

ON UNIVERSAL IGNORANCE

Beginning his campaign for the presidency just twelve years ago, Senator Barry Goldwater proclaimed boldly, and more unforgettably than many of his supporters came to wish, that "extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice." In his book on the philosophy of knowledge, provocatively entitled *Ignorance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), Peter Unger follows a similar precept in defense of skepticism against dogmatism. With great vigor and confidence he advances the view that there is no basis whatever for the claim on the part of anyone that he or anyone else knows anything whatever (chap. III). From this he derives the further conclusion that we are wholly debarred, not only from having knowledge, but also from the capacity to have reasonable beliefs, suppositions, or opinions, since to have reasonable beliefs, suppositions, or opinions, one must have reasons, and having a reason for something, say X, entails that there is something, Y, usually not identical with X, that one knows (chap. V). Similar grounds are advanced for the corollary conclusion that no one can actually adopt any attitude, be subject to any disposition, that presupposes knowledge on his part. No one, for example, can regret that he quit school, failed to study, or whatever, since to regret that one did X entails that one knows that one did, is absolutely certain that one did. And these consequent conditions cannot be satisfied (chap. IV). An analogous argument drawing upon an analysis of the concept of truth is advanced for the still more nihilistic conclusion that not only can no one reasonably believe that something is so, no one can believe, reasonably or unreasonably, or think, or assert, that something *is* so. For to believe that something, say P, is so, P must be capable of *being* so. This in turn entails that P be either consistent with or inconsistent with the whole truth about the world. But there is nothing that *is* the whole truth about the world; hence nothing can be consistent or inconsistent with that whole truth; hence nothing can be believed, or thought, or asserted to be so. (chap. VII).

The case for these and many other similar conclusions, sometimes characterized by Unger as "crazy," is based upon an extended analysis of our conceptions of knowledge, belief, certainty, truth, regret, and so on, as these are embodied in our common natural languages. The phrase "crazy conclusions"

appearing in the text enclosed in single quotation marks indicates Unger's contention that, though extreme and even paradoxical, these conclusions can be established by strict and certain reasoning from the relevant conceptions, the relevant features of the language in which we speak and think of these matters. Though the case is made with reference to one particular natural language, English, the supposition is advanced therewith that it is not likely that there is any natural language, present or past, rich enough to serve our purposes that does not in its deep grammar contain the grounds for substantially the same sweeping skeptical conclusions. Furthermore, since it is in our language and by means of such expressions and conceptions that we must think, when we think of knowledge, belief, and the rest, these conclusions naturally extend to any beings concerning whose capacity to have knowledge, belief, and so on we may have occasion to inquire. Knowledge being the sort of thing it is, having the logical connections it has in our language and thought, there are no loopholes through which exceptions might squirm, no favored beings who might be the beneficiaries of passover in this cognitive holocaust. Neither Descartes, nor Descartes's possible demon, nor the good God who eventually replaced the demon can possibly know anything whatever, even, for example, that he exists (p. 91).

As indicated, the case against the possibility of regret lies in the affirmed logical connection between regret and knowledge, and this in turn is disclosed to our logical intuition when we reflect that to say that John *regrets* that he quit school but *does not know* that he quit school is to say something that cannot possibly be true, is self-contradictory. And that John cannot know that he quit school, or even that there are schools to quit, is advanced on the ground that should John know either of these, or any other thing, then it would be all right for John to be absolutely certain of that thing, provided that there are no overriding considerations of a special nonevidential or nonepistemic kind that would make it not all right for John to be certain of that thing. The kind of overriding consideration contemplated is that in certain circumstances untoward and sometimes even severe consequences might follow from John's assuming the attitude of certainty toward some item P which he is supposed to know. Even though John should know P, even though the evidential or epistemic considerations *taken by themselves* might fully license his assuming an attitude of certainty toward P, there might be other considerations that should make him forbear. In an extreme, hypothetical case, for example, a powerful but eccentric god might decree that frightful

penalties would be exacted from mankind in case this one person should assume the attitude of certainty toward this particular item (pp. 100-101).

Since the possible overriding considerations are conceived to be only of this "external," nonevidential or nonepistemic kind, their possibility may be neglected in the case presented here against knowledge. What is important for the question whether there is knowledge is not that the right to be certain can be overridden in some cases of knowledge, but that this right is present, is a logically entailed feature of any case of knowledge that there may be. In all cases of knowledge there is a right to be certain based upon epistemic grounds. This right, which may be called an "epistemic right," is universal, even though, like many if not all rights, it is subject to override or defeat. Put in these terms, the case against knowledge advanced by Unger is that the very concept of knowledge is contradictory. Knowledge of any item P by any individual X confers upon X the right to be certain with respect to P; but this right, because it is an epistemic right, is one that cannot be conferred by knowledge of P. Therefore knowledge is impossible.

In a little more detail the case is as follows: We can see from the apparent inconsistency of such utterances as "He *knew* it, but he *didn't* know it *for certain*" that knowledge entails certainty (p. 99), and from the apparent inconsistency of such utterances as "He is absolutely *certain* that there are automobiles, but *his attitude* is that he really may change his mind should certain evidence come up," that certainty with respect to any item P entails assuming with respect to P a dogmatic attitude (p. 110). Being certain of P, as that is entailed by knowing P, itself entails assuming a certain attitude characterized by an absence of all doubt with respect to P; and this in turn entails a complete absence of openness with respect to P on the part of the individual knowing P. Henceforward this individual, having assumed the attitude, is committed to consider no new experience or information as relevant to the truth or falsity of P (p. 116). Also advanced to support the thesis that knowing entails dogmatism is an analysis of "knowing P" which explicates X's knowing P as being the same as its being absolutely clear to X *that* P. From this analysis it is argued that if X knows P, further information or experience may be disregarded by X with respect to P. For an increase in clarity is manifestly not possible, and any apparent decrease would apparently be illusory (p. 141). Finally, though Unger does not put the matter in this way, or at any place very clearly, the reason why an epistemic right to be dogmatic with

respect to P cannot be conferred by knowledge seems to be that, as an epistemic right, it is always relative to epistemic grounds or considerations. Consequently the notion of such a right, one that is epistemic and at the same time a right to disregard or be blind to the very kind of considerations that are essential to it, is fundamentally inconsistent.

One of the serious weaknesses of the kind of conceptual analysis exemplified in this book is its disposition to treat concepts as readily identifiable entities the character of which can be discerned by putting them through certain fairly simple, restricted linguistic paces. Can "knowledge" be combined with "uncertainty," or "certainty" combined with "openness to evidence," in certain forms of linguistic expression without producing thereby some kind of immediately obvious linguistic or logical dissonance? If not, does it not follow that knowledge logically entails certainty, that certainty entails dogmatism, and that hence we can now accept as an important philosophical conclusion that knowledge entails dogmatism?

As much philosophical work has illustrated in the last twenty-five years, it is easy to overestimate the significance of this kind of result. It is a kind which can be very partial and misleading unless it is combined with wider considerations reflecting, not just how we comfortably speak when we employ expressions like these in simple sentences, but how we act. What are the actual practices in which these conceptions are realized, in which we put them into effect? How do we act when we act according to these conceptions? How do these and other practices fit together; and, where they do not fit, what is a reasonable reaction to the kind of lack of congruence that there is among them? Before, on some limited linguistic basis, one concludes that, say, astronomy or chemistry is not knowledge, one needs to consider the consequences of assimilating, in this respect, astronomy to astrology and chemistry to alchemy. Are there not very great differences between these in respect to the validity of their claims to yield knowledge and reasonable judgment; and if so, must now whatever reasons abstract linguistic experimentation with the relevant terms discloses for assimilating them be evaluated with and perhaps tempered by whatever reasons further, broader philosophical examination may disclose for discriminating these from each other? We may, like C. S. Peirce two generations ago, be struck with the fact that what "you do not at all doubt, you must and do regard as infallible, absolute truth" (*Collected Papers*, 5.416). But unless we close the books of analysis here, at the risk of

committing ourselves to one-sided, precipitate, and seriously misinformed conclusions, we must, like Peirce also, investigate how an insight like this may be combined, composed, and understood in relation to those other apparently strong reasons for maintaining that no single item of human knowledge is infallible, all of them being open in some degree to possible revision or correction.

If ignorance is as universal, total, and necessary (p. 94) as this book proclaims, no one could possibly know it. If no one can know anything, not even that there are rocks, then no one can know that skepticism is universal, total, and necessary. Not only can one not know it, one cannot reasonably believe it, cannot believe it reasonably or unreasonably, cannot assert it or attempt to show that it is so. Then what are we to make of these 319 pages of argument in defense of skepticism; of a book that professes to argue seriously and in detail for a conclusion from which it follows, and is recognized to follow, that argument is impossible?

The variety of ways in which Unger is thus open to ad hominem criticism in his defense of skepticism hardly needs to be elaborated upon. The openings for just and apparently devastating criticisms of this kind are many and glaringly obvious. Unger is not oblivious of this logical threat. He refers to it at several places in the book (e.g., chap. V, §11; chap. VI, §5) and urges that though the danger is real the criticism itself is not devastating. "To think that these charges of paradox devastate skepticism is," he says, "to miss the point of both skepticism and paradox." For the source of the trouble lies in our ideas or concepts of knowing, justification, reasonableness, and the rest; and the skeptic, like the fabled messengers bringing bad news, is not to be censured just because the news is bad. "The skeptic isn't the culprit, nor the position he advocates. It is the concepts themselves that mean the trouble." (P. 247)

Trouble? What kind of trouble? It is logical trouble, of course. The situation of a fervent skeptic like Unger at odds with himself in arguing that there cannot be argument, or in professing to believe that no one can believe anything, represents in simple, paradigmatic form the wider philosophical situation from which skeptical impulses derive and in relation to which they need to be appraised. Again and again, through over two millennia of Western philosophy, the seeds of possible skeptical conclusions about knowledge, moral principles, freedom, and responsibility have been exposed. There is now no novelty in their discovery. After Sextus Empiricus, St. Augustine, Descartes, Hume, and

others, no ingenuity is required in discerning certain features of our conceptions that, if seized upon and exploited with single-minded, narrow-minded fixation, will lead to the most extreme conclusions. For example, if we fix upon one of the ways of conceiving reason for which *some* basis can be found in our common conceptions and language — if we philosophize about reason solely on the basis of this truncated, detached aspect of our conceptions and ways of speaking — then, as the young Hume proudly demonstrated, we can derive such conclusions as that “if we believe, that fire warms, or water refreshes,” our basis for this must be, not in reason, but “only because it costs us too much pain to think otherwise” (*Treastise*, bk. I, pt. IV, sect. VII), and that there is nothing “contrary to reason” in anyone preferring “the destruction of the world to the scratching of . . . [his] finger” (*ibid.*, bk. II, pt. III, sect. III).

What makes such conclusions “troublesome,” “crazy,” or “paradoxical” is that they are opposed by contrary conclusions that likewise have grounds in our conceptions or language, grounds at least as strong and in most cases much stronger than those for the skeptical conclusions. So that the skeptic and the commonsense philosopher, each resting his case upon partial grounds, can demonstrate to his own and his own partisans’ satisfaction that his opponent is in the wrong. That such demonstrations are possible is, though now no remarkable discovery, of the greatest significance for philosophy. But much of the significance is lost if both sides of the possibility are not recognized.

If only the dogmatic, commonsense side is recognized, then one is led immediately to conclude that we do have genuine knowledge of the future and the past, of moral principles, and so on and that those who argue to the contrary are being imposed upon by *Scheinprobleme* which can be dissipated by the “clarification of concepts,” an honorific name now commonly given to the celebration of those aspects of our concepts and language that favor one’s conclusions. If, on the other hand, only the skeptical possibilities residing in our language are exploited, what appear to be *Scheinprobleme* from the commonsense point of view now appear to be distressingly real. Concentration upon these aspects of our concepts and language, to the utter disregard of others, will yield conclusions such as Unger’s; namely, that we do not know, or have good reasons for believing, any of the things we ordinarily take ourselves to know or reasonably believe. And supposing, in our preoccupation with these aspects of our language and

concepts, that the language and concepts are themselves essentially and fundamentally bad, we shall be led to conclude that the only hope for relief lies in the development of a radically different language, one either altogether new, or one achieved by effecting upon existing language changes of a "radical," "creative" kind (p. 317).

When a pen, a wagon, or even a kidney proves to be fundamentally imperfect or diseased, it is reasonable to consider either replacing it or performing upon it some radically corrective operation. In cases like this it is readily apparent that we have resources, independent of the facility or organ in question, which enable us to appraise its state and, having made an unfavorable determination, to set upon devising and effecting a remedy. That the wagon is imperfect, or broken down, or that some feature, even a most important feature, of the art of wagon making and wagon maintenance has given way, does not entail that all this lore, or all vehicle manufacture and maintenance lore, has likewise given way, is in a similar condition of disrepair. We are on occasion able to criticize and improve features of what constitutes our social capital only because there are other features of it which, at least at the time and for present purposes, do not stand in need of criticism and revision but are available for use. They are, at least for the time, instruments *of* scrutiny rather than subjects *for* it. In a most striking way this signal feature of the philosophical criticism of our intellectual resources — that some resources can be criticized only with the aid of others; that, in the language of an older philosophy, doubt implies belief — this signal feature is neglected by writers in the skeptical tradition. And this neglect, more than any other thing, constantly feeds that tradition by translating responsible doubts about specific features of our cognitive tradition into irresponsible, hyperbolic doubts, the kind that Peirce characterized as "paper" or "make-believe" doubt having "nothing to do with any serious business" (*ibid.*).

For reasons connected with the breadth and persistence of the kind of criticism we call philosophical, the tendency to transform reasoned, controlled doubts into unreasoned, hyperbolic ones is stronger in philosophy than in other, more restricted intellectual disciplines or enterprises. It is no secret, for example, that there have been and remain incoherencies, inconsistencies, problems, in our conceptions or theories of numbers, of motion, of freedom, of justice, as well as of knowledge. Zeno's paradoxes about motion long ago made plain some serious difficulties resident in the ways in which we are inclined to speak and think about this matter.

Similarly, for Greek mathematics the discovery of the incommensurability of the diagonal of the right triangle raised questions concerning how we think and talk about numbers. There were similarly sources of puzzlement concerning particles during the periods of the greatest success and acceptance of Newtonian mechanics and of the kinetic theory of gases. What these difficulties called for, and fortunately in the main received, was not hyperbolic responses to the effect that now it can be proved and told that there is no motion, no numbers, or no particles, but rather that there are here occasions for earnest effort to understand and resolve the difficulties which the skeptical response takes to be insuperable. There are corresponding difficulties in our language and concepts as applied to knowledge, for example, in the relation between "know" and "cannot be wrong," as the latter seems consequent to the former. These difficulties reach also to our conception of certainty, to the relations between this and both infallibility and incorrigibility, and to the bearing of these on responsiveness to evidence, as this latter is a feature of our conception of rationality. In contrast with the kind of sober, careful, analytic examination of these matters offered, for example, by Peirce and, more recently, by J. L. Austin, the reaction of those who conclude that because there are these difficulties we therefore cannot know, reasonably believe, or believe at all is eccentric and extreme. It is comparable to that of someone in the early years of the kinetic theory of gases concluding, because there were serious difficulties, amounting to inconsistencies, in the conception of the properties of the minute particles of gases to which the theory applied, that therefore there are no such particles. From this conclusion no quantum jump in skepticism is required to extend the denial to gases themselves, since the evidence for the motions of the particles that are hypothesized and utilized in the kinetic theory is all of a piece with the evidence that there are rarified states of matter composed of minute particles to which the statistical mechanical notions of the theory might be applied. If the conclusion that there are no particles, or gases, seems paradoxical and crazy, it is surely because it flies in the face of mountains of positive grounds attesting that there are. It is not an altogether outlandish way of speaking for one to refer to the difficulties in the kinetic theory of gases as evidence that there are no gases, i.e., gases of exactly the kind that the theory supposes, so long as one keeps in mind the vast weight of countervailing evidence that, though what we take to be gases may not be exactly as the theory supposes, there are forms of matter like this to which we properly

refer under this title. For many years now we have been aware of lacunae and inconsistencies in the accepted theory of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, as that is set forth in the report of the Warren Commission. The response of some writers true to the skeptical tradition has been the extreme one of denying, in the face of mountainous evidence, simply because there are these lacunae and inconsistencies in the whole story, that Oswald did fire the rifle that killed Kennedy, or that there was a single person such as Oswald whose career and finally death in the Dallas Police Station is traced with substantial accuracy in the Warren Commission's report. This is the kind of response which Attorney Louis Nizer, commenting on the report, called the "analytic syndrome," saying that to one in the grip of it no verdict in any court of law will retain credit. In the disposition to take any element of discrepancy in a view, even those attendant to its normal healthy subsistence and development, as signs of its imminent collapse, those afflicted by this syndrome remind one of that flustered band of animals in the story of Chicken Little who precipitately proclaimed the news that the sky was falling when all that had happened was that an oak tree had shed an acorn.

In addition to the above major matters of substance, a few minor matters of form in this book should not go unremarked. The book is somewhat marred by lapses and errors which one would have expected the editors of one of the most prestigious academic publishers to have easily detected for the benefit of the author and ultimately the reader. Illustrative of the lack of care in the making of this book are neologisms such as "evidence" used as a transitive verb, roughly the equivalent of support ("we may evidence this by noting . . ."), the use of the asterisk as a discriminating mark with certain linguistic expressions, with no explanation of the kind of discrimination intended, and, in a striking case of oversight, the verb "effect" let stand where "affect" is clearly intended, in no less than four separate instances in the space of four pages (pp. 76-78).

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