In Reply to “A Defense of Skepticism”

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In his paper “A Defense of Skepticism”¹ Peter Unger argues that “every human being knows, at best, hardly anything to be so. More specifically, I will argue that hardly anyone knows that 45 and 56 are equal to 101, if anyone at all” (p. 317).

Unger’s reason for this claim is that (1) knowing entails being certain, and (2) hardly anything is certain.

In connection with (1), Unger rejects such an example as that of a student who is credited with knowing the answer on an exam even though he is not certain his answer is right. Unger says, “In everyday affairs we speak loosely, charitably, and casually.” But if Unger is right, we would also be merely charitable in saying that even the teacher knows that 45 plus 56 is 101, since, if he is right, even teachers are not certain of this. So if Unger were right about certainty, there would be much better examples suggesting that knowing does not entail being certain than is usually thought.

Unger stresses the claim that by attacking knowledge on the question of certainty he is avoiding “normative” questions and is boldly “picking on what is just about the easiest requirement of knowledge.” He says:

one more difficult requirement might be that the knower be completely justified in being certain... I wanted this defense to avoid the more difficult requirements because they rely on normative terms—

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1. [Chapter 19 in this volume.]
for example, the term "justified." The application of normative terms presents problems which, while worked over by many philosophers, are still too difficult to handle at all adequately. [P. 217]

So Unger is suggesting that it is, as a matter of fact, extremely unusual for anyone to be certain of anything. To support this, he has the following formula: if I am more certain that \( p \) than I am that \( q \), then I am not certain that \( q \). He applies this formula to his suggestion that for virtually any proposition, there is some other proposition that is more certain, and gets his conclusion, that virtually nothing is certain.

In my opinion, both this formula and the suggestion to which it is applied are preposterous. The idea that there is, for me at least, any proposition more certain than that 45 plus 56 equals 101 is false. The idea that there is a series of propositions beyond this latter proposition, each more certain than the one before, is worse than false.

Unger calls "certain" and "flat" and various others "absolute terms." He says "something is flat if and only if it is absolutely flat" (p. 326) and he seems to assume that, similarly, something is certain if and only if it is absolutely certain. He says that calling something very flat is to imply that it is not really flat, but only close to being so. And I take him to imply that to call something very certain is to imply it is not really certain.

Now if someone asks me, "Is he really certain?" and I reply firmly, "Yes, he is very certain," my reply, which is surely a correct form of speech, would be contradictory, on Unger's account. Perhaps Unger would remind us that "In everyday affairs we speak loosely, charitably, and casually." But then Unger's formula may be a case of being "loose, charitable and casual" with skepticism. I can understand an Ungerian saying that western Kansas is not really flat, but an Ungerian can understand my saying that western Kansas is really flat. Which of us would be exercising the greater charity is a matter of opinion.

Unger does not offer any statistics to support his suggestion that virtually no proposition is absolutely certain. But he does say, "Is it reasonable for us now to actually believe that many people are certain that there are automobiles: . . . we must then believe of these people that it is impossible for any of them ever to be more certain of his own existence than all of them now are of the existence of automobiles" (p. 332). And the implication is clearly that, like as not, one is, or could be taught to be, more certain of one's own existence than one now is that there are automobiles.

Unger says nothing to support this assumption. One thing which has been said occasionally in favor of it is that it is logically impossible to think you exist and be mistaken, while it is logically possible that someone should think there are automobiles and be mistaken. But then it is also logically impossible that someone should think that 45 plus 56 is 101 and be mistaken, and yet Unger claims that this latter proposition is not certain either. If he considers his own existence more certain than truths of arithmetic, he might appeal to the Cartesian idea that the Cogito is superior in clarity and distinctness to arithmetical truths. It might be said that arithmetical truths are propositions of a kind about which I have been mistaken, since I have sometimes mistaken a false proposition about arithmetic for a truth, while I have never been mistaken about a proposition like the proposition that I exist, since this is such a special proposition.

Here, then, are two considerations which some philosophers have advanced for regarding one's existence as specially certain: first, that it is logically impossible to believe mistakenly the proposition; and second, that the proposition is not even of a kind which it is logically possible to be mistaken in believing. Perhaps these considerations have seemed to relate to certainty because they sound as if they involve ruling out ways of being mistaken, or kinds of mistake one could make, and it is natural to assume that the less room there is for error, the more certain one is entitled to be.

I think it is wrong to think that ruling out the logical possibility of error is always a case of leaving less "room" for error, or that not ruling out the logical possibility of error is automatically to leave "room" for error. But at any rate, in typical cases in which the question of certainty arises, these considerations are just irrelevant.
For example, suppose that I am laid up with a broken leg, and from my bedroom window I seem to hear (by the bell) that the cow is in the garden. I call my wife, and she rushes out of the kitchen, leaving dinner to burn, only to find that the cow is not in the garden, but tethered nearby. She is irritated by my error. A few days later, I look out the window and actually see the cow break loose and head into the garden. I shout down to my wife in the kitchen, where she is having a second try at the fancy concoction which burned a few days before, “The cow is in the garden!” My wife calls back, in an anguished tone, “Are you certain?” I reply, “Yes, I can see her plainly.” Recognizing the overriding emergency, my wife lets the recipe go again and rushes out to save the food supply.

Now, this is a case in which I am perfectly correct in saying I am certain. It is logically possible I am mistaken in thinking the cow is in the garden. It is logically possible that elves have taken a stuffed replica of the cow into the garden, and that no harm is being done to the vegetables. But to regard this as a reason for demurring in response to my wife’s “Are you certain?” would be idiotic. Nor would the situation be any different if the question were the less natural “Is it certain?” I am right in saying not only that I am certain, but that it is certain, that the cow is in the garden.

Unger offers some remarks which might be mistaken for a reply to this example. He distinguishes between what it is all right to say “for practical purposes,” and what is strictly speaking true. He says:

even if you do not really know, still, it may be that for practical purposes you are in a position with respect to the matter . . . which is not importantly different from knowing. If this is so, then it may be better, practically speaking, for you to believe falsely that you know than to have no belief at all here. [P. 321]

It seems clear that this remark about the practical use of “know” would also apply to “certain.”

Unger compares this strictly incorrect, but practically useful, use of “know,” with the use of such a term as “vacuum.” It may be all right for me to call a certain region a vacuum even if it contains some tiny amount of gaseous stuff, because the region is just like a vacuum for practical purposes. It might in some contexts be silly and pointless for me to insist that a certain region is not a vacuum when it is close enough to being one for the purpose at hand. But what I say may nonetheless be true. Similarly with skepticism.

In my opinion, this is a very poor analogy. It may be that nature abhors a vacuum, and that there are no perfect vacuums. And there are not, in the physical world, any mathematically flat surfaces. But “vacuum” and “flat” do have very clear (and I do not mean “close to clear”) applications within idealized systems which are themselves of considerable interest and even practical importance. A Euclidean plane is flat, and geometry is of considerable interest. And in physical theory, the notion of a perfect vacuum has applications. The absence of actual, real-life occasions for applying such terms as “perfect vacuum” or “mathematically flat” is compensated by their clear roles in important idealized systems.

This is not the case with “know.” Perhaps the skeptic who says that the term “know” has no applications, or virtually none, in real-life situations, will be willing to formulate some idealized setup in which the term does have a use. But there is no such system which is not of overwhelming insignificance by contrast with the ordinary use of the term. The physical theory of vacuums would be nice to know if I were going to be dealing with what are “for practical purposes” vacuums. But the skeptic’s theory of knowledge is worthless in dealing with what is “for practical purposes” knowledge.

One correct feature of Unger’s remarks is that for practical purposes there is no difference between something’s being strictly true and its being close enough to strictly true to be treated as true for practical purposes. But this obvious truth is no basis for claiming that claims to knowledge or certainty are hardly ever strictly true. It is just that if we ever do find that, for reasons of theory, some term which is frequently applied in everyday use does not really apply truly very often, we can ease the conflict between the theory and everyday usage by explaining the everyday use as “close enough for practical purposes.” But the merit of such a proposal depends on the theory.
As has been observed, Unger gives no reason for thinking that people might be, or become, more certain of their own existence than they now are that there are automobiles. He says that of course people might all be this certain there are automobiles and that “each of them feels himself to be” this certain. But he says:

I think it somewhat rash for us actually to believe that they are all so certain. Certainty being an absolute and our understanding of people being rather rudimentary and incomplete, I think it more reasonable for us now to suspend judgment on the matter. [P. 332]

The reasons offered for not accepting the fact that most people feel absolutely certain there are automobiles (along with any other favorable considerations) as proof they are certain are, first, that “certainty is an absolute” and, second, that “our understanding of people is rather rudimentary.” To say that certainty is an absolute is just to hark back to the formula that if \( p \) is more certain than \( q \), then \( q \) is not certain. It is to give no reason at all for thinking that people are wrong to deny that anything is more certain than that there are automobiles. To say people would not qualify as certain there are automobiles if they could be more certain of something else is not to give a reason for thinking, contrary to what they think, that they could be more certain of something else.

The other reason offered, that our understanding of people is rather rudimentary, is difficult to comprehend. Perhaps the idea is that people are unpredictable, and may come to claim they have become more certain they exist than that there are automobiles. In a few years, the Cogito might become a national fad, with crowds milling in the streets chanting, “I exist! I exist! Nothing else is as certain as this!” Holding it to be certain there are automobiles might become associated with a defeatist attitude toward environmental pollution.

In my opinion, it is possible for a person to determine whether he is certain there are automobiles, without having to consider the possibility of his succumbing to Cartesianism at some future date. Being certain is not like, say, being as happy as you can be. It is easy to see how someone might think he is as happy as he could be, and then find later that he is happier than that. But Unger’s own definition of “certain” makes certainty a different matter.

Unger says: “He is certain that \( p \)’ means, within the bounds of nuance, 'In his mind, it is not at all doubtful that \( p \)’” (p. 328). He also holds that “certain” has the same meaning in the impersonal context: “It is certain that \( p \).” Perhaps this is right; but it is worth noting that “It is certain that \( p \)” entails \( p \) while “He is certain that \( p \)” does not.

At any rate, if someone feels that he has no doubt that \( p \), and shows no doubt or hesitation about \( p \), then what sense is there in suspending judgment as to whether, for him, it is at all doubtful that \( p \)? Of course he may come to doubt that \( p \), either for good reason or because he responds stupidly to some sophistical rigmarole; but what reason would this be for suspending the doubts he has acquired were with him all along? Here, to plead that our knowledge of people is “rather rudimentary” is false caution.

It might be said that if my life had to be put at stake, I would rest easier staking it on the proposition that I exist than I would on the proposition that there are automobiles. It is far from obvious how I would feel in such a vaguely specified situation, but in any case, I would feel has nothing to do with how I feel now. By exercising my imagination, I can make myself angry, sad, frightened, and so forth. Perhaps I could make myself feel what I would call feelings of doubt. And perhaps this is easier to do with respect to the proposition that I exist. But being able to work up a feeling of doubt by mental exercises is not the same as doubting.

Besides being unconvincing, Unger’s argument is not up to what he promised at the beginning of his essay. He began by saying that, while he could not, of course, claim to know that little is known, he would show it is reasonable to believe that little is known. But at the crucial step just criticized we find him arguing that it is reasonable to suspend judgment on the question whether much is certain. And this falls short of arguing that it is reasonable to believe that very little is certain. But then even this more limited argument ends up in a question-begging
suggestion that we be careful about questions involving our understanding of people.

It is interesting to contrast Unger's definition of "certain" with the views of another philosopher who regards certainty as very rare. H. A. Prichard says:

I, for example, might be, as we say, thinking without question that the thing in front of me is a table, or that to-day is Tuesday, or that so-and-so came to see me last week. Cook Wilson said of this state that it simulates knowledge since, as is obvious, in this state there is no doubt or uncertainty. But it obviously is not the same as being certain. In such states we are, of course, constantly being mistaken, and unless we distinguish such states from being certain, we are apt to take instances of them as instances of our being certain and yet mistaken. And once we have noticed the distinction, we are forced to allow that we are certain of very much less than we should have said otherwise.\(^2\)

Note that Prichard grants it as obvious in everyday cases that "there is no doubt or uncertainty." So by Unger's definition he would be required to grant that certainty is equally common. In my opinion, this is a good feature of Unger's definition. It is only strange that while accepting this definition, Unger should think that cases of certainty are rare.

Prichard regards it as part of the meaning of "certain" that it is impossible for someone to be certain and yet be mistaken. It even seems that he goes further than this and assumes that being certain entails the logical impossibility of being wrong. This idea has already been criticized.

It is pretty clear what Prichard means by "certain," and thus clear what he means by denying that he is certain there is a table in front of him (in a case where there is a table in front of him). He means that it is logically possible that there really is no table there, in spite of his impressions to the contrary. Some philosophers might regard this claim as unclear. But I think it is comprehensible. And even though it is a high redefinition of the ordinary word "certain," we may at least be grateful for the comprehensibility and bear in mind that the redefinition could have been worse.

Prichard's procedure really could benefit from Unger's dis-