

Does Anybody Know That Anything Is So? *Paul Sperring*

Peter Unger's 'An Argument for Skepticism' purports to show that an argument in support of the universal form of the philosophical sceptic's thesis, that 'nobody ever knows *anything* to be so' (p.42), is sound.¹ Here is the argument:

[1] If someone *knows* something to be so, then it is all right for the person to be absolutely *certain* that it is so.

[2] It is never all right for anyone to be absolutely *certain* that anything is so.

[3] Therefore, nobody ever *knows* that anything is so.

As the 'anything' makes clear he is suggesting that one cannot know that there are trees or hands, that $2+2=4$, even that one exists or that one is having an experience of something or other right now.

Knowing and Being Absolutely Certain

Perhaps, contrary to premise [1], there is an ordinary sense of 'know' that allows us to simultaneously know a thing and not be absolutely certain of it – although, admittedly, even in ordinary usage one would be quite unlikely to hear it said that 'X knows that *p*, but isn't absolutely certain that *p*'. But there could be cases where it is said truly, couldn't there? Here one thinks of the exam candidate who knows all the answers but, either through humility or revision-induced fatigue and stress, isn't absolutely certain of all the answers. Unger agrees that this is a natural thing to think, in ordinary circumstances, but that the loose sense of 'know' used here is not, strictly speaking, a correct usage.² He asserts that it is wrong to think that there are really more senses of to 'know that' than the one that is equivalent to 'absolutely certain that'.

If X claims to know that *p* then, Unger suggests, this *entails* that X is absolutely certain that *p*. Is this right? Consider the proposition, 'Alf knows that he turned the oven off, but isn't absolutely certain that he turned the oven off'. Is there a consistent reading of this? If Alf is not in a state of absolute certainty with respect to how things were left with the oven then could it also be possible that Alf *knows* that he turned it off? What if Alf has already checked the oven twice, but just as he leaves the house, with something akin to the routine of the mildly obsessive compulsive person, goes into the kitchen for one more look; might we say, before the final check, he knows he switched it off, despite behaviour suggestive of being in a doubtful state? Perhaps we might ask Alf if he was certain: 'well,' he responds, 'I knew that I had turned it off, but I just like to check, to make certain'. This seems like a perfectly consistent thing to say.

To suppose it impossible that Alf know something he is not absolutely certain of might simply be a consequence of thinking that 'to know' and 'to be absolutely certain' are synonymous – but this seems to make the argument's first premise trivial, its second question begging and its conclusion otiose. Premise [1] would simply be a

claim about how knowing that p makes it all right to know that p , and premise [2] a straightforward denial that we ever know that p .

Unger claims that when we say, for instance, that 'Alf *knew* that he turned the oven off', then, if we speak truly, we always really mean, 'Alf *knew for certain* that he turned the oven off' – even in ordinary usages of 'know'. This, he says, is evidenced by the inconsistency of 'he knew it, but he didn't know it for certain', and therefore even our earlier attempt to give it a consistent reading is not quite right. But either we say that 'know for certain' is pleonastic (and we are back to the triviality issue), or we are adding something to mere knowing when we tack on the 'for certain'.³ So what is being added?

Perhaps, to 'know for certain that p ' is to 'be unprepared to entertain any doubts that you know that p '.⁴ When Alf says that he knows he turned the oven off, but under a grilling admits to having some doubts about the matter, we naturally say that Alf *does not know for certain* that he turned it off, and thereby *does not really know it at all*. The mere fact of Alf's entertaining of the doubts seems, so to speak, to dent the certainty claim. And just as actual dents in perfectly flat surfaces render them not flat in an absolute sense, so figurative dents in certainty claims render them something other than certain, in an absolute sense.⁵ So, according to this understanding, to know for certain is to be in a position where what one is certain about is indubitable, come what may. Since one is not ever justifiably in such a position, then, given the equivalence of *know* and *know for certain*, one is, therefore, never in a position to know – concerning any putative knowledge claim whatever.⁶

The Attitude of Certainty

To claim that one is certain of something is to take up a 'severely negative attitude' concerning whether the thing in question is so (p.44). That knowledge requires such strict requirements is not something peculiar to Unger's characterisation, he argues, but is a feature even of the anti-sceptic's account of what it means to really be said to know. If one is said to be certain then this will involve having 'the attitude that *no* new information, evidence or experience which one might ever have will be seriously considered by one to be *at all* relevant to *any possible* change in one's thinking in the matter' (p.44 – Unger's emphasis). We'll call this the Certainty Attitude, or CA.

So, when I am in CA with regards to p , then I am in an attitude concerning all possible future states of affairs such that I deem it that none of those possible states of affairs should bear at all on my thinking that certainly p . Suppose p to be 'there are currently roses'. Since I take it to be true that I am now looking at some, in a vase on my desk, while I type, then it looks to be all right to say 'I am certain that p '. So, I now have an attitude concerning all possible futures, deeming them all to be irrelevant to my absolute commitment to p . Now, suppose I imagine some scenario where it becomes apparent to me that there are not roses in the vase on the desk (I am told that I have failed to identify them as some species similar in shape and smell to roses), and further that it becomes apparent that all actual roses, prior to my thinking that there were some, were struck by a sudden and mysterious blight and shrivelled away into dust, so that my thinking that there were roses, at the time I did, was apparently false. Would my attitude be that the having of such a series of experiences, should they

come to pass, would be irrelevant to my judging it to be certain that p ? If it is, says Unger, then I am being dogmatic.

Let us attempt to spell things out rather more carefully. One way of understanding CA is as follows:

[CA] If X is certain that p , then X would take it that for the appearance of each possible scenario S_1, S_2, \dots, S_n , if S^* , then X still knows that p .

Well, this can't be quite right, since the possible S in question could be the imagined giving up of the belief that p , or a proof of the falsity of p , either of which would entail the negation of X's knowing that p . So Unger himself says:

The attitude of certainty concerns *any* sequence of experience or events which could consistently be presented to a sentient subject, *without its prejudging the issue on which it might supposedly bear*. (p45 – my emphasis)

So, we could put in a clause heading off prejudicial scenarios, and come out with something like the following:

[CA*] If X is certain that p , then X would take it that for the appearance of each possible scenario S_1, S_2, \dots, S_n , if S^* , where S^* is not simply X's coming to believe that not- p , or X's accepting proof that not- p , or the coming about of not- p , then X still knows that p .

Therefore when I know that there are currently roses, or that there were roses, should scenarios S_1 , involving the experience of being told by a flower expert that it is not roses but a near relation of the rose family in the vase, and S_2 , where it appears to me that the vicious rose blight is being reported by the trusted news media that I have access to, both come to pass, I would still maintain that I know that there are currently roses (or that it is still the case that I knew earlier). Am I dogmatic here? I should say that I am, since from such a vantage point (where those scenarios came to pass) I imagine that I would most likely be a bit doubtful about whether there were any roses, which looks to be pretty clearly what it means to be in an attitude of uncertainty.

But suppose we dispute this characterisation of certainty. CA, recall, involved ruling out all possible future experiences as irrelevant to the question concerning whether one knew that p . Well it is one thing to say that one rules out this or that scenario, *should it come to pass*, as bearing on whether one knows that p . It is another thing entirely to rule out scenarios which one is prepared to accept as counting against one's claim to know that p , on the grounds that one is certain that *no such scenarios will come to pass*. So an alternative formulation of the certainty attitude, sensitive to this distinction, might be:

[CA†] If X is certain that p , then even though the coming to pass of the appearance of some possible scenario S_1, S_2, \dots, S_n would make X doubt that p , X knows that no actual appearances of S^* will come to pass.

In knowing that there are roses I am completely confident that nothing of the sort described above will occur to cause me to give up my claim to know, even though I

understand that things coming to pass as described would make me hesitate. Perhaps I am justified in thinking this – it doesn't seem to be a dogmatic stance, at least ordinarily considered anyway. This seems a perfectly acceptable way of reading 'being unprepared to entertain doubts', which was our suggested adjunct to mere knowing. So, on this re-characterisation of CA we can accept Unger's premise [1] and deny premise [2] – it is then *all right* to be unprepared to accept that any appearances of the preposterous scenarios outlined by the sceptic would occur, thus ruling out whatever might threaten one's claims to know. That is to say, it is all right to be certain.

Unger is unmoved by this sort of challenge – it is, he says, both incorrect and irrelevant (that is, even if it were thought to be correct). Firstly, it is incorrect since one is invariably (or almost) not nearly so certain about the sorts of things that might turn up as one is about the thing one purports to be certain about. Being certain about there being roses is far from the same thing as being certain that there could not be appearances to the contrary. Unger gives the following example to illustrate. I might be certain that a person is married, but then that person says to me (falsely) 'I am unmarried' and, further, gets his friends to support his story. Such a case looks like a plausible example of someone being certain about a thing despite there being easily imaginable appearances to the contrary – is one ever certain about contrary appearances not turning up? Of course, I might be inclined to reject the appearances to the contrary (after all, I claimed that I was certain this person was married, so am unlikely to give up so easily) – but this takes us back to the original characterisation of CA.

Second, it is irrelevant because even if one characterised the certainty attitude in this way it would still amount to dogmatism to rule out as possible the coming to pass of appearances to the contrary. Regarding this sort of stance Unger says that 'only a quite foolhardy man would...reject out of hand any suggestion that some things might be brought forth to speak against his position' (p.46)

Of course, there is a sense in which it might always appear to be a mistake to say that nothing could count against one's position – there are many logically possible scenarios that count against one's claims that *p*. I follow Austin however, and deem *merely* logically possible counterexamples as irrelevant to one's claims to know.⁷ If Unger takes that to be unfair we could present his position as involving him in the following dilemma: Either one knows things only if one has *shown* that all the logically possible counter examples to one's claims do not obtain, or one can know things if one is justifiably ruling out *merely* logically possible counter examples (i.e. ignoring *irrelevant* possibilities). Embracing the first horn Unger looks to be offering a characterisation of knowledge that is a long way from the ordinary conception. The alternative, however, is just to accept that we do know some things after all (supposing we can give an adequate characterisation of 'relevance').

So with this in mind, I think that Unger's claim that the alternative characterisation of the certainty attitude is incorrect has not been shown. Let us take a closer look at the example offered. I know that you are married, you lie to me and say you are not. Here, supposedly, is an appearance of things that are contrary to my knowing them. But why can I not deny that this is even an appearance to the contrary? When I say that I am going to rule out scenarios that would dent my claim to know, what I am not

ruling out is mere speech acts of a contrary nature. In fact I suppose it quite likely that in the future I will get involved in discussions with philosophical sceptics who will say, concerning things which I do know, ‘you know no such thing, since you may be a brain in a vat/asleep...’, but I don’t think that I will then feel inclined to describe those sayings as ‘appearances to the contrary’ with regard to the things known. What I am ruling out are appearances where I take it that the actual states of affairs have come to pass that would make me give up my claim to be certain about something or other – I am saying, for instance, that it will not be the case that the married person will appear to me to *truthfully* say ‘I have never been married’.

Further, supposing (as I am) that this alternative characterisation is the correct characterisation of the attitude of certainty, it doesn’t seem at all irrelevant, since it isn’t obviously dogmatic to deny that anything at all could happen to shake my commitment to the things I am certain about – since, after all, I am certain about them, and therefore the appropriate thing to do concerning them is to rule alternatives out. This is just how we characterised being certain (with [CA†]). What Unger would need to do to show that one is being dogmatic here is to show that one ought not to take up this sort of position – and I have just tried to show that he has not convincingly done this, at least with respect to the examples discussed.^{8,9}

Paul Sperring
Humanities
Richmond upon Thames College

References and Further Reading

Austin, J.L., ‘Other Minds’ in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Suppl. Vol. 20 (1946), pp.148-87

Stroud, B., ‘Review of Unger’s *Ignorance: The Case for Skepticism*’, in *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol 74, no. 4 (1977), pp.246-57

Unger, P., ‘An Argument for Skepticism’, (1974), in Sosa, E. and Kim, J., eds., *Epistemology: An Anthology* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 2000)

Kim, J., eds., *Epistemology: An Anthology* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 2000) ‘A Defense of Skepticism’, in *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 80, 2 (1971)

¹ Unger, P., ‘An Argument for Skepticism’, (1974), in Sosa, E. and Kim, J., eds., *Epistemology: An Anthology* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 2000). Hereafter all bracketed references in the text are from the Sosa and Kim.

² This sort of example is discussed by Unger in an earlier airing of the argument outlined above, ‘A Defense of Skepticism’, in *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 80, 2 (1971), p. 214.

³ Another possibility is that something is being added to *mere* certainty when we say ‘to know for certain’ – although the claim ‘she was certain that *p*, but didn’t know that *p*’ seems an even more unlikely formulation than ‘knew but wasn’t certain that *p*’, and one would be hard pushed to come up with clear cases of certainty without knowledge.

⁴ Another suggestion might be that to ‘know for certain that *p*’ is to ‘know that you know that *p*’. Of course, if to know anything (whether *p*, or ‘that one knows that *p*’) is to know it for certain then we also

have a case here, on Unger's view, of 'knowing for certain that you know that p ' – which means, according to this suggested sense, 'knowing that you know that you know that p ', and so on. This is perhaps grist to the sceptic's mill, since the attempt here to explain what it means to be certain of something threatens an infinite regress, but it seems to cause problems also for this suggested reading of 'to know for certain'.

⁵ This is because, according to Unger, both 'flat' and 'certain' do not admit of degree (pp. 46-47).

⁶ Unger does not discuss the various problems with different sorts of attempts to justify beliefs in this paper. His attack is rather more general; levelling the charge of dogmatism at any claim to certainty – and the dogmatist never holds his position justifiably. Unfortunately Unger does not clearly define what he means by dogmatism in this paper – but it seems clear enough from the examples that he takes the attitude of the dogmatist to be one of holding on to claims to know which he ought not to.

⁷ In his paper 'Other Minds' Austin discusses examples where, in ordinary cases, it would just be considered unreasonable to consider merely logically possible counter examples. For instance, suppose an expert ornithologist spots a goldfinch in the garden. Now if one asks 'how do you know?' if the expert responds with a range of criteria that mark out goldfinches from all other types of birds then we ought to be satisfied. To say 'but how do you know it isn't stuffed?' seems unreasonable here. Knowing *enough* to know that it's a goldfinch isn't knowing *everything* – just enough.

⁸ Barry Stroud argues, in a similar vein, that Unger does not show that dogmatism is intrinsic to certainty in his review of Unger's book, *Ignorance: The Case for Skepticism in The Journal of Philosophy*, vol 74, no. 4 (1977), pp246-57.

⁹ It seems that one is on firmer ground still when it comes to matters such as, that I know I am having experiences of a certain sort, or that $1+1=2$ – and the 'appearances to the contrary' that ought to dent one's commitment in these cases, such as God telling us we are wrong, also look to be nothing of the sort.