

1974

An Argument for Skepticism

Peter Unger
New York University

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

 Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Unger, Peter (1974) "An Argument for Skepticism," *Philosophic Exchange*: Vol. 5 : No. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex/vol5/iss1/3

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



PETER UNGER
Professor of Philosophy
New York University

AN ARGUMENT FOR SKEPTICISM

by

Peter Unger

I mean to offer a positive argument for skepticism about knowledge; I do not mean just to raise some doubts, however general, about statements to the effect that people know. The argument to be offered has as its conclusion the universal form of the skeptical thesis, that is, the proposition that nobody ever knows *anything* to be so. If this argument is sound, as I am inclined to think, then it will follow in particular that nobody ever knows anything about the past or future or even the present, about others or even about himself, about external objects or even about his own experiences, about complicated contingencies or even the simplest mathematical necessities. This, then, is an argument for an extremely strong and sweeping conclusion indeed.

The opposite of skepticism is often called dogmatism. In these terms, dogmatism is the view that certain things are known to be so. The stronger the form of dogmatism, the more sorts of things would be claimed to be known and, so, the weaker the form of skepticism which might still be allowed to hold. Thus, one might be a dogmatist about the past but a skeptic about the future in the sense that one might hold that we know a fair amount about the past but know nothing of the future. But typical arguments to the effect that we know things about the past do not *look* dogmatic in any usual sense. And, arguments to the effect that we know nothing of the future do not in any standard sense *look* particularly undogmatic; they do not *look* particularly indicative of an open-minded approach to things. Going by the typical arguments, then, the label "dogmatist" is unfairly prejudicial and there is no force in the claim that skepticism is to be preferred because the alternative is dogmatism. Unlike such typical arguments, the argument I mean to offer gives substance to the claim that the alternative to skepticism is a view which sanctions a dogmatic attitude. In that one may well not appreciate that this is indeed skepticism's only alternative, one might, perhaps, innocently believe that one knows things without being dogmatic in the process. But once the implications of that belief are brought out, as my argument means to do, the persistence in such a belief may itself be considered dogmatic. Of course, I do not want to be dogmatic in asserting any of this and, indeed, confess to only a moderate amount of confidence in what I have to offer. But, as I am inclined to think it true, I offer it in a spirit which I hope may be taken as quite undogmatic and open-minded.

1. A Preliminary Statement of the Argument

I begin by giving a statement of the argument which, while correct in all essentials, does not account for certain complications. On this statement, the argument is exceedingly simple and straightforward. It has but two premises

AN ARGUMENT FOR SKEPTICISM

and each of them makes no exceptions whatsoever. The first of these is the proposition:

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

For example, if it is true that Knute *knows* that there was a general called "Napoleon", then it is (perfectly) all right for him to be absolutely *certain* that there was. And, if Rene really *knows* that he exists, then it is (perfectly) all right for Rene to be absolutely certain that he does.

Our second and final premise, then, is this categorical proposition:

(2) It is never all right for anyone to be absolutely *certain* that anything is so.

According to this premise, it is not all right for Knute to be absolutely certain that there was a general called "Napoleon", nor is it even all right for Rene to be absolutely certain that he exists. No matter what their situations, these people should not have this "attitude of absolute certainty". When one understands what is involved in having this attitude, or in being absolutely certain of something, one will presumably understand why it is never all right to be absolutely certain.

These two premises together entail our conclusion of universal skepticism:

(3) Nobody ever *knows* that anything is so.

In particular, Knute does not really *know* that there was a general called "Napoleon", nor does Rene really *know* that he exists.

The first of these premises is hardly novel unless novelty may be gained by any slight change in the words one chooses. Words to the same effect are prominent in the philosophical literature; one might mention Moore, Ayer, Malcolm and Hintikka as a few significant examples.¹ To my own way of thinking any such words are in need of some small qualification to get things right. But the essential idea of this premise can hardly be faulted without doing violence to the concept of knowing.

The second premise is, I think, also in need of a small qualification, one which matches that needed for the first. But even with a qualification, it is difficult to find such a proposition put forward in the literature. Indeed, the philosophers we just mentioned seem all too typical in denying it, at least by implication. It is this premise which is most crucial, and I will argue that denying it amounts to embracing dogmatism. Given the truth of the first premise, it is for this reason that skepticism is indeed the alternative to dogmatism.

The force of these remarks will be better appreciated, I think, when we understand more fully what the premises really amount to. That will also help us appreciate how the premises must be qualified in order that the argument may actually be sound. Accordingly, I will now discuss each of the premises in

turn, beginning with the first.

2. The First Premise: The Idea That If One Knows It Is All Right for One to be Certain.

We often have the idea that someone is certain of something but he shouldn't be. Perhaps from his expressive behavior, perhaps from something else, we *take* it that he is certain of something—whether or not he really is certain of it. We ask him, if we are so inclined, “How can you be *certain* of that?” In asking this question, we manage to imply that it might not be all right for him to be certain and imply, further, that this is because he might not really *know* the thing. If the man could show us that he does know, then we should withdraw the question and, perhaps, even apologize for implying what we did by raising it. But, then, how do we manage to imply so much just by asking this question in the first place? Neither ‘know’ nor any cognate expression ever crosses our lips in the asking. We are able to imply so much, I suggest, because we all accept the idea that, at least generally, if one does know something then it is all right for one to be certain of it—but if one doesn't then it isn't. This suggests that there is some analytic connection between knowing, on the one hand, and on the other, it's being all right to be certain.

The very particular idea that knowing *entails* it's being all right to be certain is suggested, further, by the fact that knowing entails, at least, that one *is* certain. That this is a fact is made quite plain by the inconsistency expressed by sentences like “He really *knew* that it was raining, but he *wasn't* absolutely *certain* that it was”. Such a sentence can express no truth: if he wasn't certain, then he didn't know. We get further confirmation here from considering transitivity. The sentences “He was *sad* that it was raining, but he *didn't know* it was” and “He was really *sad* that it was raining, but he *wasn't* absolutely *certain* it was” are likewise inconsistent. Their inconsistency means an entailment from being sad that to knowing, in the first case, and to being certain in the second. This can be best explained, it would seem, by the entailment from knowing to being certain is convincingly clinched, I think, by appreciating the equivalence between someone's knowing something and his knowing it for certain, or with absolute certainty. To be sure, we may describe cases which we would more naturally react to with the words “He knew it” than “He knew it for certain”: Consider a man who, looking for his cuff links, unerringly went to the very spot they were while doubts went through his mind. Did he know that they were in that spot? But our readiness to say he knew might only indicate loose usage of those words by us, while we are more strict in our use when the word “certain” enters the picture. That this is much the more plausible hypothesis than thinking there to be an inequivalence here is evidenced by the inconsistency of the relevant sentences: “He *knew* it, but he *didn't know* it for certain”, “He really *knew* it, but he *didn't know* it *with absolute certainty*”, “He knew it was there, but he didn't *really know* it”, and so on. No truth can be found in these words no matter when they might be uttered. Even if they are put forth at the end of stories like that of the cuff-link finder, where we are

AN ARGUMENT FOR SKEPTICISM

inclined at first to say he knows, we realize that they must express what is false. Accordingly, we are forced to be unswayed by our tendency to loose usage and to admit the equivalence between knowing with absolute certainty and just plain knowing to be so. Admitting this equivalence, we can be quite confident that knowing does indeed entail being absolutely certain.

Now, our intuitive thought about knowledge or knowing is that it is something good, of value, which ought to be sought, and prized when attained. But, if knowing always entails being certain, and the latter may so often be bad, as our questions often imply, how might it be that knowing is so often good? The situation here is very unlike others that are only superficially alike, e.g., the case of helping someone in trouble which entails someone's being in trouble. These latter cases involve the righting of a wrong, or the improvement of a situation which starts off bad. But our idea is not that being certain is bad, or generally bad, like being in trouble. Rather, it is bad *unless* one knows, but if one does know then there's nothing wrong at all with being certain. This is the reason that there is no conflict between the supposed value of knowing and its entailing that one is absolutely certain.

All of these ideas suggest the universal and unqualified proposition that if one knows, it is always all right for one to be certain. And, quite surely, at least something like this must be right. But a qualification must be made if we are to arrive at a statement which actually is correct. Everyday life provides cases where it is bad that one knows, and these are also cases where it is bad for one to be certain even if one does in fact know. For example, one shouldn't know too much about the private lives of others. If one's neighbor sleeps in the nude and doesn't want others to know it, it may well be no good thing for one to know that he sleeps this way. In such a case as this, even if one knows that the neighbor sleeps in the nude, it is neither all right for one to know it nor all right for one to know it nor all right for one to be absolutely certain that he does. A more unrealistic case but in some ways a clearer one is as follows. Here one's being certain of a particular thing is so bad that it is quite clear that one should not be certain of it even if one in fact knows the thing. We may suppose, for example, that a powerful god makes it plain that he will bring fruitful times for the multitude just in case a particular individual is *not certain* of a particular thing: just in case Max is not certain that frogs are animals. Otherwise, years of *pain* are all that lie in store. Even if Max knows that frogs are animals it is not all right for him to be certain of this thing. If this means tampering with himself so that he no longer knows it, then Max had better go to a hypnotist or whatever: The price is too high and the knowledge too trivial. As in more realistic cases, a man's knowing something is not enough to entail that it is all right for him to be certain of it.

Cases like these, both ordinary and bizarre, show that our first premise must be qualified if we are to have any sound argument. They also show that a qualification is needed for Ayer's dictum that if one knows something one has the right to be sure of it, and for any other proposition which involves our basic idea, e.g., that if one knows something, then one is justified in being certain of the thing. There is no doubt much truth in these propositions, as we

PETER UNGER

have argued and as is evidenced by the inconsistent appearance of sentences to the contrary: "He *knows* that it's raining, but he *shouldn't* be *sure* of it", "He really *knew* they were fools, but it was *wrong* for him to be absolutely *certain* that they were", and so on. But, this inconsistent appearance, while important to notice, is not due to any actual inconsistency in what is expressed. It is due, rather, to the fact that when one attends to these sentences one is liable to think only of evidential or epistemic considerations. One is not likely to think in terms of possibilities that have little or nothing to do with sad matters—but of course those are the only ones which might falsify the statement. These upsetting cases present no interesting relation between knowing something and being certain of it.

The sorts of cases which make us qualify our premise present considerations which are not entailed by the person's being certain or by his knowing. They involve the contingencies of bad consequences, or similar external factors which must be given their due weight. Thus, the upsetting cases present unusual considerations which *override* any consideration that one knows. An adequate premise must take care to allow for these considerations, and we modify (1) to take care of just that:

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

Such a qualification was to be expected anyway. Few things, if any, are so important that some others might not sometimes take precedence. And anything which might be involved in knowing, unlike avoiding punishing the innocent, is quite surely no such absolutely important a thing. Once we make this qualification, however, it seems impossible to deny our first premise. Indeed, it is no doubt just what this premise says which is indicated by the words "for certain" and "with absolute certainty" in the sentences "He knew it for certain" and "He knew it with absolute certainty". It is not just the idea that the knower is certain to which these merely emphatic words here point. Rather, it is to the idea his knowing means that, pending no overriding considerations to the contrary, his being certain of the thing is perfectly all right.

Now, it cannot be too strongly emphasized that everything I said is meant to be compatible with the sense which the ordinary word 'know' actually has. Indeed, it fairly relies on this word's having only one ("strong") sense as it occurs in sentences of the forms 'S knows that p' and 'S knows about X'. Some philosophers have suggested 'weak' senses of 'know' in which it does not even have an entailment to absolute certainty.² But though there is some reason to suppose that 'know' has different meanings in 'John knows that Jim is his friend' and 'John knows Jim',³ there appears no reason at all to suppose that 'knows' may mean different things as it occurs in the former sentence. Indeed, reason seems to favor the opposite view. If a genuine ambiguous sentence has a meaning on which it is inconsistent, there will generally be one also on which it is consistent. Once the latter meaning is pointed out, this difference is

AN ARGUMENT FOR SKEPTICISM

appreciated and felt to be quite striking. Thus, the sentence ‘John really *types* many things, but he produces symbols *only orally*’ has an obvious meaning on which it is inconsistent. But, it may be pointed out that ‘types’ has another sense, which it shares (roughly) with ‘classifies’. Once this is pointed out, the consistent meaning is appreciated, and the effect is a striking one. No similar phenomenon is ever found with the sentence ‘John really *knows* that he types things, but he *isn’t* absolutely *certain* that he does’. There may be many *ad hoc* explanations of this fact. But the only plausible explanation is, I think, that ‘know’ doesn’t have a weak sense with no entailment to absolute certainty.⁴

To deny our first premise, then, is to do violence to the meaning of ‘know’ and to our concept of knowledge. If our argument is to be stopped, it must be with the consideration of the second premise. In any case, it is with that premise that the *substantive* claim of the argument is made: It is not only with mere questions of logical relations with which we must now contend. Accordingly, we now come to the largest and most important part of our discussion.

3. The Second Premise: The Idea That It Is Never All Right To Be Absolutely Certain.

As I have stated it, the second premise of our argument is a triply universal proposition:

(2) It is *never* all right for *anyone* to be absolutely certain that *anything* is so.

It is universal, first, in that it applies to all beings without fear or favor, the most almighty of gods as well as the humblest of creatures. Second, it is also universal in that it applies to all propositions or things (of which one might or might not be certain). It is to hold no matter how simple and certain a thing may seem to a being: that one exists right now, that there is an experience of phenomenal blueness, and so on. We want a premise which is universal in both of these respects, and I will argue that we may have one. But there is a third way in which this premise is universal, and this aspect of it may be doubted: It says that no matter what the circumstances, being certain is not all right. In other words, it says that it is not all right in *any* circumstances whatsoever.⁵

This third point of universality was needed for the second premise to match up with the first in our original statement of our argument. For if there were some circumstances when it is all right to be certain, then according to our original first premise (1), we might know in just those circumstances. Then it would not be true that nobody ever knows anything. But, we have found it necessary to alter our first premise, from (1) to (1q). So, we no longer require a second premise which, like (2), is universal with respect to circumstances as well as with respect to beings and propositions. Is this universality of circumstances fatal to the truth of (2), so that we *must* reformulate the premise now that we *may* do so?

As we have been at pains to make clear, no one’s being certain of any par-

ticular thing is all that important apart from the consequences it might have. Neither is one's knowing something—supposing that one knows—of any such great moment. Just as knowing is not so importantly good that it cannot sometimes be bad, so being certain is not so importantly bad that it might not sometimes be all right and even good. It may be in fact necessary for a researcher to find a cure for a dread disease that that man be absolutely certain that there is a cure to be found. Even if he is dogmatic about the cure's existence, this may prove to be all right, I think, if he discovers the cure. As before, a more bizarre case may serve to clarify. We may suppose that this time our powerful god wants Max to be absolutely certain that tulips are animals. Now, the god makes it quite plain that the multitude will have fruitful times just in case Max is certain of this thing and that otherwise excruciating pain and suffering will be all. In such a case, Max had better be absolutely certain no matter what negative feature might be inherent in his being so. Even if it takes hypnotism or drugs, Max ought to get himself into the state desired by the eccentric but effective deity. In such circumstances as these, it is perfectly all right for him to be certain that tulips are animals. These cases and others force us to qualify our premise. The situation is much as before with premise (1). This time, however, we have overriding considerations which—supposing that it is not otherwise all right—make being certain perfectly all right. Accordingly, we may reformulate (2) so that it matches up with (1q):

(2q) It is *not* the case that it is all right for someone to be absolutely *certain* that something is so providing only that no overriding (consideration or) considerations make it all right.

This premise says that there is something wrong with being certain but allows that this may be outweighed by external factors. These factors have nothing much to do with evidence, or with any other epistemic criteria. It is for this qualified proposition that I shall make a case. If it may be accepted, then we may deduce the conclusion of universal skepticism.

4. What Attitude Is Involved in One's Being Absolutely Certain?

I will now, at last, begin to argue for the idea that to be absolutely certain of something is, owing to a certain feature of personal certainty, to be *dogmatic* in the matter of whether that thing is so. It is because of this dogmatic feature that there is always *something* wrong with being absolutely certain. In other words, it is because of this feature that our second premise, (2q), is correct. My argument for the idea that this feature ensures this dogmatism falls naturally into two parts. The first part, which will occupy us in this present section, is aimed at specifying the feature. Thus, we will argue here that one's being absolutely certain of something involves one in having a certain severely negative *attitude* in the matter of whether that thing is so: the attitude that *no* new information, evidence or experience which one might ever have will be seriously considered by one to be *at all* relevant to *any possible* change in one's thinking in the matter.

AN ARGUMENT FOR SKEPTICISM

The second part is aimed at showing this attitude to be wrongly dogmatic even in matters which may appear to be quite simple and certain. That more normative segment will be reserved for the section immediately to follow.

That such an absolutely severe attitude should be essential to one's knowing is hardly novel with me. Indeed, philosophers who are quite plainly anti-skeptical proclaim just this attitude as essential to one's knowing. Thus Norman Malcolm thinks himself to know that there is an ink-bottle before him, and describes what he takes to be implicit in this knowledge of his:

Not only do I not *have* to admit that (those) extraordinary occurrences would be evidence that there is no ink-bottle here; the fact is that I *do not* admit it. There is nothing whatever that could happen in the next moment that would by me be called *evidence* that there is not an ink-bottle here now. No future experience or investigation could prove to me that I am mistaken. . . .

.It will appear to some that I have adopted an *unreasonable* attitude towards that statement. There is, however, nothing unreasonable about it.

In saying that I should regard nothing as evidence that there is no ink-bottle here now, I am not *predicting* what I should do if various astonishing things happened. . . .

That assertion describes my *present* attitude towards the statement that here is an ink bottle. . . .⁶

Now, Malcolm, it is true, aligns himself with the idea that there are two (or more) senses of 'know' to be found in sentences like 'John *knows* that there is an ink-bottle before him'. This idea is neither correct nor essential to his position in those passages. We have already argued, in section 2, that this idea is not correct. That this incorrect idea is not essential to the main thrust of his quoted remarks is, I think, equally clear. For he allows that there is at least a sense of 'know' where knowing entails one's having the extreme attitude they characterize. Presumably, that sense, at least, is just the sense where knowing entails being absolutely certain, and the extreme attitude is just the one which is necessarily involved in absolute certainty. In that such philosophers think that when one knows the attitude of certainty is not only present but quite all right, their thinking that the attitude is to be characterized in such severe negative terms is some indirect evidence for thinking so. An attitude which is so *severely* negative as this might well *not* be one which is very often justified. However, even if one wants to avoid skepticism, a concern for the truth about this attitude makes a severe characterization of it quite unavoidable.

The attitude of certainty concerns *any* sequence of experience or events which could consistently be presented to a sentient subject, without its description prejudging the issue on which it might supposedly bear. Thus, one is certain that there is an ink-bottle before one only if one's attitude is this: Insofar as I care about being right about whether an ink-bottle is or was before me, no matter how things may seem to appear, *I will not count* as contrary evidence even such extraordinary sequences as these:

PETER UNGER

. . . when I next reach for this ink-bottle my hand should seem to pass *through* it and I should not feel the contact of any object. . . in the next moment the ink-bottle will suddenly vanish from sight . . . I should find myself under a tree in the garden with no ink-bottle about . . . one or more persons should enter this room and declare that they see no ink-bottle on this desk. . . a photograph taken now of the top of the desk should clearly show all of the objects on it except the ink-bottle.⁷

Now, however (nearly) certain one may be that some or all of these sequences will not occur, that is of course not the same thing as being (at all) certain that there is an ink-bottle before one. But, though there are many differences between the two, perhaps the one which should most clearly be focused on is this: If one is really certain of the ink-bottle, and not just of other things however related, then one's attitude is that *even if one should* seem to find oneself in a contrary garden, one *would disregard* this experience as irrelevant to the question of whether, at the time in question, there is or was an ink-bottle before one. One might resist this characterization, but then, I think, one would lose one's proper focus on what it is of which one is certain.

Here is a line of resistance to our characterization of being certain. Suppose, in contrast, one's attitudes were these: *If* strange things seemed to happen, then perhaps I would change my mind, I just might. But, I am absolutely certain that no strange things will ever happen to speak against there being an ink-bottle. Might not these attitudes be those of a man who was *absolutely* certain that *there is an ink-bottle before him*? Might not he be certain of the ink-bottle, not in or by having a completely exclusionary attitude on that matter itself but, rather, indirectly, so to speak, in or by having just such an attitude toward the possibility of apparently contrary appearances?⁸

This suggestion, this line of resistance, is an interesting one, but it is neither correct nor of any use even if it were correct. First, let us notice that *at least almost* invariably when one is even very close to being absolutely certain of something, one is not nearly so certain that no contrary appearances will turn up. For example, you may be quite sure that I am married. But, you will not be quite so sure that no appearances to the contrary might show up: I may be married but say to you "No, I'm not really married. Mary and I don't believe in such institutions. We only sent out announcements to see the effect—and it's easier to have most people believe that we are." I might, at a certain point, say these things to you and get a few other people to say apparently confirmatory things. All of this, and some more if need be, should and would, I think incline you to be at least a bit less certain that I am married. Thus, at least with things where one is *quite* certain, the matter seems to be quite the *opposite* of what was suggested: One will not be so certain that nothing strangely contradictory will turn up—but one will be inclined to reject any such thing even if it does turn up. We may plausibly project that things work quite the same in situations where someone is absolutely certain (if there really are any such).⁹

Let us now take something of which you are as certain as anything, say, that one and one are two. Suppose that you are very sure that your favorite mathe-

AN ARGUMENT FOR SKEPTICISM

matician will never say something false to you about any simple sum. Imagine that he, or God, tells you and insists that one and one are three, and not two. If your attitude is that he is still to be trusted or, at least, that you would no longer be quite so sure of the sum, then you are not absolutely certain that one and one are two. If you think you *are absolutely certain* of this sum, then, I submit, you should think also that your attitude will be to reject entirely the message from the mathematician or God. In this simple arithmetical matter, you are to give it, perhaps unlike other messages from the same source, no weight at all in your thinking. It seems, then, that this line of resistance is not faithful to the idea of being certain of a particular thing. But would it be of any use in countering skepticism, or the skeptic's charge of dogmatism, even if it were right?

It seems to me that it is at least as dogmatic to have the position that it is absolutely certain that nothing will ever even appear to speak against one's position than to have the attitude that any such appearances which might show up should be entirely rejected. What about appearances to the effect that some contrary appearances, their precise nature left open as yet, are likely to show up in the future? If one is absolutely certain that the latter sort of appearances won't ever show up, one would, presumably, have the attitude of rejecting entirely the indication of the former appearances. One's attitude of rejection gets pushed farther back from the matter itself. Perhaps, on our line of resistance, this may go on indefinitely. But each retreat, and the consequent new place for rejection, only makes a man look more and more obvious in his dogmatism and unreasonableness about the whole affair. Even going back no farther than the second level, so to speak, only a quite foolhardy man would, it seems to me, reject out of hand any suggestion that some things might be brought forth to speak against his position. If anything, it is better for him to allow that they may and to be ready to reject them. So, even if our line of resistance had presented us with a case of being certain, the "indirect" way of being certain would hardly help us to avoid the skeptical charge. That is quite surely no way for being perfectly certain to be perfectly all right.

It is important to stress very hard that a clause like 'I should regard nothing as evidence that there is no ink-bottle now' must be regarded as the expression of a man's *current attitude*, and not as any prediction of what he will do under certain future circumstances.¹⁰ Thus, one may allow that a sentence like the following is indeed consistent: "He is absolutely *certain* that there are automobiles, but he *may* change his mind should certain evidence come up". That is because even if his present attitude is that he will not, things may not happen in accordance with his attitude. For example, things might happen to him which *cause* him to become uncertain. Or, his attitude might just evaporate, so to speak, the new evidence then effecting him in the unwanted way; and so on. Such conditions as these give us a consistent interpretation for the foregoing sentence, even if not a very ordinary one. A sentence which will always express an inconsistency, on the other hand, is obtained once we make sure that our severely negative clause is embedded so that it is clear that the man's current attitude is the point. Thus, in contrast with the foregoing, it is always

PETER UNGER

inconsistent to say “He is absolutely *certain* that there are automobiles, but *his attitude* is that he *may* change his mind should certain evidence come up”. A proper assessment of the direct linguistic evidence supports the idea that the attitude of certainty is thus absolutely severe.

This direct linguistic evidence cannot be enough to satisfy one that being certain, or the attitude in knowing, demands so much as we claim. And, it is not enough to add the indirect evidence from anti-skeptical authors. What we want is to fit a severe characterization of this attitude into some more general account of things. Toward this end, I now recall my account of absolute terms.¹¹ On this account, *absolute adjectives* like ‘flat’, ‘useless’ and ‘certain’ purport to denote a limiting state or situation to which things may approximate more or less closely. Thus, in the case of these adjectives, the modifier ‘absolutely’, as well as ‘completely’ and ‘perfectly’, is redundant apart from points of emphasis. Now, various locutions with ‘certain’ may appear to indicate matters of degree. But they will always admit of a paraphrase where this appearance is dispelled in favor of a more explicit reference to an *absolute limit*: “That’s pretty certain” goes into “That’s pretty *close to being absolutely* certain”; “He is more certain of this than of that” goes into “He is *absolutely* certain of this but not of that or else he is *closer to being absolutely* certain of this than of that”, and so on. None of this is peculiar to ‘certain’; the same happens with locutions containing other absolute adjectives. Thus, these sentences seem to denote matters of degree, but their paraphrases dispel the illusory appearance: “That’s the flattest (most useless) thing I’ve ever seen” goes into “That’s the only *absolutely* flat (useless) thing I’ve ever seen or else that’s *closer to being absolutely* flat (useless) than anything else I’ve seen”. In light of these paraphrases, we may repose some confidence in the following formula as saying what it is for something to be *x* where that is the same as being absolutely *x*: Something or someone is *x* (flat, useless, certain, etc.) just in case nothing *could possibly* ever be more *x*, or *x*-er, than that thing or person is right now. It is in this strict sense, then, that being certain, and *a fortiori* being absolutely certain, is being at an absolute limit. Now, absolute adjectives typically have contrasting terms which are *relative adjectives*: ‘certain’ has ‘confident’ and ‘doubtful’, ‘flat’ has ‘bumpy’ and ‘curved’, ‘useless’ has ‘useful’ and ‘serviceable’, and so on. Because matters of degree *are* concerned, there is nothing which is deceptive about the locutions with *these* terms: The sentence “He is pretty confident” does not go into the apparently senseless?? “He is pretty close to being absolutely confident”; nor does “That is very useful” go into?? “That is very close to being absolutely useful”. These relative terms really do denote matters of degree and not any state or situation which is an absolute limit. If something is bumpy, it is *not* true that nothing could possibly be more bumpy or bumpier. And if someone is confident of something, it does not follow that no one could ever be more confident. Now, a necessary condition for the correct application of an absolute adjective is, at least generally, that certain things denoted by relative adjectives be entirely absent. Thus, it is a necessary condition of something’s being flat that it be *not at all* bumpy, that is, that bumpiness not be present even in the least degree. Also, it is a necessary condition of being flat that the thing be

AN ARGUMENT FOR SKEPTICISM

not at all curved, or that curvature or curvedness not be present at all. We might expect the same sort of thing to hold in the case of someone's being certain of something, and indeed it does: If someone is certain of something, then that thing is *not at all* doubtful so far as he is concerned, that is, doubt or doubtfulness is not present at all in that man with respect to that thing. I have already argued this before, but there are other things which must also be entirely absent if a man is to be certain, though their absence may be included, I suggest, in the absence of all doubt.

One thing which must be entirely absent, and which is, I think, implicit in the absence of all doubt, is this: 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. In other words, if S is certain that *p*, then it follows that S is *not at all* open to consider any new experience or information as relevant to his thinking in the matter of whether *p*. Of course, our saying that the complete absence of openness is a necessary condition of personal certainty by no means commits us to the idea that it is a sufficient condition. Indeed, it is not. Someone may be fixedly attached to a proposition even if he is not certain of it. He might, for example, refuse ever to reconsider his belief in it even though, in any circumstances of choice, there will be other propositions on whose truth he would prefer to risk inferences, actions, goals and goods. Indeed, another necessary condition of being 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. I say, 'at least roughly', because one might have an aversion, moral, aesthetic, religious or otherwise, to risking anything, or to risking too much, or to risking too much on certain sorts of propositions. This might cause one to be somewhat hesitant or reluctant to take the called for risk despite one's being absolutely certain of the thing involved. But the complete absence of reluctance will still be a condition for certainty, provided that it is suitably relativized to the entire outlook of the person in question.¹² Accordingly, in parallel with our condition of no openness, this condition will be necessary but not sufficient: One might be entirely willing to risk everything on the truth of a certain proposition and yet be willing to abandon it, or at least risk much less on it, should even rather slight experience to the contrary present itself.

One may liken these two conditions to the two independently necessary conditions of being flat which we mentioned earlier, namely, being not at all curved and being not at all bumpy. In the case of being flat, we deal with matters which we may picture. So, there we may get pictures of the different ways things may meet a necessary condition and yet fail to be flat. Here, then, is a view of a surface which, while not at all bumpy, is not flat:

(Infinite smooth hyperbola)

PETER UNGER

The problem with this surface is that it is curved, though perhaps ever so slightly or gently so. On the other hand, we may have a surface which is not at all curved (though some technical usages might call it so), but which fails to be flat for failing to be not at all bumpy:



(Right-angled sawtooth)

(Of course, things which are not surfaces and which have none may meet both of these necessary conditions while easily failing to be flat. Thus, numbers and treaties are not at all bumpy and not at all curved, but neither are they flat.) In the case of being certain, we do not of course have the aid of pictorial representation. We cannot use our eyes or our mind's eye to see how being not at all open differs from being not at all hesitant to risk. But, we may understand that the logical relation of these two being certain is just the same as that of pictorially understood conditions to being flat. (Again, other things, like stones, may easily fail to be certain of something though they are not at all open and not at all hesitant in the relevant respects. This parallels a number's meeting the necessary conditions but failing to be flat. The parallel holds because in both cases the conditions are just negative ones.)

It should be quite clear from this discussion that we do not identify being certain with being not at all open to new experience, or even to what we may call the attitude of certainty. Rather, we only claim that the latter is a *necessary* condition of one's being certain, or a logically *essential* feature of one's personal certainty in a matter. It is in just this way that the attitude described by Malcolm and Hintikka fits into our general account of absolute terms. But, of course, it is just in this way that the attitude they describe is needed for our skeptical argument.

5. Why Is There Always Something Wrong With Having This Absolute Attitude?

At the beginning of his brilliant paper, "Certainty", G. E. Moore, perhaps the most influential opponent of skepticism in this century, makes some assertions and, as he points out, does so in a very positive and definite way. In just this way, he says, for example, that he had clothes on and was not absolutely naked. Moore goes on to note that although he did not expressly say of the things which he asserted that he *knew* them to be true, he implied as much by asserting them in the way he did. His words are these:

. . . . I implied . . . that I myself knew for certain, in each case, that what I asserted to be the case was, at the time I asserted it, in fact the case. And I do not think that I can be justly accused of dogmatism or over-confidence for having asserted these things positively in the way that I did. In the case of

AN ARGUMENT FOR SKEPTICISM

some kinds of assertions, and under some circumstances, a man can be justly accused of dogmatism for asserting something positively. But in the case of assertions such as I made, made under the circumstances under which I made them, the charge would be absurd.¹³

I think that we may take it that, according to Moore, the reason he could not so be accused is that he was *not* dogmatic here. And the reason for that is that he *knew* these things, e.g., that he was not naked, so that he was *justified* in being absolutely *certain* of them. And, so, in those innocuous circumstances of speech, he was justified in acting out of, or in accord with, his position or attitude of personal certainty. Moore was saying, in effect, that one could have this by now familiarly characterized attitude without any pain of being at all dogmatic in the matter: That no new experience or information will have any effect at all on one's thinking in the matter at hand, in this case, in the matter of whether at the then present time one is absolutely naked or not. Moore's position here is, then, quite of a piece with Malcolm's thought that it is *not at all unreasonable* of him to allow nothing to count as contrary evidence in the matter of whether an ink-bottle is before him. But Moore's point is more particular than Malcolm's, for he notes the *particular way* in which one who is certain might be thought to be unreasonable, or not justified, in his attitude: He might be thought to be such *in that* he is *dogmatic* in the matter. Moore similarly foreshadows, while focusing more clearly on the form of the opposite view, Hintikka's implication that in many matters one is *justified* in disregarding any further information: In situations where one knows, Moore says or implies, one is not at all dogmatic in having just such an absolutely negative position or attitude. It seems, then, that Moore was more sensitive than these other authors to the possibility that *dogmatism* might (almost) always be charged of one who was absolutely certain, even when he might rather plausibly claim to know. Now, it strikes me as oddly unfortunate, in a way, that others who actually spelled out what was involved in being certain, were not so sensitive to this particular charge. For it is, I think, precisely the feature they spell out which makes the charge of dogmatism live and convincing. By the same token however, it is to Moore's credit that, without articulating the key idea, he was able to sense the charge of *dogmatism* as a particular threat to his position, perhaps as the key one. Indeed, in the three full sentences I quoted, he refers to this charge as many times. We may put the substantial question, then, in these words: Was Moore referring to a charge of some real substance, or was he right in contending that (because he knew) there was really nothing to be feared?

Controversy being what it is, dogmatism is most often associated with questions or matters where there does not seem to be a clear-cut answer either way. For example, someone might commonly be called dogmatic about whether some form of socialism is the most efficient form of government for the economic growth of a certain country now. Or one might well be called dogmatic about whether the old-time baseball stars were better hitters than their modern counterparts. Perhaps, one might be recognizably dogmatic in the matter of whether Germany would have been defeated eventually had the

United States not entered World War II. During a discussion of such matters as these, people commonly refuse to be moved *at all* by apparently forceful evidence for the other side; instead, they belittle that evidence as misleading or irrelevant. It is at these times that we say people are just being dogmatic and that, if they continue to have such an attitude, there can be no point in discussing the matter with them.

People may, of course, be more or less dogmatic in various matters: The more dogmatic someone is, the less the evidence he would admit as relevant and possibly damaging. When *nothing* is allowed to count, the person is completely dogmatic about the matter. Now, it may be that some people who are dogmatic, even completely dogmatic, about a certain thing are not absolutely certain of that thing. Perhaps they would not bet so much on its truth; perhaps they would not be so ready to draw inferences from it, and so on. Thus, their exclusionary attitude toward new experience is not on a par with certain other things, as it might be in cases where matters seem clear-cut, e.g., where the matter is whether one is absolutely naked, or whether there is an ink-bottle before one. This may make people's dogmatism more obvious in controversial cases than in clear-cut ones. There are a number of reasons for this, some themselves quite obvious and some not quite so obvious. In apparently clear-cut cases, there is, first of all, likely to be no disagreement on the matter, so no one is apt to question anyone else's view in the matter. But, more than that, each person is likely to be at least quite close to being perfectly certain of his position, at least if he has about as much experience or involvement in the matter as other parties present. So, no one is apt to question either the degree of strength of anyone's position, since anyone else's is quite close on that score to his own. These are quite obvious reasons for there being no apparent dogmatism in matters where things appear to be certain, e.g., where people agree that it is quite plain that there is a rug on the floor where they are standing. But, here are some reasons which, though less obvious, may operate as well. In the first place, it may be that in many matters which seem certain, people are not really absolutely certain of things. This is what I suggested before, in preparing the way for skepticism.¹⁴ If this is correct then, as people will not be absolutely certain even, e.g., that there is a rug on the floor, any dogmatic feature of being certain will not be there to be noticed even in such cases, and so for this most elementary reason must of course not be noticed. All that will be noticed then might be everyone's agreement in the matter. But if this is not so and people are certain, there will be further factors unobviously masking possible dogmatism anyway. And these may be at work as well when people are quite close to being absolutely certain of something. Whether people are perfectly certain or only nearly so, the sorts of experiences which might be pertinent to their becoming less certain, whether in actuality or only in description, are not likely to present themselves. They will likely range from very unusual to utterly bizarre. Thus, tests for spotting too great an adherence on someone's part, that is, too exclusionary an attitude to contrary experience, are not likely to arise in such matters. With people being thus untested, any dogmatic feature on this score will go unnoticed in the normal course of life and conversation.

AN ARGUMENT FOR SKEPTICISM

Still another reason for the masking of dogmatism here might be the lack of a relevant inconsistency in such matters. This is suggested from our previous discussion, where we saw that personal certainty has several independent necessary conditions or, so to speak, essential dimensions. In a controversial case, the following sort of inconsistency often arises: a man who is very exclusionary in his attitude regarding a particular proposition may, at the same time, not be so willing to risk stakes or base inferences in it as on several other less controversial propositions. In other words, in such matters, people often are not even very close to being certain—mainly, at least, for failing to be close along dimensions other than the one of tenacity. Thus, their tenacity in debate or discussion bespeaks an inconsistency on their part which is unreasonable and, in a way at least, dogmatic. This sort of dogmatism will not be present when people are even very nearly certain, or at least it will never be obviously present then. For, in such cases, the disparity involved will be, of analytic necessity, nothing or very small. Thus, in apparently clear-cut cases, it may be that the only way that one might be thought dogmatic is through the appreciation of an overly exclusionary attitude. No significant inconsistency, at any rate, is likely to bring such a charge.

There are quite enough reasons, for our not noticing dogmatism in cases where matters are, not controversial but, clear-cut. Accordingly, we should suspect that in quite clear-cut cases, one might well be at least very nearly certain of something and dogmatic for having too exclusionary an attitude in the case. For one's dogmatic feature is not likely to be brought to one's attention. In consequence, we ought to be careful to guard against being prejudiced against the possibility that in apparently clear-cut cases people may often be dogmatic.

We may now, I think, more fairly assess the question of whether in cases where one is absolutely certain, supposing there are any such, one's attitude is dogmatic at least in some degree. In such a case, there may be no relevant inconsistency, there being no disparity between one's tenacity and willingness to risk and infer. And, it may well be that no one will ever disagree with one, or even be much less certain of the thing. For, when one is absolutely certain, as we are supposing, the matter is likely to be clear-cut. But, even if nothing rubs the wrong way, from within oneself or without, one's attitude in the matter is this: I will not allow *anything at all* to count as evidence against my present view in the matter. The case being clear-cut, this attitude will cause one no trouble nor bring any challenge. But, what is one to think of it anyway, even if no penalty or embarrassment is liable ever to occur. I think that any reflection at all makes it pretty plain that, no matter how certain things may seem, *this* attitude is always dogmatic and one who has it will always be open to that charge even if circumstances mean that he will never be exposed to it.

Now, in order to see more clearly why, even in the apparently most clear-cut and certain matters, there is something wrong with letting nothing count against one's being right, it will *help* to describe some sequences of experience. I do *not* think that such an appreciation of detail is really necessary to gaining conviction that the attitude of certainty is always dogmatic and, providing there are no other considerations in its favor, to be foregone in favor of a more open minded position. One must favor such an attitude in any case, no matter how

certain something seems and no matter how little one is able to imagine what experiences there might be which, should they ever occur, one had best consider seriously and not just disregard. This is the right view in the matter however poor our own imaginations might be. But, the strength of habits to the contrary being so great, it will be a big help if we can succeed in imagining sequences of experience which seem to cry out for serious thought. Even in the cases of things which at first seem quite certain, then, and beyond any possibility of questioning at all, I will strive to be of service by imagining experiences. These described experiences should help one grasp firmly the idea that the attitude of certainty is always dogmatic.

6. Helpful Experiences for Rejecting The Attitude of Certainty.

In quoting Malcolm's meditations on himself and his ink-bottle, we looked at some sequences of experiences which, if they occurred, might rightly be considered to have some weight and, accordingly, result in one's not being quite so certain as before that there is or was an ink-bottle before one. Malcolm says he wouldn't take those experiences as relevant here, that that is his attitude and that all of that is perfectly all right. I would disagree. But, in any event, it seems that one can easily imagine experiences which are more telling in this regard. And, also, with only more difficulty, one can imagine others which are easily more telling.

In respect of the matter of that ink-bottle, there are, it seems to me, all sorts of possible experiences which might cast some doubt. For example, one may be approached by government officials who seem to demonstrate that the object on one's desk is a container of a material to poison the water supply, which somehow found its way out of government hands and into one's home. It was disguised to look like an ink-bottle, but it is seen to have many small structural features essential to such a container of poison but which no ink-bottles have. One might well think, then, that though this object holds ink it is not an ink-bottle but, rather is something else. Perhaps, then, there never was *an ink-bottle* before one, but only some such other object. It seems, at any rate, that such an experience as this should not be disregarded out of hand no matter what one eventually should come to think about whether an ink-bottle was before one. An attitude which would thus disregard it seems, then, to be a dogmatic one.

The experience just described is, I suppose, less than completely convincing. And, even if it is admitted that the experience does have some weight, it seems easy enough to retreat to other statements which are not thus susceptible to experimental challenge. For example, one may be, instead, absolutely certain that there is before one something which looks like an ink-bottle, or that there is something with a circular top, or whatever the favored things turn out to be. Though the sort of experience just imagined might go against one's being certain that *an ink-bottle* is before one, such a sequence of experience will not go against one's certainty about many other things: that there are automobiles, that there have been automobiles for quite some time now, and that one is not

AN ARGUMENT FOR SKEPTICISM

now absolutely naked. To get a more completely convincing case about one ink-bottle, and to begin to get a convincing case for these less susceptible things, one's imagination must work more radically. Descartes was quite well aware of the problem when he imagined his evil demon. We may do well to follow suit, though in a more modern and scientific vein.¹⁵

I begin to imagine a more radical sequence of experience by supposing myself to experience a voice, coming from no definite location, which tells me this, in no uncertain terms: All the experiences I am having, including that of the voice, are artificially induced. Indeed, this has been going on for all of my conscious life and it will continue to do so. The voice tells me of various experiences I have had, some of which I had myself forgotten almost entirely. It then says that scientists accomplish all of this with me; it seems to tell me what they are like, what I am really like and, in great detail, how they manage to bring about these effects in me. To make its case most convincing, the voice says what experiences I will next have, and next after that and, then, after that. First, I will seem to fly off the face of the earth to a planet where the inhabitants worship me because I have only one mouth. After that, I am to come back to earth and seem to find that I have been elected Secretary-Treasurer of the International Brotherhood of Electricians. Finally, if that is not preposterous enough, I will seem to open up my body and find myself stuffed with fried shrimps, even unto the inner reaches of my thighs. Miraculously enough, I experience just these to happen. The experiences are not as in a dream but indistinguishable from what I call the most ordinary waking experiences—except, of course, for the extraordinary content. Nor does this predicted sequence seem to take place in a flash, or in any very brief interval. To mirror what I take as reality, it seems to take a couple of months. After a convincing talk with the voice at the end of this experiential journey, I am left in a blue homogenous field of visual experience, feeling little but wonder, to think over whether an ink-bottle was ever before me, whether there are now or ever were any automobiles, and so on. Of course, the voice has told me that none of these things ever were, and told me why I thought otherwise. What am I to think now?

My attitude toward these imagined experiences is that if they should occur I would be at least somewhat less certain than I now am about these matters. I would be at least somewhat unconfident, even, that I was not naked at the time in question. This is my present attitude. If things would not develop in accord with it, that would be something I can now only hope will not happen. Moreover, I think it pretty plain that this is the attitude which I ought to have and that anyone who held an opposite one would have a dogmatic attitude in these matters. That is, if one's attitude is that these experiences will not be counted as having any weight at all, one would be dogmatic in these matters.

Now, some people might have the attitude that if these experiences occurred one should think himself to be quite mad or, at least, to have had his capacity for judgement impaired in some damaging way.¹⁶ My own attitude is more open than this. But it should be pointed out that even this attitude of prospective self-defeat is quite compatible with that of lessening one's confidence. One's total attitude, that is, might be that if the imagined experiences really came to

pass one would both be less certain that there ever were automobiles and also be inclined to think that one must have become quite mad. All that I am claiming or need to claim is that one ought to have at least the first part of this total attitude or, more precisely, that one ought not to have the opposite attitude that any such experiences will be completely disregarded.

It is easy to suppose that I am claiming quite a lot for these imagined experiences no matter how hard I try to make it clear that all I claim is rather little. One might suppose that, according to what I am saying, if the appropriate experiences turned up one ought to believe the opposite of what now seems to one to be absolutely certain—or that the proper attitude is one to this effect. But I am, in fact, saying no such thing. All I am saying is that one's attitude should be that one will be less certain of those things than one formerly was. If one is now just as certain that there are automobiles as that ten and ten are twenty, then towards the experience of our voice denying the first while affirming the second one's attitude ought to be that a difference will emerge: one will then be less certain that there are or were automobiles than that ten and ten are twenty. At least this much must be admitted, I think, even if one may properly be set never actually to believe that there are no automobiles. Again, one might suppose that I have it that one must be prepared, in the face of such experiences, to abandon one's position or view in, say, the matter of automobiles. But I am not saying even this. One might just as well, so far as what I say goes, continue to believe that there are automobiles. That one's attitude should be to this effect might be quite all right according to my argument here. What is not all right, I say, is to hold it *as certainly as ever* that there are automobiles. Now, my *own* attitude is that should such experiences as these actually occur and persist, I *would* consider my present experiences to be an induced illusion, just as the voice would say. And I would *believe* the opposite of what now seems so certain to me. I think that there is nothing wrong with this attitude and I suspect that there is something wrong with any which is grossly incompatible with it. These points will, however, strike some as being rather more controversial. It is for this reason that I have taken pains to put forward a much weaker and, I think, quite uncontroversial claim about attitudes toward experiences. And, for just this reason, I have been careful to point out the difference between this safer claim and these others which I also believe to be true. Since only the safer claim is needed to establish that the attitude of certainty is, even in these simple matters, dogmatic, it is hard to deny that this attitude is indeed just that.

7. Helpful Experiences for the Hardest Cases.

In respect of almost any matter, the possibility of certain imagined sequences of experience makes quite a convincing case that one ought not, on pain of dogmatism, have the attitude of absolute certainty. There are, however, two sorts of matters where something more must be said to explain how such experience might help us to appreciate the wrongness of this severe attitude. I treat them in turn, proceeding from the less to the more difficult.

AN ARGUMENT FOR SKEPTICISM

The first and lesser difficulty concerns certain sorts of matters about the past. The most famous of these due to Russell,¹⁷ is the matter of whether the world sprang into existence five minutes ago. But the matter of whether one-self has existed for more than a brief moment will pose the problem more clearly so far as sequences of convincing experiences are concerned. The problem may be put like this: If any sequence of experience is to be convincing, it must itself endure for much more than a brief moment. Even in advance of any experiences which might look to show that one has been in existence only for a brief moment, one can and ought to appreciate this fact about the conditions of convincing. Therefore, it is in any case quite all right to have the attitude that no possible experience will be counted as convincing evidence for the claim that one has existed only for a brief moment. Rather, one may disregard any new experience which purports to be to this effect.

The difficulty with this reasoning is that it doesn't take into account how new experiences might make us view time differently. If our voice told us new things about time, we might not be able to disregard it without ourselves being dogmatic. Suppose that the voice says that one has been brought into existence only a brief moment ago complete with an accurate understanding of how long temporal intervals are. But one is also provided, the voice says, with an appealing consistent web of ostensible memories: to believe that one has experienced the things it seems to one that one has will be, then, only to believe what is false. Now, the recent experiences one indeed has had are, according to the voice, part of a sequence which has gone on only for a brief moment, a billionth of a second, to be quite precise. And, this includes these very messages that even now are coming to one. Though it seems to one that the experiences have been going on for some months, one has in fact been alive for only a brief moment and, indeed, the world of concrete things, including the source of the voice, has existed for less than a minute. In response to these vocal claims one might put forward some relativistic theory of time on which the claims would make no sense and, at any rate, on which they could not possibly be true. But, that would only be to adduce some theory. And, if there is anything scientific about science it is that one should never be too certain of any theory, no matter how beautiful, comprehensive and powerful it may seem. So it seems that, no matter how one might wish to reply, one would do well to allow some influence for such a sequence of experience as the one just imagined. One should have the attitude, at least, that should it occur one will be not quite so certain, as one otherwise might be, that one has been alive for more than a brief moment.

The greatest difficulty in finding possible experience a help in abandoning the attitude of certainty comes, I think, in matters where we think that the only possible error must be a "purely verbal" one. This occurs, I take it, with matters of "immediate experience", e.g., with whether one is now experiencing phenomenal blueness or pain. And, it occurs with the "simplest matters of logical necessity", e.g., with whether two is the sum of one and one. Perhaps the most famous case, due to Descartes, is that concerning one's own present moment thinking and existence, e.g., whether one now exists. Now, some philosophers have found it quite an article of faith to suppose that there might

PETER UNGER

be anything to answer to the word "I". They would think, I suppose, that what one ought to be sure of is that *something* now exists, leaving it quite open, what that thing might be. Even if it is true that in such matters as these, any error must be purely verbal, why shouldn't the possibility of just such an error make the attitude of absolute certainty dogmatic in these very matters? I have never heard anything to convince me of the opposite. It is said that what one believes or is certain of are propositions or, at least, some things that are too abstract to have uncertainty over words interfere with their status. Let us agree at the outset that we understand such attempts to downgrade the effect that words might have. But, nevertheless, ought not the following story about possible experience cause at least some very small doubts to enter one's mind? Again, we have our voice. After going through the sequence of experiences I described before, the voice tells me that I become easily confused about the meanings of certain terms. It says that on occasions, and now is one of them, I confuse the meaning of "exist", a word which means, roughly, "to continue on in the face of obstacles", with the meaning of "persist", a word which, roughly shares a meaning with the verb "to be". Consequently, in philosophizing, I often say to myself "I exist" and "It seems certain to me that I *exist* now". And, I then seem to remember that I have never thought otherwise. But, in fact, of course, I am quite a changeable fellow and, so I rarely if ever *exist*. It is true that I *persist*, as everyone does, and I *should* say *this* when I do that philosophizing. No doubt, I will soon change once again and say and think, rightly, that what I do is *persist*. This will then seem certain to me, which is better than it's seeming certain to me that what I do is *exist*, since at least the former is something which is *true*. But, it would be far better still if *neither* ever even *seemed* to be absolutely certain. At the very least, the voice concludes, I ought never to *be* certain of these things, no matter how tempting that might be. This is especially true in my case because I am so changeable and, as a consequence, so often and so easily confused.

I have no doubt that many would want to protest to this voice. Some might say that the matter of whether the words "I exist now" express a truth and that of whether I exist now are two utterly different matters. Now, it is very true that these matters are very different. But, why should that lead anyone to protest what I am saying? What I am saying is just that under certain conditions of experience one ought to become less certain than before that one indeed *exists*, that one thing one does is *exist*. Indeed, one may be in just such an experiential situation even while being quite confident that the words "I exist now" do indeed express a truth. We may suppose, after all, that the voice tells one that one *does* continue on in the face of obstacles, and so one ought to be confident that one *exists*, as well as that one *persists*. Now, it *may* be that there is something deeply wrong with any of these vocal suggestions and, so, that one ought never to allow any to effect one's beliefs or attitudes even in the most minimal way. But I can't see how anyone can be absolutely certain that *this* is so. And, suppose that the *voice itself* went through all those matters with you and told you to rest assured that such verbal confusions can get you, and are now getting you, into error here. In that one might experience even this, so far as I can see, one's

AN ARGUMENT FOR SKEPTICISM

attitude in any of these matters ought not to be that of absolute certainty. Thus, one ought not, really, be absolutely certain that one now exists, or that something exists, or that one now feels pain, or whatever. Of course, the source of uncertainty we have just uncovered is present in matters which are not so apparently certain or simple. Thus, we may now appreciate a bit more fully why it is at least a bit dogmatic to be certain that there is an ink-bottle before one, that there ever are any automobiles, or that one has existed for more than a brief moment.

As I said earlier, these imagined sequences of experience are only meant to be a help in coming to the idea that being certain involves being dogmatic. Their role is to exemplify some situations where this feature of dogmatism might be brought out. I hope that the sequences I have described have been thus revealing and, so, convincing. But that they be so is hardly essential to making good our claim. For even if the particular experience one is able to imagine does not seem to jeopardize some statement which seems quite certain, one shouldn't be *sure* that there isn't any such sequence—possibly, even one which a human imagination just can't grasp in advance. And, even if there is no sequence of *experience* which ought to make one less certain, *mightn't* there be some other factor information about which ought to give one pause? Perhaps, there are some currently obscure conceptual truths about the nature of thought and reason, which show how any thinking at all is parasitic on the possibility of error in the case. No matter how comfortable one feels in his philosophy and his view of the world, I can't see how he might properly be *certain* that there is no way that he could possibly be wrong. He cannot properly be certain that he has given a complete accounting of every sort of experience, evidence and information which might possibly exist. For this reason, if for no other, it will be dogmatic of him ever to have the attitude that he will disregard *any* new experience, evidence and information which runs counter to what he holds.

This is our case, then, that being certain involves being dogmatic and, so, that there is always at least *something* wrong with being certain. As we noticed, whatever is wrong with this dogmatism may be overridden by other considerations, considerations which are not properly epistemological ones. But, the fact that there is always some dogmatism, whether overridden or not, means that nobody ever knows anything about anything. In this sense, then, dogmatism is the opposite of skepticism, and the necessary presence of dogmatism means that skepticism is really true.

8. Some Concluding Remarks.

Having argued for its premises at some length, there is not much left for me to say in support of our argument. As regards the first premise, one can keep checking for entailments that it would predict—especially when we conjoin it with our rigid condition for being certain: that one's attitude is that *nothing* will be allowed to change one's mind. Is it consistent to say, for example, "He regrets that he quit school, but his attitude is that he may yet change his mind about whether he did"? It seems that it is not. If that is right, then it speaks

PETER UNGER

strongly for the idea that knowing entails having the attitude that nothing will change one's mind. And, given the purported value and justifying power of knowing, it speaks also for the idea that knowing entails that it's all right for one to have this attitude, providing that there are no overriding reasons to the contrary. So, we trade on no equivocation in our first premise—on some “weak sense” of ‘certain’ to get it accepted and some “strong sense” to get it to connect with the second. The evidence for accepting it in the first place itself connects with what serves to make the second premise acceptable.

As regards the second premise, one may be in sympathy with its spirit, but may think that it takes things too far. Philosophy has traditionally distinguished between statements about one's own present moment existence and experience, on the one hand, and on the other, statements about things further removed from one's momentary consciousness. It has also separated the simplest or most intuitive logical truths and those which might better be called derivative. One might feel that as regards statements of these first two classes there is no real possibility of error, and only some confused argumentation might look to show otherwise. If one takes this position, which is not an entirely implausible one, one may restrict our argument and, accordingly, accept the skeptical thesis in a restricted form. First, he may accept our first premise

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

for he has voiced no cause for denying it. And, then, he may restrict the matters on which the second will be taken to hold true. Let us call the statements which he favors, “statements of type x”, and the correlative matters, “matters of type x”. Thus, the statement that something now looks blue to one might be allowed as a statement of type x, and the matter of whether something now looks blue to one would then be a matter of type x. Our restrictor may then say that he thinks it quite all right for one to be certain that something is so, provided that it is in a matter of type x. But then he may accept this restriction of our second premise:

(2qR) In respect of any matter which is not of type x, it is *not* the case that it is all right for someone to be absolutely *certain* that something is so providing only that no overriding (consideration or) considerations make it all right.

From these two premises, he will deduce the correlatively restricted form of skepticism:

(3R) In respect of any matter which is not of type x, nobody ever *knows* that anything is so.

Thus, we have a quite obvious refuge for one who thinks that some confusion must have come upon me when I claimed the attitude of certainty to be *every-*

AN ARGUMENT FOR SKEPTICISM

where dogmatic. He need not abandon skepticism about knowledge entirely. All he need refuse is a small part of what that thesis claims. He will accept the idea that, while a few simple sorts of things might be known, almost all the sorts of things which people claim to know to be so are never really known by anyone at all.

My final passage must emphasize again that 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 the ordinary sense of these words and, so far as I can discern, their *only* ordinary sense in the relevant sentences of philosophic 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. Now, a fairly standard attitude for a philosopher to take at this last juncture is the one of being gracious in defeat toward the skeptic's empty victory: "I will give you the words 'know' and 'certain', and never use them in the sorts of sentences and claims to which you have objected. Nor will I ever believe any such to be true. But, this still allows me to say and think almost everything I formerly did, for hardly any of our statements or beliefs are, in fact about whether people know or are properly certain of things. So, though skepticism may be right, it need not have much consequence even so far as the truth or falsity of things goes, much less regarding practical problems. The victory of skepticism about knowledge is as unimportant as it is isolated." What are we to say to this response? We must agree with at least the last remarks, that insofar as it is isolated skepticism's victory is bound to lack much significance. But, our objector has produced no evidence that any such isolation must be accepted as a consequence of victory. Surely, nothing which we have said in skeptical argument entails as much and, indeed, some things, like our experience with 'regret' and 'happy' point quite the opposite way. We need not, then, acquiesce to this hopefully disarming agreement from the former dogmatist. On the contrary, we may look forward with open minds toward looking into the question of what consequences our newly won skepticism might have.¹⁸ Perhaps, practical matters will not be much affected. But for those of us for whom truth matters, we may wonder at least that the consequences of skepticism might be quite material.¹⁹

FOOTNOTES

¹G. E. Moore, "Certainty" in *Philosophical Papers*, New York: 1962, p. 223, Sir A. J. Ayer, *The Problem of Knowledge*, Baltimore: 1956, pp. 33-35, Norman Malcolm, "Knowledge and Belief" in *Knowledge and Certainty*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: 1963, pp. 67-68, and Jaakko Hintikka, *Knowledge and Belief*, Ithaca, New York: 1962, pp. 20-21.

²For examples, see Malcolm, *op. cit.*, p. 62ff. and Hintikka, *op. cit.*, p. 18ff.

³For example, Spanish uses the verb 'saber' to translate the first of these sentences and 'conocer' to translate the second, and so for various other languages. This evidence is both indirect and inconclusive, but it is *some* evidence anyway.

⁴Perhaps philosophers who seem to see more senses than I do are using 'sense' in a different sense. Or, perhaps more likely, they are inventing a new sense for 'sense', so as to use the word to make important distinctions about the meaning of our expressions. But, without being impertinent, I can only request to see some reason for supposing that, even in such a new sense of 'sense', our verb 'know' has two senses.

⁵By 'any circumstance', I mean 'any logically possible circumstance', or 'any consistently describable circumstance'. This only means that we are willing to treat our premise as open

PETER UNGER

to any counter-examples even purely hypothetical, unrealistic ones so long as they may be consistently described.

⁶Malcolm, *op. cit.*, p. 67-68.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 67. The introductory clause "Insofar as I care about being right about. . . ." is left out by Malcolm. I think it may be necessary for ruling out certain counterexamples concerning untoward motivations. As it plays no important part in our argument however, I will leave it out from now on.

⁸Some such line of resistance was suggested to me by Gilbert Harman and also by Michael Lockwood.

⁹I owe to Saul Kripke the idea that these observations are important to consider for such matters.

¹⁰In a footnote on p. 68 of "Knowledge and Belief", Malcolm says that he doesn't think the word 'attitude' is very satisfactory. He would rather put things, he says there, in terms of some conditional statements about what he would say or think right now if or when he imagines things now as happening. But, actually, this latter suggestion is much the poorer and, indeed, Malcolm's choice of the word 'attitude' is quite apt and satisfactory.

¹¹Peter Unger, "A Defense of Skepticism", *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. LXXX, No. 2, (April, 1971), Sections II-IV. In a later issue of this journal, James Cargite replied to the skeptical suggestions in that paper of mine: "In Reply to a Defense of Skepticism", *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. LXXXI, No. 2, (April, 1972). Perhaps the present paper may be taken as deepening the debate between myself and this critic in a way that would not be possible in a brief and direct rejoinder on my part.

¹²A vivid characterization and illustration of this necessary condition of being certain, involving both himself and his wife, is given by Harry G. Frankfurt in "Philosophical Certainty" *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. LXXI, No. 3 (July, 1962), sections IV and V. The main difference here between Frankfurt and myself is that he thinks this complete willingness to risk is not implied by a meaning of 'certain' or even 'absolutely certain' but is only a philosopher's idea; which deserves a new expression, 'philosophically certain'. My own view of course is that no new expression is needed here.

¹³Moore, *loc. cit.*

¹⁴Unger, *op. cit.*, sec. IV.

¹⁵For a rather different but quite congenial description of unsettling experiences, see Edward Erwin's "The Confirmation Machine", in *Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. VIII, Roger C. Buck and Robert S. Cohen, eds.

¹⁶Malcolm suggests this sort of view in his lecture "Memory and The Past", *Knowledge and Certainty*, p. 201. He considers it in a somewhat different context, being most concerned there with the proposition that the earth has existed for no more than five minutes. I will treat such propositions as that in the section following this one. My thoughts on this view owe something to conversation with Michael Slote.

¹⁷Bertrand Russell, *The Analysis of Mind*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1921, pp. 159-160.

¹⁸I look into this question, or part of it, in the following two companion papers: "The Wages of Scepticism", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 3, (July, 1973) and "Two Types of Scepticism", (forthcoming in) *Philosophical Studies*.

¹⁹The main points of this paper were presented as part of a Symposium entitled "Perception, Observation and Skepticism" on March 30, 1973 in Seattle, Washington to the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association. My fellow symposiasts were Gilbert Harman and William P. Alston. Switching gears, I would like to thank the many people who have conversed helpfully with me about the ideas of this paper, and to give special thanks to Gilbert Harman, Saul Kripke and Michael Slote for their very great assistance in that regard.