

Philosophy 311: Knowledge and Justification

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Handout 16: Unger's 'A Defense of Skepticism'

Unger's argument:

1. There is almost nothing of which you're certain.
2. If you know something, then you're certain of it.
3. Therefore, there's almost nothing that you know.

Most of the paper is a defense of premise 1.

Section 1: "Sophisticated Worries"

Worry one: Suppose we're almost always wrong in saying that we know. Shouldn't experience lead us to discover this, and modify our use of the term "knows"? Unger: Not if there's no practical difference between knowing and being in the state we're in. Vacuum example.

Worry two: If skepticism is right, then "knows" is an "isolated freak" of our language. Much of Unger's paper responds to this worry.

Section 2: "Absolute and Relative Terms"

If X is an *absolute* term, saying that something's X = saying that it's absolutely, perfectly X
e.g. 'flat', 'straight', 'dry', 'crucial', 'complete', 'useless'

Contrast with *relative* terms, which concern matters of degree
e.g., 'bumpy', 'curved', 'wet', 'important', 'incomplete', 'useful'

Both take *degree modifiers* like 'pretty', 'very', 'extremely':

- When X is an absolute term, 'very X' means something like 'very close to being absolutely X', or 'very close to being X'. (E.g., 'very flat') Moreover, to say that it's 'really very flat' seems to 'say less of the thing' than to say simply that it's really flat.
- When X is a relative term, 'very X' doesn't mean this at all. (E.g., 'very bumpy') Moreover, to say that it's 'very bumpy' does not seem to say less than to say that it's really bumpy.

Both admit of comparative constructions: 'A is flatter / bumpier than B':

- When X is an absolute term, 'A is X-er than B' means something like 'A is closer to being X than B is'. When X is a relative term, 'A is X-er than B' doesn't mean this.

Section 3: "Certainty and Certain Related Things"

"The presence of certainty amounts to the complete absence of doubt, or doubtfulness"
(208)

'Certain' is absolute; 'doubtful', 'uncertain', and 'confident' are relative terms.

Section 4: "The Doubtful Applicability of Some Absolute Terms"

If A is flatter than B, then B isn't (really) flat. More importantly, if it's "logically possible" for there to be a surface flatter than B, then B isn't (really) flat. Since for most surfaces we observe it seems at least logically possible for there to be a flatter surface, "It is at least somewhat doubtful, then, that 'flat' ever applies to actual physical objects" (212).

Similarly, if it's possible for someone to be more certain of something than you are of P, then you aren't (really) certain of P.

It's possible for someone to be more certain of your own existence than you are that:

45+56=101

There are automobiles

Section 5: "Does Knowing Require Being Certain?"

Some philosophers have come to think that knowledge doesn't require certainty. Why?

"In everyday affairs we often speak loosely, charitably, and casually; we tend to let what we say pass as being true. I want to suggest that it is by being wrongly serious about this casual talk that philosophers (myself included) have come to think it rather easy to know things to be so. In particular, they have come to think that certainty is not needed" (214).

E.g., case of a student who comes up with the right answer, and we say that she knows.

Unger says that we should "emphasize the terms in question" if we want to get at what they really mean:

(1) "He knows it is raining, but he isn't certain of it"

vs.

(2) "He really *knows* that it is raining, but he isn't actually *certain* of it"

Unger says that while (1) might not feel contradictory, (2) does. So when we focus on the real meanings of 'know' and 'certain' we can recognize that knowing requires being certain.