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Unger's Argument from Absolute Terms

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I. Introduction

Peter Unger's work in the seventies made him infamous as an epistemological skeptic, the first of many contrarian views Unger has defended over his productive career. Two of Unger's most significant contributions to epistemology are "A Defense of Skepticism" (*The Philosophical Review* 80:2 (1971) pp. 198-219) and Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism (Oxford University Press, 1975), which included a reworking of "Defense". As of my writing "Defense" has been cited an impressive 150 times while Ignorance has been cited an astonishing 925 times.¹ One would expect that the widely-cited work of a philosopher notorious for his onetime skepticism would have spurred sophisticated responses, critiques, and perhaps developments in the literature. Not even close: the argument of "Defense" and chapter two of Ignorance has only been seriously discussed four times.² Furthermore, Unger does not clearly state the role of the argument in Ignorance. Interestingly, unlike traditional skeptical arguments, this argument targets the belief condition on knowledge rather than the justification condition. The argument's novelty and its simultaneous popularity and neglect suggest that it is overdue for re-reading.

Unger does not name the argument. I call it The Argument from Absolute Terms (AAT). The argument says some terms denote 'absolute' semantic limits and thus have demanding standards for application. Consequently, absolute terms are rarely or never used to make true positive claims. "Certain" is one such term, and "knowledge" is defined by "certain". Thus "knowledge" also has demanding standards of application, and consequently knowledge claims are usually or always false. The AAT aims to demonstrate that we lack knowledge because we lack sufficient confidence, regardless of how strong our epistemic reasons often are.

In this paper, I (in §2) explain the curious role played by the argument in Ignorance, (§3) provide a critical presentation of the argument, and (§4) consider some outstanding issues and the argument's contemporary significance before concluding.

¹ Data from Google Scholar, accessed July 13, 2017.

² These are Andre (1982), Barnes (1973), Cargile (1972), and Dretske (1981).

II. The Role of the Argument from Absolute Terms in Ignorance

Unger states in the first chapter of Ignorance that he will present a version of “the classical argument for skepticism”, by which he means a closure-based skeptical argument (p. 8). They have this structure:

1. If S knows that p, then S knows that not-q
2. S does not know that not-q

3. S does not know that p

Premise 1 is supported by the principle that knowledge is closed under known entailment.

Premise 2 is plausible whenever a tough-to-eliminate knowledge-undermining proposition is substituted for “q”. The conclusion follows by *modus tollens*. Unger’s version of the classical argument says that if someone knows that there are rocks, then he knows that he is not deceived by an evil scientist into falsely believing that there are rocks; he does not know this; therefore he does not know that there are rocks. Unger’s presentation here is merely an updated version of Descartes’s.

In the start of chapter three, when Unger identifies the central argument of the chapter, he describes the same argument that concluded chapter one (cf. p. 46, p. 95). So, chapter three picks up where chapter one left off. But what about chapter two, wherein appears the expansion of “Defense”? He makes a cursory remark in chapter three that the material of chapter two is relevant to the chapter three argument: “The connection with our ideas about absolute terms is meant to be considerable” (p. 94). He does not say what the connection is. The arguments are plainly independent. I suspect that he was fully aware of this, which would explain why, at the start of chapter two, Unger marks off the argument of that chapter as special: “...I will also present a relatively independent and quite new skeptical argument” (p. 48). Relatively, indeed.

Unger summarizes the chapter two argument thus:

1. In the case of every human being, there is at most hardly anything of which he is certain.
2. As a matter of necessity, in the case of every human being, the person knows something to be so only if he is certain of it...
3. In the case of every human being, there is at most hardly anything which the person knows to be so (Ignorance p. 87-88; cf. “Defense” p. 216).

That argument is very different from the classical skeptical arguments presented in chapters one and three. Unger acknowledged the peculiarity of the chapter two argument:

My offering the argument I did will strike many philosophers as peculiar, even many who have some sympathy with skepticism. For it is natural to think that, except for the requirement of the truth of what is known, the requirement of ‘attitude’, in this case of personal certainty, is the *least* problematic requirement of knowing (p. 89).

The chapter two argument challenges the possibility of satisfying the attitude condition on knowledge rather than the possibility of having adequate epistemic justification for knowledge. Unger’s conception of certainty is psychological. It is important to note this because some philosophers distinguish psychological certainty and epistemic certainty, the (alleged) property of having the highest possible epistemic status (Reed 2011).

III. The Argument from Absolute Terms

The AAT claims that some English terms are “absolute terms” that denote semantic limits, that “certainty” is among them, that “knowledge” is partly defined by “certain” and consequently also has demanding standards of application. These, combined with the way the world is, imply that there is very little (if anything) that anyone knows. I take these in order, devoting more attention to the first and most difficult premise than the others. I will follow the expanded version of the argument that appears in Ignorance, citing “Defense” only where necessary. I withhold discussion of objections until the end.

Unger goes through the work of classifying terms as absolute and non-absolute to show that epistemic terms are not “isolated freaks of our language” (p. 54), alone in having demanding standards of application. Rather, he argues that English is stocked with terms expressing semantic limits—thus these terms’ alternative characterization as “absolute limit terms”—the presence of which can be discovered by tests that he proposes. Examples help illustrate the concept, which Unger consistently tries to bring out by emphasizing characteristics that a thing “really, truly” has. If something is really, truly straight, then nothing can be straighter than that thing is (p. 56). If something is really, truly flat, then nothing can be flatter than that thing is (p. 54). If something is perfect, then nothing can be better than it is. Absolute terms are so called because they can be modified with “absolutely” without altering the meaning of the sentence: “X is absolutely F” has the same meaning as “X is F” when “F” is an absolute term (p. 61). Similarly, “relative” terms, which behave in a superficially similar way to absolute terms but lack demanding standards of application, take “relatively” without affecting the meaning of the sentence: when “F” is a relative term, “X is relatively F” has ‘arguably’ the same meaning as “X

is F”.³ Of course, whether we should accept Unger’s distinction depends upon the success of his arguments. The absolute/relative contrast is exclusive but not exhaustive. He further distinguishes *basic* absolute terms and *defined* absolute terms. A defined absolute term is one that is partly defined by a basic absolute term. “Knowledge” is a defined absolute term, while “certain” is a basic absolute term that partly defines it.

Why think there are any such things as absolute terms? Unger argues that the absolute/relative characterization is a plausible explanation of some linguistic facts. He first offers a test for distinguishing basic absolute terms from relative terms. The test concerns the appropriateness of a sentence that results from modifying a term with an adverb or adjective to indicate the degree to which a thing exhibits some property. Consider “flat” and “bumpy”. Sentences involving either of them are intelligible when the thing that is said to be flat/bumpy is modified for degree, like “X is *very* Y” or “X is *a little* Y”. “This surface is *very* flat” and “This surface is *very* bumpy” are both perfectly acceptable, but they handle paraphrase differently. “This surface is very flat” can be comfortably paraphrased as “This surface is very *nearly* flat”. However, “This is very bumpy” does not paraphrase comfortably as “This is nearly bumpy”, as that entails that the surface is *not* bumpy. The difference in how “flat” and “bumpy” handle paraphrase suggests a general test for detecting that difference and labels the terms on that basis.

The Paraphrase Test: When “F” is an *absolute* term and “high-mod” is a high-degree modifier like “very” or “extremely”, “X is high-mod-F” will paraphrase comfortably as “X is nearly F” or “X is close to being F”; “X is low-mod-F” where “low-mod” is a low-degree modifier like “hardly” or “barely” paraphrases comfortably as “X is not close to being F” or “X is not nearly F”.

The Paraphrase Test merely characterizes absolute and relative terms. Both accept degree modifications, but they handle paraphrase differently.

According to Unger, the Paraphrase Test is most effective for *comparative* constructions (p. 59). Consider “This is not as flat as that is.” On the surface the sentence says that one thing has *more flatness* than something else. Unger suggests the paraphrase “This surface is not flat although that surface is, or this surface is not as nearly flat as that surface is.” That paraphrase

³ Two notes. First, Unger is less insistent that relative terms easily take “relatively” than that absolute terms easily take “absolutely”. Of the former, he says “it is arguable” that they do (p. 62). He says nothing about why this is so.

Second, one might *convey* additional content by through emphasis, including by adding words like “absolutely” and “relatively”. I address this in the Objections, below.

sounds comfortable enough. But it does not work for “bumpy”. “This is not as bumpy as that is” does not comfortably paraphrase as “This surface is not bumpy although that surface is, or this surface is not as nearly bumpy as that surface is.” The comparative paraphrase with “flat” implies that at most *one* of the surfaces is flat, while the “bumpy” paraphrase allows that both surfaces may both be bumpy to different degrees.

Unger offers a hypothesis as to why absolute and relative terms paraphrase differently.

Basic absolute terms, and so other absolute terms as well, generally may be defined, at least partially, by means of certain relative terms. The defining conditions presented by means of the relative terms are negative ones; they say that what the relative terms purport to denote is *not present at all*, or *in the least*,⁴ where the absolute term correctly applies; in that sense, the *limit* has been reached...For example, something is flat in the central, literal, spatial sense of “flat” only if it is *not at all*, or *in the least*, curved or bumpy...In noting these demanding negative standards, we may begin to suspect that a variety of absolute terms, if not all of them, might well be quite troublesome to apply, perhaps even failing consistently in application to real things and beings (p. 60).

The hypothesis is that the Paraphrase Test distinguishes terms that denote limits from terms that do not. When relative terms appear within degree constructions, the resulting sentence describes the thing as exemplifying a property to some degree. But when absolute terms are modified, the resulting sentence describes how close the thing comes to exemplifying the property (p. 57). The hypothesis for “flat” that explains why it handles paraphrase as it does is that if something is flat, then nothing could be flatter than that thing is (p. 54). It then follows that flatness does not come in degrees, but proximity to flatness does.

Recall that defined absolute terms are those that are defined by some absolute term. Unger admits that the Paraphrase Test fails to identify *defined* absolute terms as absolute rather than relative (p. 60). Unger uses “happy” as an example of a defined absolute term. “Mary is very happy that there are rocks” (his example) is not adequately paraphrased the ‘absolute’ way, which would read “Mary is nearly happy that there are rocks”. Thus “happy” appears to be a relative term. But it is not a relative term, says Unger, because there is a second test.

The Contradiction Test: If a sentence of the form “X is F but X is not-G” is self-contradictory, then X being G is necessary for X being F.

⁴ Unger’s “*not present at all*, or *in the least*” is rhetorical. The expression is not intended to be a disjunction. He is saying that absolute terms designate that what a relative term denotes is completely absent.

Unger claims that “Mary is happy that there are rocks but she isn’t certain that there are” is “inconsistent” (p. 61). Generalizing, he writes:

Now, if whenever anyone or anything is happy there is an implication to someone or something being certain, then “happy” will always really function semantically as, and so be, an absolute term (a defined one) (p. 61).

To claim that one term is defined by another is stronger than claiming that the true application of one term is a necessary condition of the true application of another term. Unger needs only the second, yet he explicitly states the first. X’s being G may be *necessary* for X’s being F, but it does not follow that X’s being G is a *constituent* of X’s being F. Only the latter would show that “happy” is *defined* in terms of “certain”, which is what Unger claimed in the quote. It is quite possible that for one to be happy that X requires that one is certain that X, even if it is not that case that one’s happiness *consists* in one’s being certain. Fortunately, this does not affect the AAT overall because Unger’s aim is just to show the inapplicability of many terms. Whether this is because those terms are defined by others that do not apply, or whether those terms simply entail others that do not apply, is of secondary interest.

Ignoring some details, that is the essence of Unger’s strategy for showing that epistemic terms are not ‘isolated freaks of our language’ for rarely applying to anything in the world. Unger has shown us how to identify absolute terms and offered the explanatory hypothesis that a terms’ behavior in his tests depends upon whether the term expresses an extreme semantic limit. Once it is clear which feature the tests bring out, it is obvious that absolute terms can only rarely, if ever, be used to make true positive claims. It will be true that something is flat only if the surface has no bumps or curves *at all*, in *any* sense. It will be true that someone is certain that a proposition is true only if *no one* could *possibly* be even a little more confident of *anything* else.

The trouble with absolute terms is not only that they denote extreme standards, of course, but that the world rarely if ever meets those standards. My desk has no *obvious* bumps or curves, but looking down from above I see small nicks on the top and looking from the side I see slight curvature of the surface. By the absolutist standard, my desk is not flat, even if it would be unusual say of it, “that is not flat” or “that is curved” because in normal circumstances we regularly call such things “flat”.

The remaining steps of the AAT are straightforward compared to the general discussion of absolute terms. Those remaining steps are to argue that “certain” is an absolute term and that

“knowledge” is defined by “certain”. As with most absolute terms, “certain” can be defined by a complete lack of its opposed relative term “doubtful” (p. 64). To be certain that p entails maximum confidence that p. The same Paraphrase Test that identified “flat” as an absolute term works for “certain”, and suggests that “confident” is a relative term.

For example, from ‘He is more certain that p than he is that q’ we get ‘He is either certain that p while not certain that q, or else he is more nearly certain that p than he is that q’. But from ‘He is more confident that p than he is that q’ we do not get ‘He is either confident that p while not confident that q, or else he is more nearly confident that p than he is that q’ (p. 65).

Note that from “certain” passing the Paraphrase Test Unger is entitled to conclude that “certain” is a *basic* absolute term. One is certain that p only if no stronger attitude toward p is possible. It follows that “certain” is rarely used to make true positive claims.⁵

The final step of the argument is showing that “knows” only applies when “certain” does. Interestingly, Unger provides very little argument for the connection. He merely points to the inconsistent sound of “He knows that it is raining, but he isn’t certain of it” (p. 85) and a few unimportantly similar sentences. Presumably he thought the inconsistent sound is obvious and that the more substantive work had already been done. This is a problem that Unger did not seem to recognize. I return to the point below.

That concludes the Argument from Absolute Terms. To summarize, there are many “absolute terms” in English. These express extreme semantic standards that are rarely met. “Certain” is among them, and one “knows” only if one is “certain”. Consequently, the standards for true application of “knows” are rarely met. There is very little that anyone knows—if anything at all—because there is very little of which anyone is certain.

⁵ Dretske (1981) agreed with Unger’s analysis of absolute terms—they denote extreme standards—but argued that many of Unger’s absolute terms are actually “relationally absolute”: absolute “only relative to a certain standard” (p. 366). Something is empty when it is devoid of all *relevant* things, flat when it has no bumps or curves *of the sort that count for this type of object*, etc. But this attempt to save the applicability of absolute terms cannot appeal to the arguments for absolute terms that Unger put forward. As we have seen, “This is flatter than that” paraphrases as “Either this is flat and that is not, or this is closer to being flat than that is.” The acceptability of the paraphrase implies that if the surfaces differ in their shape then at most one of them is flat, regardless of the type of surface under consideration. When the concept of an absolute term is properly understood, it is clearly impossible that a road and a mirror (Dretske’s examples) could both be ‘absolutely’ flat when there is an irregularity in one or the other, even if we ordinarily call a road “flat” in ordinary contexts. Consequently, Dretske’s notion of a relational ‘absolute’ is simply not absolute. The same argument applies to (Lewis 1979).

IV. Evaluating the Argument from Absolute Terms

In this section I consider a few further points and defend the AAT from some criticisms.

First. As Unger acknowledges, there is an alternative way of approaching the meanings of terms in ordinary language like “flat”, “certain”, and “knowledge”. That is to attend to the ordinary use of the terms and to derive their meanings from such use. Ordinary language philosophers would object to Unger that as we normally use allegedly absolute terms, those terms are neither absolute nor rarely used to express true claims.⁶

This is the basis of Shane Andre’s (1982) objection to the AAT. Andre claims that

As we ordinarily use [certain terms], many familiar things are flat—the top of this table, the floor, the ceiling and so on...Similarly, we are certain of many things—that the sun will rise tomorrow, that we were not born five minutes ago...(p. 456).

If ‘using a term’ merely amounts to making an utterance which includes the term then Andre is surely correct. It is perfectly obvious that we regularly utter sentences of the form “S knows that p” and “X is flat” and so on. But it is implausible that merely making an utterance involving a term is ‘using the term’ in the sort of way that should serve to constitute the term’s meaning. We regularly make claims that we recognize are false, to good communicative effect. A teacher sloppily draws a figure on the board and calls it “a square” to illustrate the properties of squares while being aware that the figure is not a square. A friend says “I’ll be there in a minute” to express that she’ll be there in a little while, fully aware that she will probably not be there in sixty seconds. If “square” and “a minute” and many other terms are used in the sort of way that constitutes meaning just by occurring in a sentence that is regularly uttered by ordinary speakers, then ‘non-skeptics’ about squares must admit that some non-rectangular figures are squares and that sometimes two minutes equals a minute.⁷

As we normally use “certain” or “sure”, raising error possibilities concerning what we claim to be certain about generally reduces our confidence and makes us think that we should not have been so confident. If I say “I am sure that my car is parked behind my apartment” and you point out that it may have been towed within the last hour (and I am being sincere and not difficult, and I have no additional evidence that the car is indeed still there), I will now be

⁶ Malcolm (1942) is especially clear about this idea, but he offers no general guidance concerning when the use of a term implies that it has a denotation and when use does not imply this.

⁷ I raise similar concerns in Stoutenburg (2016).

unsure.⁸ Not only this, but I will think that I should not have been sure just a moment ago, before you raised the possibility. Similarly, if I say that I know some proposition and someone mentions an error-possibility that I cannot eliminate, I will retract my knowledge claim. Generalizing, the ordinary language conclusion about “sure” and “knows” should be that one is only (properly) sure and one only knows if, when challenged, one would not be inclined to withdraw one’s claim that one is “sure” or “knows”. The facts concerning the ordinary use of epistemic terms like “sure” and “knows” do not favor an anti-skeptical view.

Another objection from ordinary language is that Unger’s tests fail because emphasizing selected terms in a sentence to search for inconsistencies does not highlight features of the sentence, but changes the meaning of the sentence. Dretske pushed this argument in “Contrastive Statements” (1972). Consider Dretske’s main example. Suppose Clyde gave Dretske the tickets (to what we are not told). If it was a mistake for Clyde to give Dretske the tickets then the following sentence is either true or false, depending on what part of the sentence is emphasized:

(A) “Clyde gave Dretske *the tickets* by mistake.”

or (B) “Clyde gave *Dretske* the tickets by mistake.”

If Clyde was supposed to give the tickets to Harry but accidentally gave them to Dretske, (A) is false and (B) is true. If Clyde gave Dretske the tickets but was supposed to give him something else—perhaps the Snickers—(A) may be true while (B) is false. Dretske concludes that emphasis serves a semantic function, not merely a pragmatic one. There is no need to follow Dretske here. It is far more plausible that (A) and (B) mean the same thing, but that the speaker implicates different contents through emphasis (Grice 1975). Philosophers who accept the extremely plausible distinction between semantic content and pragmatic content should not find Dretske’s argument compelling.

Second. Some of Unger’s appeals to intuition are questionable. To my ear, some of his allegedly inconsistent sentences are obviously so, but others are not so compelling. “That is really *flat*, but it is *not* absolutely *flat*” (p. 82) and “He really *knows* it is raining, but he isn’t certain of it” (p. 85) both sound inconsistent to me, just as Unger intends. “He actually *knows*

⁸ Empirical work suggests that our knowledge attributions are destroyed even more easily than this: cf. Gerken (2013), Nagel (2008, 2010). See my (2017) for discussion of views that try to accommodate this data while denying the implication to demanding standards for “knows”.

it's a Cadillac, but he's really *more certain* it's an automobile" does not sound obviously inconsistent to me except when I am already thinking about absolute terms.⁹ In these cases, it is unclear whether Unger has identified untutored intuitions that support his conclusions or whether he has led the reader from clearly inconsistent-sounding sentences and the absolutist hypothesis that explains their effect to more contentious examples, hoping to persuade the reader that the principles apply in the latter cases, too. However, Unger never claims that the absolutist hypothesis is obvious or that simply thinking about what "flat", "knows", and "certain" mean would reveal their demandingness. The truth of the absolutist hypothesis is a discovery. It should be expected that what is obvious in some cases requires theorizing for extended application.

A more difficult concern is that Unger does not distinguish hearing a sentence as inconsistent from hearing it as awkward, and consequently he does not consider the possibility of a pragmatic explanation of the evidence rather than a semantic one.¹⁰ There are many sentences that sound awkward but are logically consistent, like the Moore-paradoxical "It is raining, but I do not believe that it is." I know of no uncontroversial criteria for distinguishing inconsistent sentences from consistent-but-awkward ones that do not rely on a prior grasp of the meaning of the terms in the sentence. But if the awkwardness is evidence of what crucial terms in the sentence mean, then there is no clear non-question-begging argument from awkwardness to inconsistency. However, Unger's absolutist hypothesis explains why we hear the example sentences as unusual: it is because they are inconsistent.¹¹ He has provided an account that explains the data. The objector cannot undermine the argument merely by claiming that an alternative explanation of the data is *possible*. She must also *provide* an alternative explanation that is at least as plausible as Unger's.

Third. By attacking the possibility of satisfying the attitude condition on knowledge, the AAT only undermines the possibility of having *knowledge*. No part of the AAT targets the adequacy of our epistemic support for believing the various propositions we believe. For all the AAT says, we could have excellent epistemic support for believing everything we ordinarily

⁹ For each of these example sentences, "really" and "actually" are intended to be synonyms for "truly".

¹⁰ Andre also makes this point (1982, p. 459).

¹¹ There is a general strategy at work. The philosopher first 'hears' a sentence as awkward, then sets off in search of an explanation of the awkwardness. That strategy has been used to develop Grice's (1975) account of implicature, Davidson's (1978) account of how we understand metaphor, and (as I mentioned above) hypotheses concerning how to understand Moore-paradoxical utterances.

believe. Unger's thesis that we lack certainty is compatible with our having nearly perfect epistemic justification for our beliefs. Because having a sufficiently high degree of confidence that a proposition is true and having adequate epistemic reasons for believing the proposition are *distinct* conditions on knowledge, it is possible to satisfy one without satisfying the other: all that the AAT attempts to show is that we are not confident enough to have knowledge.¹²

While many contemporary epistemologists are almost exclusively concerned with knowledge—think of the “knowledge first” trend—the most serious skepticisms target the adequacy or possibility of our epistemic justification.¹³ These skepticisms are far more severe than what the AAT implies, for while it would be surprising to discover that we know little of what we think we know, it would be positively devastating to discover that we have little *reason* to believe much of anything. Unger eventually argues for that more radical thesis, but those arguments are distinct from the AAT. The real strength of Unger's position appears when he *combines* the anti-knowledge conclusion of the AAT with the further hypothesis that knowing that *p* is necessary for having many *p*-related propositional attitudes. For example, one cannot be happy that *p* unless one knows that *p*, one cannot use the belief that *p* as a reason unless one knows that *p*, one cannot assert that *p* unless one knows that *p*, etc. Similarly, one could combine the anti-knowledge conclusion of the AAT with the view that knowledge is the norm of practical reason and assertion in service of the disruptive view that it is never appropriate to act on any belief and that it is never appropriate to assert anything. In fact, Unger drew just these conclusions in Ignorance, well before the start, decades later, of the contemporary debate about the norms of action and assertion.¹⁴ Knowledge fanaticism aside, it is important to recognize that the strength of the AAT is not its anti-knowledge conclusion itself, but its implications for practical living and other epistemic states. At the time of his writing, Unger was content with

¹² Unger argues later in (1975) that it is not “perfectly all right” to be certain. That is because, he claims, it is never perfectly all right to be certain that counter-evidence will never defeat one's present justification (p. 195). Presumably, if one had perfect, infallible epistemic justification for believing that *p*, then it would be “perfectly all right” to be certain that *p*. Since Unger evidently thinks it is not perfectly all right to be certain of many ordinary propositions, we may infer that he thinks our ordinary epistemic justification falls short of perfect. That is consistent with what I said above: we may have *very good* epistemic justification while lacking knowledge because we lack certainty.

¹³ Some epistemologists think even localized knowledge-skepticisms are radical. Pritchard (2015, p. 11) characterizes radical skepticism as concerning “our knowledge of a world external to us, and it proceeds by attempting to undermine the possibility that we might have knowledge of that world.” Carter (2011, p. 115) says that “what radical skeptical arguments aim to show is that we lack everyday knowledge.” These so-called radical skepticisms are far less radical than what the AAT suggests.

¹⁴ Thus it was Unger, not Williamson (2000), who first proposed that knowledge is the norm of assertion.

being a destructive skeptic. He put little effort into reconciling the widespread ignorance that is implied by the AAT with the evident fact that we regularly rely on what we take ourselves and others to know. (I return to this in the next objection.) Rather, he concludes that there is no adequate way to analyze the epistemic content out of many of our ordinary claims. To take the “happy” example, again: because he holds that “S is happy that p” entails “S knows that p”, and the latter is false, it follows that the former is, too. But, he further argues that no alternative characterization of “happy” will adequately describe the mental state that we intuitively think of as happiness (p. 189-196). Other verbs subject to the same devastating treatment include “admits”, “discovered”, “remembers”. This further skeptical result is indeed drastic, and leaves us without the resources to say much of what we want to say. The view recalls ancient skeptics who avoided making positive claims of any sort. In any case, these practical implications are strictly separate from the results of the AAT, as they depends upon several further arguments in Ignorance.

Fourth. The AAT suggests that our ordinary thought and talk—both epistemic and non-epistemic—is shot through with falsehood. What makes false knowledge-talk appropriate, Unger claims, is that we are often close enough to knowing *for relevant practical purposes* (pp. 50-52). Other views about knowledge and knowledge-talk closely connect the truth of knowledge-attributions with their ordinary appropriateness. For instance, DeRose (2002), an epistemic contextualist, claims that the appropriateness of positive knowledge attributions in ordinary contexts is due to their truth; knowledge-denials in more demanding contexts are also true, thus they are also generally appropriate. Subject-sensitive invariantists like Hawthorne (2004) and Stanley (2005) hold that while the semantic character of knowledge-attributions is invariant, whether or not one knows critically depends upon practical factors. Unger’s skeptical proposal is different from both of these: while our knowledge claims are always false, we may often be close enough to knowing for practical purposes. Put differently, what passes for “knowledge” in ordinary discourse is *not* genuine knowledge, but it is close enough to get by. I may usually be close enough for practical purposes to knowing where my car is, but when I must prevent an emergency from becoming a disaster, I am not close enough to knowing. Much of

our ordinary knowledge-talk is easily explained by Unger's proposal. Where it works, it works as well as these competitors.¹⁵

However, the account is not general enough to cover *non-epistemic* false speech: or, for that matter, all false knowledge-talk. (Consider: what practical purposes bear on knowing that there is a freckle on one's shoulder?) Focusing our attention on the *general* phenomenon of false speech, not only on epistemic thought and talk, we find that the absolutist hypothesis must be supplemented with a story of how it is normally appropriate to assert and rely on propositions that are false because doing so is *practicable*. An absolutist view about "knowledge", "flat", and so on is incomplete without a further account of how in many ordinary circumstances false uses of language are even more useful than true ones. It may be appropriate to assert a falsehood when one's doing so is known to one's hearer and when expressing and understanding the falsehood consumes less time and fewer cognitive resources than would uttering or thinking a more complicated truth. Some familiar uses of language fall into this category, like exaggeration, loose talk, and metaphor. But the absolutist needs more than these: specifically, the absolutist needs to defend the view that *straightforward* false claims of the form "X is F" are often conversationally appropriate due to their practicability. A worked-out defense of that idea, combined with arguments like the AAT, would provide a comprehensive semantic alternative to popular views: in epistemology, this comprehensive skeptical view would especially be a worthy competitor to epistemic contextualism and other versions of invariantism.¹⁶

This interesting, non-standard skeptical argument deserves renewed attention today as epistemologists continue to work toward an account of our knowledge and "knowledge"-talk. No one now argues that we lack much knowledge because we lack adequate confidence. By devoting attention to the AAT, I hope to have shown that an argument that targets the attitude

¹⁵ It is important, though, to emphasize that the entailment expressing that a subject is close enough to knowing for practical purposes is true only on a non-skeptical view of epistemic justification (or reasons, etc). Otherwise, no subject is close to knowing *anything*, and consequently the explanation of why subjects fail to realize that they lack knowledge will be plainly false. Unger adopted a very strong form of skepticism in *Ignorance*, and so it is a wonder that he used this error theory.

¹⁶ More can be said on behalf of the view that much of our knowledge-attributing behavior is loose or exaggerated, but those views go beyond what Unger offered. For more, see (BonJour 2010, Butchvarov 1970, Davis 2007, 2015, Dinges 2016, Schaffer 2004, Stoutenburg 2016). See (Chung forthcoming) for arguments that epistemic talk is metaphorical.

condition on knowledge is interesting, forceful, and worth serious attention. Those interested in the AAT are of course encouraged to study “A Defense of Skepticism” and Ignorance for themselves. I especially recommend Andre’s important reply, which is worth more attention than my brief remarks allow. It is a striking fact that Unger abandoned his absolutist view by the time Philosophical Relativity was published in 1984, a mere nine years after Ignorance. In my estimation, his later arguments are far less compelling than the AAT.¹⁷

¹⁷ I thank Bryan Appley, Ryan Cobb, Peter Unger, and the audience of the 2015 Science and Certainty Workshop at UC San Diego for comments and feedback. I especially thank Ward Jones, both for extensive feedback on drafts of this paper and the opportunity to publish a re-reading of an argument that has been a tremendous philosophical influence on me.

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