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The All-or-nothing skeptic : the case against Peter Unger's Ignorance: a case for skepticism

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**The all-or-nothing skeptic: The case against Peter Unger's
"Ignorance: A Case for Skepticism"**

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San Jose State University, 1993

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THE ALL-OR-NOTHING SKEPTIC

The Case Against Peter Unger's *Ignorance: A Case for Skepticism*

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of Philosophy
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Lucretia Beaman Nelson
May, 1993

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ABSTRACT

THE ALL-OR-NOTHING SKEPTIC:

The Case Against Peter Unger's *Ignorance: A Case for Skepticism*

by Lucretia Beaman Nelson

Peter Unger's *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism* is considered by some to be perhaps the best case since Hume's for a radical epistemological skepticism. The thesis of this work is that Unger's arguments are not sound, that his case for skepticism is not as good (not as plausible, not as epistemologically preferable) as the "common sense" case against skepticism, and that if one is to be a reasonable skeptic, it must be for some other reason than those offered in Unger's arguments.

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The observation of human blindness and weakness is the result of all philosophy, and meets us at every turn, in spite of our endeavors to elude or avoid it.

—David Hume

To pretend to prove by reasoning that there is no force in reason, does indeed look like a philosophical delirium. It is like a man's pretending to see clearly that he himself and all other men are blind.

—Thomas Reid

Introduction

Peter Unger's *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism* is perhaps one of the best such cases for radical epistemological scepticism that has been presented since Hume. As such, it poses a challenge to one who, like myself, considers radical epistemological scepticism to be an unsound and incorrect view. My thesis will be that Unger's arguments are not sound, that his case for scepticism is not as good (not as plausible, not as epistemologically preferable) as the "common sense" case against scepticism, and that if one is to be a reasonable sceptic, it must be for some other reason than those offered by Unger.

A Word About Labels

While it is pretty clear that 'scepticism' and 'the sceptic' are proper terms for referring to one side in our debate, it has not always been clear how we should refer to the side in opposition to scepticism. In part, this problem arises because there are so many different epistemological philosophies which might be considered as opposed to scepticism, e.g., realism, phenomenism, representationalism, positivism, fideism, etc. In the past, when a very *general* term has been wanted to oppose to scepticism, both 'common sense' and 'dogmatism' have been used. I will favor the former, because 'dogmatism,' simply by its meaning, appears to beg the very question at issue in the debate. 'Common sense' will serve as a more neutral term, since what is common sense may be correct or it may be incorrect (as it was, for example, when it

was common sense to suppose that the Sun revolved around the Earth). I considered using the term ‘non-scepticism,’ but decided the ‘ism’ suffix renders it too misleading, because it implies a *single* epistemological position, rather than a wide world of mutually inconsistent ones. This, I believe, would have been unnecessarily handicapped our attempt to explicate the problems of scepticism, as we shall see. To refer to those who are not sceptical, or who actively oppose scepticism with arguments against it, I will generally employ the terms ‘non-sceptic’ and ‘anti-sceptic’ respectively.

The “Burden of Proof” Issue

One of the first issues that needs to be addressed in any discussion of epistemological scepticism is the question of a “burden of proof.”

Sceptics often argue that non-sceptics have a special “burden of proof,” because, they say, the non-sceptical side is the “affirmative” side, and it is often said that the affirmative side in a debate should have a special burden of proof. The non-sceptic may counter that the sceptics are themselves the affirmative side, because they *affirm* that “ignorance is universal,” while non-sceptics do not—because they have no need to—go about *affirming* “common sense” views. To non-sceptics, it seems enough to be able to show that the arguments for scepticism are not cogent (or even self-contradictory), because doing so indirectly confirms common sense to be “beyond a reasonable doubt.”

Moreover, some anti-sceptics have argued that the sceptics are offering an “extraordinary” claim, and it is said that “extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof.” To this latter claim a sceptic might respond that it

is itself a claim about how things really are in the “external” world, and is therefore something he does not admit. To this a anti-sceptic may respond that a sceptic then has no business offering any opinion about anyone having any kind of burden of proof at all, since this would be a self-contradictory claim to be able to discern something about how things really are in the “external” world.

The anti-sceptic is always tempted not to abandon this dispute because a radical sceptic has little hope of discharging any kind of *burden of proof*, should it fall to him, and that, therefore, the game might be won by the anti-sceptic almost before it has begun. However, it seems that the whole controversy here rests upon a false dilemma. Therefore, I propose to set the debate on a more equal footing by rejecting the whole pre-conception that one side must be exclusively handicapped by any special “burden of proof,” as if this were a criminal trial, and instead agree simply to consider the winner whichever side presents the better case. This is not a criminal trial, so let us simply ask the question: when all is said and done, which, if either, is on the whole the more likely, credible, probable, plausible, i.e., epistemologically preferable, side, the sceptical or the anti-sceptical?

Unger's Case for Scepticism

In his book *Ignorance*, Peter Unger defends a radical scepticism, arguing that “no one ever knows anything about anything.”¹ In addition to this he also argues that “nobody is ever (even the least bit) reasonable or justified in anything, in particular, in believing anything,”² and that “nothing can ever be true or ever false.”³ Unger also suggests that, accordingly, “nobody can ever be rational, or sensible, or wise, or intelligent, or prudent, etc., in anything.”⁴ He also confesses that he is “quite doubtful that there are facts or states of affairs, or propositions or statements,”⁵ asserts that “no one ever...asserts that anything is so,”⁶ and even claims that “no one can ever think or believe something to be so at all.”⁷

Can Scepticism Succeed in Spite of Self-Contradiction?

The first thing we may notice about Unger is that, as he is the first to admit, he leaves himself wide open to a charge of self-contradiction. While asserting on one page that “nothing can ever be true,”⁸ we find him on another talking about “becoming more convinced of the truth of scepticism,”⁹ and arguing

¹Peter Unger, *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) p. 1.

²Peter Unger, *Ignorance*, p. 198, see also p. 1.

³Unger, p. 310.

⁴Unger, p. 242-243.

⁵*op. cit.*, p. 308.

⁶*op. cit.*, p. 273.

⁷Unger, p. 310.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Unger, p. 198.

both that “it seems reasonable for us to believe that not many people are actually certain that there are automobiles,”¹⁰ and that “nobody is ever (even the least bit) reasonable or justified in anything, in particular, in believing anything.”¹¹ In the course of his book, we often find him arguing thus:

One may...think that any feelings which were aroused by this argument are not trustworthy.... I don't think this reaction is correct. Indeed, I think the argument's sceptical conclusion is true, and that intuitions aroused by the argument for that conclusion are some support for thinking it true, for thinking that we can't be reasonable in beliefs.¹²

In other words, Unger finds himself proposing that, although “nothing can ever be true or ever false,”¹³ and “no one can ever think or believe something to be so at all,”¹⁴ nevertheless, he *thinks* that we have some *reason to believe* that it is *true* that “nobody is ever (even the least bit) reasonable or justified in anything, in particular, in believing anything.”¹⁵ And, of course, this also entails the conclusion that his sceptical claims, such as “no one ever knows anything about anything”¹⁶ and “no one ever...asserts that anything is so,”¹⁷ cannot possibly be true, reasonable, justified, believed, or even asserted.

“Should anyone believe me,” Unger admits, “then according to my own thesis, he would not be at all reasonable in so doing.”¹⁸

¹⁰*op. cit.*, p. 68.

¹¹*op. cit.*, p. 198.

¹²*op. cit.*, p. 38.

¹³Unger, p. 310.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵*op. cit.*, p. 198, see also p. 1.

¹⁶*op. cit.*, p. 1.

¹⁷*op. cit.*, p. 273.

¹⁸Unger, p. 1.

Like Hume before him, Unger's solution to this sceptical dilemma seems ultimately to plead guilty and throw himself on the mercy of the court. And like Hume, he too offers the startling suggestion that even though scepticism may contradict itself, we should not hold this against it. Unger is even cheeky enough to suggest that we might look on any contradictions in his arguments as evidence in favor of their truth:

I will develop straightforward paradoxes and contradictions. I take these disconcerting results to be no criticism of my sceptical position, though they may be that, but rather to *show that* our language is in need of radical change.¹⁹

Of course, there seems to be a paradox in accepting these arguments. For...[they say that] one will never be justified or reasonable in accepting those [sceptical] arguments themselves. This is quite disconcerting. But, on reflection, I think there really is no paradox here. The arguments may be sound and effectively forceful—one who considers them may be brought to believe what is true. If he cannot be reasonable or justified in believing what is true, that may be only because the ideas of being reasonable and being justified are so impossibly demanding. This need not reflect badly on my arguments; rather, that will be their whole point.²⁰

Even if my arguments should terminate in genuine paradoxes, and in plain contradictions, that may be no fault of the arguments; indeed, it may make clear their whole point.... If there is something wrong with the language in which they receive substance and expression, this might be expected. Hence, in such a case, we may best regard the sceptical reasonings as indirect arguments against the suppositions embodied in our language, or against our common sense beliefs, which are given substance in its terms. I will not, then, be overly fearful of contradiction. Rather, I will look at untoward results as possibly indicating good starting points for linguistic reconstruction, and for the attendant alteration of our common sense beliefs.

¹⁹ *op. cit.*, p. 273, emphasis altered.

²⁰ *op. cit.*, p. 199.

Should appropriate reconstruction be achieved, then some day some philosopher might write a sceptical essay...free of contradictions.... I write without that opportunity.... Even if this means many contradictions run through my own work.²¹

The trouble with all this, of course, is that it utterly begs the question. Unger suggests that perhaps the reason his arguments can't help contradicting themselves is because our "common sense" way of thinking and, indeed, our very language itself, are terribly flawed in some way. But the only reason he can offer for thinking *that* is, of course, the sceptical arguments themselves. If those arguments are no good, then there is no longer any reason to suppose there is anything wrong with common sense or ordinary speech, in which case there is no longer any reason to believe that Unger's self-contradictions might be excusable. For Unger then to "not...be overly fearful of contradiction" and to "look at untoward results as possibly indicating good starting points for...the attendant alteration of our common sense beliefs" would be to abandon all pretense of reasonableness.

After all, if a sceptic says that he just intends to go on being a sceptic come what may, he displays the same "severe dogmatism" for which Unger justly criticizes Norman Malcolm,²² namely "the attitude that we will disregard any new experience, evidence, and information which runs counter to what we hold."²³ Unger himself argues that "there is always something wrong with having this attitude."²⁴ Moreover, if it turns out that the sceptic did not

²¹Unger, p. 6.

²²Unger, p. 106, challenges Malcolm's claims as presented in his "Knowledge and Belief," *Knowledge and Certainty: Essays and Lectures*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963).

²³Unger, p. 134.

²⁴*op. cit.*, p. 118.

have any good reason to embrace scepticism in the *first* place, then his would seem to represent a dogmatism even more pronounced than Malcolm's, since Malcolm seems at least to have had *some* reason to suppose, in the beginning, that there was an ink-bottle in front of him.

It is very important to stress this point because sceptical arguments really do wield a kind of problematic psychological influence. At first encounter, the arguments appear to possess a certain plausibility. But their conclusions are so shocking that most people quickly recoil from "these speculations...so cold, and strained, and ridiculous,"²⁵ as Hume put it. And so the natural response is to dismiss scepticism as a kind of idle game for philosophers. This is unfortunate, because the only way to overcome the sceptical arguments is to approach them with an open mind and take them quite *seriously*. Then, after carefully considering precisely what they have to say and exploring them in detail, their flaws can be discovered. The trouble is that if one then finds the sceptic's argument (that no one knows anything) contradictory, the classic response comes almost automatically: "Well there you go! The sceptic would *agree* that his beliefs are untenable. His point is just that—*all* beliefs are untenable." But this response is not a valid one, since we may happily admit that *some* beliefs are untenable without committing the fallacy of "hasty generalization" by concluding that, *therefore*, all are.

What exactly is going on here? The sceptic admits that scepticism may be contradictory, but—he says—so what? That doesn't help common sense because *it*, no less than scepticism, leads to contradiction. But this move

²⁵David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, L. A. Selby-Bigge ed., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888) Book I, Part IV, Sect. vii, p. 269.

seems to beg the question, if the only reason we are offered for *supposing* that common sense leads to contradiction are illogical or self-contradictory arguments. If the sceptical arguments are not sound, it appears we do not then *have* any good reason to suppose that common sense might be flawed.

Granted, sceptics don't care if scepticism refutes itself, just so long as it, like a Kamikaze, flies long enough²⁶ to take common sense down with it. But, if their arguments are unsound, then it would seem that their Kamikaze pilot is out of gas. And if he cannot even get off the ground, how can he shoot down common sense? Moreover, it seems that if scepticism refutes itself, then common sense does not need to shoot scepticism down, because it, so to speak, shoots itself down. After all, what could be more certain than something whose denial leads one into self-contradiction?

There appears to be only one way out of this conundrum for the sceptic: while admitting that he contradicts himself, he might complain that the very first premises from which he began have led him inescapably into these self-contradictions, and that these premises *are not his alone*, but also belong to

²⁶Perhaps one reason why Popkin, Hume and others have thought that a sceptical Kamikaze might be able to shoot down common sense, "before"²⁷ itself crashing, arises from the fact that we seem to have a funny habit of thinking of an argument as a *temporal* sequence of events, almost as if we are saying: 'if P (in the morning), *then* Q (in the afternoon).' But, of course, a fundamentally unsound argument does not really enjoy any probationary *period of time* in which it is sound. Granted, a long period of time, even hundreds of years, might go by before anybody *realizes* that an unsound argument is unsound (and perhaps they might even be epistemologically *justified* in believing it, perhaps because they could not, for some reason, have been expected to know better). But, however this may be, an unsound argument is always unsound. It may wield a nearly irresistible power in the face of human weakness, it may have persuaded even the most brilliant of men for centuries, and it may go on ensnaring them. It may even be that no one has ever yet doubted it, or exposed its flaws. But if it's no good then it's no good. Such an argument is not temporarily sound, but only temporarily persuasive. Someone may describe it as "effective," but this would be accurate *only* in the sense that it is effectively deceiving.

those epistemologists on the non-sceptical side. That is, he might take the position that all he is doing is simply performing a *reductio ad absurdum* on a theory of knowledge he has received from non-sceptics.

There is, however, a serious drawback to this move. The trouble is that there are many different non-sceptics, and many different non-sceptical theories about knowledge. In this case, it would appear that all the sceptic is really doing is showing that *some particular non-sceptical epistemologist's theory about knowledge* is untenable. That is, assuming that the sceptic is successful in his *reductio*, it seems that this hardly justifies us in concluding that therefore *there is no knowledge*. It seems that it would be more sensible simply to conclude that that particular theory of knowledge is incorrect or inadequate in some way.

The more reasonable response would then seem to be to begin a search for a better theory of knowledge, not to embrace scepticism—especially if scepticism contradicts itself. After all, if scepticism is just as absurd as the non-sceptical theory of knowledge we have just rejected for being absurd, then we have the same reason to reject scepticism as we had for rejecting the non-sceptical theory of knowledge. (If, on the other hand, we were so far gone as to suppose, as Unger seems to suggest, that contradictions “need not reflect badly on...arguments,”²⁸ then *reductios* are vain and we no longer have any reason to reject the absurd non-sceptical theory of knowledge.)

For example, if we are led to Unger's conclusion that ‘nobody is ever reasonable or justified in believing anything,’²⁹ only because we previously *accepted*

²⁸Unger, p. 199.

²⁹Compare Unger, p. 198.

his premise that 'it is reasonable to believe that not many people are actually certain that there are automobiles'³⁰ then this can hardly justify us in considering the conclusion to be sound. The conclusion contradicts one of the premises needed to support itself.

Again, if the sceptic admits that scepticism is absurd, and his claim is merely that he can perform a *reductio ad absurdum* on some non-sceptical theory of knowledge, then at best he can hope to succeed only in showing that scepticism and the non-sceptical theory are *in the same boat* (a boat which doesn't seem to float). Rather than leading us to embrace scepticism and go down with the ship, all this should simply inspire us to look around for another boat: i.e., a better non-sceptical theory of knowledge. Indeed, once we realize this, we can begin to appreciate the value and importance of scepticism to the progress of philosophy in general. To non-sceptical epistemologists, scepticism is irreplaceable as a kind of foil or test for theories of knowledge.³¹

Remember, too, that in order to embrace scepticism, we would have to think that the sceptic has not made any *mistakes* in his argument which purports to show that some particular non-sceptical theory of knowledge really does *lead inescapably* to unacceptable consequences. And obviously there is some degree of uncertainty here. Is the theory of meaning Unger uses a good one? Are his implied rules of inference correct? We don't want to abandon

³⁰*op. cit.*, p. 68.

³¹I would argue, for example, that Hume—and, in their own way, Berkeley and Kant—provided an invaluable service to philosophy when they reduced to absurdity certain tempting but untenable philosophical doctrines, especially the notion that "the senses do not comprehend the foreign object, but only their own impressions." (Michel de Montaigne, "Apology for Raymond Sebond," 1576, in R. H. Popkin, ed., *The Philosophy of the 16th and 17th Centuries*, New York: Free Press, 1966, 81.)

ship until we are sure that it's really going down. We might want to double check and make sure that the sceptic has not taken any wrong turns in the course of his attempted *reductio ad absurdum*.

And, once we realize this, it seems that we may be more justified in rejecting scepticism than we might think we are in rejecting the non-sceptical theory of knowledge. This is simply because the contradictions of scepticism are generally more obvious and direct than those of some painstakingly reduced non-sceptical theory. So, if a mistake has been made somewhere, it seems more likely to have been in one of the sceptic's relatively elaborate trains of reasoning. After all, which alternative looks more likely on the face of it: that 1) there are no flat surfaces in your house, snow is not white, nothing is ever true, and no one can possibly ever know, or have reasons for believing, or even think or believe or assert, anything at all; or 2) that Peter Unger has made at least one mistake in 319 pages of relatively obscure and convoluted philosophical argument?³²

Another way to express the logic behind this concern is this. The success of a *reductio ad absurdum* depends on the targeted provisional assumption being the *only* unjustified, or, more precisely, on its being the *least* justified, premise in the argument. That is how the *reductio* works: the contradiction at the end shows that there has been at least one wrong move—*somewhere*, and so the least justified premise naturally takes the blame. If Unger wants to perform a *reductio* on the premise that 'knowledge is possible for us,' then, of all those

³²To see just how far from direct and obvious are the steps taken in Unger's 319 pages, it would serve to glance at a few representatives; for example, pages 276 and 279 come to mind.

in his argument, that premise will have to be the *least* justified.³³ If there is any step which is less plausible, less justified, than that ‘knowledge is possible for us,’ then the sceptic’s *reductio* strategy has failed.

It might be hoped that Unger, at least, can escape the first of our two objections to a *reductio ad absurdum* strategy, because he does not purport to perform a *reductio* upon just any old theory of knowledge, but on a theory of knowledge which he claims to be somehow inherent in the English language itself! Unger aspires to do something *more* than merely to show that, on some particular theory of what ‘knowledge’ is, it follows that we don’t have any. He purports to reveal that many English words, such as ‘knowledge’ and ‘know,’ just cannot apply to anything at all. These words are, he says, simply “inapplicable.”³⁴

There are, however, serious difficulties here. In the first place, the idea that Unger can perform a *reductio ad absurdum* on a *language* (rather than on a claim or an argument) seems very suspect. Surely he will have to rely on some particular philosophical theory of language or meaning in order to argue that there is some particular theory of knowledge somehow “embodied in” our language. This means that here again it would seem premature to jump from such an argument to the conclusion that the English language needs radical reform, rather than to draw the *prima facie* more plausible conclusion that perhaps we have employed a bad theory of meaning or an inadequate philosophy of language. After all, there is still a lot of controversy in the

³³Perhaps it was this that Moore was trying to get at when he argued that Hume must be wrong because we *do* have knowledge, and yet he says we don’t.

³⁴Unger, p. 5.

philosophy of language.

The same holds for Unger's argument that "nothing can ever be true or ever false."³⁵ In order to make his argument Unger finds that he needs first to put forward and defend a particular theory of truth. As a matter of fact, he rejects the conventional "correspondence" theory of truth in favor of his own new and peculiar theory in which he defines 'truth' as "being in agreement with the truth," rather than, conventionally, as "being in conformity or correspondence with the *facts*" or "the world," or "reality." Unger's claim is that his new, unconventional theory of truth leads him to conclude that there is no such thing. Yet, one might think that this should give him as much pause before his peculiar new theory of truth as it supposedly does before the idea that truth is possible. Again, which is more plausible on its face: that nothing can ever be true or ever false, or that Unger's unconventional new theory of truth is somehow inadequate? Without even sketching the convoluted steps of his argument, I think one can see that Unger's definition of truth as "being in agreement with the truth" looks hopelessly redundant.

There is another problem with a claim to perform something like a *reductio ad absurdum* on the English language itself. If we accept Unger's claim that many of our words, such as 'knowledge,' "don't really apply,"³⁶ then it seems difficult to accept, or even understand, Unger's crucial intermediate claim that "knowledge" is a thing of a particular nature—for example, that it has the property of absolute certainty. (For his entire sceptical edifice, it seems, stands or falls on the crucial claim that knowledge is, in fact, a thing of such

³⁵ *op. cit.*, p. 310.

³⁶ Unger, p. 5.

a nature that it is absolutely certain.)

There are two ways we can try to understand Unger here. On the one hand we might assume that he means to say that the word 'knowledge' is so radically "inapplicable" as to be meaningless. But, then his important claim that "knowledge" has various properties (such as certainty) would itself appear to be a meaningless claim. On the other hand, we might interpret Unger as saying merely that the word 'knowledge' "does not apply" simply in the sense that, like 'unicorn,' it is a perfectly meaningful word which just doesn't happen, as a matter of fact, to apply to anything which really exists in the world. That is, perhaps he means to say that there is nothing wrong with such *words*, per se, but don't expect to find any 'unicorns' or 'knowledge' really existing out there.

On this interpretation, his claim that knowledge requires certainty is simply a claim that the concept we have, or the word as we use it, carries this implication, this meaning. That is, 'knowledge' requires certainty only in the perfectly understandable sense that a 'unicorn' requires a horn.³⁷

There is, however, a problem with this second interpretation. The problem is that there is nothing wrong with a language which contains words which denote imaginary or non-existent things such as unicorns, griffins, and evil demons. That it enables us to discuss impossible or contradictory situations,

³⁷Compare: "I have nowhere in this essay used any key terms, neither 'certain' nor 'know,' in any special or technical or philosophical sense. I have used them in an ordinary sense and, so far as I can discern, their only ordinary sense in the relevant sentences of philosophical interest. It is in virtue of certain shared aspects of their sense or *meaning* that these words do not allow for simple positive sentences which express anything true." "It is for reasons of logic, or analytic reasons, that it is not possible for people, at one time or another, to know that anything is so." (Unger, p. 150, 233, emphasis altered).

such as round squares, incorporeal bodies, or speeds faster than light, hardly seems like a reason to think a language stands in need of radical reform. Nor is there anything necessarily wrong with the *language* of people who actually believe in unicorns and evil demons; rather, there is something wrong with their *science*. If all that Unger aspires to do is to show that there isn't any knowledge in the same way that there aren't any unicorns, then he would have to surrender his pretense to be revealing some fundamental flaw inherent in our *language*. In that case, the objections which this pretense had seemed to bridge will come back to bear again.

Moreover, the idea that a sound *reductio ad absurdum* can be performed on a language, while carried out entirely in the supposedly questionable language and in strict accordance with its allegedly flawed rules, seems problematic. Then again, if it is possible for a sceptic as radical as Unger to express his views in ordinary English, then this fact would seem to speak for the tremendous flexibility and versatility of the language, and, so, against the idea that it needs an overhaul. On the other hand, for Unger to complain that any failure to succeed in his endeavor to show that the language is flawed must be due to a flawed language is surely to beg the question in a most objectionable way.

Although it seems to me that in Unger's case "that expeditious way, which some take with the sceptics, to reject at once all their arguments without enquiry or examination"³⁸ should actually be sufficient, in case it is not, let us proceed to an "enquiry and examination" of Unger's arguments in detail in order to discover precisely where he may have gone wrong. I will confine

³⁸Hume, *Treatise*, Book I, part IV, sect. ii, Selby-Bigge ed., p. 186-187.

my remarks only to a few issues which are the most fundamental to his main arguments.

Unger's Main Arguments

Unger's most important arguments may be roughly outlined in the following way:

The 'Classical' Argument for Ignorance About the External World:

1. Knowledge requires, at least, true, justified belief, and certainty.³⁹
2. Certainty is absolute, perfect certainty.
3. Absolute certainty means that any error in the case must be impossible.
4. It is possible that your experiences are being fed to you by an evil scientist who uses electrodes to stimulate your brain while it floats in a vat of life-preserving solution.
5. It would be possible for such an evil scientist to deceive you into believing things about the external world which are false.
6. This applies to any possible belief you can have about the external world.
7. Therefore, it is always possible to be in error with regard to any belief about the external world.
8. Since error is always possible, absolute, perfect certainty cannot be attained with regard to any belief about the external world.

³⁹See Unger, p. 87.

9. Therefore, any knowledge of the external world is impossible.

The 'Argument for Universal Ignorance':

1. Knowledge requires, at least, true, justified belief, and certainty.
2. Certainty is absolute, perfect certainty.
3. Absolute certainty means that any error in the case must be impossible.
4. Absolute certainty also entails a severely dogmatic attitude: "that we will disregard any new experience, evidence, and information which runs counter to what we hold."⁴⁰
5. If we did have knowledge, this attitude would be justified, because it would be impossible for us to be mistaken.
6. This severely dogmatic attitude is never justified, because error is always possible (see Classical Argument).
7. Therefore, we can have no knowledge about anything at all.

The Argument for Universal Irrationality:

1. Reasonableness and reasonable believing require reasons for beliefs.
2. *Reasons* must always be complete and indefeasible. They must always be based on absolutely, perfectly certain (and propositional?⁴¹) knowledge.⁴²
3. So, reasonable beliefs require that error be impossible.⁴³
4. However, error is always possible (see Classical Argument).

⁴⁰Unger, p. 134.

⁴¹See Unger, pp. 200-201, 204-206.

⁴²*op. cit.*, p. 209.

⁴³*op. cit.*, p. 201.

5. Therefore, we can have no reasonable beliefs about anything at all.
“Nobody is ever (even the least bit) reasonable or justified in anything, in particular, in believing anything.”⁴⁴

⁴⁴Unger, p. 198, see also p. 1.

The Issue of Certainty

Does Knowledge Require or Entail Certainty?

The first thing we notice about the arguments outlined above is that a crucial role is played by some particular notion of *certainty*, as well as a few of notions *about* certainty. The first claim important to Unger's arguments is that *knowledge requires certainty*.

The trouble here is two-fold. In the first place, not all non-sceptics would agree that knowledge requires certainty. The most popular view still seems to be that it is enough for our beliefs to be true and justified, without necessarily being certain.⁴⁵ Unger offers only a brief argument that knowledge requires certainty: he says that it is "a contradiction"⁴⁶ to say of someone that "he knows" something but "he isn't *certain*" of it.⁴⁷ Unger apparently feels that this is something which is self-evident,⁴⁸ but, unfortunately, here he seems to do little more than beg the question, since one who does not suppose that knowledge requires certainty is not likely to agree.

John L. Koethe,⁴⁹ for example, argues that "this whole line of argument

⁴⁵See, for example, Paul Edwards, ed., "Certainty," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, p. 67.

⁴⁶Unger, p. 87.

⁴⁷*op. cit.*, p. 84-87.

⁴⁸We might also note that it seems epistemologically suspect for Unger to rest his argument that no one knows (or has any reason to believe) "that there are rocks" upon the idea that something so much *less* sure than the existence of rocks (i.e., the claim that it is "a contradiction" to say 'he knows but he isn't certain') is yet *self-evident*.

⁴⁹John L. Koethe, book review of *Ignorance*, in *Philosophical Review*. 87 (January 1978),

strikes me as sophisticated, especially since nearly the entire weight of it is borne by our (Unger's?) intuitions about the deviance or 'inconsistent sound' of statements." Koethe suggests that the inconsistent sound of certain statements may be explained by other considerations besides the precise kind of logical inconsistency needed for Unger's argument. While Koethe suggests that it may have something to do with Moore's paradox, I will suggest that the "inconsistent sound" may be explained by admitting as a necessary condition for knowledge nothing more than a weak and uninteresting kind of "certainty," i.e., one which merely satisfies the *belief* condition of knowledge—for which even a groundless and purely psychological sort of certainty would suffice.

To what extent, and in what sense, does knowledge require or entail certainty? Consider the following example:

An examiner asks a student when a certain battle was fought. The student fumbles about, and, eventually, unconfidently says what is true: The Battle of Hastings was fought in 1066. It is supposed, quite properly, that this correct answer is a result of the student's reading.⁵⁰

Here, Unger admits, people would ordinarily say the student knows the answer, yet they would not say that he was "certain." So, if the meaning of the word "know" depends on how people ordinarily use it, then this fact about how people ordinarily talk might appear to contradict Unger's claim that "a person knows something to be so only if he is certain of it."⁵¹ In fact, Unger himself admits that "the ordinary tendency to be liberal with 'know' is greater

154-158.

⁵⁰ *op. cit.*, p. 83.

⁵¹ *op. cit.*, p. 49, 87.

than our tendency to be liberal with ‘certain’ in common conversations”⁵²—an admission that would seem, if coupled with the uncontroversial premise that the meaning of a word depends on how it is used, to amount to an admission that, in fact, it is not really correct to say that “a person knows something to be so only if he is certain of it.”⁵³

However, Unger wants to block this inference. He says, “I want to suggest that it is by being wrongly serious about this *casual talk* that philosophers...have come to think it rather easy to know things...they have come to think that certainty is not needed.”⁵⁴ From this we might conclude that he means to introduce some more formal sense of “know” more suitable for use by philosophers in the context of epistemology. Yet he emphatically denies this:

I have nowhere in this essay used any key terms, neither ‘certain’ nor ‘know,’ in any special or technical or philosophical sense. I have used them in an *ordinary* sense and, so far as I can discern, their *only* ordinary sense in the relevant sentences of philosophical interest. It is in virtue of certain shared aspects of their sense or meaning that these words do not allow for simple positive sentences which express anything true.⁵⁵

This claim of commitment to *ordinary* usage contradicts the earlier suggestion that we suppose knowledge doesn’t require certainty because we “wrongly” take our “casual talk” too seriously. After all, what is casual talk if not *ordinary* talk? If it is right, as Unger appears elsewhere to agree, that the meaning of a word depends on how we actually use it, and Unger’s thesis is that ‘no

⁵²Unger, p. 86.

⁵³Unger, p. 49, 87.

⁵⁴*op. cit.*, p. 83, emphasis added.

⁵⁵Unger, p. 150.

one can ever *know* anything,' in a perfectly *ordinary* sense of the word "know," then it seems that he will have failed to provide any reason for us to suppose that knowledge requires certainty.

Actually, Unger does not appear very concerned to argue for his claim that knowledge requires absolute certainty. Rather, he seems to some extent to take this for granted as a point conceded to him, because of the fact that the prominent anti-sceptics G.E. Moore and his student Norman Malcolm apparently both granted this premise.⁵⁶ (And since that time, the anti-sceptic Peter Klein has also elected to concede the premise. However, Klein does this in what seems more of a "sporting" humor than any conviction of the premise's truth.⁵⁷)

So, here again we see the importance of our general objection that it would seem more sensible for us, and Unger, to question such relatively shaky premises as this, if we believe that they lead us to absurd conclusions, rather than to embrace the absurd conclusions. And we might also recall here our other objection that, even if we believe we can reduce to absurdity one or two particular anti-sceptics, this hardly seems to provide sufficient justification to throw away *all* of non-sceptical "common sense" and embrace sceptical absurdities, as Unger recommends. Remember, Unger originally promised to show us that "speakers of English *all* accept these ideas about knowing...so, those ideas represent necessary truths...[and] our sceptical conclusion is necessarily true."⁵⁸

⁵⁶*op. cit.*, p. 83.

⁵⁷Peter D. Klein, *Certainty: A Refutation of Scepticism*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981).

⁵⁸Unger, *Ignorance*. p. 36.

There is another problem with this claim that knowledge requires or entails certainty, and it is this. Even those non-sceptics who might admit the proposition ‘knowledge requires certainty,’ or ‘knowledge entails certainty,’ might not all agree on what they mean by “certainty” here, or in what *way* knowledge “entails” or “requires” it.

For example, it might be thought merely that knowledge “entails” or “requires” a reasonable amount of “certainty,” only in the psychological sense of a subjective feeling of conviction—simply because knowledge requires *belief* and we might question whether one who lacks a strong enough feeling of assurance really *believes* the thing in question. In this case, the admission that “knowledge entails certainty” would be a rather weak and unimportant one, since even a *groundless* feeling of assurance would provide (this kind of) certainty.

Or, again, it might be thought that “anything we know is certain” only because in order for a belief to qualify as knowledge, it must be *true*, and that therefore we may be sure that anything which really *is* knowledge *must be true*—and that therefore, in some sense, anything which is really and truly known is *certainly* true. In this case, we will have to be very careful not to confuse the (less controversial) premise that knowledge “necessarily must be true” with the different (and controversial) premise that knowledge “must be necessarily true.”

Finally, an admission that “knowledge requires certainty” might be understood as having nothing to do with either the *belief* or the *truth* requirement of knowledge, but only with the *justification* aspect. Here it might be supposed, by one who admits the claim that ‘knowledge entails certainty,’ that

this talk of “certainty” is simply motivated by a concern that our beliefs must be also justified for us, not just to any degree, but to some degree deemed really sufficient. In other words, it may be felt that these beliefs should be, not necessarily *absolutely* certain, but at least *relatively*, certain.

As we shall see, when Unger says that knowledge requires and entails certainty, he means this in a way different from any of the above, and his ideas about the necessary conditions of certainty are very particular. Unger has his own, very demanding, notion of “certainty” and of its relationship to knowledge.

The Absoluteness of Ungerian “Certainty”

The first thing we learn about Unger’s notion of “certainty” is that it is not a more-or-less kind of thing, but an all-or-nothing kind. That is, in Unger’s terminology, certainty is not a “relative term,” but an “absolute term.” A *relative term*, Unger says, admits of degrees, but an *absolute term* does not. As examples of other “absolute terms,” Unger offers ‘useless’ and ‘flat,’ and explains that

Something or someone is x (flat, useless, certain, etc.) only in case nothing could ever be more x, or x-er, than that thing or person is now.⁵⁹

It means “being at an absolute limit”⁶⁰:

To say that something is flat is, so far as content goes, no different from saying that it is absolutely, or perfectly, flat. To say that a

⁵⁹Unger, p. 115.

⁶⁰Ibid.

surface is flat is to say that some things or properties which are matters of degree are not instanced in the surface to any degree at all.⁶¹

In fact, to say “absolutely” flat (or certain) is, Unger thinks, “always redundant.”⁶² *“Something is flat if and only if it is absolutely flat.”*⁶³ Indeed, “something is *relatively* flat if and only if it...is not flat.”⁶⁴

From which one must conclude that Kansas is not flat. In fact, it must be concluded that there are no flat surfaces in New York City, and that there are no flat surfaces in your home. Not even if you have a glass coffee table. Applying the same reasoning to the concept of certainty, we must conclude, as Unger says, that “it seems reasonable for us to believe [and, presumably, to say] that not many people are actually certain that there are automobiles.”⁶⁵

Now, surely, these are preposterous claims. At least they are obviously inconsistent with the *ordinary usage* of the words ‘flat’ and ‘certain.’ If you have been to New York City and you tell someone who has not been there that “there are no flat surfaces in New York City,” you are pulling his leg. If you testify in court that you “didn’t *know* the gun was loaded” (of a gun you were holding which you had just loaded yourself in all lucid and deliberate sobriety), it seems to me that you are guilty of perjury. If you say that you were “not certain,” whether the gun was loaded, you are at least being deliberately misleading, and no English-speaking jury will be likely to excuse such linguistic license.

⁶¹Unger, p. 54.

⁶²*op. cit.*, p. 61.

⁶³*Ibid.*

⁶⁴*op. cit.*, p. 62, emphasis added.

⁶⁵*op. cit.*, p. 68.

Now imagine that, after testifying that you were “not certain” and “did not know” that the gun was loaded, you *further* testified before the same jury that “I have nowhere in this testimony used any key terms, neither ‘certain’ nor ‘know,’ in any special or technical or philosophical sense. I have used them in an ordinary sense.”⁶⁶

Again, remember that Unger originally promised to show us that “speakers of English all accept these ideas about knowing...so, those ideas represent necessary truths...[and] our sceptical conclusion is necessarily true.”⁶⁷

Perhaps we can rescue Unger from this bind by letting him forsake the commitment to adhere only to the ordinary usage of words as we find them in our “casual talk.” As James Cargile has charitably observed:

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.⁶⁸

So let us grant Unger a stricter kind of “certainty” and a more demanding sense of “knowledge.” To avoid confusion, we can call these *Ungerian certainty* and *Ungerian knowledge*. We can consider these two new technical terms for use by epistemologists. What follows?

⁶⁶Compare Unger: “I have nowhere in this essay used any key terms, neither ‘certain’ nor ‘know,’ in any special or technical or philosophical sense. I have used them in an *ordinary* sense and, so far as I can discern, their *only* ordinary sense in the relevant sentences of philosophical interest. It is in virtue of certain shared aspects of their sense or meaning that these words do not allow for simple positive sentences which express anything true.” (p. 150.)

⁶⁷Unger, p. 36.

⁶⁸James Cargile, “Reply to ‘A Defense of Skepticism,’” in George S. Pappas and Marshall Swain, ed., *Essays on Knowledge and Justification*, (Cornell University Press, 1978) p. 338.

Here both Cargile and Klein⁶⁹ have pointed out the difficulty. That is that once we admit that an Ungerian sceptic doesn't necessarily mean the same thing by "knowledge" that ordinary people do, his claim that no one can ever have "knowledge" in the Ungerian sense becomes rather uninteresting and unimportant. As Cargile complains, "the [Ungerian] sceptic's theory of knowledge is worthless in dealing with what is 'for practical purposes' knowledge."⁷⁰ Who cares whether anyone can have "knowledge" in the *Ungerian* sense? What we want to know is whether we can have knowledge, in the regular sense. In Klein's words: "the dispute with scepticism appeared to be over the scope of knowledge, not this newly created, so-called 'knowledge.'"⁷¹

The only reason we considered scepticism important in the first place was because we were surprised and shocked to hear that no one knows anything, in the same way that we would be surprised and shocked to hear that there are no flat surfaces in New York City. If we then discover that the whole controversy is a "purely semantic" quibble over nothing but words, and the person who offered these seemingly amazing claims really doesn't dispute the reality behind the words, then he looks like a disingenuous and pedantic grandstander. Moreover, far from leading us to suppose that a "radical reform" of ordinary English is called for, it leads us rather to the conclusion that it is the sceptic's way of speaking that needs reform, since it is *that* kind of (extra-ordinary) way of talking that leads to all the self-contradictions of radical scepticism. In other words, if there is a manner of speaking upon which Unger has success-

⁶⁹Peter D. Klein, *Certainty: A Refutation of Scepticism*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981) p. 103.

⁷⁰Cargile, p. 341.

⁷¹Klein, p. 103.

fully performed a *reductio ad absurdum*, it is the Ungerian manner of speaking, not our ordinary one.

With this in mind, let us go back and examine more carefully Unger's contention that certainty is an "absolute term." First of all, as Unger admits, people ordinarily speak of being "fairly certain," "pretty certain," and "very certain." Even Unger himself can't resist occasionally speaking of one of his own points being "quite certain," though not absolutely so,⁷² and he frequently speaks of something being "less certain"⁷³ than something else, and of holding something "as certainly as ever."⁷⁴

Secondly, when we do say that we are "*absolutely* certain," we really don't seem to treat the "absolutely" as redundant. After all, why should we bother to say "absolutely,"—often with great emphasis—if it were redundant? In this vein it is instructive to note that even Unger finds himself having to use the supposedly redundant "absolutely certain" throughout the rest of his book in order to make his meaning clear.

It seems, rather, that if there is any redundant modifier we might affix to these common adjectives it is 'relatively,' or 'enough.' That is, when we ordinarily speak of something as being "flat," or "cold," or "accurate," we are normally understood to mean that it is relatively flat, relatively cold, or relatively accurate. Usually we mean that it is flat enough, cold enough, accurate enough.

The only reply Unger seems to be able to offer to this objection is that,

⁷² "There is no strict necessity in this, of course, but it does seem quite certainly true" (Unger, p. 229).

⁷³ Appears three times, for example, pp. 126-127.

⁷⁴ Unger, p. 127.

sensible though it may be, it is not absolutely decisive against him. It is still *possible*, he argues, to maintain in the face of these facts that what people “really” mean when they say ‘fairly certain’ and ‘very certain,’ is, respectively, ‘fairly close to absolutely certain,’ and ‘absolutely certain.’ This, Unger boldly contends, is “their *real, unsuspected meaning*.”⁷⁵ But this contention is not very plausible. Is it even logically possible for a word to have an “unsuspected meaning”? If nobody suspects its “real” meaning, how can people possibly be considered to *mean* it that way? And if nobody *means* it that way, how can that be its meaning? If someone says that something “is cold,” it seems at best spurious to suggest that the “real, unsuspected meaning” of this statement is that its temperature is absolute zero, or even close to absolute zero.

As one reviewer of Unger puts it:

He speaks of ‘the real but unappreciated meanings of key terms.’ His argument, then, rests on the assumption that a word like ‘flat’ or ‘know’ has only one proper meaning, and that this meaning is something different from what the word is commonly used by speakers to convey and commonly understood by hearers as conveying. This ‘real meaning,’ which is something different from what is intended and understood by the users of the word, I find quite mysterious; and Unger does not explain what it can be or how it can be discovered. Thus his linguistic argument seems to me to rest on arbitrary assertions in conflict with evident facts. We do not use ‘flat’ or ‘know’ or ‘reasonable’ in this excessively stringent sense.⁷⁶

The strange thing is that Unger himself seems quite aware of these kinds of objections, and in trying to answer them, he appears to capitulate, almost accidentally. “Many philosophers,” he realizes, “will think that my account of

⁷⁵*op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁷⁶C. H. Whiteley, book review of *Ignorance*, in *Philosophy*. 50 (Oct. 1975), p. 490.

terms like 'flat' and 'certain' flies in the face of how people in fact ordinarily use these words."⁷⁷ Now, note his "answer" to this objection:

I don't think that this need be correct. True enough, people *call* all sorts of things 'flat.'... They even use it to refer to certain prairies... This surely does say something about the normal use of these terms, and no account can afford to deny it.

[But] it may be...that the normal use is, in each case, to indicate that the object is close enough to being [absolutely] flat, for the kind of thing it is, for the purposes which may be presumed in the case, and relative to other factors the context may provide. That is the way my account would have it.⁷⁸

Unger is saying, then, that "the way his account would have it" is that people normally use the term 'flat' to mean '*close enough* to being perfectly two-dimensional (for the purposes at hand).' In other words, he is admitting that when they say 'flat,' *they mean relatively* flat. *Not 'perfectly* two-dimensional.' But, of course, this is *not* the way his account would have it. Rather, this is the way his previous account would *not* have it. If people *mean* 'relatively two-dimensional' when they say 'flat,' then that is the meaning of the word. And if Unger admits this, then he has simply repudiated his claim that 'flat' is an "absolute term."

Moreover, we should notice that, although Unger divides terms into the categories "absolute" and "relative," it is quite possible for a term to be both "absolute" and "relative" at the same time. That is, it is not uncommon to find a concept, such as 'cold,' which although it certainly admits of relative degrees, possesses also an "absolute" degree or limit. Here we might profit

⁷⁷Unger, p. 68, emphasis added.

⁷⁸Unger, p. 69.

by thinking of these things in terms of the geometrical concepts of lines, line segments, and rays. Temperature, for example, may be thought of as a ray, with absolute zero as the limit of coldness, and an indefinite continuation of relative degrees of heat. But, again, it is neither necessary nor judicious to look at such a ray and conclude that “something is cold if and only if it is absolutely cold (i.e., at absolute zero)”; or to suppose that when someone says ‘it’s cold in here’ or, ‘this food is cold,’ that the “real, unsuspected meaning” of these statements is, ‘it is close to absolute zero in here’ and ‘the temperature of this food is close to absolute zero.’⁷⁹

All this matters because, as Unger admits: “the *absoluteness* of the attitude...[of certainty] is needed for our sceptical argument.”⁸⁰

It may also be worth mentioning here that the sceptic’s overall approach to this issue again illustrates the objectionable method of clinging tenaciously to some dubious premise even if it eventually leads to absurd conclusions (e.g., the contradictions of radical scepticism), and then supposing that, rather than go back and question any of these relatively shaky premises, the whole experience should instead make us reject common sense, and indeed, the very idea of trying to be reasonable.

Other Necessary Conditions of Ungerian “Certainty”

We have already touched on some of the reasons why we need to spell out

⁷⁹Unger’s own habits of speech appear to confirm that a concept may have both relative degrees and also a maximum degree or limit, for example, in his discussion of ‘dogmatic,’ where he says: “*relative* term though it is, when *nothing* is allowed to count, the person is *completely* dogmatic” (p. 120, emphasis added).

⁸⁰Unger, p. 118.

a lot more clearly what is meant when one asserts that knowledge requires or entails certainty. Now we must add more reasons to that list.

First of all, what exactly *is* certainty? What does it mean for a proposition to be certain? What does it mean for a bit of knowledge to be certain? What does it mean for a person to be certain?

And which aspect of knowledge is it that must be certain: the knower or the thing known? Or both? That is, when we say that “knowledge requires certainty,” do we mean that the thing you believe must be certain or it can’t be known—or do we mean that if you are not really certain then you don’t know? Or, do we simply mean that if you don’t *feel* certain then you don’t know?

Most philosophers distinguish at least two kinds of certainty: *psychological* certainty (also called “personal,” or “subjective”) on the one hand, and *propositional* certainty (also called “impersonal,” “objective,” or “evidential”) on the other. Psychological certainty (as well as its opposite, psychological doubt) may further be divided into two types: reasoned and groundless. Peter Klein adds to this distinction a further distinction between “relative” and “absolute” certainty, yielding him four varieties of certainty which he calls: relative psychological, absolute psychological, relative evidential, and absolute evidential.⁸¹

Moreover, we should remember the distinctions we drew above between one who thinks of certainty as something which is required by the *belief* component of knowledge, one who thinks of it as required by the *truth* component, and

⁸¹Peter D. Klein, *Certainty: A Refutation of Scepticism*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981) p. 134.

one who thinks of it as signifying a sufficient level of *justification*.

In addition to these considerations, we might remember Unger's idea that "to say that a surface is [absolutely] flat is to say that some things or properties which are matters of degree are not instanced in the surface to any degree at all."⁸² And here, of course, we understand that these "things or properties" are bumps. So, if we are to suppose, likewise, that something or someone is absolutely *certain* when some thing or property which is a matter of degree is not instanced to any degree at all, then we might ask: what is the relevant "thing or property" in *this* case? Some possible candidates might include: doubts (either reasoned or groundless; propositional or merely psychological), the logical possibility of error, the physical possibility of error, one sound argument against it (in the case of a belief), or simply a better overall case against a belief than for it. In other words, when Unger says that being certain "is being at an absolute limit,"⁸³ we are asking questions here about the nature of the metric on which he considers certainty to be an absolute limit. We need to be able to answer this question before we can tell whether or not someone or something "is certain."

We can now look to see how Unger might answer all these questions, explaining what *he* means when he says that knowledge requires and entails certainty.

In answer to the first question (which is it that must be certain, the knower or the thing known?) Unger appears to feel that the answer is both. On the one hand he asserts that "a person knows something to be so only if *he* is

⁸²Unger, p. 54.

⁸³Unger, p. 115.

certain of it,"⁸⁴ while on the other hand he sometimes speaks of the things we might know as being themselves certain or uncertain.

In answer to the question of what variety of certainty Unger feels is required, the answer seems to be that he considers—in Klein's terminology—both an absolute psychological and an absolute evidential kind to be required by the knower and the thing known respectively.

In answer to the question of whether it is the *belief*, the *truth*, or the *justification* condition of knowledge which requires or entails certainty (or whether certainty might be a condition of knowledge somehow independent of these others) the answer is not clear. Here, it seems, we have found a fertile ground for confusion and equivocation. For example, Unger often appears to think of certainty as a requirement of justification. However, it might be argued that Unger's claim, "a person knows something to be so only if he is certain of it,"⁸⁵ draws whatever plausibility it may have from our feeling that if the person doesn't feel certain then perhaps he doesn't really *believe* the thing.

We should also recall here the tricky situation we have uncovered with regard to certainty and the *truth* requirement of knowledge. As we noticed, it concerns the fact that anything which is known must be true. Therefore, one might say, if something is known, then it "is *certainly* and necessarily true." So it is very tempting to fall into the easy mistake of thinking that, since knowledge must necessarily be true, therefore, it must be necessarily true. Or of starting with the following conditional: 'if something is known *then* it is certain (i.e., certain that it is true),' and wrongly concluding from this that,

⁸⁴Unger, p. 49, 87, emphasis altered.

⁸⁵Unger, pp. 49, 87.

therefore, “it must be certain in order to be known.” Rather, the conditional must be understood as: ‘if *it is certain that X is known*, then it is certain that X is true,’ or ‘if *you are certain that X is known*, then you may be certain that X is true,’ and *not* as (the very different): ‘if X is known, then X is known with certainty.’ As Peter Klein has pointed out, it is important that we take care not to confuse or equivocate between “Direct Scepticism” (you don’t know X) and “Iterative Scepticism” (you don’t know that you know X).⁸⁶

Our final question for Unger concerns the nature of the metric on which he sees certainty to be an absolute limit. If ‘absolutely flat’ requires the total absence of all bumps, does ‘absolutely certain’ require the total absence of something? If so, what? For Unger, the answer seems to be that absolute certainty requires the complete and total absence of several things. First, “the absence of all *doubt*.”⁸⁷ All three types of doubtfulness seem to be included: propositional, reasoned psychological, and groundless psychological.⁸⁸ Secondly, Unger seems to require, in addition to the absence of all doubt, the absence of all *possibility of error*.⁸⁹ Whether this means *logical* or *physical* possibility, or both, is not clear.⁹⁰ Thirdly, Unger requires of one who is to be “certain” the complete absence of something which seems more accurately

⁸⁶See Klein, pp. 5-11, 18-19, 106, 115, 212-216.

⁸⁷Unger, p. 115.

⁸⁸That even a groundless psychological doubt must preclude us from having Ungerian certainty, see Unger, p. 107: “one is certain...*only if one’s attitude is this...*” I.e., that “No matter what any experience may seem to show or suggest as to whether or not something is so, I will now reject as misleading any experience which seems to show or suggest that the thing is *not* so.... I call this the attitude of (absolute) certainty.” (p. 30.)

⁸⁹“I can’t see how we might properly be certain that *there is no way we could possibly be wrong*” (p. 134).

⁹⁰It might also be wondered whether perhaps a *possibility of error* is just what the *propositional* variety of doubtfulness boils down to—and whether it is or not, perhaps Unger might see it this way.

labeled *open-mindedness* than *doubt*, namely: “any openness on the part of the man to consider new experience or information as seriously relevant to the truth or falsity of the thing.”⁹¹ Finally, Unger requires of psychological certainty a complete absence of any reluctance to bet (any amount, presumably) on the truth of a proposition: “another necessary condition of being [absolutely] certain of something is, at least roughly, this: that one is not *at all* hesitant or reluctant to risk what he deems valuable or of worth on the truth of that thing.”⁹²

Not only must both the knower and the thing known be absolutely certain in all of these various ways, but on top of all this it appears Unger demands also that we must have what might be called “iterative certainty.” That is, he demands that we must *be absolutely certain that we are absolutely certain*. For example, at one point he protests: “I can’t see how we might properly *be certain that there is no way we could possibly be wrong*,”⁹³ which implies that it is not enough that we cannot possibly be wrong, but it must also be impossible for us to be wrong in our belief that we cannot possibly be wrong! The next question is obvious: must it also be impossible for us to be wrong about it being impossible for us to be wrong about it being impossible for us to be wrong? If so, do these iterations continue indefinitely? Do they continue *ad infinitum*?⁹⁴

⁹¹Unger, p. 116.

⁹²*op. cit.*, p. 116.

⁹³Unger, p. 134.

⁹⁴Here again we have encountered the problem of a potential confusion or equivocation between *Direct* and *Iterative* scepticism. It is one thing to argue that “one cannot know anything” (Direct Scepticism) and another to argue that “one cannot know that one can know anything” (Iterative Scepticism). Peter Klein has argued that “in fact, it is the

Once we begin like this to spell out all the many and varied demands Unger places on his own particular kind of certainty, we can begin to see just how particular, and how extreme, his conception of “certainty” is.

This is important because, as we have seen, the self-contradictory nature of Unger’s radical scepticism leaves him in a position such that the very best he can hope for is to perform a sound *reductio ad absurdum* upon non-scepticism, thereby showing it to be *no less* absurd. However, in order to succeed in this attempted *reductio*, it is essential that the views thus reduced truly represent those of non-sceptics, so as to avoid wasting time reducing to absurdity what turns out to be a mere straw man.

Yet, as has already been noted, many non-sceptics do not even suppose that knowledge requires or entails “certainty” in the first place—not in *any* sense. In fact, this may even be the majority view. It is the view, for example, expressed in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* under the heading of “Certainty”:

It has become apparent that there is a connection between certainty and knowledge in that whatever is certain is known. But usage does not require, conversely, that whatever is known is certain. Not only may some forms of knowledge—for example, knowledge

conflation of those two forms of scepticism which provides a basis for some of the initial plausibility of scepticism” (Klein, *Certainty*, p. 6).

There are many things that might be said about Iterative Scepticism. In the first place, it should be noticed that one who suddenly abandons Direct Scepticism for Iterative Scepticism has radically altered his position. Moreover, Iterative Scepticism cannot be used to prove Direct Scepticism, since it does not entail Direct Scepticism. It is possible for Direct Scepticism to be false while Iterative Scepticism is true, in the same way that it is possible that Peter Unger *can know* that snow is white, even if he does not *know that he can know*. At any rate, Iterative Scepticism is not very interesting or important in comparison to Direct Scepticism. Direct Scepticism makes a big splash by claiming that nobody knows anything, while Iterative Scepticism simply offers the relatively meek suggestion that, while people may know everything they think they know, or even *more* than they think they know, they don’t know that they know these things (perhaps because too many clever sceptics have gotten to them?)

by acquaintance and know-how—occur unexpressed in statements, but also some of what is commonly called knowledge...is less than certain. Admittedly some philosophers, notably Plato and Locke, have refused to label as knowledge that which is only probable. By dominant usage now, however, that which is certain forms a subclass of things known.⁹⁵

Furthermore, even of those non-sceptics who would espouse (some version of) the doctrine that knowledge (somehow) entails or requires (some kind of) certainty, few are likely to follow Unger to all his extremes. For example, they should probably reject, as has been argued, Unger's dubious contention that certainty must be *absolute* or *total*, in any sense. This is important because, as Unger admits, "the *absoluteness* of the attitude...[of certainty] is needed for our sceptical argument."⁹⁶

For example, even a non-sceptic who agrees that "knowledge entails certainty" might hold that it entails nothing more than a moderate amount of a purely subjective, and even groundless, feeling of psychological conviction, simply in order to fulfill the rather unimportant and undemanding *belief* requirement of knowledge.

Remember, this talk about what most non-sceptics would or would not agree to is not an *ad populum* appeal; the point is that if Unger is to succeed in performing a *reductio ad absurdum* on the views of non-sceptics, then he must start from what really are their views. Unger himself seems to understand this. He says: "*speakers of English all accept these ideas about knowing,*"⁹⁷ "*antisceptical philosophers think that...the attitude [of certainty] is to be char-*

⁹⁵Paul Edwards, ed., "Certainty," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* p. 67.

⁹⁶Unger, p. 118.

⁹⁷Unger, p. 36.

acterized in such severe negative terms.”⁹⁸

Remember too that the form of a *reductio* is that it begins with some unjustified provisional assumption(s) and proceeds to some kind of contradiction. The logical conclusion of such an argument is that the provisional assumption(s) is or are untenable. In order for such an argument to support scepticism, the proposition that ‘we have knowledge’ must actually be a provisional assumption negated by the *reductio*. It will not suffice merely to reduce some particular non-sceptic’s claims about *what knowledge is*. This may only prove that those ideas about what knowledge is are mistaken, not that we can’t *have* knowledge.

Of course, this is why Unger aspires to do more than show that some particular non-sceptic’s assumptions about what knowledge is are untenable. He aspires to show that these problematic assumptions (for example, that knowing requires every kind of certainty, and in an absolute degree) are, as Kant would say, “contained in the very concept” of knowledge—i.e., that they are inherent in the very meaning of the word “know” as it is determined by the ordinary usage of ordinary English speakers. “It is in virtue of certain shared aspects of their sense or *meaning* that these words [e.g., knowledge] do not allow for simple positive sentences which express anything true.”⁹⁹ Therefore, “it is for reasons of logic, or analytic reasons, that it is not possible for people, at one time or another, to *know* that anything is so,”¹⁰⁰ Unger says.

Now, it has been argued that Unger has failed in the attempt to show

⁹⁸*op. cit.*, p. 106.

⁹⁹*op. cit.*, p. 150.

¹⁰⁰*op. cit.*, p. 233, emphasis altered.

this, because, for example, his account of how these words are ordinarily used and meant is not accurate. But let us suppose, for a moment, that someone *did* succeed here. Let us suppose for a moment that people were really such simple-minded absolutists that they often (or usually) used the words “flat” and “certain” in a manner that seemed to imply that they thought of flatness and certainty as all-or-nothing kinds of things, and they used the word “know” in a manner that seemed to imply that they thought of knowing as if it, too, must be an all-or-nothing kind of thing which, furthermore, required the impossibility of error. Now, even here, it seems that we might be torn between saying that, in this case, nothing is flat, no one is certain, and nobody knows anything, or whether we would instead simply want to say that these people shouldn’t talk (or think) in such a simple-minded, absolutist way.

Notice that Unger himself seems eventually to prefer the latter of the two alternatives, above. For example, he does not seem to draw from the sceptical premise that “nobody knows anything” any of those practical conclusions about the world which historically have been drawn by others—for example, that therefore science is a fraud, that therefore reasoning and empirical study are useless, or that we must therefore base our behavior on habit or religious faith rather than reason or science. Instead, Unger simply draws the practical conclusion that, therefore, we shouldn’t *talk* the way we do: our manner of speaking is the only thing in need of “radical reform.”

Again, let us suppose for a moment that Unger is right about this and take his suggestion seriously. Let us take this advice to heart and reform our manner of speaking. Now, what is left for us to do but to stop talking about

certainty as if it were an all-or-nothing kind of thing, and stop talking about knowing as if it were an all-or-nothing kind of thing which required absolute certainty? Indeed, let us stop talking that way—if and when we ever do!

But, now, what is left of our pretensions to being “radical”? Taking such modest (and laudable) care in our speaking habits could only with great exaggeration be called a “reform of our language,” much less a “radical” one. Was it, really, *a radical reform of the English language* that was required when, after Einstein, we realized we should stop talking about ‘velocity’ as if it were absolute rather than relative?

And anyway—radical or not—these are not really instances of *linguistic* reform, but of a reform in ideas, in beliefs. Now, certainly, Einstein was a radical innovator. But how radical is an epistemologist who insists that ‘knowledge,’ ‘certainty,’ and ‘truth’ are not all-or-nothing kinds of things, but more-or-less kinds of things? Perhaps this cannot be said too often—but I’m sure it has been said before. Isn’t it even “common sense”? (Isn’t this why we have multi-value logic?¹⁰¹)

Moreover, it seems that one who takes this kind of position has turned out not to be a real sceptic after all.

As one reviewer of Unger has observed:

It seems that Unger is not denying that we can do what we *call*

¹⁰¹ Perhaps people sometimes speak of obviously more-or-less kinds of things as if they were all-or-nothing. Perhaps economy sometimes prescribes such oversimplification, since in practice it is a waste of precious time to be any more precise or accurate than is required in any given situation. However, it seems questionable whether there really are “absolute terms” outside of mathematics. People used to joke that “you can’t be sort of pregnant,” but even that old paradigm of an all-or-nothing situation is not really such. (Compare the “borderline cases” of hydatidiform mole, incomplete abortion, and conception without implantation.)

knowing, believing, regretting, asserting, etc.; he is only denying that we are entitled to call these mental states or attitudes by these names. The moral he draws from this is that we should try to replace our present epistemological terms by other, non-absolute, less demanding terms.

But do we need a fresh terminology? Don't the required non-absolute modes of speech already exist? Unger himself admits that we use 'flat' of stretches of land like the Isle of Ely...and that this use produces no misunderstanding. He admits that we freely use 'know' in cases...in which absolute certainty is neither present nor justifiable. He admits that we call beliefs 'reasonable' when they are not founded on absolutely certain premises.... But he disparages all these uses as 'loose' and improper.¹⁰²

So Unger advises us to reform the way we think or talk about that phenomena we ordinarily think of as (and call) "knowing." If we take this advice to heart, however, we find that we have already been complying with it. Moreover, we find, in another place, Unger himself disapproving of us for doing so.

¹⁰²C. H. Whiteley, book review of *Ignorance*, in *Philosophy*. 50 (Oct. 1975), p. 490.

The Evil Deceiver Argument

Unger is a great fan of the Cartesian ‘evil genius’ argument, and relies heavily on it in his scepticism. “These arguments are exceedingly compelling,” he feels. In fact, he considers this “the most compelling sceptical argument the philosophical literature has to offer,”¹⁰³ and goes so far as to claim that, to the extent we might neglect this argument, our neglect “has nothing to do with anyone’s finding any serious fault with the arguments, for *none has ever been exposed.*”¹⁰⁴

“This argument,” Unger explains, “is the same in form as the ‘evil demon’ argument in Descartes *Meditations*; it is but a more modern, scientific counterpart.”¹⁰⁵ It turns on the claim that it is possible that you are really nothing more than a brain floating in vat of life-preserving fluid while all of your experiences are being induced in you by electrodes which connect you with a super-sophisticated computer, run by some evil scientist who enjoys deceiving you.

Now, Unger argues, if there is anything that you know about “the external world,” i.e., the world *outside of your own mind*, “then you can know that there is no evil scientist, a being other than yourself, who, by means of electrodes, is deceiving you into falsely believing”¹⁰⁶ that thing. “But...you can’t ever know

¹⁰³Unger, p. 8.

¹⁰⁴*op. cit.*, p. 9.

¹⁰⁵*op. cit.*, p. 8.

¹⁰⁶Unger, p. 13.

that all of this is so. So, you don't know"¹⁰⁷ anything about the world outside your own mind. "Since any of your experiences may be due to a scientist's operations, they can never give you any reason for believing that there is no scientist deceiving you."¹⁰⁸ Unger refers to this as scepticism's 'Classical Argument.'

Keith Lehrer puts it this way:

Before scepticism may be rejected as unjustified, some argument must be given to *show* that the infamous [evil deceiver] hypotheses employed by sceptics *are incorrect* and the beliefs of common sense have the truth on their side. *If this is not done*, then the beliefs of common sense are not completely justified, because conflicting...hypotheses have not been shown to be unjustified.... Then the sceptic wins the day.¹⁰⁹

Barry Stroud has expressed the same idea, saying that "without...establishing that that possibility [i.e., the evil scientist] does not obtain,"¹¹⁰ the prospect of knowledge may be hopeless. Stroud refers to this as "the idea that all conceivable counterpossibilities must be ruled out."¹¹¹

Is this right? It seems that there are several things we might say in response to an argument of this form. First of all, it appears to appeal implicitly to some epistemological principle. What might this principle be, and is it valid? Secondly, the argument appears to take it entirely for granted that

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

¹⁰⁸*op. cit.*, p. 39.

¹⁰⁹Keith Lehrer, "Why Not Scepticism?," in George S. Pappas and Marshall Swain, ed., *Essays on Knowledge and Justification*, (Cornell University Press, 1978) p. 358-359, emphasis added.

¹¹⁰Barry Stroud, book review of *Ignorance*, in *Journal of Philosophy*. 74 (April 1977), 255.

¹¹¹Stroud admits that "we do not in fact insist on that in everyday life, even in important scientific or legal matters," but he wonders, "so why do we find it so obvious when we think philosophically about human knowledge?"

there is a special burden of proof which rests exclusively on the non-sceptic, and that, furthermore, the sceptic is entitled to be considered the winner in a case of a stalemate. To see the prejudice in this, we can simply reverse the argument. What's good for the goose is good for the gander. If the implicit epistemological principle is a valid one, then it must apply to the sceptic as well as to the non-sceptic. So:

Before common sense may be rejected as unjustified, some argument must be given to show that it is incorrect and the claims of skepticism have the truth on their side. *If this is not done*, then the claims of skepticism are not completely justified, because conflicting hypotheses have not been shown to be unjustified. Then the anti-skeptic wins the day.

Lehrer says that “unless we can show that the sceptical [evil deceiver] hypothesis is false, we cannot justly conclude that it is unjustified. In that case our beliefs, which contradict the sceptical hypothesis, are not completely justified.”¹¹² He says we must “either show that the sceptical hypothesis is false and unjustified or concede that beliefs inconsistent with it are not completely justified.”¹¹³ But if this principle is really valid, then it is a two-edged sword, whereby it would follow that the sceptic also must “either show that common sense is false, or concede that skepticism is not completely justified.”¹¹⁴ According to Lehrer's own rules: “unless we can show that common sense is false, we cannot justly conclude that it is unjustified.”¹¹⁵

¹¹²Lehrer, in Pappas and Swain, p. 359.

¹¹³Lehrer, p. 360.

¹¹⁴Lehrer, p. 360.

¹¹⁵Cf. also Dan Turner's formulation of Lehrer's principle: “An hypothesis is shown to be unjustified only if there is some argument which shows it to be false.” (Dan Turner, “Why Scepticism?,” in Pappas and Swain, p. 367.)

And, of course, a radical sceptic cannot really be expected to successfully discharge such a burden of proof—or, indeed, a *burden of proof* of any kind.

The whole dispute over scepticism operates epistemologically on such a radically fundamental level that it is hard to see how either side can have any *basis* upon which to argue that the other has a special “burden of proof” at the outset.¹¹⁶ So let us leave off altogether trying to saddle one side or the other with a “burden of proof” and simply ask which side has the *more* plausible case, overall? If neither side is “completely” justified—whatever *that* means—which side is *more* so?

Lehrer’s apparent dilemma points out another lesson for us. This concerns his inclusion of the word *completely*, in his talk about not being “completely” justified. Here we might smell a hint of Unger’s unwarranted insistence on absolute, perfect “certainty.” What does it mean to be “completely” justified? Is it necessary to be “completely” justified in order to be justified at all? Is it not sufficient to be relatively justified, justified enough, or simply more justified in thinking one thing rather than its contrary? Lehrer appears to present us with the same false dilemma that Unger did, if he is assuming that justification must be an all-or-nothing kind of thing.

Let us return to Unger’s formulation of the Classical Argument. Like Lehrer, Unger appears to be saying that you must prove that the sceptical hypothesis is false (i.e., that there is no evil scientist deceiving you with electrodes), *or else* your common sense beliefs about the world are unjustified. To

¹¹⁶Certainly an Ungerian sceptic cannot get away with a claim that we have some *reason* to think that the non-sceptic has the burden of proof, while at the same time denying that we can ever have any reason to think anything.

the extent that Unger can be understood as appealing to the same epistemological principles as Lehrer here, to that same extent our objections against Lehrer apply to Unger.

Peter Klein has suggested four possible epistemological principles—which differ only slightly in subtle ways—to which the Classical Argument might be interpreted as appealing. He then demonstrates why none of these can support the sceptical conclusion they are alleged to support. For the details of his arguments I will just refer to his book, but it may be remarked here that much of what he has to say is in agreement with what has been said above, when we rejected the unwarranted assumption that justification requires something so extreme as a proof that any error in the case is absolutely impossible.

As Klein points out, a sceptic who goes to a lot of trouble to prove that errors are not absolutely impossible is wasting his time, since this should be readily admitted without argument. The answer to Unger's complaint that he "can't see how we might properly be certain that there is no way we could possibly be wrong"¹¹⁷ is—so what? We don't *need* to be "certain that there is no way we could possibly be wrong." We only need to have sufficient reason to think that we are probably right. It is not enough for the sceptic to show that it is *possible* for us to be wrong about everything. He must show that this is *no less plausible* than the contrary view.

The Status of the Sceptical Hypothesis

The sceptic's hypothesis of an evil deceiver who feeds you all your expe-

¹¹⁷Unger, p. 134.

riences often makes people laugh. But, in truth, the way to overcome this argument is to take it quite seriously to heart.

In the first place, we should ask ourselves why it is that modern sceptics feel the need to give the original, Cartesian version a scientific facelift. The original version just had an “evil demon” deceiving us. The modern versions have super-intelligent aliens or clever scientists, electrodes and sophisticated computer programs instead. Why is this?

The answer, of course, is that people today are not likely to agree that the existence of a demon is even a *possible* state of affairs, much less a *plausible* hypothesis. And there’s the rub. The problem for the sceptic is that it is necessary that his story represent a *possible* state of affairs. In fact, as we have just been arguing above, something more than mere *possibility* is necessary here, namely, sufficient *plausibility*. That is, the evil deceiver story must represent a state of affairs that is, if not more plausible, at least *no less so* than the contrary, “common sense” hypothesis. (When I say “plausible” I simply mean to indicate ‘epistemological preferability’: the thing we often refer to by asking of an hypothesis how *credible*, *likely*, or *probable* it is.)

Examine carefully the following sceptical argument of the Classical form:

Suppose I know that it now appears to me that there is a triangular object some distance before me. I may take this to be a reason for thinking that there is such an object there. But the appearance *may* be due only to an evil scientist’s electrode operations.... It *may just as well* be the product of that scientist. Or *equally well*, it may have no external cause at all.¹¹⁸

When Unger says here that something or other “may” be the case, he is

¹¹⁸Unger, p. 37, emphasis altered.

asserting that *this is possible*. “*It may be that* all the time your experiences are induced by electrodes.”¹¹⁹ That is the whole point of the story about the brain in the vat—and it’s why the old “evil demon” is given a scientific facelift. (Occasionally, Unger will actually use the word “possible.”¹²⁰)

Likewise, when a sceptic says that some state of affairs, such as the brain in the vat story, “*may just as well*,” or “*equally well*,” be the case, he is arguing—as he must—that, as an hypothesis, this one is *no less plausible* than the contrary, “common sense” one. The moral of the story about the brain in the vat is that it is *because* this story is no less likely to represent the reality behind your experiences, that, *therefore* you have no reason to prefer the contrary, “common sense” story. So the crucial claim here is that the “common sense” hypothesis is not epistemologically preferable:

Since any of your experiences *may be* [i.e., may just as well be] due to a scientist’s operations, they can never give you any reason for believing that there is no scientist deceiving you.¹²¹

Now, perhaps Unger, at least, might feel that he doesn’t need to say this much, and that it is enough for him to show that the vat story is merely *possible*. But all that we have argued about the issues of certainty and burden of proof show that we should not agree with Unger about this. Firstly, because we have seen that the kind of absolute certainty Unger thinks we need is not necessary after all, and secondly, because we have agreed that since neither side in the dispute can justly saddle the other with a “burden of proof,” as in

¹¹⁹ *op. cit.*, p. 27.

¹²⁰ He complains about not being able to “discriminate amongst various *possible* origins [of our experiences]” (p. 37).

¹²¹ *op. cit.*, p. 39.

a criminal trial, we will instead just ask which side has the better (i.e., more plausible) case. Unger cannot rely on the idea that his opponent carries a special “burden of proof,” and he is wrong in supposing that without perfect, irrefragable certainty, we have nothing. Therefore, it is not enough if Unger merely argues that the vat story is a barely *possible* state of affairs; he must also argue that it is a sufficiently *plausible* state of affairs—where “sufficiently” means that it must be, at least, no less so than the contrary, “common sense” hypothesis.

With this in mind, we should proceed to inquire into whether the sceptical hypothesis is possible and whether it is sufficiently plausible. The first question may be divided into two parts, since it seems that something which is impossible may be impossible in two ways, either *logically* or *physically*. For example, perhaps it is not logically, but it is probably physically, impossible for you to jump from the Earth to the Sun in the next five seconds. Likewise, it may not be physically, but it is logically, impossible for a bachelor to be a married man. If we want to be able to say, with a clear conscience, that the sceptical hypothesis is not impossible, it ought to be both logically and physically possible.

Therefore, we will explore the following three questions: Is the sceptical hypothesis logically possible? Is it physically possible? And, finally, is it sufficiently plausible?

Is the Sceptical Hypothesis Logically Possible?

The sceptical hypothesis may be expressed in a way which would, it seems,

bring into doubt its logical possibility. For example, consider the sceptical suggestion that “it may be that nothing really is as it appears because the world actually exists only in your mind.”

This suggestion appears to be logically impossible. To see why, first suppose for the sake of the argument that the suggestion is true, that, in fact, the world really exists only in your mind. But, now, in that case, what does “your mind” *mean*? Who are “you,” and what is your “mind?” If you really supposed that the “external world” “existed” only “in your mind,” it seems that you could no longer even make sense of these categories or distinctions.

Perhaps this involves the problem of universal predication, i.e., the problem which arises with any claim that “*everything* is x ,” since this seems to render x meaningless. If we try to say that “*everything* is in your mind,” what can we possibly *mean* by “in your mind”? In order to understand the expression, we need to be able to understand the difference between something being “in your mind” and something *not* being in your mind. If you say that *everything* is in your mind, what is “your mind”? Perhaps it might be suggested that your “mind” is just that which is not the outside world, but only the awareness of it, or the ability to perceive it, or something like that. But this seems to make the world something which must logically, necessarily remain outside your mind.

Somehow, this categorical distinction between “mind” and “world,” between subject and object, seems to be one of the most fundamental of all logical distinctions. Perhaps it is the most fundamental; perhaps your understanding of all others depends upon your first drawing (perceiving?) this

distinction. Anyway, it seems that it may be impossible to understand or to define the mind in a way consistent with both ordinary usage and the sceptical hypothesis. We might remember how a sceptic such as Hume found himself in difficulties here, when he tried to define “the mind” as a concept.

Again, what about “the world?” Isn’t this the same thing as what philosophers mean by “the external world”? Yet this would be, by definition, the world outside. Outside what? Well, your mind. Likewise, if we suppose that to ‘exist’ means literally to *ex-sist* (to ‘stay’ or ‘rest’ ‘outside’), then to suggest that ‘the world may exist only *in* your mind’ might be to suggest something logically impossible.

If someone suggests that “it may be that most bachelors are actually married,” what can we say except “I don’t understand what you are suggesting—what do you *mean*?” We might suppose that the speaker is being facetious, and we might hope that he will rephrase the suggestion so that we can understand what he means. So perhaps the sceptic who suggests that the world may exist only in your mind likewise rephrase his suggestion in a way that avoids such difficulties.

Perhaps he can suggest, instead that: ‘it may be that what you call “reality” or the “external” world actually exists only in your mind.’ But this, again, seems objectionable, if, logically, nothing can “*ex-sist*” only *in* your mind. So let us remove the controversial word ‘exist.’ How about this: ‘it may be that what you call “reality” or the “external” world is actually a mere illusion in your mind, no more real than a dream.’ Here there is another objectionable bit: “your mind.” The meaning of “your mind” in this context appears to

be at best equivocal and at worst incomprehensible. So let's drop the part about "your mind," and just say: 'it may be that what you call "reality" or the "external" world is actually a mere illusion, no more real than a dream.' Will this do? It still seems that we have some logical difficulties which call for more work.

Here is the problem. If nothing is as you believe it to be because you are just a dreaming brain in a vat, then your own language, too, is just a part of your dream. And since you are not really conversing with other minds, as you believe you are, this language is in some sense just your own private language. Now, some have thought that a "private language" is ridiculous, but perhaps that is only in the case or on the assumption that you have conversational partners—language peers. Without these linguistic peers, it seems you just cannot help the fact that, ridiculous as it may be, your language is actually just your own private game—it is just a game you play with yourself. But, now, if this is the case, then it would seem that you must be the sole master of meanings. That is, you will actually be in the position that Humpty-Dumpty thought he was in when he told Alice that "a word means whatever *I* think it means." In this case, the very hypothesis that *what you call* the "external" world is not really external, or that *what you think of as* "real" is not truly real, will again seem to run into problems of purely logical impossibility.

Now, such "Humpty-Dumptyism" is usually rightly condemned as unacceptable. But, again, perhaps this follows only when we take it for granted that the conversations you enjoy are actually occurring between conversational peers. Perhaps you can, and must, be a Humpty-Dumpty if and only if you

have no regular conversational peers, as in the sceptical hypothesis. (Note that it is not enough for the evil scientist merely to eavesdrop, since that is not to participate as a peer in conversation.)

Such considerations lead us to inquire more deeply into the nature of the sceptical hypothesis. Do we suppose the brain in the vat to know nothing, and to perceive nothing? Yet, isn't it perceiving the computer, by means of the electrodes? Isn't that all that perceiving something *is*—being in touch with it, being “fed experiences” by it? If the brain in the vat is perceiving the computer (whether we think of it in terms of its hardware or its software or both), doesn't it then have some knowledge of them? True, the brain doesn't see these things the same way the evil scientist does, but then neither does a man see a mosquito the same way a bat does. The scientist may be able to intercept light waves with his eyes as they bounce off the exterior of the computer's housing—something the brain doesn't do—but then again the brain in the vat can perceive (and enjoy) a computer program of a sunny day or a love affair in a way that the evil scientist does not.¹²²

In fact, if the evil scientist has never “tasted” his floppy disks in the same way that the brain has, then the brain knows something about them that the evil scientist does not know—namely, what they “look” like from that point of view. And how wonderful that point of view is! Surely, the evil scientist is

¹²²Unger admits that the classical argument is “quite powerless” (p. 148) against “someone's knowing that any bachelors there may be are unmarried,” or “someone's knowing that he himself exists” (p. 11). However, he says: “I mean to include any case of someone's knowing something which entails the existence of some concrete entity outside his own mind.” “By ‘concrete entity,’ I mean to exclude such ‘abstract’ things as Platonic universals, the number four, and so on, in case any such things exist. Roughly, I suppose I mean to include anything which exists in time. Thus, I would include Descartes evil demon...” (p. 11-12, 12n). Wouldn't this also have to include the hardware and software of the computer?

missing something, if all he ever does with a roller coaster ride is to load up the floppy for someone else to enjoy.

What does Unger mean when he speaks of the brain in the vat as having *false beliefs*? (We might remember that Unger argues in another place that there are no such things as false beliefs.¹²³) It is important to realize that the data sent to the brain cannot itself be “false.” Data is just data. There is no such thing as uninformative information.¹²⁴ Suppose, for example, that the brain believes that ‘snow is white.’ Now it seems, in the case of the brain in the vat, that these very words “snow” and “white” might have to be understood as referring to, and, thus, the statement as being *about*, the computer’s software. In what sense, then, is it a false belief? After all, if you are a brain in a vat being fed experiences via electrodes hooked up to a sophisticated computer, then your belief that “snow is white” may be true in the sense that it is true that under the usual conditions, the entity (the ‘program,’ as the evil scientist might call it) to which you have given the name “snow” affects or interacts with you in a certain way to which you have assigned the term “white.” After all, what else can a brain in a vat be thought to *mean*, when he says or thinks: ‘snow is white’?¹²⁵ So, it no longer seems clear that if such a one believes that “there are rocks,” that this is a *false* belief. When he says “the Rock of

¹²³Unger, p. 310.

¹²⁴Even so-called “noise” is information on some level, it’s just that it’s not the particular information you’re looking for. The trees get in the way when you are looking for the bear, but since the existence and location of the trees is part of the whole situation, their appearance is not uninformative to you. It’s just that this is not the information that you are interested in at the moment, and meantime it is getting in the way of the information you really want.

¹²⁵At one point Unger claims that “we systematically say what is false.” (p. 88.) Now, perhaps we can *often*, or even usually, say what is false, but can we do so “systematically”? Perhaps this depends on what we mean by “systematically.”

Gibraltar,” he means what the evil scientist might call “the Rock of Gibraltar program,” and when he says that it is “there,” “out there,” and that it “exists” outside himself or his “mind,” he might have to be considered correct.

He may be correct either because of the fact that the ‘program’ (as the evil scientist would call it) really *does* exist outside his mind, or, more fundamentally, because of the fact that what the vat-dweller *means* when he says “my mind,” “outside my mind” or “inside my mind” is not the same thing and not co-extensive with what the evil scientist would refer to as “the brain (in the vat).” Look at it this way: if you really are an unsuspecting brain in a vat, then the distinction, the concept, or the category you think of as (and call) “my mind” would, it seems, not actually be co-extensive with the “brain” (in the vat), but would instead constitute a more limited category. This would also seem to apply to the concept you have of what you normally think of as (and call) “me” or “my body.” For example: suppose you are having the experience of seeming to look down at your own feet. Here you will draw a distinction between your feet, which you consider a part of yourself, and the sidewalk, which you consider to be *not* a part of yourself. Now suppose that “you” (?) are actually a brain in a vat being fed this experience. Now the sidewalk is no longer something outside of you—not even outside of your body. But, now, what meaning is left to “you?”

If we say “you seem to see your feet at the end of your body,” and then we say “but you have actually been deluded all your life, and you are really floating in a vat and your body is round and gray,” is there not some logical problem here? Is there not some kind of equivocation between these two

statements? That is, do the terms “you,” “your” and “your body” have the same meaning in both statements, and do they refer to the same things? On closer inspection, it does not appear that they do.

Perhaps the evil scientist can detect many things—and in a different way—from his vantage point, that you (the brain in the vat) cannot. And perhaps there is nothing like your “rocks” in the scientist’s experience of the wider world beyond your computer. However, it now appears that the right way to describe this situation is not to say that you, if you are a brain in a vat, *know nothing* or that *you falsely believe rocks exist*. “Rocks” as you refer to them, *do* “exist,” as you would say, “outside” of what you think of as (and call) “your mind.” Granted, it now appears that there are many things you do not know—things which, if you knew about them, would really surprise and amaze you. But don’t you already admit this—that there are probably many things you don’t understand—things which, if you ever found out about them, would no doubt surprise and amaze you? It is the task of the sceptic to show that we do not know anything, not that we do not know everything. Non-sceptics have no need to deny that perhaps what we know about reality would be considered a poor little pittance by someone who knew much more.

The idea that the Classical Argument suffers from purely logical faults has been at least suggested by Peter Lamarque,¹²⁶ and C. K. Grant,¹²⁷ and further

¹²⁶ “There are logical, as well as psychological, worries. Can we even say there is no self-contradiction in speaking of such a scientist?” (Peter Lamarque, book review of *Ignorance*, in *Philosophy Quarterly*. 26 (Oct. 1976), p. 370).

¹²⁷ “It is doubtful whether the activities of the mad scientist can be described in any way that is conceptually coherent, that is, in a way that makes sense.... Given Unger’s supposition, what meaning can be given to the word ‘electrode’?” (C. K. Grant, book review of *Ignorance*, in *Mind*. 86, July 1977, p. 457-458).

developed by O. K. Bouwsma.¹²⁸ At any rate we can say that the question of whether the sceptical hypothesis is *logically* possible is not a simple one.

Is the Sceptical Hypothesis Physically Possible?

Is it physically possible for a brain to survive in a vat of life-preserving solution? Is physically possible for an evil genius to induce in you, by means of electrodes and a computer, the kind of experiences you have? How many incoming electrodes would be required to duplicate your sense of touch? If you suppose it to be accomplished by millions of intertwined incoming nerves in your body, should you not suppose it to require millions of electrodes for an evil genius to duplicate it?

It is important to realize that not everything which sounds possible on its face is actually physically possible. For example, Unger speaks at one point of being “left with a blue homogenous field of visual experience.”¹²⁹ Even this seemingly unproblematic kind of perception is now believed by scientists who have studied the question to actually be impossible. Experiments were performed on subjects who were given ping pong ball halves to place over their eyes and presented with a blank wall evenly bathed in green light, in order to produce a “a green homogenous field of visual experience.” The result was that, due to lack of contrasts, the “green” homogenous field of visual experience was soon replaced in the subjects by an experience psychologists call “brain

¹²⁸O. K. Bouwsma, “Descartes’s Evil Genius,” in *Twenty Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy*. ed. Bowie, Michaels, and Solomon, (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992) 2nd ed., pp. 233-240.

¹²⁹Unger, p. 125.

gray,” which is simply the visual “experience” (or lack thereof) you have when you close your eyes in the dark. Some have concluded from this surprising result that experiences (like words?) may be relative in the sense that they require contrast with other, different experiences to give them meaning.

And it is in cases such as this that we might begin to wonder whether logical and physical impossibility are really always completely independent variables. Perception seems to have a certain logic to it. This logic sometimes seems to resemble that of J. S. Mill’s methods of induction or Spencer Brown’s *Laws of Form* (a novel system of mathematics built entirely upon the axiom: “let there be a distinction.”) In any case, it seems that there is still much about both the mechanics and the logic of perception that we fail to understand.

While Unger appears to admit that his sceptical hypothesis has to be logically consistent, it is not clear to what extent he feels an obligation to argue that it is *physically* possible. At one point he says that a sceptical hypothesis “can be as crazy as you like, providing the chosen description is self-consistent.”¹³⁰ And he later casually suggests that “it *may* be an incorporeal witch who deceives me.”¹³¹ (To which it seems the only proper response is: *may* it—really?) On the other hand, he has obviously taken some pains to make his evil scientist story as physically plausible as he can.

But, it might be wondered whether Unger *has* to support his premise that this evil scientist story is physically possible. Perhaps it might be argued that if what he is doing is simply a *reductio ad absurdum* on non-scepticism, then he need only show that it is according to the common sense way of thinking

¹³⁰Unger, p. 42-43.

¹³¹*op. cit.*, p. 23, emphasis added.

that the non-sceptic must consider the deception-vat story to be physically possible.

Perhaps this is a fair objection. Therefore, us examine that way of thinking which leads the non-sceptic to agree that it is *physically possible* for himself to be a brain in vat deceived by an evil scientist using electrodes and a computer.

The reasons you have for supposing that such a thing might be physically possible, are, of course, reasons like these: that you believe electrodes really exist, either because you think you have seen them, or heard of them from reputable sources; that you believe for similar reasons that computers exist and can do amazing things, that you believe you have actually perceived glass vats which really existed in an "external" world outside your mind, etc., etc.

What is interesting about these reasons is that they illustrate the common sense view of how *reasons* work. The non-sceptic usually accepts his experience of seeming to see electrodes, or even of just hearing about them, as providing at least *some* reason, even if it is a relatively weak or *defeasible* reason, for supposing that electrodes probably exist. That is why he is willing to concede to the sceptic that the evil scientist story may well be *physically possible*.

Unger, however, rejects this view of *reasons*, as we can see from the way he argues:

Suppose I know that it now appears to me that there is [an electrode] some distance before me. I may take this to be a reason for thinking that there is such an object there. But the appearance may be due only to an evil scientist's electrode operations.¹³²

If you think of reasons as things which can be defeasible and relatively

¹³²Unger, p. 37, emphasis altered.

weak or strong, rather than as absolute, all-or-nothing kinds of things, then the conclusion you should draw from this argument is that, therefore, seeming to see something is a defeasible, and not a irrefutable, reason to suppose the thing exists. After all, the thing may turn out, on further inspection, to be a dream or an optical illusion.

But this is not the conclusion Unger draws from the argument. He draws a much stronger one: that, therefore, seeming to see something is *no reason at all* for thinking that it exists. He draws this overstrong conclusion because he believes that our reasons for believing things must be either perfectly irrefutable or entirely non-existent.

But, according to non-sceptical, “common sense” notions, this just isn’t the way reasons work. Suppose a woman confides to a friend that she suspects her husband of infidelity. The friend may ask, “do you have any *reason* to think this?” If the wife cannot offer any reasons, then her suspicions are groundless. But, suppose she says “firstly, he has suddenly been getting mysterious whispering phone calls, secondly, I have been getting hang-up phone calls, thirdly, he has been coming home from ‘work’ at three a.m. smelling like perfume and with lipstick on his collar, fourthly, he has suddenly turned cold to me in a physical sense, and fifthly, he has never acted anything like this before in twenty years of marriage.” Now she has explained her *reasons*. Now, certainly we would not want to say that these *reasons* are decisive or irrefutable, but neither would we say that she has *no reason at all*. If these reasons continue and multiply, they will soon amount to a sufficient *justification of belief* for her that her husband is indeed having an affair.

Suppose eventually she actually catches sight of him embracing his office assistant in a passionate kiss. Even if he is actually innocent, all these pieces of evidence can *justify her believing* him guilty.¹³³

On the other hand, if it is true that her husband is having an affair, and all the evidence together justifies the wife in thinking so, and she does think so, then we can say that she knows about the affair.

The point here is that when we say we have “reason” to believe something, we do not necessarily mean that we are absolutely certain or incapable of error. That is not what having a “reason” *means*. When the wife’s confidant asked her to explain her “reasons,” she was not asking for an air-tight deductive demonstration. She did not *mean* “are you absolutely certain?” She was just asking if she had any reasons. In this sense, we can say that reasons do not require certainty or indefeasibility with the same assurance that we can say that bachelors are not married, or that unicorns have horns.

Even Keith Lehrer has conceded this point:

It might seem that to introduce an appeal to probabilities is to concede the day to scepticism because the probabilities must be based on observational evidence and the latter must be something we know [with absolute, perfect certainty] to be true. But this

¹³³Notice that, according to the common sense view, it is perfectly possible for you to have reasons for believing, and to be reasonable and justified in believing, something which is actually *false*. For example, it may be reasonable for you to believe that your life is in serious imminent danger when a strange midnight intruder points a gun at you and threatens to kill you, even if it later turns out that his gun was not loaded and he didn’t really mean what he said but was only drunk and kidding. You may have had, at the time, sufficient *reason to believe* what was actually false (that you were in great danger), which is why you will probably be excused if you then shot the actually harmless intruder. You can be *justified* in believing something that is not true. This is simply because justification depends on the necessarily limited amount of information that you actually have available to you at the time in question.

objection is unsound. First, as Richard Jeffrey has shown,¹³⁴ we may employ a concept of subjective probability in which no observation statement is assigned a probability of unity. Moreover, we may reassign probabilities on the basis of sense experience without assigning the probability of unity to any such statement.¹³⁵

And “just as we can give an analysis of rational decision in terms of probabilities...so, we can give an analysis of rational belief on the basis of probabilities.”¹³⁶ “Neither analysis requires that we know anything [with absolute, perfect certainty].”

If Unger is to succeed in reducing this way of thinking to absurdity, then he must attack this common sense notion of reasons as defeasible things which can override, or be overridden by, other reasons and be relatively strong or weak. If Unger assumes, to the contrary, that reasons must be absolute or perfectly irrefutable things, then this is his own view and not that of ordinary common sense. If his argument is supposed to be a *reductio ad absurdum*, then it fails for being a straw man.

If the argument is *not* a *reductio*, then Unger will be in the fatal position of having to defend his claims that reasons must be absolute and that it is logically and physically possible for you to be a deceived brain in a vat. But, according to his own rules, Unger cannot do this. Remember, his argument is that “since any of your experiences may be due to a scientist’s operations, they can never give you *any* reason for believing that there is no scientist

¹³⁴Richard Jeffrey, *The Logic of Decision*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965).

¹³⁵Keith Lehrer, “Why Not Scepticism?,” in George S. Pappas and Marshall Swain, ed., *Essays on Knowledge and Justification*, (Cornell University Press, 1978) p. 362-363.

¹³⁶Lehrer, p. 363.

deceiving you.”¹³⁷ But, if that were really so, then neither could they give you any reason for supposing that a scientist *is* deceiving you—nor any reason to agree that such a thing is even *physically possible*.

Therefore, Unger is faced with three alternatives. He can claim that his Classical Argument is a *reductio ad absurdum*, in which case it fails for being a straw man. He can abandon his absolutist, all-or-nothing view of “reasons” (i.e., justification), but then the Classical Argument will be invalid. Finally, Unger might deny that his argument is a *reductio*, in which case he will have to be able to support his crucial premise that the evil scientist story represents a possible state of affairs—something which, according to his own epistemology, he cannot do at all, and which, according to our epistemology, he cannot do without contradicting himself.

Is the Sceptical Hypothesis Sufficiently Plausible?

It is not enough merely for the sceptical hypothesis to be possible. In addition to being possible, it must be sufficiently plausible. More precisely, it must not be any *less* plausible than the contrary, “common sense” hypothesis.

Remember, this is the sceptic’s argument:

Suppose I know that it now appears to me that there is a triangular object some distance before me. I may take this to be a reason for thinking that there is such an object there. But the appearance may be due only to an evil scientist’s electrode operations.... It may *just as well* be the product of that scientist.¹³⁸

When Unger says here that it “may *just as well* be” that you are a brain in

¹³⁷Unger, p. 39.

¹³⁸Unger, p. 37, emphasis altered.

a vat being deceived by an evil scientist using electrodes and a sophisticated computer, he implies that such a thing is not only possible, but also that it is *just as* plausible as the contrary, common sense hypothesis that the triangular object you seem to see really exists. In other words, he denies that the common sense hypothesis is in any way epistemologically preferable to the evil deceiver story. But is this right? Are these two hypotheses really equal in plausibility? No, they are not.

In the first place, we have seen that the evil deceiver hypothesis may even be logically impossible. And even if it is not logically impossible, it may be physically impossible.

Now, certainly, we have *some* reason for supposing that the sceptical hypothesis might be physically possible. We have some reason to think electrodes, computers, vats, scientists and brains really exist. We have some reason to believe that computers have great unrealized potential. We have reasons to suppose that our experience of the world is made possible by a large gray organ in the skull coupled with a complex system of connected nerves and sensory organs which operate, in part, by means of electrical impulses. And so on.

But, obviously, all these sorts of reasons to believe that the evil deceiver story might be physically possible do not add up to anything close to an absolutely, perfectly certain "proof" that it *is* physically possible. It still might be physically impossible, even if all these reasons are truths. After all, if it weren't for a surprising experimental result to the contrary, most people probably would have figured that it should be perfectly possible to be "left

with a blue homogenous field of visual experience.” This didn’t seem, at first glance, to be something either logically or physically impossible. Yet it now appears, on closer inspection, that it is, at least physically, impossible.

At any rate, it is pretty obvious that the plausibility of the evil deceiver story is not really equal to the plausibility of the “common sense” story. Now it may be true that the reasons we have for accepting the common sense hypothesis or doubting the evil scientist story leave room for error or do not add up to absolute certainty. But if we cannot be absolutely certain of anything, at least we are somewhat more justified in believing that computers exist than we are in believing that they exist *and* that they are really capable such a tremendous programming feat as the sceptical hypothesis requires. It is more likely that scientists exist than it is that they exist *and* there is one so clever and so evil as to be doing all this to us. The common sense hypothesis requires only that brains exist, while the sceptical hypothesis requires *more* than that: that they exist *and* that they can survive disconnected from a body. The common sense hypothesis requires only that electrodes exist, while the sceptical hypothesis requires that they exist, *and* that they be capable of producing the rich kind of experience we have.

So *even if* the sceptical hypothesis is both logically and physically possible—something which we have found dubious—still we cannot say that it “*may just as well be*” so.

Remember, we don’t *need* to eliminate all possibility of error here. Absolute, irrefragable certainty is simply not required to justify a preference for one hypothesis over another. Think of the suspicious wife case. We need to

overcome the sceptic's all-or-nothing mentality. Some things are more certain than others. Some statements truer than others. Certainty, truth, reasons, and knowledge are more-or-less kinds of things, not all-or-nothing kinds of things.

It is not that "all *conceivable* counterpossibilities must be ruled out"¹³⁹ as has been suggested by sceptics such as Stroud, Lehrer and Unger, but only that *plausible* (i.e., at least equally so) counterpossibilities should not be available. And, of course, in order for an hypothesis to be a "counterpossibility," it must be a *possibility*, both logically and physically.

¹³⁹Barry Stroud, book review of *Ignorance*, in *Journal of Philosophy*. 74 (April 1977), p. 255.

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