, because it stimulates doubt, reflection, and discussion. Against this background Rorty speaks of 'enlarging the canon', which should replace "the attempt by moral philosophers to bring commonly accepted moral intuitions about particular cases into equilibrium with commonly accepted moral principles" (Rorty, 1989, p. 81). Bransen, on the other hand, qualifies the proceeds of Rorty's approach as a kind of fooling, an arbitrary juggling with perspectives (Bransen, 1992, P. 173). However, one may wonder whether this verdict does not erroneously identify Rorty's position with that of Bransen's own 'dogmatic constructivism'. Rorty does consider statements - resulting from man-made vocabularies - as 'made', but contrary to Bransen's dogmatic constructivist, Rorty does not consider them arbitrary conceptual creations. As Rorty formulates it: "The realisation that the world does not tell us what language games to play should not ... lead us to say that a decision about which to play is arbitrary, nor to say that it is the expression of something deep within us. The moral is not that objective criteria for choice of vocabulary are to be replaced with subjective criteria, reason with will or feeling" (Rorty, 1989, p. 6). Rorty views vocabularies as tools, as instruments for producing statements that help us set aims and strive for them, as instruments that are developed and abandoned in the course of cultural history (Rorty, 1989, pp. 16-17). There seems to be no reason why supposing a reality, as Bransen does, is less arbitrary than supposing a vocabulary. However, on closer inspection Rorty's interpretation of irony, which is based on his theory of vocabularies, still raises some questions.
5. Irony and the opposition of context and renewing content

Robert Brandom issued a fundamental critique of Rorty's approach of vocabularies. Brandom agrees with Rorty that the form, content, and acceptability of our statements are regulated by vocabularies, by "shared norms that antecedently govern the concepts one deploys in making such a claim" (Brandom, 2000b, p. 176). And just like Rorty, Brandom regards vocabularies as 'tools'. However, Brandom does not share Rorty's view of the nature and the use of vocabularies in all respects. According to Rorty, practically anyone can handle a diversity of vocabularies - this is the background of his idea that irony will be fruitful not only in a philosophical setting, but in a private or social setting as well. However, not everyone can create a new vocabulary. As Rorty sees it, the creation of a new vocabulary requires the genius of what he calls 'a poet' (Rorty, 1989, p. 43). Brandom disagrees. He considers the development of new vocabularies an everyday phenomenon. In his view new vocabularies should not be considered the result of one major creative effort of an exceptionally gifted individual, but rather the result of a continuous, piecemeal process in which every language user participates. According to Brandom, vocabularies are changed and renewed simply by using them in the process of communication. "To use a vocabulary is to change it. This is what distinguishes vocabularies from other tools" (Brandom, 2000b, p. 177). As a consequence, Brandom's view on the way vocabularies can be interrelated also differs from Rorty's. He does not consider them separate and incompatible, and in his view Rorty overrates the novelty of new vocabularies. According to Brandom vocabularies result from each other in use.

In a reaction Rorty agrees with Brandom: "I have been in danger of overromanticizing novelty by suggesting that great geniuses can just create a new vocabulary ex nihilo. I should be content to admit that geniuses can never do more than invent some variations on old themes, give the language of the tribe a few new twists" (Rorty, 2000, p. 188). This way of putting things also has consequences for how irony can be understood to function as a tool in philosophy. If we admit that vocabularies are changed and renewed by using them, and that any statement expresses a conventional linguistic practice - a vocabulary - and renews it at the same time, it will be difficult to sharply demarcate the different vocabularies. Consequently, it would be inconsistent to consider any specific statement an expression of one specific vocabulary while excluding all others.

Rorty's appeal to the regulating influence of 'vocabularies' will result in a similar problem as Bransen's appeal to the regulating influence of a supposed 'object'. As we can only have access to concrete, linguistically expressed statements, the vocabularies these formulated statements
are supposed to stem from are just as inaccessible and 'external' as presupposed objects in reality. It does help as little to distinguish description and vocabulary from each other, as it does to distinguish a presupposed object from the conceptual perspective that is used to describe it. A 'new' vocabulary can only be distinguished from an 'old' one by means of a statement that in itself would represent a vocabulary, and it remains unclear what kind of vocabulary that could be.

This critique of Rorty's theory implies the necessity of reformulating his idea of the use of irony. A first step in that direction could be to assume that a statement does not express a specific, separately 'existing' vocabulary, but in a way creates it by being formulated. Brandom acknowledges this by depicting the maker of a statement as someone who communicates, which means: as someone who addresses a public. This emphasis on the communicative function of making statements depicts the speaker as someone who assesses what conventions with respect to meaning-making (what 'vocabulary' in Rorty's terms) his public might share in that particular situation at that particular moment in order to decide what he wants to add to those conventions (his statement). In Brandom's theory, these "shared norms that antecedently govern the concepts one deploys" (Brandom, 2000b, p. 176) take the place of Rorty's vocabularies. Brandom emphasizes that a linguistic expression can only be understandable to a public insofar as it follows shared norms, and it can only be informative insofar as it adds to this convention. In his words: "Every use of a vocabulary, every application of a concept in making a claim, both is answerable to norms implicit in communal practice - its public dimension, apart from which it cannot mean anything (though it can cause something) - and transforms those norms by its novelty - its private dimension apart from which it does not formulate a belief, plan or purpose worth expressing" (Brandom, 2000b, p. 179).

In view of a revised interpretation of the philosophical use of irony, I would add at this point that the novelty of a statement - what it will add or change - cannot be determined in advance by comparing the statement to the set of publicly shared norms themselves, but only by comparing the statement to the norms a speaker thinks his audience will share (or, from the perspective of the audience, to the norms a listener supposes a speaker ascribes to his audience). The publicly shared norms themselves should not be imagined separately, independent of the practice of linguistic use. They only exist in the mind of language users: the speaker who attributes them to his public; the audience that attributes them to a speaker (and if speaker and audience attribute differently they will misunderstand each other); and finally, the analyst who attributes them to the statements of subsequent speakers. It should also be clear that
such supposedly shared norms do not reside as fixed sets in the minds of those participants; they are constantly updated with every statement that is made or received in the course of communication (Brandom, 2000a, pp. 164-165). I will call such momentarily attributed shared norms the 'communicative context' of a statement (cf. Stalnaker, 1999). Consequently, a communicative context is not to be considered part of the situation as such, it only belongs to the situation as participants in communication define it at that specific moment (while leaving open the possibility that they define it differently).

Against this background an interpretation of the use of irony has to be developed in terms of an opposition between (supposedly) shared norms, i.e. the communicative context and intended addition to that context, and not in terms of the opposition between vocabulary and aim (way of coping), as Rorty's interpretation of the use of irony implies. This third version of understanding the use of irony is based on the idea that the informative value of any statement should be understood by viewing it as an addition to a communicative context, and - in case of its acceptance - as a renewal of this communicative context. Trying to understand the informative nature of a statement, my ironist would find himself in an alternating movement between communicative contexts the communicator is supposed to have had in mind and the related renewing of the contents of the statement. Like any form of irony, this version will inevitably fail to provide decisive answers, because communicative context and renewing content cannot be accessed separately by any language-user or analyst. Though it seems clear that we will never be able to separate the two components - content and context - of statements, this interpretation of irony will still result in insight into the process of meaning-making and its intangible fluctuation between 'new' and 'old'. The central importance of 'new' and 'old' as well as the concentration on the linguistic dimension of meaning-making, are reminiscent of Rorty's conception of irony as a tool, but my interpretation is also cognate to Bransen's. And although I replaced his opposition of presupposed object and conceptual frame with the opposition of communicative context and renewing content, the motivation of my ironist resembles that of Bransen's. It concerns the unattainable desire to get a grip on both components that are considered to constitute the process of making meaningful statements, rather than the desire towards self-(re)creation which motivated Rorty's ironist. The primary motive of my ironist is the wish to understand the communicative transformations that take place in the intangible interplay between context and content.

The difference between the proceeds resulting from Rorty's interpretation of irony and from my version, that is based on Brandom's
theory, can be illustrated with the interpretation of a short oppositional episode in philosophy. Rorty (1989, p. 133 ff.) discusses a debate between Jacques Derrida and John Searle, in which both authors seem to be talking at cross-purposes. Searle reproaches Derrida with not doing justice to the philosophical work of John Austin. In his reply to Searle, Derrida refuses to systematically respond to Searle's points of criticism. Rorty explains this episode as a collision of vocabularies, labeling Derrida's contributions as those of an ironist who "refuses not because he is 'irrational' or 'lost in fantasy', or too dumb to understand what Austin and Searle are up to, but because he is trying to create himself by creating his own language-game ... trying to get a game going which cuts right across the rational-irrational distinction", as would be characteristic of the established philosophical vocabulary. In Rorty's interpretation, Derrida - motivated by the wish for self-creation - is trying to create a new vocabulary. Because this new vocabulary differs from the (established) philosophical vocabulary Searle uses, Searle is unable to understand Derrida's text as a meaningful reaction to Austin. By creating his own language game, Derrida might hope to create an alternative "pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it" (Rorty, 1989, p. 9) as an alternative philosophical vocabulary.

My ironist, on the other hand, would understand Searle's critique of Derrida as related to the philosophical communication context Searle implicitly assumed as the context Derrida would have imagined in making his statements about Austin. By saying that Derrida did not do justice to the philosophical work of Austin (and to Searle's critical comments), Searle took this assumed context - which supported his own conclusion that Derrida had made 'mistakes' - for granted. However, ironic concentration on the intangible interplay between content and context could have drawn attention to the possibility that Derrida's texts could also be understood as adding something 'new' to an alternatively imagined context - for example a context of notions about what constitutes 'philosophical' discourse and 'philosophical' plausibility and what does not. Against the background of a context imagined like this, Derrida's texts could be understood as adding something 'new' to the definition of philosophical discourse and its inherent criteria (such as the distinction between 'rational' and 'irrational'). According to this interpretation, irony would draw attention to unavoidably presupposed contexts, making their definition accessible for discussion and transformation within the current discourse. Like other interpretations of irony as a philosophical tool, this approach does not claim to bring us closer to the Truth. This kind of ironic exercise will not reveal the communicative contexts as 'really' imagined by either Derrida or Searle, but it still will further insight by motivating attempts to
imagine alternative combinations of presupposed context and informative content. Each renewed turn of irony will stimulate further questions, and the process as a whole will generate an insight into the game of context and renewal.

In my approach the philosophical yield of irony results from the opposition of the (supposed) communicative context and renewing informative content. This approach also suggests a different explanation of the working of counternarratives or counterpractices, not understanding them as alternative vocabularies - as was suggested against the back-ground of Rorty's interpretation of the use of irony - but as potentially renewing predominant communicative conventions. On closer inspection, authors who write about counternarratives and counterpractices give different explanations as well. By stressing mutual incommensurability between "a heterogeneity of different moral language games", Michael Peters and Colin Lankshear (1996, p. 3) seem to argue along the lines of Rorty's idea of playing off different vocabularies against each other. Other authors seem to understand the function of counternarratives more in line with Brandom's theory and my interpretation of the philosophical use of irony.

For example, Gert Biesta stresses that an interpretation of an incommensurable heterogeneity of countenarratives "only makes sense as long as we believe that we occupy a place outside the system from which the system can be viewed" (Biesta, 1998, p. 507). This observation ties in with the problem of distinguishing vocabularies, as I mentioned in my critique against Rorty. In Biesta's interpretation the function of counterpractices should not be understood as playing off different practices against each other, because the "practice of transgression is not meant to overcome limits (not in the least because limits are not only constraining but always also enabling)". This 'enabling' function of limits corresponds to the function of (presupposed) communicative contexts as a prerequisite for making meaningful statements while at the same time limiting their possible range. Henry Giroux makes a similar point. According to him, counternarratives should not be viewed as making use of completely alternative vocabularies, but as attempts by "educators to fashion a critical politics of difference not outside but within a tradition" (Giroux, 1997, p. 152). What Giroux calls 'politics of difference' refers to a philosophical attitude that emphasizes the local, the partial, and the contingent (Giroux, 1997, p. 151). Just like my interpretation of the use of irony, which draws attention to the interrelatedness of the 'new' and the 'old', Giroux considers a counternarrative "a vision of public life which calls for an ongoing interrogation of the past that allows different groups to locate themselves in history while simultaneously struggling to make it" (Giroux, 1997, p. 158).
6. Exemplification and comparison: an occasion for meta-irony
I have discussed three different interpretations of irony as a tool in philosophy, resulting from three different ways of considering statements as expressing 'making meaning of the world'. None of these interpretations allows for a complete understanding of how this meaning-making functions exactly, but all three of them at least claim to enhance insight into the process. Though I did give reasons for developing my own approach on the basis of Brandom's theory, I do not claim to have developed a 'final' view of the use of irony. Before exploring this comparative issue in more depth, I will briefly exemplify each of the three interpretations by applying them to the issue of 'students at risk' and the programs that have been developed to tackle this problem. I will start with a broad definition by Robert Slavin that characterizes 'students at risk' as those students who "are failing to achieve the basic skills necessary for success in school and in life" (Slavin, 1989, p. 5). Though most workers in the field will subscribe to this definition, it appears to be less unequivocal than it may seem at first sight. Each of the three varieties of the use of irony will throw a different light on this issue.

From Bransen's point of view irony will reveal the insolvable ambiguity of how we recognise a student as being 'at risk'. Taking the position of dogmatic empiricist and considering the statement as a result of finding, we act as if the statement this is a student at risk' forces itself upon us as a property of 'the world'. From this position, any difference of opinion about such a statement would be impossible, and if it would occur nevertheless, the dogmatic empiricist position would forbid saying anything that could contribute to its solution. Even trying to explain what to look for in order to recognise a case of 'at risk' would imply the inevitable role of concepts - in this example the role of a definition. Such an approach would also leave the practice of discourse completely unexplained, because the apparent differences of opinion in the field are not treated as insolvable at all. Two of the most influential programmes for 'students at risk' - Success for All and High/Scope - appear to hold different views of what counts as 'necessary basic skills for success'. Whereas Success for All considers academic skills, i.e. skills in the domain of language and cognition, as covering the preconditions for success (Madden et al., 1989; Slavin, 2002; Slavin & Madden, 1989), High-Scope defines a much broader range of skills, including social, emotional, and motor skills, as necessary basic skills for success (Schweinhart Weikart, 1986; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1998). A next step in Bransens' view of irony would involve considering the possibility that recognition of a student as being 'at risk' would result
completely from the conceptual perspective that is taken. However, assuming that position would make designating someone as being 'at risk' a matter to be decided at the discretion of the subject's conceptual perspective. Also, meaningful discussion of the issue would be impossible, because any reference to experience, observations, and research results would be forbidden - and this is precisely what discussants do all the time. However, referring to 'the world' will not settle the issue either, as the position of the dogmatic empiricist demonstrated. The result is a 'consciousness in motion' (Bransen, 1991, p. 171) between the conceptual and empiricist components of statements about 'being at risk'. It will not settle the issue of what being at risk 'is', but it will stimulate further questions and thus help to gain more in-depth insight in the issue.

Putting Rorty's approach of irony into practice would first result in identifying both interpretations of being at risk as originating from two different vocabularies, each allowing for different coping-related descriptions while excluding others. In my example, the concentration on linguistic and cognitive skills in 'Success for All' can be understood as stemming from a vocabulary that primarily relates education to a future position in society, especially a position on the labor market (Stringfield & Land, 2002, p. vii; Winch & Gingell, 2004, p. 6), and that favors aims related to the vocational future of children. This educational vocabulary has a long tradition, as does its opposite, from which the broader approach of necessary skills for future success in 'High/Scope' can be understood. This alternative educational vocabulary aims primarily at "the education of the integral whole child" (Adelman, 2000, p. 103), at becoming a "whole man in his social context" (Rohrs, 1995, p. 12). This vocabulary is often called 'child-centered' or 'progressive' (Brehony, 2000) and pays more attention to liberal aspects of education (Winch & Gingell, 2004, p. 6). After making this first step from the perspective of Rorty's interpretation of the use of irony, the next one follows almost naturally. Once we have recognized the vocabulary-relatedness of being considered 'at risk', it would seem logical to ask whether alternative vocabularies could be possible, and how they could shed light on the way current vocabularies favor certain aims and orientations in education while excluding others. This could draw attention, for example, to what should be considered 'success' and to the possibility that both current vocabularies - no matter how different they are - still represent norms of 'excellence' that are related to dominant cultural groups in society (Margonis, 1992). As mentioned before. Rorty's conception of irony will not result in one 'right' vocabulary, but cause a proliferation of vocabularies, an oscillation between considering aims and vocabularies, putting each aim in perspective and furthering understanding of the restrictive nature of each vocabulary.
In conclusion, my interpretation of irony as a tool in philosophy does not relate statements to relatively stable and restrictive vocabularies, but understands them as attempts to amend presupposed contextually accepted standards. In this approach, understanding a statement will require an identification of how it deviates from such standards. For example, the presentation by Robert Slavin and Nancy Madden (1993) of the positive scores for the effectiveness of Success for All can be understood as an attempt to add the desirability of implementing this program in schools to a presumed context in which the priority of linguistic and cognitive skills are accepted standards. However, presentation of these favorable scores can also be understood as an attempt to convince an audience that favors High/Scope to accept Success for All in a presumed context where fighting or preventing any kind of being 'at risk' is an accepted standard. As there is no way of diagnosing the 'real' context - because neither speaker nor audience or analyst can have direct access to the assumptions of the interlocutors -, making as well as understanding any statement involves a (re)construction of content and matching context. In each case the analyzing philosopher can understand the informative content of a statement by reconstructing the part of the context he thinks a speaker assumes and wants to attack. The philosopher now understands the statement as aiming to change this specific part of the context while making use of other aspects of this perceived context in order to be able to make him/herself understood and potentially accepted. Consequently, it depends on the reconstructed context what renewing content is perceived by the audience and what kind of reply would seem appropriate - and each possible reply would testify to a differently changed context. This interpretation of irony as a philosophical tool implies a fluctuation between content and context, potentially furthering an understanding of how one changes the other - although never resulting in a conclusive understanding. Without being able to definitively solve the problem of understanding statements and how we make meaning of the world, it enhances insight into the development of thinking by alternately concentrating on restrictive and renewing dimensions. It helps to make our changing - and at least supposedly - communicative assumptions explicit and bring them up for discussion.

This investigation again raises the question whether the reasons I formulated for preferring my third interpretation of the use of irony can be considered decisive. Is this the ultimate philosophical conception of irony as a philosophical tool? I don't think I can - or want to - substantiate such a claim. Like Bransen's and Rorty's, my interpretation does not - and cannot - claim to overcome the insolvability of philosophical questions in any way. Instead, all three interpretations aim at making insolvability
productive without removing it. Pretending to have developed the 'ultimate' explanation of the use of irony would contradict the meaning of 'irony' itself, at least in the definition by Colebrook (2002, pp. 2-3) which I took as my starting point: as a technique for reflecting upon the pre-conditions of making meaning of the world, not to establish the 'right' pre-conditions once and for all, but to be able to bring any reconstructed preconditions up for discussion.

What I can do is put the three versions of the use of irony that figured above to the test of irony as I interpreted it. This would result in a kind of meta-irony which would not only challenge the informative nature and imagined context - including the presupposed shared norms - of Rorty's and Bransen's interpretations, but the informative nature and imagined context of my own interpretation as well. In reply to Brandom's critique Rorty remarks that he had not realized he had devised an approach that in its turn depended on a specific vocabulary, a "vocabulary vocabulary" (Rorty, 2000, p. 188). In his case, the concept of 'vocabulary' obviously functions as a basic assumption he supposes his audience to be able to share with him. A closer look at Bransen's interpretation of the use of irony reveals the supposedly shared basic assumption that statements have a representational nature and also result from a subject-dependent conceptual frame. Finally, my own version seems characterized by the presupposed shared basic assumption that any meaningful statement should be considered part of an ongoing communication, i.e. is formulated to inform others instead of being informative by itself. The irony in all of this is that all three versions appear to depend on a supposedly shared basic assumption - whether seen as communication-related or not - that is both fallible and indispensable at the same time. Without such an assumption - whichever one prefers - it would not be possible to define any interpretation of the use and the yield of irony at all. So this is an illustration of meta-irony: it consists in playing off the different interpretations of irony as a philosophical tool against each other, bringing them all up for discussion without being able to designate one of them as decisive.

Stimulating new questions and new directions to find them summarizes how all versions of irony make philosophical insolvability productive without ever overcoming it. The importance of the different varieties of irony is that they give us "a new problem instead of an old principle [trans. RvG]" (Bransen, 1992, pp. 179-180). This meta-level of irony also puts the very idea of insolvability in a new light. It makes the idea of a (potentially) 'right' basic assumption suspect, and replaces it with the idea of fallible - though indispensable - basic assumptions. The fruits of irony as discussed here largely consist in revealing such basic assumptions and bringing them up for discussion, while at the same time being
aware that other 'conceptual perspectives', 'vocabularies' or communicative 'contexts' are inevitably at work and kept beyond discussion - at least for the time being. Such procedures will replace hopes for 'the right' basic assumption with attention to the process of making meaning of the world itself.

7. References
FACING EPISTEMIC UNCERTAINTY


