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Unger, "A Defense of Skepticism"

Unger "happily accept[s] the fact that there is much that many of us correctly and reasonably believe" (324). But, he argues that "much more" is needed for knowledge than for correct, reasonable belief.

1. Unger's skeptical argument:

a) If A knows that p then A is certain that p.

b) There is hardly anything, if anything at all, of which A is certain.

Therefore, there is hardly anything that A knows.

2. Unger's argument for (b):

Unger argues for (b) in **two steps**:

Step one: make the distinction between absolute and relative terms. This way, we can see what we mean by the term 'certain' and, in turn, see that it is an absolute term.

Absolute term: Can be naturally qualified by 'absolutely'—e.g. 'flat'
Generally fails to apply to the world

Relative term: Can be held to a matter of degree
Can be naturally qualified by 'relatively'—e.g. 'bumpy'

According to Unger, absolute terms and relative terms "go together". To say that something is flat is to say that it is not at all bumpy.

Question: But don't some absolute terms admit of degree? We can say that a surface is somewhat flat, or very flat, or that the bottle is somewhat or very empty. According to Unger, when we modify an absolute term this way, we really mean to speak of how close a thing comes to instantiating the property associated with the absolute term (e.g. 'flatness, 'emptiness').

Linguistic test: pretty nearly _____, very nearly _____, extremely close to being _____.

Comparative case: the first is either _____ though the second is not, or else it is closer to being _____ than the second.

Absolute or relative?

'wet' – 'dry'

'crooked' – 'straight'

'important' – 'crucial'

'incomplete' – 'complete'

'useful' – 'useless'

'good' – 'bad'

'rich' – 'poor'

'empty' – 'full'

'happy' – 'unhappy'

What about: 'certain'?

Unger: 'Certain' is an absolute term. It can be naturally qualified by 'absolutely'. That seems right: 'absolutely certain' makes sense.

Step two: Argue that 'certain' is hardly ever applicable.

Principle: If A is certain of p (or if p is certain), then, there is no q such that A is 'more certain' of q than p (or that is more certain than p).

This principle is a matter of **logical necessity**. (Think about what it is to be an absolute term.)

According to Unger, the consequent of this conditional is false (or at lease suspicious). So, A is not certain of p (or at least ought to suspend judgment with respect to p).

Modus tollens: p g q; ~q; therefore, ~p

If the consequent is false (or suspicious), then there is some q such that either:

(1) A is certain of q and not of p, or

(2) A is more nearly certain of q than p. (That is, q is *less doubtful* than p)

Either way, A is not certain of p.

Is this true for any p?

Take the proposition that *there are automobiles*.

Suppose that is certain that there are automobiles.

Then (by modus pollens on the principle), there is no proposition q such that A is 'more certain' of q than that there are automobiles.

But this is false. Consider 2. According to Unger, there is (or we ought to at least be suspicious that there is) some q of which A is more nearly certain (that is less doubtful to A) than the proposition that there are automobiles.

What might q be? (Think of Descartes here.)

3. Unger's argument for (a):

Suppose that 1 is false. Then we should be able to say things like:

"He (actually) knows that it is raining, although he isn't (really) certain that it is raining."

But, this is absurd.

Therefore, (a) is true.