

## Philosophy 311: Knowledge and Justification

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### Handout 17: The Practical Significance of Knowing and Skepticism

Consider the following dialogue, related to the "it's self-refuting!" response to skepticism:

Skeptic: Hey, listen, you know very little, if anything at all!

Anti-skeptic: But if you don't know anything, you don't know *that*!

Skeptic: I'm not saying I *know* that, just that it's true!

Anti-skeptic: But... but...

Unger thinks the anti-skeptic has a good and important point. In chapter 10 of *Ignorance*, he proposes the following hypothesis:

*Knowing and asserting (KA)*

When you assert that p, you *represent yourself as knowing* that p

Given KA, someone who asserts that p without knowing that p misrepresents herself. You shouldn't misrepresent yourself. So given KA, if you don't know that p, you shouldn't assert that p. Or, at least, given KA, you always do something improper by asserting things you don't know.

The radical skeptic says you know hardly anything. Given KA, this means that you misrepresent yourself whenever you say almost anything. Hence one of the consequences of radical skepticism is that hardly anyone should ever say anything at all. Or, at least, that you almost always do something improper by asserting anything.

Two lines of support for KA. In each case, KA explains something otherwise puzzling:

#### 1. "P but I don't know that P"

That's always a bad thing to say. (Try some examples.) But why? It can be *true*. (Suppose that it's raining but you don't know it. Then if you were to say "It's raining but I don't know that it's raining" you would say something true. But it would still be bad.)

KA explains why that's a bad thing to assert. In asserting P, you represent yourself as knowing that P. If you go on to say that you don't know that P, you're representing yourself in a contradictory way, even though you're not asserting anything contradictory.

#### 2. Support from conversational situations

a. When someone asserts something, but we find out that she didn't know it, we think she's done something wrong. "What she did, in so far as it was intentional, was of a piece with lying, though perhaps it was not quite so badly wrong as that" (260). Why? KA explains why.

b. You can always challenge someone's assertion by asking how she knows that it's true. And if she can't give you a satisfactory answer, then she has to admit that she's said more than she's entitled to say. But why? She hasn't, after all, *said* that she knows. KA explains why.

So given KA + radical skepticism, you shouldn't assert much.

But what about doing something weaker than asserting? Can you *suggest* that P even though you don't know that P? Yes, but...

Unger: when you suggest that P, you represent yourself as knowing that *it's possible that P*. If you don't know that it's possible that P, then you misrepresent yourself.

"If even this much is right, then there is no appropriately accepted way for a skeptic about knowledge to express his view without falsely representing himself in the process" (268).

How about *questioning* someone? Unger (268):

When you question someone about something, you represent yourself as knowing that you want an answer to the question. If you don't know that you want an answer, then you misrepresent yourself.

How about *ordering* or *requesting* someone to do something? Unger (269):

When you order someone to do something, you represent yourself as knowing that you have a right to expect her to do it. But if you don't know that you have this right, then you misrepresent yourself.

When you request for someone to do something, you represent yourself as knowing that it's not impossible for her to do it. But if you don't know that, then you misrepresent yourself.

The upshot: "[A] skeptic who would communicate is in an unfortunate situation" (271).