Certainty Without Dogmatism: A Reply To Unger's "An Argument for Skepticism"

Georges Dicker

The College at Brockport
GEORGES DICKER
Assistant Professor of Philosophy
S. U. C. Brockport
CERTAINTY WITHOUT DOGMATISM: A REPLY TO UNGER’S 
“AN ARGUMENT FOR SCEPTICISM”

by

Georges Dicker

I

When confronted by a powerful philosophical argument for scepticism, one may be inclined to respond by minimizing its significance. One may feel like saying: “After all, we live in an uncertain world. We often find that we have been mistaken about things we thought we knew. Most of what we call knowledge is acquired at second or third hand from people or books whose reliability is somewhat questionable. Even the experts on most matters disagree among themselves. So what is so surprising about this conclusion that nobody really knows anything? Isn’t this what we should have expected? And what difference does it make, anyway?”

I think that such a response to Professor Unger’s argument would be quite mistaken. It seems to me that if nobody knows anything, the implications are radical. For example, the medical profession should be abolished; or at least a much larger number of people should be allowed to practice medicine. For if nobody knows anything, then doctors don’t know anything about the causes or cures of any diseases. Yes, you may answer, but at least they have reasonable beliefs about them, even if they don’t have knowledge. But many first-year medical students and a fair number of laymen have reasonable beliefs about the causes and cures of diseases. So if doctors don’t know anything about medicine but like medical students and some laymen only have reasonable beliefs about it, then there’s an easy and obvious solution to the shortage of doctors. Again, if nobody knows anything, it seems pointless to have departments of foreign languages, history, or physics. Professors of French don’t know the meaning of a single French word, historians don’t know that the United States had a civil war, physicists don’t know any principles of physics. Perhaps they should all be replaced by philosophers, who claim not to know the truth but only to love it! Seriously, if universal ignorance is our common lot, then obviously the implications are sweeping and radical. So my chief aim in this paper will be to show that Unger’s argument fails to establish his conclusion of universal scepticism.

Unger begins with a preliminary version of the argument, containing just two basic premisses. The first is that if any person did know anything to be so, then it would be all right for the person to be absolutely certain that it is so:

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

The second premiss is that it is never all right for anyone to be absolutely certain that anything is so:
CERTAINTY WITHOUT DOGMATISM

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

From these two premisses it follows that

(3) Nobody ever knows that p.

In the final version of the argument, Unger qualifies both basic premisses. He qualifies the first to allow for cases where even if someone did know that p it would not be all right for him to be certain that p because his certainty would be bad for non-epistemic reasons (e.g. it would have undesirable consequences). He qualifies the second to allow for cases where it is all right for someone to be certain that p because his certainty is good for non-epistemic reasons (e.g. it has beneficial consequences) that outweigh the disvalue of the dogmatism Unger thinks to be inherent in all certainty. In these two contrasting types of exceptional cases, Unger says that an overriding consideration (or considerations) makes it respectively not all right or all right for a person to be absolutely certain that something is so. Accordingly, he reformulates the premisses as follows:

(1q) If S knows that p, then it is all right for S to be absolutely certain that p providing only that no overriding consideration(s) make it not all right.

(2q) It is not the case that it is all right for S to be absolutely certain that p providing only that no overriding consideration(s) make it all right.

The introduction of the qualifications concerning overriding considerations complicates somewhat the logic of Unger's argument. For the sceptical conclusion that

S does not know that p

does not follow by Modus Tollens from (1q) and (2q), because (2q) is not the contradictory of the consequent of (1q). Indeed, the sceptical conclusion cannot be deduced from (1q) and (2q) alone. For what (2q) means is that it is never all right for S to be certain that p except when there are overriding (i.e. non-epistemic) considerations making it all right. In other words, a necessary condition for its being all right for S to be certain that p is that there be overriding considerations making it all right. And what (1q) asserts is that if S knows that p, then the absence of overriding considerations making it not all right for S to be certain that p is a sufficient condition for its being all right for S to be certain that p. To obtain the sceptical conclusion from these two premisses, the following premiss is also required: If the absence of overriding considerations making it not all right for S to be certain that p is a sufficient condition for its being all right for S to be certain that p, then it is not the case that the presence of overriding considerations making it all right for S to be certain that p is a necessary condition for its being all right for S to be certain that p. (Compare:
If the nonexistence of a law making it illegal to gamble is a sufficient condition for its being legal to gamble, then it is not the case that the existence of a law making it legal to gamble is a necessary condition for its being legal to gamble.) Thus the final version of Unger's argument is, strictly speaking, an enthymeme whose missing premiss appears to be an analytic truth.¹

I agree with Unger that the qualification concerning overriding considerations is needed. But for the sake of simplicity I shall address my critical remarks to the preliminary version of the argument, leaving the qualification understood. My objections to the argument continue to apply mutatis mutandis when the qualification is restored.

II

I have two criticisms to make of Unger's argument. First, I shall argue that premiss (1) is true only if the phrase "all right . . . to be . . . certain" has a different meaning in that premiss from the one it is supposed to have in premiss (2). If I am right about this, then even if both premisses are true the argument should be rejected as invalid because it equivocates on certainty. Second, I shall argue that the reason Unger gives for premiss (2)—that to be certain is to be dogmatic—is unsound. If I am right about that, then I think we may reject premiss (2).

In order for the argument to be valid the phrase "all right to be certain" must have the same meaning in both premisses. Of course Unger is perfectly aware of this; so near the end of his paper he says, "we trade on no equivocation in our first premi..." Nevertheless, I contend that the argument equivocates on certainty in just this way.

Consider first what we are told about why premiss (1) should be accepted. According to Unger, the idea that knowing entitles the knower to be certain of what he knows is one that "can hardly be faulted without doing violence to the concept of knowing," and one that "we all accept . . . at least generally." He cites, as alternative ways of expressing this idea, Ayer's well-known dictum that if one knows then one has the right to be sure, or the proposition "that if one knows something, then one is justified in being certain of that thing"—a proposition endorsed by Moore, Malcolm, Hintikka and many other epistemologists. Like these philosophers Unger thinks that "there is some analytic connection between knowing . . . and its being all right to be certain," so that it is only with premiss (2) that we pass beyond "mere questions of logical relations" and "that the substantive claim of the argument is made". The reason given for accepting premiss (1), then, is that it is an obvious, uncontroversial, and analytic truth.

Next let us ask how premiss (1) is supposed to connect with premiss (2). The answer is to be found, of course, in Unger's account of the certainty to which knowing would entitle the knower. This certainty, we are told, essentially involves what Unger calls "the attitude of absolute certainty." This is a totally exclusionary attitude toward any new experience or information that seems to tell against what one is certain of. As Unger puts it:
CERTAINTY WITHOUT DOGMATISM

... one's being absolutely certain of something involves one in having a 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... If S is certain that p, then it follows that S is not at all open to consider any new experience or information in the matter of whether p.

In characterizing this attitude toward new experience or information, Unger repeatedly uses such terms as "disregard", "disregard out of hand", "disregard completely", "reject entirely", and so forth. Evidently, then, the "attitude of absolute certainty" is not just the attitude that one would be able to explain or account for the new experience or information in such a way as to show that it does not really tell against what one is certain of. Rather, it appears to be the attitude of a man determined in advance to disregard, ignore, or refuse to consider any apparent counterevidence no matter how directly it may seem to bear on the matter in question.

I agree with Unger that this attitude is dogmatic, indeed irrational in the extreme. But I submit that if having this attitude is really required for being certain of something, then premiss (1) of Unger's argument is neither analytic nor even true. To see this, suppose we substitute the description of this attitude into premiss (1). This gives:

(1s) If S knows that p, then it is (perfectly) all right for S to have the attitude that he would disregard, reject or refuse to consider any new experience or information to be at all relevant to any possible change in his thinking as to whether p.

I think it is clear that this proposition is not one that "we all accept... at least generally"; and that it is not the same as any uncontroversial analytic truth about knowing endorsed by Ayer or the other philosophers Unger mentions. For when we are told that knowing gives the knower the right to be sure, or that it justifies him in being certain, what we are being told is obviously tied to the knower's justification or warrant for accepting a proposition. Thus, premiss (1) could be paraphrased in the following way:

(1a) If S knows that p, then S's justification or warrant for accepting p meets a certain maximum standard, entitling S to a corresponding degree of confidence in p.

In other words, knowing that p entitles the knower to a degree of confidence in p that matches or is appropriate to p's having met a certain maximum standard of justification. I shall not try to say how such a standard should be defined nor how it would be shown that any proposition meets it. These are major issues in the theory of knowledge. But I do not think that I need to go into these issues in order to make my point. This is that the thought that knowing entities
the knower to be certain of what he knows is not the same as and does not entail the thought that it entitles him to disregard utterly or refuse to consider any apparent counterevidence. Indeed, (1s) does not seem to be an analytic truth at all: what is contradictory about asserting that S knows that p and denying that it is perfectly all right for S to disregard or refuse to consider any new experience or information to be at all relevant to any possible change in his thinking as to whether p? Finally, (1s) seems to be false. Suppose that doctors know that the cause of tuberculosis is the tubercule bacillus. Even so, I submit that it is not perfectly all right for them to disregard or refuse even to consider any new medical data that seems to suggest that the tubercule bacillus may not be the true cause of tuberculosis. One might try to reject this counterexample by maintaining that the reason it is not all right for doctors to disregard the new data is that this is a case where an overriding consideration makes it not all right: had the doctors been mistaken about the true cause of tuberculosis, avoidable suffering and death would have resulted. But this will not do. Overriding considerations cannot include the consideration that bad consequences would have resulted had one been mistaken. For any result of such a mistake is one which it is in our power to avoid only by maintaining the highest epistemic or evidential standards—such as never refusing to consider surprising new data. Thus, the fact that disregarding new data could have had bad consequences had one been mistaken, far from being irrelevant to the truth of (1s) when the qualification about overriding considerations is kept in mind, shows the falsity of (1s) all the better. But there are counterexamples of a more neutral sort as well. Suppose that astronomers know that there are only nine planets in our solar system. To make this easier, imagine that several astronomers have thoroughly and simultaneously surveyed every portion of space within the sun's gravitational field, that they have done this several times under carefully controlled conditions of observation, that each time they have found only nine planets, and that there are in fact only nine planets. Even so, and from the point of view of one whose sole interest is in the truth of the matter, it is not perfectly all right for the astronomers to disregard any new indication that there may be a tenth planet.

III

I have argued that in order for the first premiss of Unger's argument to be true, the concept of certainty embedded in that premiss cannot be the one featured in his defense of the second premiss. I turn now to my second criticism, which is that the second premiss need not be accepted in any case, because one can be certain of something without having a dogmatic attitude. Unger's defense of premiss (2) underscores what is surely an important aspect of certainty—that it involves some sort of severe attitude toward new experience or information. One valuable feature of Unger's argument is that it forces us to think about this attitude, and indeed to wonder whether it can be anything but dogmatic. Accordingly, I shall proceed by describing the attitude that I think is really involved in being certain of something. I hope to show that there need be nothing dogmatic about this attitude. First, however, let me give one reason for
CERTAINTY WITHOUT DOGMATISM

thinking that this attitude isn't the one described by Unger. If we ever have the right to be certain of anything, then that right will characteristically be acquired by seeking and weighing evidence. This includes considering and accounting for any apparent counterevidence. Yet, according to Unger's account of certainty, the right to be certain would have to consist in the right to (have the attitude that one would) disregard or refuse to consider any new experience or information that seems to tell against one's position. Now I find it difficult to understand how a right which (whether or not we ever have it) would characteristically be acquired by attending to evidence could itself be a right to disregard evidence. To put my point correctly—since it is contradictory to speak of a right to disregard evidence—I do not see how a right acquired by attending to whatever data seems relevant could itself be a right to disregard data that seems relevant. It might be thought that the conception of such a right is intelligible at least with respect to mathematics and logic. For example, once I have proved the validity of an argument I may reject with impunity anything suggesting that the argument is invalid because logical proof is a conclusive method of establishing validity. But from this it does not follow that I may reject any contrary data as irrelevant, but only that there is a certain range of things I need not consider. For instance, I need not consider the fact that the argument seems intuitively invalid to me, since I have shown its validity by a method that supercedes intuition. Nor need I worry about the fact that many people accept the premisses but reject the conclusion. But suppose a famous logician claims to have found an error in the derivation of a theorem I was relying on in my proof. Plainly I am not justified in disregarding this new information out of hand. The conclusiveness of logical or mathematical proof, then, does not make intelligible the notion of a right, acquired by attending to data that seems relevant, to disregard data that seems relevant. The notion of such a right seems to me as incoherent as this: a right to lie, cheat or steal acquired by having been scrupulously honest up to the present.

What attitude toward new and apparently contrary data is really involved in being (absolutely) certain of something? I think it is the following: complete confidence that there will be some explanation of the new data such that it is not really evidence against what one is certain of. In other words, if S is (absolutely) certain that p, then S is completely confident that there will be some explanation of any new data that seems to tell against p such that this data does not really tell against p. For example, I am now absolutely certain that I live on Holley Street. Yet I admit it is possible that next time I look at the street sign next to my home I shall see it reading "State Street". Does my being certain that I live on Holley Street mean that I must have the attitude that I would utterly reject, disregard or refuse to consider the sign to be at all relevant to any possible change in my belief as to the street I live on? I think not. Rather, it means that I am completely confident that there would be some explanation for the sign such that its reading "State Street" does not really tell at all against my belief that I live on Holley Street. Perhaps the sign has been painted over by vandals, perhaps someone has switched the signs on Holley and State streets for a joke, perhaps I am so distracted that I took the wrong street
and still don't realize that I am about to enter someone else's house. I am now completely confident that should I have the experience of seeing the sign next to my house reading "State Street", there will be some such neutralizing explanation of that experience, i.e. some explanation in virtue of which it does not really tell at all against my living on Holley Street. This attitude is not dogmatic because it implicitly recognizes that should I be mistaken about there being a neutralizing explanation of the sign then I may be mistaken about the street I live on; it implicitly recognizes, as opposed to ignoring or disregarding, the possible evidential force of the sign. Yet it is an attitude of (absolute) certainty because I am completely confident that there would be a neutralizing explanation of the sign. Finally the attitude is justified because I have ample evidence that I live on Holley Street—more than enough evidence to entitle me to my confidence that a neutralizing explanation of the sign would be forthcoming.

It is worth noting that in the article by Norman Malcolm cited by Unger as evidence for his account of certainty, where Malcolm describes his certainty that there is an ink-bottle before him, he does not say that if his hand should seem to pass through the bottle with no feeling of contact, or if the bottle suddenly vanished, or if several persons assured him that there was no bottle, or if he suddenly found himself in a garden with no ink-bottle about, he would simply disregard or refuse to consider these experiences. Rather, he offers for each of them a neutralizing explanation, i.e. one in virtue of which they would not really be evidence against there being an ink-bottle before him:

I could say that when my hand seemed to pass through the ink-bottle I should then be suffering from hallucination; that if the ink-bottle suddenly vanished it would have miraculously ceased to exist; that the other persons were conspiring to drive me mad, or were themselves victims of remarkable concurrent hallucinations . . . that I might be instantaneously transported to the garden.4

There are cases where it may seem that being certain of something involves the wholly exclusionary attitude toward new data described by Unger, because in those cases it is difficult to make out the difference between such a dogmatic attitude and the one I have described. One such case is described by Unger as follows:

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 mathematician will never say anything 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 certain of the sum, then you are not absolutely certain that one and one are two. If you think that you are absolutely certain of this sum, then, I submit, you should also think that your attitude will be to reject entirely the message from the mathematician or God.
I think this example plays an important role in Unger's argument as a whole. For in this case it does look as though if one is absolutely certain of the sum then one must be ready to disregard or "reject entirely" the contrary message. But then, given Unger's plausible claim that there is only one meaning for "absolutely certain" when it refers to a psychological state, one may feel obliged to generalize from this example and so to agree that in all other cases of personal certainty, the person must be prepared to disregard or entirely reject any apparent counterevidence. But even if we insist that such an attitude would not be unreasonable with respect to something so obvious as the sum of one and one, it certainly would be unreasonable or "dogmatic" with respect to less obvious and trivial matters. Accordingly, if one accepts Unger's claim that being certain of this simple sum requires readiness to disregard utterly the contrary message, one may be driven into the position (outlined by Unger in the concluding section of his paper) that with the exception of the simplest and most obvious matters, it is never all right to be certain and so one never has knowledge.

But is it true that if one is absolutely certain that one and one are two then one's attitude must be that one would disregard or "reject entirely" the contrary message? Here it is necessary to distinguish explicitly two possible meanings for the words "reject entirely" and similar phrases. On the one hand, these words may mean "ignore" or "refuse to consider." On the other hand, they may mean "judge to be wholly without weight" or "evaluate as wholly worthless." If a lab assistant gives a scientist a report claiming that it contains data that refutes the scientist's favorite theory, and the scientist responds by throwing the report into the garbage without looking at it, he is rejecting the report in the former sense of the term. But if the scientist reads the report, finds the data to be easily explainable in his theory, and so continues to accept the theory with confidence unabated, he is rejecting the report in the latter sense. The first type of rejection is dogmatic, the second isn't. Yet Unger sometimes seems to conflate the two: he seems to think that if one's attitude is that one's confidence in p would remain undiminished after some apparently contrary experience, then one's attitude must be that one would dogmatically refuse to consider its weight; whereas in fact one's attitude may be that one would consider the experience but judge it to be wholly without weight against p. And when this distinction is applied to the example of the sum of one and one, the example's force evaporates. For why should being certain that one and one are two require rejecting the contrary message in the former sense of ignoring or refusing to consider it? Indeed, I have some difficulty imagining what it would be like to reject it in that way. Presumably, it would not consist in flatly denying having had experiences as of being told by God or the mathematician that one and one are three: being certain of something doesn't require repressing apparent counterevidence. Would it then consist in this: first I feel sure that one and one are two, then I seem to hear God or my favorite mathematician telling me that they are three, and then with unaltered state of mind I go on feeling sure that they are two? That seems psychologically difficult. Rather, it seems that in discounting the contrary message I would by the same token come to
think that there was an explanation for it such that it wholly failed to tell against the sum. For example, since I am absolutely certain that one and one are two, I would come to think that I was hearing voices, becoming delirious, or perhaps a little mad. Even if I became persuaded that God was talking to me, since I am absolutely certain that one and one are two and not three, I would in coming to think that God was talking to me also come to think that He wished to deceive me. As for my favorite mathematician, there are many possibilities: he is joking, he is giving new meanings to "1", "2", or "\(+\)", his mathematical aptitude has taken a sharp drop, he is using a different base for addition. Thus, even when one's certainty pertains to very simple or obvious matters, one's attitude need not be that one would reject any apparent counterevidence in the sense of ignoring it or refusing even to consider it. Rather, one is completely confident that there would be some explanation for it such that it is only apparent counterevidence, such that it does not really count at all against what one is certain of. So, one would reject it only in the sense of judging it to be wholly without weight, of making a totally negative evaluation of its worth as evidence. I believe that the same attitude is present when one's certainty pertains to less obvious or trivial matters; so that this account preserves the univocity of personal certainty no less than Unger's. Yet the account also shows, I believe, that one can be (absolutely) certain of something without having an unreasonable or dogmatic attitude.

Let me conclude with two disclaimers so as to forestall some possible objections. First, the account of certainty I have put forward does not presuppose that there can be no chance or random events, i.e. that everything that happens must have a causal or some other type of scientific explanation. To say that there is a neutralizing explanation of an item e of apparent counterevidence to p—one that explains why e does not really constitute evidence against p—is not necessarily to say that there is any explanation of e itself. Typically, as in the examples I have given, one explains why e does not really count against p by providing an explanation of e that reveals e's lack of evidential force against p. But it does not follow that one cannot do the former without doing the latter. For if e is a purely chance event (in which case there is no explanation of e), that explains why e has no evidential bearing on p. A purely chance event is by nature not related to any other state of affairs in any way that would allow it to be evidence for or against the latter. Of course, the description of a chance event may logically require the truth of p. This is illustrated by Malcolm's example (cited earlier), where an ink-bottle's miraculously ceasing to exist is offered as a neutralizing explanation of its suddenly vanishing. Describing e (the bottle's vanishing) as "the bottle's miraculously ceasing to exist" entails that p is true, i.e. that the bottle previously existed. But this is not an essential feature of the neutralizing explanation. If e is a miracle (in the relevant sense of a purely chance event), then, provided only that the description of e is logically compatible with p, that alone explains why e cannot constitute evidence against p.

It would be absurd to suppose, immediately upon the appearance of some apparent counterevidence, that it was due to a miracle. Obviously this possibil-
CERTAINTY WITHOUT DOGMATISM

Certainty should be entertained, if at all, only as a last resort. And I should think it never reasonable to be completely confident that any occurrence is a purely chance event—that there is not some still unknown explanation of it. However, given (i) a sufficient body of evidence for \( p \), and (ii) the failure of various other neutralizing explanations of an item \( e \) of apparent counterevidence to \( p \), it might be perfectly all right to be completely confident of the following disjunction: either \( e \) has a still unknown natural explanation in virtue of which it does not count against \( p \), or \( e \) does not count against \( p \) because it is a purely chance occurrence. Whether this attitude would be reasonable in given circumstances depends, I should think, on the nature of those circumstances and especially on the strength of the evidence already at hand for \( p \).

Finally, nothing I have said implies that if contrary data actually turns up, it is always perfectly all right to discount it without searching for its correct neutralizing explanation. In many cases, such as the street-sign case and the case of the sum of one and one, there would be nothing unreasonable about assuming that there was a neutralizing explanation without actually searching for it. But in other cases, such as the one about the number of planets and the one about the cause of tuberculosis, contrary data may be regarded as a challenge to one's right to keep one's attitude of complete confidence that a neutralizing explanation is available. And in those cases, failure to establish a neutralizing explanation could be grounds for relinquishing both one's certainty and one's claim to know. But it does not follow that one would not have been entitled to these in the first place.

**FOOTNOTES**

1This is best seen when one attempts to prove the validity of the argument. Thus, let \( K \) stand for “\( S \) knows that \( p \)”; \( C \) for “It is all right for \( S \) to be certain that \( p \)” ; \( O \) for “Overriding considerations make it not all right for \( S \) to be certain that \( p \)” ; and \( R \) for “Overriding considerations make it all right for \( S \) to be certain that \( p \)”. Then Unger's two qualified premisses may be symbolized as

\[
(1q) \ K \Rightarrow (~O \Rightarrow C) \\
(2q) \ C \Rightarrow R
\]

from which the sceptical conclusion

\[ \sim K \]

cannot be derived unless one supplies the additional premiss, “If it is all right for \( S \) to be certain that \( p \) providing only that no overriding considerations make it not all right, then it is all right for \( S \) to be certain that \( p \) even if no overriding considerations make it all right,” whose symbolization is

\[ (~O \Rightarrow C) \Rightarrow (~C \Rightarrow R) \]

2All quotations, except where otherwise indicated, are from Unger's paper.


5This example was suggested by Professor Jack Glickman.

6This objection was raised in discussion by both Professor Unger and Professor Max Black.