Facing epistemic uncertainty: characteristics, possibilities, and limitations of a discursive contextualist approach to philosophy of education
van Goor, R.L.C.

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1. Introduction
The results from my endeavor so far have prompted me to further explore a contextualist approach to epistemology, in which justification is embedded in a horizontally ordered network of mutually related beliefs. The first question that springs to mind then is how we can understand the idea of contexts of justification at all. After all, the contextualist authors discussed in chapter two, for instance, have not been able to offer any unequivocal clarity on that matter. The study concerning irony as a philosophical method presented in chapter four might provide an answer for this issue. An exploration of Rorty’s interpretation of the concept of irony will help us to obtain an idea of how the embedding of statements in a broader context of related beliefs might be comprehended. The subsequent question to be answered then will be whether the idea of contextual justification does not inevitably lead us into the trap of relativism.

2. Contextualism: relativism or arbitrariness?
In Rorty's interpretation of context claims and arguments are understood in light of a used vocabulary. Here, vocabulary is understood as a linguistic tool that is characterized by a collection of beliefs, rules or principles – with regard to matters like correct use of words, manner of speaking and standards for justification – and is applied in sight of the realization of a certain objective. Each vocabulary has its own forms of justification and description. To give an example: a physicist’s vocabulary, which is used, for example, to describe and explain the trajectory of a ball, differs greatly from a competitive athlete's vocabulary. Whereas the athlete's vocabulary will explain the ball’s trajectory in terms of the technical treatment by, and the tactical intentions of, the player, those matters are irrelevant to the physicist, who will focus on the forces exerted in and on the ball. Vocabularies, thus, constitute the justification context for beliefs. However, they cannot be regarded as foundations that function as ultimate justification grounds, as in foundationalism. The great difference is that they do not function as justification grounds because they are thought to enable us to describe the world as truthfully as possible, but because they have proven to be of practical use (after all, they are 'tools'). They are, therefore, not regarded as 'certain', but rather as suitable for the task which with we are faced. For the same reason, it is no
use to wonder which vocabulary is the ‘correct’ one, irrespective of what is intended by using that respective vocabulary.

In Rorty’s approach, vocabularies seem to be there, independent of, and 'ready-to-use' for a speaker. From that perspective speakers may use a certain vocabulary, but as soon as they do, they also seem to be forced to stay within the boundaries of that vocabulary. Once an athlete's vocabulary is used, the world appears in terms of techniques and tactics, whereas a physicist’s vocabulary conjures up a world of exerting forces. This view might seem to imply relativism, which says that things 'are true' only from a certain – cultural or subjective – perspective (in this case, a vocabulary) (cf. Williams 2001, p. 10). The reproach of relativism, however, is out of place here. The concept of relativism demands that certain descriptions and explanations emerge as ‘true’ when a certain perspective is used. Perspectivity, then, implies the impossibility of any exchange beyond the boundaries of one's own horizon, so that an evaluative comparison of perspectives is impossible and we must conclude that the one perspective - in this case, the one vocabulary - is as good, or as 'true', as the other. In this regard Blackburn emphasizes that the danger of relativism is over as soon as we have been able to explain that an exchange beyond the boundaries of perspectives is indeed possible (cf. Blackburn 2001). And although it might seem that Rorty’s vocabularies force perspectives on their users, this is not how he imagines the use of vocabularies. In Rorty’s view, a vocabulary is a communicative context. The communication may be restrained by the vocabulary used but, according to Rorty, this does not mean that we cannot look across the boundaries of the vocabulary; for instance, because different vocabularies may be ‘played off against each other’ (cf. Rorty 1989, p. 73) in light of what we wish to achieve. This also shows that it is not the vocabulary that functions as the final criterion for the 'truth', but rather the extent to which we are capable of dealing with a certain practical problem. Against this background, it is understandable as to why Rorty describes the use of vocabularies as a way of 'coping' (ibid., pp. 14-15). Furthermore, Rorty also deems it possible to create, and further develop, vocabularies. “Languages are made not found”, so he argues (ibid., p. 7). Which shows again that he does not think that vocabularies restrict our view in any predetermined way.

Thus, an image emerges of vocabularies that, in principle, are always under the pressure of rejection, or improvement in their function as a tool. In philosophy, such a process of change usually takes place in when there is a “contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which vaguely promises great things” (ibid., p. 9). In Rorty's view, it is not 'pre-existing' vocabularies that make claims 'true', as would be the case in relativism.
Hence, his approach also leaves no room for the relativist idea of different, coexisting ‘truths’. Moreover: Rorty relinquishes the entire traditional notion of ‘truth’. Rorty claims that, due to the uncertainty of our fallible vocabularies, it is impossible to achieve something like an ‘umbrella-truth’, and that the idea of vocabulary-based ‘local truths’ cannot be upheld, because vocabularies do not set outer boundaries for whatever may, or may not, be considered to be justified. Within Rorty’s interpretation of vocabularies, certain descriptions and statements are used not because they are regarded as ‘true’, but simply because they do their job. And if we are in need of anything better, we just go and look for it.

Rorty, therefore, is not a relativist, but we may wonder whether his approach does not get us into even deeper trouble since he gets us bogged down in a total anarchy of vocabularies where one can just randomly choose to use one or another. We saw earlier that, as regards this issue, Bransen accuses Rorty of 'Spielerei' (cf. chapter four). In his reaction to Bransen, Rorty counters this allegation by drawing attention to the influence of what Gadamer refers to as 'Wirkungsgeschichte' (see Bransen 1991, p. 173). Rorty thereby wants to show that we most certainly can derive criteria from our collective history that enable us to let certain vocabularies prevail over others, or to reject certain vocabularies as undesirable or abject. In other words, he does not see an arbitrary sequential order of vocabularies. He rather sees a history in which vocabularies are continually tried, tested, adjusted and/or replaced as linguistic tools in a continuing communicative process – which he refers to as an ongoing dialogue. In light of human history, but also against the background of communicative exchange in our current society that may be regarded as characterized by plurality and change, this seems to be a plausible picture that shows no signs of 'Spielerei' at all. With Rorty, nothing is certain, but nothing is simply accepted either: everything is potentially exposed to criticism and replacement. That is the central point in Rorty’s concept of irony – and also my motivation to elaborate on that concept in chapter four.

Therefore, in order to escape the reproach of relativism and arbitrariness, the potential discussability and changeability of justification contexts is essential. Within Rorty’s variant of contextualism, ideas about the practical usability of communicative justification contexts seem to play a primary role in this. After all, the value of the descriptions and statements that we use seems to be evaluated in light of the extent to which they enable us to deal with the practical problems we face. This idea is utterly important because it enables us to abandon the traditional idea that the epistemological value of descriptions and explanations will ultimately depend on the question of whether, or to what extent, they offer us a 'correct' description of the how the world is. However, Rorty does not
manage to draw a plausible picture of how that process of vocabulary-transformation within the communicative process, which takes such an important place in his vision, might actually work. He does show that he does not regard the formation of a new vocabulary as something common, but rather as something exceptional that requires the creativity of a poet – broadly interpreted as “one that makes things new” (ibid., pp. 12-13), like certain revolutionary writers, scientists or philosopher (cf. Rorty 1989, pp. 19-20). However, his work does not elaborate on the possible origin of this creative impulse, or how it takes shape in the communicative process. Those issues are important because they are where the epistemological significance of the concept of ‘context’ – including its possibilities and limitations – can only become truly clear. The next question, therefore, is how we can understand the transformation of communicative justification contexts.

In chapter four, drawn upon the ideas of discourse theorist Stalnaker (cf. 1999), I give an explanation of how the transformation of communicative contexts might take shape. To understand this explanation, it is first of all necessary to recognise that a communicative context is not imagined as an independent, ready-to-use entity – which the metaphor of a vocabulary as a tool seems to suggest – but rather as something that is constructed time and time again within the communicative process by the participants in that communication. According to Stalnaker, claims and arguments are not understood in light of a clearly defined collection of rules and basic beliefs. Instead, they should be viewed in light of the (assumed) image the speaker has of the beliefs (how things are seen, what is considered to be the right tone or a proper argument, what the conversation is about or the direction it should take) his audience shares when he makes his statements. Stalnaker, therefore, defines a communicative context as a collection of what he refers to as ‘speaker-presuppositions’ (Stalnaker 1999, p. 101). Stalnaker's interpretation of communicative contexts enables us to understand how contexts transform over time. Since communicative contributions inevitably influence the audience - at least, if the audience accepts them as such – the participants in the communication will have to re-imagine the context after each communicative contribution. They will have to gauge how the collection of presuppositions, which the audience is assumed to share, is influenced, because that in turn helps to assess how the next communicative contribution is to be understood. It is in this way that a context does not emerge as relatively independent, since it is constructed by each participant in the communication, and not as unchangeable either, as this (re-)construction will have to be (re-)adjusted time and time again. Moreover, the transformation of communicative contexts does not emerge as something exceptional – as Rorty imagines – but as a structural characteristic of communication and,
therefore, as something common. This picture of the everyday (re-) construction of communicative contexts will also be less susceptible to the reproach of relativism, since every suggestion of justification contexts being independent, and determining beforehand whatever is regarded as justified, or not, is completely avoided here.

Brandom (cf. 1994; 2000) develops a position that links up with the theory of Stalnaker. In line with Stalnaker, Brandom emphasizes that the claims and arguments speakers should be understood as attuned to the beliefs that the audience is thought to share, on the one hand, and aimed at changing (some of) those beliefs, on the other hand, so that the communicative contexts will partly transform with each contribution to the communication. Since all the participants in the communication will have to keep an eye on how the context is subsequently transformed, Brandom refers to them as ‘scorekeepers’ (cf. Brandom, 2000). Understood as such, all the participants will thus keep up with the subjects that are discussed, the concepts that are applied, the beliefs that prevail, and the arguments that are deemed to be persuasive within the communication, whilst these issues change from to time to time. Because Brandom uses Rorty’s ideas as building blocks, he enables us to expand on Rorty’s concept of communicative contexts. This is the reason why, in chapter four, Brandom’s ideas play such a decisive role in the formation of my own concept of irony, and eventually in the formation of my own interpretation of context. In becomes clear that Brandom too, not only focuses on the speaker as a user of a vocabulary in his theory, but also, and at the same time, on the audience addressed by that speaker. This puts the spotlight on the ongoing communicative process and the changeability of communicative contexts. Hence, the concept of context that emerges can be regarded as discursive and dynamic.

3. A discursive approach to epistemology
The notion of dynamic-discursive contexts of justification changes our image of justification, especially when set off against a foundationalist model of justification. Foundationalists believe that a claim can only find its way to justification if it is supported by a fixed, or ‘certain’, ground or foundation; an argumentative basis of which the validity itself has already been determined. Williams calls this model of justification a ‘prior grounding’ model since, according to this approach, one is only “epistemically responsible in believing a given proposition” (2001, p. 24) once its evidence has been established completely. The contextualism that I propose here, submits not only that the idea of an evidential – ‘certain’ – ground for justification cannot be properly defended, but also that this is unnecessary when it comes to understanding the notion of justification. Claims by speakers are considered against the background of beliefs that
assumed for the time being, and that are not claimed to be ‘more certain’. On the contrary: most of the time, such assumptions, or presuppositions, remain undiscussed and are not considered at all. That is partly so because speakers are not continually asked to explicitly justify their claims. In communication, it is usually silently assumed that the speakers are justified to make their claims. As William puts it: “[e]ntitlement to one's beliefs is the default position” (ibid., p. 25). It is only when there is reason to in the conversation that someone will be challenged to explicate his or her reasons and those reasons will be scrutinized. Williams, therefore, refers to this as a 'default and challenge' model of justification.

This picture of the process of making and justifying claims resembles the way in which we deal with justification in our day-to-day conversations. Day-to-day conversations are also held against the background of a collection of assumptions that appear to be accepted by all partners in the conversation, and in day-to-day conversation we also usually refrain from asking for explicit reasons for someone’s claim. As Elgin puts it: “We just take her at her word” (1996, p. 140). It will even often be viewed as nonsensical, or even ill-mannered if, for no apparent reason, speakers are asked which arguments they believe to support their claims (cf. Adler 2008, p. 345). In such cases, the background of the beliefs and assumptions applied 'by default' functions as a justification ground and thereby provides potential reasons for claims, it is just that we usually do not expect our partners in the conversation to continually explicate those reasons (cf. Elgin 1996, p. 140).

The question now is whether such a concept of day-to-day justification offers also a point of departure for – be it more academic-intellectual – epistemology. Adler thinks it does, because, on the one hand, contributions to conversations can always be deemed to be claims about the world and, therefore, claims to knowledge and, on the other hand, in day-to-day conversations, just like in epistemology, plain rules apply as to when someone is justified to make a certain claim (cf. Adler 2008, p. 337). Adler shows that a so-called 'conversationalist epistemology' is definitely not without requirements, even though it abandons the requirement of an extensive justification of knowledge claims irrespective of the specific communicative context. In his view, in day-to-day conversations strict requirements are set in general to whatever someone may or may not claim. “Hearers would not accept a speaker's assertion if it was doubtful that the speaker has sufficient reason or knowledge to believe his assertion” (ibid., p. 345). As such, it applies to every conversation that the participants involved ensure that not everything is just taken for granted. Both in day-to-day and more intellectual conversations, participants will keep an eye on whether they trust the speakers to have sufficient reasons to make their claims. Of course, whatever is considered
to be ‘sufficient reasons’ in a day-to-day conversation will substantially differ from those in an academic-intellectual conversation, but the justification model used does not necessarily have to be different.

Therefore, there is reason to take the ‘default and challenge’ model of justification connected to my dynamic-discursive concept of context as a point of departure for my own epistemological position. Since this epistemological position depends on a description of the way in which justification takes shape in communicative processes in which claims are made, challenged, and defended, it may be called ‘discursive’. One of the characteristic starting points for such a discursive epistemological approach is that the development of knowledge is made fully dependent on a cooperative, critical-reflective exchange between speakers and their audience. The exchange may be regarded as cooperative, since the audience usually trusts a speaker to have sufficient reasons to make their claims, and because speakers aim to meet the expectations of their audiences (cf. Adler 2008, p. 339). The exchange is critical-reflective, for any contributions that are not considered to meet the epistemological standards applied, will be critically challenged. In a case like that, a speaker will be obliged - at least, if they want to be taken seriously - to respond in accordance with the acceptability standards prevailing within the communication (cf. Williams 2001, p. 25). However, critical contributions to the communication do not have a privileged status (cf. Adler 2008, p. 345). The raising of critical questions is simply a contribution to the communication as any other and is thereby also bound by the standards employed in the communicative process.

In a discursive epistemology, the exchange and justification of knowledge is thus made dependent on a community of discourse participants who jointly aim to keep the communicative process going, but that at the same time acts as a gatekeeper that watches closely as to whether the prevailing epistemological standards are met.

The subsequent question is whether whatever is regarded as knowledge, then, is not made fully dependent on an arbitrarily agreed convention between the participants within a communicative community and, if so, whether we can still speak of a progress of knowledge in a more scientific sense. On that issue, chapter six, which revolves around the question of what it means for a subject to acquire a language, will offer us insights that can help us along.

4. Provisional remarks about the tasks of the philosophy of education
Against the background of the central question of this thesis, it is now relevant to check whether conclusions may already be drawn as regards the significance of the epistemological insights found for my ideas about the tasks and possibilities of a future philosophy of education.
We have arrived at an approach in which epistemological justification is made dependent on dynamic-discursive communicative contexts. It, therefore, seems that in any case the ambition to generate generally valid claims should be abandoned. This conclusion also affects the discussion about whether or not general prescriptive pretensions can be connected to philosophical educational claims, especially since such pretensions formerly were regarded as depending on epistemological validity. On this issue, it has in any case become clear that there is no longer an epistemological ground for the formulation of general educational prescripts. In as far as philosophers of education feel the need to make general educational recommendations, they will have to appeal to considerations other than epistemological ones – although it is difficult to see how one could do this in a philosophically acceptable way.

The antifoundationalist authors in chapter two have already drawn attention to the corrosion of the prescriptive possibilities of the philosophy of education. They plead for a philosophy of education that is not aimed at the substantiation of educational claims in order to offer these as recommendable, but rather at the clarification of the restrictions to which every possible form of substantiation, of justification is bound, and so to fight the systematic exclusion that would be implied by such a justification. Although this thesis, partly due to the epistemological insights of these antifoundationalist philosophers of education, has put me on the track of developing my own contextual approach to knowledge, contrary to these authors I do not see a direct reason to attach any content-specific consequences to it. I have submitted that communicative contexts continually transform with every communicative contribution, so the plea for the clarification of contextual restrictions as a kind of exclusive possibility to break through the boundaries of justification contexts seems redundant. Insofar as the philosophy of education wants to engage in the clarification of elements of the justification context – for instance by applying an ironic philosophy – it is also bound by a communicative context, which implies that it will not help us in overcoming justificatory restrictions anyway.

Now, does this mean that the entire epistemological exercise is irrelevant to the question of the tasks of the philosophy of education? In response to the ideas of antifoundationalism in the philosophy of education, Cooper claims something to that effect. Insofar as they would be valid, he argues, these ideas are of such a nature that when it comes to the interpretation by philosophers of education, “[they] leave everything as it is” (Cooper 2003, p. 212). I would not want to go that far. Considering the foregoing, for instance, it seems that it is quite well-defendable to act with some caution where your prescriptive pretensions as a philosopher of education are concerned. Whether there is more to say about the content
of the philosophy of education in the light of my epistemological insights, I will discuss later in this thesis.

5. References