

Philosophic Exchange

Volume 5
Number 1 *Volume 5 (1974)*

Article 2

1974

An Immoderate Skepticism, Some Comments on Professor Unger's Paper

Max Black
Cornell University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex

 Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Black, Max (1974) "An Immoderate Skepticism, Some Comments on Professor Unger's Paper," *Philosophic Exchange*: Vol. 5 : No. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex/vol5/iss1/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophic Exchange by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact kmyers@brockport.edu.



The College at
BROCKPORT
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK



MAX BLACK
Susan Linn Sage Professor of Philosophy
Cornell University

AN IMMODERATE SKEPTICISM
SOME COMMENTS ON PROFESSOR UNGER'S PAPER

by

Max Black

Unlike Hume or Descartes, Professor Unger is apparently undisturbed by skeptical doubts about the existence of the external world or other minds. *Knowledge* alone is the target of his skepticism. He regards knowledge as a chimera and offers "a positive argument" to prove that "nobody ever knows *anything* to be so." This is indeed "an extremely strong and sweeping conclusion," implying, among other things, that Unger does not know what he is saying, does not know whether he has the slightest reason for holding his conclusion, and for all he or anyone else knows may be talking gibberish. (He admitted as much in discussion.) But such an *ad hominem* retort, relevant though it is, is too facile to be satisfying. So let us look at the argument.

Unger's formulation runs as follows:

(1) If someone *knows* something to be so, then it is all right for that person to be absolutely *certain* that it is so.

(2) It is never all right for anybody to be absolutely certain that something is so.

Hence:

(3) Nobody ever knows anything to be so.

Unger subsequently introduces some modifications of the two premises. Thus, he suggests rewording (1) as follows:

(1q) If someone *knows* something to be so, then it is all right for that person to be absolutely certain that it is so—*providing only that no overriding considerations make it not all right.*

Unger's reasons for the qualification I have italicised in (1q) is that sometimes it is a "bad thing" to know something to be the case—e.g., to know embarrassing details about somebody's private life—and hence a bad thing to be certain about such matters. But Unger is in no position to attach such a qualification. For he holds that, in virtue of the ordinary uses of the key words, to know anything "entails" being "absolutely certain" of it. Hence, his proposed amendment of (1) is incoherent. If knowledge entails absolute certainty, there can be no question about it's being "all right" for a knower to be absolutely certain of the thing he knows—he can't help himself! It is as absurd for Unger, from his standpoint, to say that it is sometimes all right for a knower to be abso-

AN IMMODERATE SKEPTICISM

lutely certain as it would be to say that it is sometimes all right for a bachelor to be unmarried. Unger can at best contend that while "absolute certainty" and the knowledge entailing it are always "wrong," we might condone such wrongs as lesser evils. (As one might think it always wrong to kill, while allowing that killing might be preferable to something even worse.)

Something similar may be said about the parallel modifications that Unger introduces into his second premise. Here, too, the *caveat* that, in certain exceptional cases it may be "all right" to be absolutely certain, e.g., because of the incidental and accidental good that might result, is beside the point. He thinks that "absolute certainty" *per se*, and the knowledge which supposedly entails it, are bad things—and that is what is really in question. The original, unqualified form of the argument, is faithful to Unger's intentions.

The argument from (1) and (2) to (3) is formally valid. (Yet it would be, at best, an odd argument from "should not" to "is not"—from the supposedly bad consequences of knowledge to its non-existence.)

Let us then consider what Unger means by "absolute certainty." For him it is virtually synonymous with "dogmatic," a move that makes his thesis more persuasive than it would otherwise be. But there is no justification for using "dogmatism" as a direct negative of "skepticism," when the latter is defined, for Unger's purpose, as the proposition that *Nothing can ever be known by anybody*. The negation of that proposition would be, *At least one thing is known by somebody*. (And that thesis might have "cognitivism" rather than the passion-engendering epithet of "dogmatism" attached to it.)

But Unger repeatedly uses "dogmatism" in another sense, in which he equates it with the "rejection" of evidence. He says that the "dogmatic" attitude is that of holding that no "new information, evidence or experience which one might have will be seriously considered by one to be *at all* relevant to *any possible* change in one's thinking in the matter." For Unger, to be dogmatic, or absolutely certain of anything, is to have closed one's mind utterly, to "give no weight in one's thinking" to further evidence, to consider no "new experience or information as seriously relevant to the truth or falsity" of the thing known. In short, to be beyond the reach of relevant criticism.

No doubt, "dogmatism" of this sort is a "bad thing." (But in what sense? Is it morally reprehensible to be over-confident, even arrogant, in one's knowledge-claims?) If knowledge entailed contumacious tenacity of belief, it ought to be shunned as evil. (But an imaginary evil, according to Unger, since cases of knowledge *never* occur.) But does knowledge have such dire implications? I think not.

Suppose I am charged with an offense that I *know* myself to be incapable of committing—say that of having profited by passing off Unger's essay as my own for the purpose of publication. Does my knowledge make it logically impossible for me to "consider seriously" the evidence introduced by the prosecution? Of course not. My knowledge of my own innocence of this implausible crime leaves me still able to see that certain pieces of evidence are *relevant* and therefore *need* rebuttal. Of course, there is a sense of "seriously consider" in which I could never attach any credence to the suggestion that I might be

MAX BLACK

mistaken in *this* matter. (Could I have used his paper inadvertently? Anybody who could believe that, as the Duke of Wellington once said in another connection, could believe anything.)

Most cases of knowledge are less dramatic than the one I have imagined. My justified claim to know that, say, copper is metal, cannot exempt me from the damaging impact of possible contrary evidence. However confident I may be that further relevant data would only vindicate my knowledge-claim, and however justified I now am in making that claim, I might prove to be wrong after all. And in saying so, while reaffirming what I know, I am not, *pace* Unger, contradicting myself.

The most plausible variant of Unger's proposition (1) might read as follows:

(1a) If somebody knows something to be the case, then he is justified in *feeling confident* (or, perhaps, even: *being convinced*) that it is the case.

And is that a "bad thing?" I see nothing wrong with it. One may be confident that something is the case while conceding on the basis of one's demonstrated fallibility that one might after all be mistaken. Confident assertion is compatible with the absence of any "dogmatism" that might warrant censure.

I conclude that Unger's argument has little to recommend it, except as supplying one more example of how easily philosophers can be led into advocating preposterous conclusions, by misusing ordinary language while all the time claiming to have used the key words "in the ordinary senses of those words."