IGNORANCE AND IRRATIONALITY:

A STUDY IN CONTEMPORARY SCEPTICISM

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ABSTRACT

The essay is an exposition and critical analysis of Peter Unger's book *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism* (Oxford, 1975). In the introductory chapter my main object, in addition to defining terms, is to distinguish the two forms of scepticism Unger defends in *Ignorance*, which he calls, respectively, scepticism about knowledge and scepticism about rationality. Chapter II is devoted to an exposition, analysis, and evaluation of the latter and Chapter III of the former. In Chapter IV I consider a second-order argument that informs Unger's case throughout the book, his "ancestor language" hypothesis. In the final chapter I assess his scepticism as a whole and attempt to develop some of its implications concerning both the possibility and actuality of knowledge.

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I

The New Scepticism

1. *Two Forms of Scepticism*

In recent years a number of writers have defended epistemological scepticism, or the view that knowledge is impossible. Representative of the new sceptics are Arne Naess, who in his book *Scepticism*[1] attempts to reformulate classical Pyrrhonism in the terminology of contemporary analytic philosophy, Keith Lehrer who in an article with the rhetorical title "Why Not Scepticism?"[2] gives a new, and unexpected, twist to Descartes's "evil demon" argument, and John Kekes, who in his article "The Case for Scepticism"[3] presents a very penetrating critique of any attempt to justify the existence of knowledge. By far the most ambitious defense of scepticism, however, is contained in Peter Unger's book *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism*.[4] The essay that follows will concentrate on this book, offering an analysis, examination, and evaluation of the arguments

[1] A. Naess, *Scepticism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968).

[2] K. Lehrer, "Why Not Scepticism?" *The Philosophical Forum*, II (1971), 283-298. It should be noted, however, that in his recent book *Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974) Lehrer no longer defends scepticism.

[3] J. Kekes, "The Case for Scepticism," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 25 (1975), 28-39.

[4] P. Unger, *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). All further references to Unger in the essay will be to this book.

for scepticism that Unger presents in it.[5]

Because we cannot know anything, most of the contemporary sceptics agree, we must be satisfied to get along with something less than knowledge, like reasonable or rational belief. This conclusion is exemplified by Lehrer, who remarks: "... we need not mourn the passing of knowledge as a great loss. The assumption of dogmatists that some beliefs are completely justified and that they are true, is not a great asset in scientific inquiry where all contentions should be subject to question and must be defended on demand. Moreover, the sceptic is not deprived of those practical beliefs necessary to carrying on the business of practical affairs.... Thus, we may, while remaining sceptics, contend that our beliefs and actions are rational even though we agree that such beliefs are not so completely justified as to constitute knowledge."[6]

With this view, which is a form of mitigated scepticism, Unger takes issue, defending instead a total scepticism that denies the possibility not only of knowledge but of reasonable belief as well. To distinguish these two forms of scepticism Unger employs the term *ignorance* to describe scepticism about knowledge and the term *irrationality* to describe scepticism about reasonable belief. Concerning our ignorance he writes as follows:

> What we are arguing for ... is the thesis that no one ever knows anything to be so.... I will say that a being is *ignorant* as to whether something is so if and only if the being does *not know* that it is so and also does *not know* that it is not so; that is, just in the case the being does not know whether or not the thing is so. And I will say that the sceptical conclusion we now seek to yield may be put like this: Everybody is always *ignorant of everything*.... And, intending to establish our conclusion as a necessary truth, I will say, finally, that this argument means to show that ignorance is necessary or inevitable, as

[5]In its consideration of Unger's full sceptical position, this essay will supplement the more narrowly focused examination of his scepticism about knowledge appearing in Chapter V of my *Skepticism and Cognitivism,* which Chapter III of the present essay partially overlaps.

[6]Lehrer, "Why Not Scepticism?" pp. 297-298.

well as universal, or complete, or total.[7]

As far as the possibility of reasonable belief is concerned, Unger has the following to say: "... no one can ever be reasonable in anything, not even in the least degree ..."[8] The reason why Unger embraces such a total scepticism lies in his conclusion that he must do so. One cannot, in his mind, rest in a mitigated scepticism of the type represented by Lehrer because, if none of us knows anything, it follows that none of us can have any reasonable beliefs about anything either. As he puts it, "... *universal* scepticism about knowledge entails *universal* scepticism about rationality."[9]

By denying the possibility not only of knowledge but of reasonable belief as well, Unger espouses what is clearly a very radical type of scepticism. To emphasize the extreme nature of his scepticism, it might be appropriate here to refer to some of the specific consequences he derives from it in the course of his book. He refers to these collectively as the "wages of ignorance."[10] A sample of these "wages" includes the following: "So, just as universal ignorance will entail that nobody ever sees, or remembers, or notices anything *about anything*, it will entail that nobody ever admits or regrets anything *at all*." "... if nobody ever really knows anything, then nobody will ever be angry, or happy, or surprised about anything." "... it is never the case that anyone *ought* to do anything, or that anyone *ought not* to do anything." "... nothing can ever be true or ever false." "... no one can ever think or believe anything to be so at all." "Nothing ... can be asserted or even said to be so ..." "If no one can ever be reasonable or justified in anything, then nobody can ever be rational, or sensible, or wise, or intelligent, or prudent, etc., in anything." "In a very general way, then, our ignorance enjoins our silence."[11]

[7]Unger, pp. 93-94. Italics Unger's. Henceforth, in all quotations from Unger in which italics appear, these will be his own. On page 272 Unger adds: "According to our account of it, knowing about something is a very special state or position, so special, indeed, as to be impossible."

[8]Unger, p. 242.

[9]Unger, p. 226.

[10]Unger, p. 152.

[11]Unger, pp. 186, 243n, 310, 311, 242-243, 269.

2. *Organization of the Essay*

I need hardly emphasize, after the quotations I have just given, that Unger defends an extreme form of scepticism in his *Ignorance*. If his conclusions are correct, we are left in a pitiable condition indeed. Bereft of any possibility of knowing anything, we are denied the capacity to be even in the slightest degree reasonable about anything either, with all of the consequences that follow from such irrationality. To make his case for such overwhelmingly sceptical conclusions, Unger must provide two arguments. (1) He must establish his scepticism about knowledge; that is, he must demonstrate that it is impossible for us to know anything. (2) He must show that scepticism about knowledge entails scepticism about rationality; that is, he must demonstrate that, if we cannot know anything, then we cannot be reasonable about anything either.

Most of *Ignorance* is devoted to providing these two arguments. Roughly speaking, Chapters I-III and VII are concerned with (1) and Chapters IV-VI with (2). In my review and examination of Unger's case I shall adopt the following procedure: I shall begin with his second argument, examining the reasons he gives for his claim that ignorance (*i.e.*, scepticism about knowledge) entails irrationality (*i.e.*, scepticism about rationality). This discussion will occupy Chapter II of the essay. In Chapter III I shall turn to his first argument, or his case for ignorance. Since Unger's defense of scepticism rests on this argument--his case for scepticism about knowledge directly and his case for scepticism about rationality by implication--it is essential that it be examined in detail and with care. My reason for considering Unger's two main theses in what may appear to be a backward order is this: Since his scepticism about rationality is derived from his scepticism about knowledge, hence is dependent on it, I think my best procedure is to begin with the less basic argument and then, after having evaluated it, turn to the central core of Unger's case for scepticism.

After completing my examination of Unger's arguments for both of his forms of scepticism, I shall, in Chapter IV, consider a complication in his case which, although it stands in the background throughout his *Ignorance*, adds another, quite novel dimension to his sceptical thesis. This complication, which I shall call his "ancestor language" hypothesis, is a kind of "meta" or "second-order" argument that he offers in support of scepticism and is, as far as I know, original with him.

In the concluding chapter of my essay I shall trace out a number of implications that Unger derives from his scepticism

--the so-called "wages" of ignorance--and then draw some constructive conclusions of my own that, as I see it, follow from Unger's scepticism. In doing so, I hope to be able to reach a definitive answer, derived mainly from my examination of Unger's *Ignorance*, to the basic question that scepticism raises: Do we, or do we not, know anything at all?

II

From Ignorance to Irrationality

In this chapter I shall examine the second of the two main theses of Unger's *Ignorance*; namely, that ignorance (scepticism about knowledge) entails irrationality (scepticism about rationality). His argument in support of this entailment occupies the first part of Chapter V of *Ignorance*; he calls it the "Basis Argument."[12]

1. *The Basis Argument*

The main part of the Basis Argument consists of a sorites with three premises. Each of these will require some explanation. I shall begin, in this section, with a statement of the argument and then turn, in the following section, to an elucidation of its premises.

> (1) If someone S is (even the least bit) *reasonable* in something X, then there is something which is *S's reason* for X ....
>
> (2) If there is something which is *S's reason* for something X, then there is some propositional value of '*p*' such that S's reason *is that p* ....
>
> (3) If S's reason (for something X) *is that p*, then S *knows* that *p* ....
>
> (4) If someone S is (even the least bit) *reasonable* in something X, then there is some propositional value of '*p*' such that S *knows* that *p*.[13]

[12]Unger, p. 199. Its full title is the "Basis in Knowledge Argument (for Scepticism about Rationality)."

[13]Unger, pp. 200-201. For reasons of simplicity I have shortened each of the premises of Unger's sorites. This change has no effect on the argument.

To complete the Basis Argument Unger takes three further steps, all concerned with the conclusion of his sorites. First, he generalizes, deriving from the statement "If someone S is (even the least bit) *reasonable* in something X, then there is some propositional value of '*p*' such that S *knows* that *p*" the universal conditional "If anybody is (even the least bit) *reasonable* in anything, then he or she *knows* something to be so." He then contraposes this conditional, to get "If nobody knows anything to be so, then nobody is (even the least bit) reasonable in anything." From this, finally, he derives the conclusion he seeks, the link between scepticism about knowledge and scepticism about rationality. For from the proposition just quoted the following proposition trivially follows: "If nobody knows anything to be so, then nobody is (even the least bit) reasonable *in believing anything* to be so."[14]

2. *The Basis Argument: Explication*

The importance of Unger's Basis Argument should be apparent. If it is cogent, it not only cuts off the retreat sought by those sceptics who have attempted to replace knowledge with reasonable belief but it also prepares the way for a whole host of consequences, some of which I described in Chapter I. So we must examine it with some care. I think we can say at the outset that the logical manipulations Unger performs on the conclusion of his sorites (which I repeated at the end of § 1) offer no problems; these all seem to be in order. So we shall not consider them further. Also, the sorites itself is valid; the conclusion follows from the premises. This leaves the premises themselves. Before we attempt to examine them, we need to be more clear about what they mean.

(1) The first premise is quite straightforward, being simply the statement of a necessary condition of reasonability. One cannot be reasonable in anything unless he has a reason or reasons for that thing. For example, if Fred believes it is going to rain, to be judged reasonable in so believing, he must have some reason or reasons for his belief. He cannot claim to be reasonable in his belief and admit that he has no reasons to offer in support of it, for to lack such reasons and still believe *is* to be unreasonable. So understood, the first premise seems quite acceptable. Unger's thesis that reasonability in anything--and particularly in belief, which is our central concern--demands reasons is consonant with what we mean by this concept. For someone to say that he believes something but admits he has no reasons whatsoever for believing it is a self-confession

[14]See Unger, p. 201.

of unreasonableness.

(2) To understand the point made by the second premise it is necessary to grasp Unger's locution "some propositional value of '*p*'." Since the premise is stated in general terms, using the variables "S," "X," and "*p*," to apply it to a concrete situation we must replace these variables with constants--"S" with some person, "X" with a belief that person holds, and "*p*" with the reason why he holds the belief. Thus we might say that *Ralph* (S) *believes that it is going to rain* (X) and his reason for believing this is that *the barometer is dropping rapidly (p)*. The second premise is concerned with "*p*" and what it is saying is that "*p*," if it is to constitute someone's reason for anything, must be capable of articulation in the form of a proposition, which will ordinarily follow the word "that" in an introduction of the following kind: "S's reason for X is that ...," for example, "Ralph's reason for believing it will rain is that *the barometer is dropping rapidly.*"

The explanation I have just gone through is a (perhaps necessary) prolix way of making an obvious point; namely, a reason for something, if it is to be a reason, must be a *reason*. If, for example, one believes that something is the case, and offers a reason for believing this, his reason will be that something else is the case. And to affirm that something else is the case (the reason) one must state a proposition, *e.g.*, "The barometer is dropping rapidly." This premise, I believe, is as uncontroversial as the first. If we offer reasons for things and, in particular, for things we believe, these reasons must be such that they can be formulated in propositions that state that something or other is the case.

(3) The third premise raises no questions, as far as understanding is concerned; its meaning is clear. If one gives some reason *p* for something X, then one knows that *p*. If Ralph gives the reason that the barometer is dropping rapidly for his belief that it will rain, then Ralph knows that the barometer is dropping rapidly.

3. *The Basis Argument: Justification*

Clearly the cogency of Unger's sorites rests on its third premise. The first two premises merely set the argument up but it makes the substantive point linking scepticism about knowledge to scepticism about rationality. So in evaluating the Basis Argument we must concentrate on it. As it stands, the premise does not seem to command ready support. It is simply a bald assertion whose truth appears to be intuitively opaque. Therefore, if he is to get us to accept it, Unger must offer good reasons in its support. Unger

recognizes as much and devotes a long section (4) of Chapter V to accomplishing this task. In this section I shall develop a form of the argument Unger gives in defense of his third premise.[15]

The strategy of Unger's defense of the premise "If S's reason (for something X) *is that p*, then S *knows* that *p*" is as follows: He will establish that any proposition, to qualify as someone's reason for something, must satisfy certain conditions and that these conditions are the conditions that qualify it as something that person knows. Thus, the proposition "The barometer is dropping rapidly," to qualify as Ralph's reason for his belief that it will rain, must satisfy conditions that are the same as the conditions necessary to qualify it as something that Ralph knows. To make his case Unger sets forth the conditions a proposition must satisfy to qualify as something someone knows and then attempts to show that any proposition given as a reason for something must satisfy these same conditions. So let us follow him in this endeavor. We begin by assuming the standard definition of knowledge as justified true belief. Since our concern is with beliefs, and their reasonability, we can say, according to our definition, that any belief, to qualify as knowledge, must be justified and true. To make his case, thus, Unger must show that any belief that anyone offers as a reason for believing something else must be both justified and true. Let us see how this might be done.

We shall begin with the "truth" condition. Must any "reason" we give in support of some belief, if it is to qualify as a *reason* for that belief, be true? Turning to our example, suppose Ralph said "I believe it is going to rain and my reason for believing this is that the barometer is dropping rapidly." But in fact the barometer is *not* dropping rapidly. Under these circumstances, could the rapid dropping of the barometer be Ralph's reason for believing that it will rain? Unger would say "No,"[16] and I think we should have to agree with him. The rapid dropping of the barometer *cannot* be Ralph's reason for believing *anything*, let alone for his believing it will rain, because there is no such thing as the rapid dropping of the barometer. (Of course, Ralph's mistaken belief that the

[15]Although the argument I give will be substantively the same as Unger's, it will depart from his argument in detail. My reason for this departure is to avoid a commitment to a conception of knowledge that would beg one of the central questions at issue in Chapter III.

[16]See Unger, p. 208.

barometer is dropping rapidly might be his reason for believing it will rain; but that is a different question, to which we shall have to address ourselves later.) Our first conclusion is that any "reason" given in support of a belief, to constitute a reason, must be true.

We turn next to the "justification" condition. Must any "reason" we give in support of a belief, to qualify as a *reason*, be justified? This condition is more difficult to analyze than the "truth" condition, because the concept of justification can be interpreted in different ways. For purposes of the argument to follow I shall adopt a quite strict interpretation, rendering the term "justified" in the definition of knowledge as "justified true belief" to mean "justified to be true."[17] Adopting this interpretation of justification, let us see if it forms a necessary condition to qualify any "reason" we give in support of a belief as a reason for our believing it. Suppose the following: Both Ralph and Fred believe it will rain and both give as their reason for believing this that the barometer is dropping rapidly. The barometer *is* dropping rapidly (*i.e.*, the "truth" condition of knowledge is satisfied). However, Ralph is a trained meteorologist and believes that the barometer is dropping rapidly because he has been observing it carefully. But Fred knows little of meteorological instruments and believes that the barometer is dropping rapidly because he has been watching a thermometer, which he confuses with a barometer and which is also dropping rapidly. In this case both Ralph and Fred give the same "reason" for believing that it will rain. The question is: Are they both reasonable in giving this "reason"? Can the "reason" each gives constitute his *reason* for believing that it will rain? Let us assume that Ralph's observation of the barometer justifies the truth of the proposition "The barometer is dropping rapidly." We can then conclude that Ralph knows that the barometer is dropping rapidly, therefore he has a legitimate reason to give in support of his belief that it will rain so he qualifies in being reasonable in believing that it will rain. Fred, however, when he gives as his reason for believing that it will rain that the barometer is dropping rapidly, is basing his reason on his observation of a thermometer. He does not know that the barometer is dropping rapidly because he has not justified this to be true.

Can we not, nevertheless, say that Fred has given a reason in support of his belief that it will rain--on the grounds that his reason is the same as that given by Ralph,

[17]This procedure is consistent with that adopted by Unger, although he develops the argument in somewhat different terms. See Unger, pp. 209-211.

which we recognize to be a reason? Unger's answer would be "No" and, once again, I think we must agree with him. The point that is decisive here is that we are concerned with the *reasonableness* of individual human beings. We are asking: Is *Ralph* reasonable in giving as his reason for his belief that it will rain that the barometer is dropping rapidly? And, crucially, is *Fred* reasonable in giving as *his* reason for his belief that it will rain that the barometer is dropping rapidly? We can agree that Ralph is reasonable because he knows that the barometer is dropping rapidly. But Fred is not reasonable because the "reason" he gives as his reason is not a reason for him at all; although the barometer *is* dropping rapidly, he does not know that it is.

To sum up, we have argued, following Unger, that the third, and crucial, premise of the sorites is sound. If anyone gives, as his reason for believing X, some proposition "*p*," then for us to count *p* as a reason for him, and therefore to count the person reasonable in believing X for the reason *p*, he must *know* that *p*. Reasonable belief, it follows, entails knowledge. Hence, if knowledge is impossible so too is reasonable belief.

4. *The Basis Argument: Evaluation*

As I indicated at the beginning of the last section, Unger's Basis Argument stands or falls with the third premise of his sorites. I have explained and, to some extent, defended that premise; in this section I shall examine it critically, my goal being an evaluation of the argument as a whole. For purposes of my examination, I shall consider three objections that could be offered against the premise.

(1) The first criticism arises out of my discussion of the "justification" condition of knowledge, with which I concluded § 3. If the argument I offered there was intended to establish that nobody is ever reasonable in anything he believes (which is what Unger claims to show), it failed; rather all it succeeded in showing is that specific individuals may hold certain beliefs without reason. This is clear from the illustration I used. Granted that Fred was unreasonable in believing that it will rain, because he had no reason for doing so, *Ralph was reasonable* in believing it, because (by hypothesis) he did have a reason.

The response to this objection should be apparent. What I concluded in my illustration about Fred must be concluded about Ralph as well. For purposes of making my point I drew a contrast between the two, but this contrast is only provisional; finally we must recognize that both are in the same predicament. If a person's being reasonable about

anything entails that he knows something, and knowledge is impossible, it follows that Ralph can be no more reasonable about anything than Fred can. Both, knowing nothing, must be unreasonable about everything. It would, of course, be necessary to show that Ralph could not be any more reasonable than Fred in believing it would rain; but this Unger is prepared to do through his argument for scepticism about knowledge. Since, finally, no one *can* know anything, everyone necessarily is unreasonable in everything he believes.

(2) The second criticism relates to a point I made earlier in my defense of the premise. In discussing the "truth" condition of knowledge, I supposed a situation in which Ralph believed that it would rain, offering as his reason for believing this that the barometer was dropping rapidly, when in fact the barometer was not dropping rapidly. I then argued that the rapid dropping of the barometer could not be Ralph's reason for believing that it would rain because there was no such thing to be his reason. The objection would grant my immediate point but would counter by adding that, in this situation, Ralph *did* have a reason for believing it would rain; namely, his *belief* that the barometer was dropping rapidly. The mere fact that he was in error about the barometer did not annihilate his reason for his belief.

In response to this objection we must recollect what my point in that discussion was. I was trying to show that, to qualify as a reason for a belief, any "reason" we give must state something true. In the illustration the reason offered was that the barometer was dropping rapidly, but this was not true, so, I concluded, it could not be a reason for Ralph's belief regarding the immanence of rain. What the objection does, in effect, is say that Ralph could have another, different reason for his belief, in this case, his belief that the barometer is dropping rapidly. Granting this, we must pursue the illustration further. We are now faced with a situation in which Ralph is saying "I believe that it will rain and my reason for believing this is that I believe that the barometer is dropping rapidly." Now, if Unger's third premise is correct, Ralph must *know* that he believes that the barometer is dropping rapidly; otherwise the proposition "I believe that the barometer is dropping rapidly" cannot qualify as his reason in support of his belief that it will rain. But, if Ralph can know nothing because no one can know anything, he cannot even know that he believes that the barometer is dropping rapidly. Therefore, he cannot use this "belief" as a reason supporting his belief that it will rain, so that belief still remains unsupported and Ralph unreasonable in believing it.

(3) The third criticism is much more basic than the first

two, for it consists in a direct challenge to the truth of the premise itself. The premise asserts that, if someone offers a reason for believing anything, that reason must consist of something he knows. But why, the criticism runs, must this be true? The premise simply asserts but does not establish its truth. So why must we accept it? Indeed, it can be shown to be false because it can be shown that one can give a reason for believing something even though the reason he gives *does not* consist in anything he knows.

Before we can pursue this criticism, we must set up some guidelines in the form of constraints on what might legitimately count as someone's reason for believing something. Unless we do this we shall have complete intellectual anarchy in which anything can count as anyone's reason for believing anything. Ralph could, for example, say that he believes it will rain and his reason for believing this is that India has a larger population than China. Assuming the obvious--that Ralph's "reason" here is irrelevant to what he believes--we can rule it out on the logical grounds that anyone could equally offer it as a "reason" for believing it will not rain. To rule out such frivolous "reasons" we could adopt as a condition that a proposition, offered as a reason for a belief, to constitute a reason must be something that the person who offers it (a) believes to support the belief and (b) believes to be true. But this is not strong enough, as a case I discussed earlier makes clear. In that case, Fred gives as his reason that it will rain that the barometer is dropping rapidly. Fred *believes* both that the rapid dropping of the barometer is relevant to a change in the weather and that the barometer is dropping rapidly. Granting that he is right in his first belief, he is mistaken in his second, because he bases it on his reading of a thermometer. I think we should agree that Fred does not really have a reason for believing it will rain, even though the reason he gives is both relevant to that belief and something he believes to be true.

Fred's case indicates the next step we must take. It is not enough for a person simply to believe in the truth of what he offers as a reason; his belief in its truth must be *reasonable*. He must be able to offer reasons in its support. So we can say: If anyone S believes something X, and gives as his reason for believing X that *p*, then, if *p* is to qualify as S's reason for X, S must *reasonably believe* that *p*. In this formula we have offered an alternative to the third premise, in which Unger's requirement that S *know* that *p* is replaced by the weaker requirement that S *reasonably believe* that *p*. If this alternative can be defended, the third premise can be rejected, and Unger's Basis Argument refuted.

To help us decide between the two alternatives let us return to Fred and his prediction of the weather. Fred had, we agreed, no reason for believing that it would rain because the "reason" he gave--that the barometer was dropping rapidly--was not something he was reasonable in believing. So we can ask: Under what conditions would Fred be reasonable in believing that the barometer was dropping rapidly? We might reply: If he knew he was reading a barometer, rather than a thermometer, when he made his prediction. But such an answer has a fatal defect, because it acknowledges that, in order for Fred reasonably to believe that *p* ("The barometer is dropping rapidly"), he must *know* that *q* ("The instrument I am reading is a barometer"). Hence, to have a reason for believing X (that it will rain), Fred, although he need not know, but only reasonably believe, that *p*, must know that *q* (in order reasonably to believe that *p*). It follows that Unger is still correct, although at one remove: Reasonable belief still entails knowledge.

But the way out of this difficulty seems obvious. We do not need to agree that Fred must know that *q* in order reasonably to believe that *p*; he must only reasonably believe that *q*. To see if such an answer resolves the issue we must consider its implications. If *q* is to constitute something Fred reasonably believes, he must have a reason for believing it. Suppose he says: "I believe that I am reading a barometer (*q*) because the instrument is exactly like barometers I have read in the past" (*r*). Immediately, however, Unger could respond that, in order for Fred reasonably to believe that he is reading a barometer (*q*), he must *know* that the instrument *is* exactly like barometers he has read in the past (*r*). So, at a second remove, appeal must be made to knowledge to underwrite reasonable belief.

At this point, however, the critic might object, asking: *Why* must Fred know that *r* in order reasonably to believe that *q*? To this objection Unger could reply: For Fred legitimately to offer, as his reason for believing that he is reading a barometer (*q*), that the instrument is exactly like barometers he has read in the past (*r*), it must be true that the instrument *is* exactly like those he has read in the past. If the instrument is different from them, then *r* couldn't be his reason for *q*. For what *r* asserts--the exact likeness between the present instrument and past instruments Fred has read--simply would not exist, so could not be a reason for anything. If Fred is to use *r* as his reason for believing *q*, he can do so on one or the other of two grounds --(a) that he knows that *r* or (b) that he is reasonable in believing that *r*. If he chooses (a), it follows that *r* is true. Fred cannot know that *r* unless *r* is true. If, however, he chooses (b), it follows that *r* either may or may not be true. That is, he can have reason for believing that

r whether *r* is true or false.

On the critic's alternative Fred must opt for (b) because (a) requires that he know something; namely, that *r*. So let us follow him in this option. Suppose Fred says: "I believe that this instrument is exactly like barometers I have read in the past (*r*) because it has written on it 'Manufactured by the Acme Barometric Pressure Instrument Company' (*s*)." Once again, we are in precisely the same situation regarding *s* in which we found ourselves in the preceding paragraph regarding *r*. To constitute a reason in support of *r* what *s* asserts must be true. If Fred *knows* that *s*, then the truth of *s* is guaranteed, but Unger wins the argument. If Fred does not know but only reasonably believes that *s*, then *s* may or may not be true, but Fred must have a reason for believing that *s*. However, if Fred seeks a reason for believing that *s* in some *t*, the same problem can be raised regarding *t* that we have already raised regarding *s*, *r*, *q*, and *p*. To put the point in another way, in order for Fred, on this alternative, to give a reason for believing X ("It is going to rain"), he must provide a set of reasons, reasons for reasons, reasons for reasons for reasons that is infinite in length. He must, thus, launch himself into a vicious infinite regress. The only way to break this regress is to provide, somewhere along the chain, a reason such that he *knows* it to be true. But as soon as he does this he grants Unger his case.

To sum up, the resolution of this objection to the third premise and the reply Unger could make to it is as follows: The premise, as Unger states it, is too strong. It can be argued that one can give, as his reason for believing X, that *p*, even though he does not know but only reasonably believes that *p*. However, in order for anyone reasonably to believe that *p* he *must know something*. So we can reformulate the Basis Argument slightly by splitting the third premise into two which read, respectively: (3a) if S's reason for believing X is that *p*, then S has reason for believing that *p* and (3b) If S has reason for believing that *p*, then S knows something. From these two premises, plus the original first two, we can deduce the following variation on Unger's conclusion: If someone S is (even the least bit) reasonable in believing something X, then S knows something. This conclusion, although it requires one more step than appears in Unger's sorites, agrees in its essential point with Unger. Knowledge *is* a necessary condition of reasonable belief. So, if no one knows anything, then no one can reasonably believe anything either. Ignorance (scepticism about knowledge) *does entail* irrationality (scepticism about rationality).

III

Ignorance

I turn in this chapter to Unger's main argument--to establish scepticism about knowledge--from which, as we saw in the last chapter, scepticism about rationality follows. Much of *Ignorance* is devoted to showing that no one can know anything; in all Unger offers four different arguments leading to this conclusion. I shall examine each of these arguments individually. To aid in distinguishing them from each other I shall call them, respectively, (1) The Argument from the Necessity of Certainty, (2) The Normative Argument from Certainty, (3) The Argument from the Necessity of Clarity, and (4) The Argument from the Impossibility of Truth.

1. *The First Argument Stated*

Unger states his first argument for scepticism about knowledge, *The Argument from the Necessity of Certainty*, formally early in Chapter II of *Ignorance*. I reproduce it here.

> (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.[18]

The argument I have just reproduced is clearly valid, so to determine its cogency we must decide whether its premises are true. I shall examine each premise in turn, asking, first, Is it true, as Unger claims in his major premise, that no one is certain of anything?[19] and, second, Is certainty, as he claims in his minor premise, a necessary condition of knowledge?

[18] Unger, pp. 87-88.

[19] It should be noted that Unger qualifies his major premise slightly. Since the qualification will not affect our discussion and since, as we shall see later, Unger need not have made it, I shall disregard it.

2. *Evaluation of Major Premise*

Before we can undertake an assessment of Unger's major premise, we must first understand what it means. This will require an analysis of the crucial concept "certainty." Unger offers such an analysis early in Chapter II of *Ignorance*.[20]

He begins by distinguishing two general classes of terms, which he calls *absolute* and *relative* terms, respectively. "Certainty," he then argues, falls within the class of absolute terms. A characteristic of an absolute term like "certain" (in contrast to a relative term like "confident") is that, if the term is descriptively applicable to any state of affairs, it cannot (logically) be more applicable to some other state of affairs. To clarify this point, he makes use of an analogy, distinguishing between the relative term "bumpy" and the absolute term "flat." We can truly say of a given surface A that it is bumpy, even though we can say of another surface B that it is bumpier than A. But we cannot truly say of a surface A that it is flat and also say of another surface B that it is flatter than A. For to say that surface B is flatter than A is to imply that A is not flat. According to Unger, "certainty" is analogous to "flatness" in being an absolute term. He makes his point in the following way: "As a matter of logical necessity, if someone is certain of something then there never is anything of which he or anyone else is more certain.... Thus, if it is logically possible that there be something of which any person might be more certain than he now is of a given thing, then he is not actually certain of that given thing."[21]

Although Unger's analogy offers us a criterion for the application of the concept of certainty, it does not give us any information about the nature of certainty as it is directly experienced by an individual who believes something to be true. To fill this gap Unger provides the following description of certainty: "'He is certain that *p* means, within the bounds of nuance, '*In his mind*, it is not at all doubtful that *p*,' or '*In his mind*, there is no doubt at all but that *p*.' Where a man is certain of something, then, concerning that thing, all doubt is absent in that man's mind."[22] Again, he speaks of someone's *feeling* of

[20]His main discussion appears in §'s 2-4 of Chapter II.

[21]Unger, p. 67.

[22]Unger, p. 64.

certainty.[23] Thus we can say that, for Unger, to be certain of something is to be in a psychological state concerning the thing of such a nature that one has no doubt in his mind at all about it.

If we put these two analyses of certainty together, Unger contends, the result is the major premise of his Argument from the Necessity of Certainty. That this is so can be seen by pursuing the analogy between "certainty" and "flatness" further. Let us begin with "flat," which, according to Unger, is analogous to "certain" in that both are absolute terms. The two share another common feature; they are both empirical concepts. With flatness, this is evident; to answer the question "Is surface A flat?" we must examine it empirically--look at it, feel it, etc. The empirical nature of certainty is not so evident. However, from what Unger tells us about it, I think it fair to say that, to answer the question "Is X certain that *p*?" we should have to conduct some kind of empirical investigation of the state of X's consciousness.

With this similarity between the two concepts in mind, let us return to "flatness." If no surface can be flat if it is logically possible that there be a surface that is flatter than it, and if flatness is an empirical concept, we can conclude regarding *any* surface A that it is logically impossible for us legitimately to claim it to be flat. Since we must decide the issue of whether A is flat by means of empirical investigation, we cannot conclude that it is flat--*i.e.*, that it is logically impossible that we should ever discover some other surface flatter than it. Our judgment regarding its flatness could always be blunted by the weakness of our sensory organs or the limitations of our measuring instruments. Given an improvement in either of these it is possible that we should discover another surface that comes closer than A to the ideal of total flatness. So we can conclude that, if flatness is an empirical concept, and is defined in such a way that no surface can be flat if it is logically possible that there be a surface flatter than it, we can never legitimately claim of any surface that it is flat.

Turning to "certainty," we can make a parallel kind of analysis. Of *any* proposition *p*, we can say that it is logically impossible that we can legitimately claim that X is certain of it. Our reasoning would be analogous to that just offered regarding flatness. No matter what our empirically justified conclusions may be about the condition of X's consciousness concerning *p*, it is always logically

[23]See Unger, p. 68.

possible that we shall discover that the condition of his consciousness regarding some *q* is such that it more nearly fulfils the defining characteristics of being a state of certainty than does the condition of his consciousness concerning *p*, therefore it is logically impossible for us legitimately to claim that he is certain of *p*. Since, according to the minor premise of Unger's argument, certainty is a necessary condition of knowledge, we can conclude that it is logically impossible that we should ever legitimately claim that anyone knows anything. Thus we are forced to embrace scepticism.

The conclusion to which our argument has led us must be that Unger *does* succeed in establishing the truth of his major premise. If the analysis of the nature of certainty (as an "absolute" term) that he gives is correct, we must agree that no one can legitimately claim of any proposition *p* that he is certain of it. If, in addition, certainty is, as the minor premise of the Argument from the Necessity of Certainty asserts, a necessary condition of knowledge, it follows that we can never legitimately claim of any proposition *p* that any person knows it to be so. We must now turn to that minor premise, to examine its contention that certainty, so understood, is indeed a necessary condition of knowledge.

3. *Unger's Argument for His Minor Premise*

The minor premise of Unger's Argument from the Necessity of Certainty reads, "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." This premise, in stating a necessary condition of knowledge, offers a partial definition of that term. The definition is not complete; Unger does not identify certainty with knowledge, believing, as we shall see later, that additional conditions must be satisfied before a person can be said to know something. Nevertheless, in defining knowledge at least in part in terms of certainty and then using this definition as a premise in his argument for scepticism Unger is taking a serious risk. He lays himself open to counter-attack, for any argument based on a definition of a crucial concept can be defeated by the simple device of showing that the concept in question has been improperly defined. In this instance we can ask: Must, or should, knowledge be defined as Unger defines it, making certainty one of its necessary conditions? Rather than answering this question directly, I shall first pose another. Why does Unger define knowledge in the way he does? His answer is that the definition he gives simply repeats the

"traditional view"[24] of knowledge. In support of this conclusion he refers to G. E. Moore.

It is worth noting that Moore is the only philosopher whom Unger cites as agreeing with him about the definition of knowledge, a fact that raises questions about his labelling it the "traditional" view of knowledge. Most epistemologists would disagree with Unger's claim that his definition is traditional, holding rather that the traditional view (at least in modern philosophy) makes no reference to certainty at all, but defines knowledge as "justified true belief." In his recent book *Analytical Philosophy of Knowledge*, Arthur Danto refers to this definition as the "Standard analysis" of knowledge.[25] So we should realize that Unger, in his reference to certainty, is offering us an unusual definition of knowledge and one not widely accepted among epistemologists. In any case, however, the question of whether Unger's definition is traditional is hardly crucial to the issue of whether it is a conception of knowledge that we must all adopt. To resolve that issue we need to consider the arguments he offers in its defense. Despite the fact that the point is of central importance to his case, Unger presents only one argument in support of his definition of knowledge. Although he elaborates it in a variety of ways and discusses it at length, the argument itself is quite brief. He writes: "... while we might feel nothing contradictory, at first, in saying 'He knows that it is raining, but he isn't certain of it,' we should feel differently about our saying 'He really *knows* that it is raining, but he isn't certain of it.' And, if anything, this feeling of contradiction is only enhanced when we further emphasize, 'He really *knows* that it is raining, but he *isn't* absolutely *certain* of it.' Thus it is proper to suppose that what we said at first is actually inconsistent, and so, that knowing does require being certain."[26]

[24]Unger, p. 83. "Even that most famous contemporary defender of common sense, G. E. Moore, is willing to equate knowing something with knowing the thing with absolute certainty. I am rather inclined to agree with this traditional view ..." (p. 83). Actually Unger mis-states himself slightly in saying that he is inclined to agree with the view that *equates* knowledge with absolute certainty. He doesn't himself equate the two; rather he holds that certainty is only a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition of knowledge.

[25]A. C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of Knowledge* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1968), p. 73.

[26]Unger, p. 85.

This argument, which I shall call the "Argument from Emphasis," rests for its force on an appeal to psychology. Unger clearly hopes to convince his readers of the truth of the conclusion he draws through the device of having them emphasize the words in italics. Nevertheless, it is hard to say how any given individual might react to this method. I think that responses would probably vary a good deal. Speaking for myself, and trying to convey my own natural response, I can only say that I find Unger's use of emphasis to have just the opposite effect from what he intends. If someone were to say to me "He really *knows* that it is raining, but he *isn't* absolutely *certain* of it," I would not draw the conclusion that he is contradicting himself. On the contrary, I would understand him to be trying to impress on me the point that, to know something, one does *not* need to be certain of it. I do not know how others might react but it seems to me that my interpretation is just as plausible and natural as that favored by Unger.

Unger's Argument from Emphasis raises another question in my mind. The conclusion he reaches is that a given proposition is inconsistent or self-contradictory. To say this is to make a *logical* judgment about the proposition. But to reach this conclusion he appeals to something he calls a "feeling of contradiction." In the first place I am not sure that I understand what he means by a feeling of contradiction. Surely he needs to explain this notion further. I assume that we can describe it as some kind of psychological state, of a kind that Unger has experienced. However it may be described, the feeling of contradiction seems to fall within psychological categories. Which leaves us with the question: How can a conclusion that makes a logical judgment be deduced from premises describing people's psychological feelings? At the very least the Argument from Emphasis appears to commit a category mistake and hence to be a *non sequitur*.

But more needs to be said about Unger's Argument from Emphasis, for it raises a number of interesting possibilities about the defense of scepticism, which Unger himself does not mention but which should be pursued further. As we have seen, Unger defends scepticism, first, by making a specific state of mind, the attitude of certainty, a necessary condition of knowledge, and then going on to establish that, because "certainty" is an absolute term, we can never legitimately claim of any of our states of mind that it exemplifies that attitude. He completes his case by justifying his contention that the attitude of certainty is necessary to knowledge by means of his Argument from Emphasis. I should like to suggest that a parallel--and, I think, equally plausible--case for scepticism can be made through an appeal to states of mind other than certainty. Let me

offer an example, with its Ungerian-style argument.

(1) In the case of every human being, there is at most hardly anything to which he is *committed*.

(2) As a matter of necessity, in the case of every human being, the person knows something to be so only if he is *committed* to it.

(3) In the case of every human being, there is at most hardly anything which the person knows to be so.

In support of my major premise I could argue that "commitment" is an absolute term, therefore, that one can be committed to *p* iff there is never a *q* to which it is logically possible that he or anyone else might be more committed. Since we can never legitimately claim that any *p* fulfils this condition, we can never conclude that anyone is committed to anything. In support of the minor premise we can turn to the Argument from Emphasis, holding (to put it briefly) that the proposition "He really *knows* that it is raining, but he *isn't* absolutely *committed* to it" feels contradictory to us, so is inconsistent. Therefore, commitment is a necessary condition of knowledge. Put our two premises together and we get a sceptical conclusion. Since commitment is a state of mind different from certainty, we have produced a second argument for scepticism, apparently as strong as Unger's original one.

Furthermore, we could produce equally strong parallel arguments for scepticism by appealing to other states of mind than certainty or committedness. I shall not take the time here to fill in the details but only suggest that Unger's "Argument from the Necessity of ..." could be built around such states as "adamant" (about), "convinced" (of), "dedicated" (to), "unquestioning" (about), etc., all of which seem to be absolute terms in Unger's sense. If I am right, a large number of arguments parallel to Unger's Argument from the Necessity of Certainty could be produced in support of scepticism. I am *not*, of course, offering this apparent wealth of support for Unger's thesis in order to strengthen his case for scepticism. Quite the contrary. I am suggesting that, since it seems so easy to reach a sceptical conclusion by the route Unger follows, we should view the procedure he uses with considerable suspicion. This sceptical thought takes me back to Unger's argument itself, and its minor premise. Is Unger correct in his claim that we can know nothing unless we are certain of it? The Argument from Emphasis, which he offers in support of that claim, is far from convincing. But we have yet to consider counter-examples that will show how much Unger's definition

of knowledge departs from the conception that most of us hold. A few illustrations will emphasize this point; they will be given in § 4.

4. *Certainty and Knowledge--Some Counter-Examples*

The minor premise of Unger's argument--that certainty is a necessary condition of knowledge--when added to his description of certainty as a psychological state, produces the conclusion that a person can know something *only* when he is thinking about it, when it occupies his consciousness. When he stops thinking about it, for example, when his consciousness is occupied by something else, he no longer knows it. Thus, I may be standing in a downpour, certain that it is raining, but lose my knowledge about the state of the weather because the rapid approach of an automobile, skidding directly at me, empties my consciousness of everything except the thought of my imminent danger. Or I may, as I sometimes do, drift off into a dreamless sleep, in which I am conscious of nothing. Once again I know nothing. Of course these things may be true, indeed would be true if Unger's definition is correct. However, they illustrate that Unger is offering a definition that is quite at variance with the way in which most of us understand the term "knowledge." Whether he might be thinking about something else altogether, or even be asleep and not dreaming, Einstein even then knew more about the theory of relativity, most of us would concede, than the rest of us ever do.

Unger might try to meet the objection I have just raised by altering his view to hold that, although certainty is a psychological state, it is not a state we need to possess about something at every moment we are said to know that thing. Once we have achieved a state of certainty about a given thing, he could say, we can legitimately claim to know that thing even when we are not thinking about it. I do not know whether Unger would be willing to make this change in his conception of knowledge. It would seem to have certain consequences that he might find it difficult to accept. For example, suppose that someone became certain of something, hence knew it. According to the revision of the theory I am suggesting, he would continue to know it even when he was not thinking about it. But suppose the reason why he was not thinking about it was that he had completely forgotten it. Would we, or Unger, still want to claim that he knew it? Perhaps certain additional criteria could be stipulated that would eliminate this kind of anomaly in the revised theory, but they would complicate it in ways that would make it quite different from the original version, as Unger lays it down in *Ignorance*.

To emphasize how far Unger's definition departs from

normal usage, consider the following case: A mathematician, through a series of brilliant steps, solves a problem that has baffled mathematicians for years. Although he runs through his proofs several times and finds no mistakes in them, the result he has achieved is so momentous that he cannot entirely erase from his mind a tiny lingering doubt that his solution may be wrong. Gradually, however, his doubt dissipates and he becomes absolutely certain that his answer is correct. If we were asked: When did the mathematician *know* the answer to this problem--when he had solved it, or only after he was psychologically able to overcome his last doubt to become subjectively certain that he had solved it? almost everybody but Unger would, I think, choose the first alternative.

Here is another example. Two logicians, working independently, simultaneously solve in identical ways an outstanding problem in logic. However, the two have different temperaments, the first being by nature confident and the second diffident. Because of this difference between them, the first achieves a state of certainty about the correctness of his solution but the second can never quite rid his mind of doubt. Would we conclude that the first possesses knowledge about logic that the second does not? Speaking for myself I would say "No," and I think most people would agree with me.

Or, to give a somewhat fanciful illustration, consider the following situation: Someone publishes a series of brilliant papers in the mathematical journals, in which he demonstrates the truth of a number of propositions that no other mathematician had proved before. The mathematical world is dazzled and agrees that he knows more mathematics than any other person alive. Then an eminent engineer steps on to the scene admitting a hoax. The mathematician in question, although he has done these things, and is in every external respect indistinguishable from everyone else, is not human at all but a robot. Because it possesses no consciousness, it can never be psychologically certain of anything. Should all the mathematicians therefore retract their earlier judgment and now conclude that it doesn't know anything? I think this example is harder to evaluate than the earlier ones. Some people, at least, might be unwilling to admit that a robot could know anything, on the grounds that only human beings can possess knowledge. However, I doubt that many, except Unger, would deny knowledge to the robot simply on the grounds that it is incapable of achieving a state of psychological certainty.

My aim in offering my counter-examples is to cast sufficient doubt on Unger's definition, insofar as he makes the

psychological state of certainty a necessary condition of knowledge, to lead us to reject the definition. Because of the very nature of definition, however, such counter-examples cannot be *logically* coercive, for anyone is free to define any term in any way he wants. I could, for example, define "knowledge" as "a figure that is both a square and a circle" and then conclude that knowledge is impossible because square circles cannot exist. And I could continue to maintain my definition no matter how many counter-examples were offered against it. All my critics could do would be to point out that what they mean when they (and almost everyone else) talk about knowledge is quite different from what I mean when I talk about it. I do not intend any parallel between the ludicrous definition of knowledge I have just offered and that given by Unger. Mine is absurd; his clearly is not. On the contrary, it has a considerable plausibility. Some of us probably find that, when we know something, we possess a state of mind about what we know that is different from its state when we merely believe something. We have come to characterize this state by applying the term "certainty" to it. Hence it is understandable that philosophers might make the mistake of concluding that possession of such a state is a necessary condition of anyone's knowing anything. That this is a mistake and, therefore, that Unger's definition ought to be rejected I would defend on the following grounds: (1) His definition is not the traditional conception of knowledge. (2) It forces us to conclude that we should not use the term "knowledge" in situations in which most of us would find this term appropriate, hence is a faulty definition. (3) It seems to be designed to lead to a sceptical conclusion about knowledge. (4) Other, better definitions of knowledge--definitions that *do not* lead to scepticism but *do* reflect more accurately what most people mean by the term than Unger's does--can be offered. In the next section I shall address myself briefly to point (4).

5. *A Proposed Alternative to Unger's Definition*

In this section I shall offer a definition of knowledge that is different from--and, in my judgment, better than--that given by Unger. However, since my aim in this essay is not to develop a theory of knowledge but to examine Unger's case for scepticism, I shall not discuss it in any detail. The conception of knowledge I have in mind is a modified version of the traditional view, that knowledge is justified true belief. My definition will not be complete, but only partial; I shall limit myself to a statement of the sufficient conditions of knowledge. According to this definition, "X knows that *p* if X can establish that *p*." To offer a specific example: "I know that it is raining if I can establish that it is raining."

Let us look at this partial definition a bit further. The conditions it lays down are held to be sufficient for knowledge, but they do not include the notion of certainty, which Unger claims to be necessary for knowledge. As a result my definition is incompatible with his. The two important concepts in the definition are "can" and "establish." Before we could understand it adequately, we would have first to explicate the criteria governing *can* (establish). Perhaps we could say, briefly, that one *can* establish that *p*, if one has established that *p*, remembers that he has done so and how he has done so, and is able to repeat the process on demand. As far as "establish" is concerned, its inclusion in the definition makes truth a necessary condition of knowledge. I can establish that *p* only if it is true that *p*. Of course, problems remain, the most important and difficult being that of determining how we might go about establishing the truth of any *p*. But this is a problem not of the definition of knowledge but rather of its acquisition. To resolve it we should have to go beyond definition and develop a theory of knowledge of our own.

I think we now have a clear enough picture of a conception of knowledge different from Unger's to permit us to face the main question we are trying to resolve. We have been presented with two alternative (partial) definitions of knowledge--Unger's, which makes the psychological state of certainty a necessary condition of our knowing anything, and mine, which makes no reference to our psychological states at all. If we accept Unger's definition, we must embrace scepticism, which he derives from it; but, if we accept mine, we can avoid Unger's sceptical conclusion. Which of the two should we prefer? As far as Unger's definition is concerned, we have seen, through the counter-examples I have offered, that it does not capture what most of us mean when we use the term "knowledge." On the other hand, I see no objections of a similar kind against my definition. If someone can establish that *p*, almost everyone would, I think, agree that he *knows* that *p*. What more would we require of him? That he should be in some specific psychological state? Speaking for myself, I should say that, to the extent that I am concerned about what I know and can know, I would find my concerns about any proposition laid to rest once I realized that I had established the proposition to be true. That I should still continue to doubt my knowing it is a supposition I find not worth entertaining. And the further supposition that I should continue to doubt my knowing it because I have not achieved some kind of state of psychological certainty I find equally not worth entertaining. In this I believe most people would agree with me. Consider the following: A person has just succeeded in establishing that some *p* is true and Unger accosts him,

saying, "You don't know that *p* because your mind is not (because it can't be) in a state of psychological certainty regarding *p*." How many of us would abandon our claim to know in the face of such an objection?

For the reasons I have given in the last three sections I have no hesitation in rejecting the minor premise of Unger's Argument from the Necessity of Certainty. It asserts a thesis about knowledge that we neither need nor ought to accept. With its rejection we can dismiss Unger's first argument for scepticism.

6. *The Normative Argument from Certainty*

I have called Unger's second argument for scepticism the Normative Argument from Certainty, for reasons that will soon become apparent. It occupies the first nine sections of Chapter III, being stated formally at the beginning of § 1, in the following terms:

> (1) If someone *knows* something to be so, then it is all right for the person to be absolutely *certain* that it is so....
>
> (2) It is never all right for anyone to be absolutely *certain* that anything is so....
>
> (3) Nobody ever *knows* that anything is so.[27]

It is clear from its crucial use of the concept of certainty that this argument is based on Unger's first argument. Since we have already concluded that the state of certainty is irrelevant to what we know, we may feel reasonably sure without having to look at it that Unger's second argument will not succeed in buttressing his case for scepticism. However, we can hardly take that point for granted; it may be that Unger has brought additional considerations to bear that will overcome the weakness of his first argument. To determine that issue we need to examine the argument on its own terms.

I shall begin with the minor premise, which Unger believes to make "the *substantive* claim of the argument."[28] Unger offers one general reason in support of the claim made in this premise that it is never all right for anyone to be absolutely certain that anything is so; namely, that such an attitude is always *dogmatic*. As he puts it: "What we have

[27] Unger, p. 95.

[28] Unger, p. 103.

just been arguing for most directly is the idea that the attitude of certainty, this attitude which is always had in being certain, always means that one is (completely) dogmatic in the matter at hand. And, for that reason ... this attitude is never all right for anyone ever to have."[29] In this argument Unger makes two points: (1) That to be certain of anything is to be dogmatic about it, and (2) that dogmatism can never be justified. About his second point he would, I think, find general agreement. Few of us would undertake to defend dogmatism. The truth of his first point, however, is not so obvious. His main way of supporting it lies in offering examples of situations in which individuals who are certain of something can be shown to be dogmatic. Although some of Unger's illustrations are of interest, and make telling points against some contemporary epistemologists, any adequate consideration of them would take us far afield from our argument. So I shall forego a detailed scrutiny of these cases, adding, however, that I agree with Unger at least to the extent of believing that in many situations in which people claim to be certain they are being dogmatic.

Even if we agree with much of what Unger says about dogmatism, however, we are not bound by that agreement to accept the minor premise of his argument, for that premise makes a *universal* claim. If the reason why it is *never* all right for anyone to be absolutely certain that anything is so is that such an attitude is *always* dogmatic, we must, before we can judge the truth of the premise, find out just what Unger means by dogmatism. He has little to say on this subject, his remarks on the nature of dogmatism being very brief. Nevertheless, though brief, they are illuminating. He writes: "... the opposite of scepticism is often called *dogmatism*.... Given the truth of the first premise [of the Normative Argument from Certainty] it is for this reason that dogmatism is indeed the alternative to scepticism."[30] If I understand Unger correctly, the view that he must be referring to when he talks of the "opposite of" and the "alternative to" scepticism is the belief that we can know things. He is, in other words, equating dogmatism with the positive view about knowledge accepted by all epistemologists except sceptics. If my interpretation of what he says is correct, it would seem hard to avoid the conclusion that Unger is simply begging the question against his opponents. Nevertheless, the fact that Unger's argument is question-begging does not preclude its conclusion from being true.

[29] Unger, pp. 134-135.

[30] Unger, p. 97.

Perhaps all claims to knowledge *are* dogmatic. Rather than attempting to resolve this issue directly here, I shall instead turn to a view that Unger expresses in Chapter VI of *Ignorance*, which raises a serious problem for himself. There he defends a position that, I think, is indisputable; namely, that to assert that a proposition is true is to make a knowledge claim. In his words, "If someone asserts, declares, or states that something is so, it follows that he represents himself as *knowing* that it is so."[31] But, if we turn back to the remarks Unger makes in his introduction to his Normative Argument from Certainty, we find him writing: "Each of the two premisses of this new argument is put forward as necessarily true."[32] Putting these two theses together we can conclude that, as Unger understands his own argument, in asserting its minor premise to be (necessarily) true he is making a knowledge claim. Such a claim, like all claims to knowledge, must for him be dogmatic. So in making it Unger abandons scepticism to join the ranks of the "dogmatists." Since the claim is also inconsistent with the conclusion he intends it to support, the Normative Argument from Certainty collapses in self-contradiction.

Before leaving Unger's second argument for scepticism, I should like to make a further comment about it. The line he pursues in the argument, besides ending in failure, is worked out in a way that is unexpected because it does not develop naturally out of his first argument, even though it makes central use of the notion of certainty. Given his first argument, one would have anticipated that he would have adopted a quite different tactic in his second. Having established that certainty is a state of mind that we can never attain, he could (quite naturally) have used this result to justify him in drawing the further conclusion that it is never all right for anyone to be absolutely certain that anything is so. It cannot be *all right* to be certain of something if one cannot *be* certain of anything. The normative claim, he could reasonably have maintained, entails a possibility claim. Thus, instead of turning to a normative argument against dogmatism in support of his minor premise, Unger could have derived the conclusion of his second argument in a straightforward deductive way from his first argument. The second argument might thus have been reformulated in some such manner as this:

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

[31]Unger, p. 265.

[32]Unger, p. 92.

(2) Because one *cannot* ever be absolutely *certain* that something is so, it is never all right for anyone to be absolutely certain that anything is so.

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

Why Unger did not develop his case in the second argument in this obvious way is not clear to me, for he says nothing on the subject in *Ignorance*. However, had he done so, his attempt would have failed, because of an ambiguity in the major premise. To lay this ambiguity bare one need only expand the premise to read: "If someone knows something to be so, then it is all right for the person to be absolutely certain that it is so, *unless* some other reason can be given why it is not all right for him to be certain that it is so." But, according to Unger, another reason *can* be given: It is not all right to be certain that anything is so because it is impossible to be so. However, as we have already shown in our examination of Unger's first argument, the impossibility of attaining certainty, hence the impossibility of claiming it to be all right to be certain, has nothing to do with our knowing things. Rather, the state of certainty is irrelevant to knowledge. Therefore, the conclusion that it is never all right to be certain of anything is quite consistent with the view that we may know all sorts of things.

7. *The Argument from the Necessity of Clarity*

Unger's third argument for scepticism--the Argument from the Necessity of Clarity--appears in §'s 10 to 12 of Chapter III. Although Unger does not state this argument formally, it is easy to reconstruct. Paraphrasing Unger's language, I shall formulate the argument on the model of his first argument.

(1) In the case of every human being, there is nothing about which he is clear.[33]

(2) As a matter of necessity, in the case of every human being, the person knows something to be so only if he is clear about it.[34]

(3) In the case of every human being, there is

[33]"Fundamentally, the absolute clarity required by knowledge can never be attained" (p. 147).

[34]"S knows that *p* if and only if it is clear to S that *p*" (p. 137).

nothing which the person knows to be so.

The logical structure of Unger's third argument is the same as that of his first; the difference between the two lies simply in his substitution of the term "clear" in place of "certain." Before we can evaluate the argument, therefore, we must get clear about the meaning of "clear," as Unger uses it. Unfortunately, this is no easy task. In fact, I am unable to explain what Unger means by the term "clear" in this argument, because I find myself at a loss when I try to understand his language. The problem is not that he fails to say what he means by "clear"; on the contrary, he does so quite explicitly. The difficulty is that I find myself incapable of discerning any relation between his conception of clarity and what I mean by knowledge. To see why this is so let us look at his own statement on the subject. After arguing that "clear" (like "certain") is an absolute term, Unger goes on to add the following remarks: "I take it that 'clear' means the same in each of these sentences:

The water was clear.

His meaning was clear (to her)."[35]

Although we might agree that "clear" is not a very clear term, one of its clearest uses occurs when we apply it to describe liquids, such as water, as Unger does in his example. When we say that water is clear, we mean that it is not opaque (muddy, oily, etc.). Our judgments concerning the relative clarity of bodies of water are usually based on visual evidence. Water in which we can discern objects to a depth of twenty feet we judge to be clearer than water in which we can discern objects only to a depth of five feet. Now, as we have just seen Unger to write, "clear," when applied to meaning, has the same meaning as it has when applied to water. Thus, according to his notion of clarity, to make decisions about the relative clarity of different meanings, we must determine how many feet we can see through them. The best response I can make to such a view of the nature both of meaning, and of clarity, when it is applied to meanings, is that Unger is talking a language unknown to me.

The problem of understanding what Unger is talking about, bad as it is when we try to attach his conception of clarity to what we normally mean by "meaning," becomes even worse when we try to fathom the relationship between his conception and what we mean by knowledge. In defending the minor premise of his third argument Unger explains his thesis that

[35]Unger, p. 137.

clarity is both a necessary and a sufficient condition of knowledge by contending that the notions of knowledge and clarity are identical in meaning. In his words, "... your knowing something is the same thing as that thing's being absolutely clear to you ..."[36] From the context in which this statement appears, we must conclude that Unger means the same thing by clarity, as he uses it here, as he meant by it a few pages earlier when he was talking about the clarity of meanings; *i.e.*, in his statement "His meaning was clear (to her)." Thus we are forced to conclude that the proposition "X knows that *p*" or, to give our proposition some content, "John knows that Caesar was assassinated in the Roman Senate" *means* the same as "That Caesar was assassinated in the Roman Senate is something John can see a great distance through, without any foreign matter (like mud or oil) obstructing his vision." Such a conclusion hardly requires comment. Needless to say, I am at a loss to explain why Unger gives the notion of clarity (and hence that of knowledge) the peculiar meaning he does in his third argument, but his doing so clearly renders the argument unintelligible. So we might ask: Could he avoid the consequences I have just drawn by redefining clarity in a way that does not lead to absurdity? I see no reason to prevent him from revising his argument through a redefinition of "clear," as it applies to meanings and relates to knowledge, that would be consonant with what we normally mean by that term in these contexts. But *can* Unger define the notion of clarity in such a way that his third argument becomes not only intelligible but cogent as well? To answer this question, we must consider a second point he makes in his argument, one that is independent of the meaning he has given to "clear." Through considering this point we can generate a basis different from that of meanings in terms of which we can evaluate the argument. Unger writes: "... our condition [*i.e.*, the clarity condition] implies that the subject is (absolutely) certain of the thing. If that thing [that they left] is (absolutely) *clear* to Mary, then she is (absolutely) *certain* that they left. It is inconsistent to say 'It was *clear* to her that they left, but she *wasn't certain* of it.'"[37] In this passage Unger says nothing about the meaning of clarity. But he does say something else of importance about it; namely, that it entails certainty. Unless one is certain that something is so, he cannot be clear that it is so. Now we have already shown that Unger is mistaken in his view that knowledge entails certainty; certainty is not a necessary condition of knowledge. If certainty is necessary to clarity but not necessary to knowledge, clarity

[36]Unger, p. 141. See also pp. 142 and 144.

[37]Unger, p. 140.

cannot be necessary to knowledge either. So the minor premise of Unger's Argument from the Necessity of Clarity, which asserts that clarity *is* necessary to knowledge, is something we need not accept. With its minor premise gone the argument collapses.

8. *The Argument from the Impossibility of Truth*

Unger presents his fourth argument in a discursive way also, never giving it a formal statement; nevertheless, although it is the most complex of his arguments, it is fairly easy to reconstruct. I shall formulate it in two syllogisms in which the conclusion of the first, restated, becomes the minor premise of the second.

I. (1) Truth is the property of being in agreement with the whole truth about the world.[38]

(2) There can be no whole truth about the world.[39]

(3) There can be no truth (or truth is impossible).

II. (1) Truth is a necessary condition of knowledge.[40]

(2) Truth is impossible.

(3) Knowledge is impossible.

My evaluation of the Argument from the Impossibility of Truth will be based on an examination of the first syllogism. The second need not be considered directly, because its two premises consist of the statement that truth is a necessary condition of knowledge, a thesis I accept, and the conclusion of the first syllogism. If we establish that the first syllogism is not cogent, we can reject its conclusion, hence the minor premise of the second syllogism, and thus the final conclusion, which is the sceptical thesis that the fourth argument claims to establish.

Unger places the main weight of his fourth argument on the minor premise of its first syllogism; namely, that there can be no whole truth about the world. This is a weighty claim that needs to be examined with care, for it appears on the surface to be far from obvious. Why, we might ask,

[38]See Unger, pp. 273 and 284.

[39]See Unger, pp. 272-273 and 308-309.

[40]See Unger, p. 309.

can't there be any whole truth about the world? It would seem, on the contrary, that, if there is a world, there is a whole truth about it. Such a thesis is considerably more plausible than Unger's minor premise. Before he can reasonably expect anyone to accept his minor premise, therefore, Unger has a formidable job to accomplish. He must offer arguments capable of overcoming its initial implausibility and showing that it is justified and that the more plausible view that there is a whole truth about the world mistaken.

The view that I have just expressed--that the minor premise of his argument is in need of strong support--is not at all apparent to Unger. On the contrary, he believes that his denial of the possible existence of the whole truth about the world is both *simple* and *uncontroversial*. In his words:

> The central entity in our account of truth is the whole truth about the world.... I find it almost incredible that there should actually exist or obtain ... the whole truth about the world. Indeed, I am quite ... confident that there really is no such thing, nothing such at all. And it follows from this, of which I am thus confident, that there really isn't anything either which is any part of that first, that is, there really is nothing which is any part of the truth. The consequences for us of this rather simple and uncontroversial idea now look to be remarkable. As this non-existence is, I suppose, strictly necessary, these remarkable consequences will also hold of the strictest necessity.[41]

As I have already indicated, I think that there is a whole truth about the world. I certainly cannot agree with Unger that his denial of its existence is a simple and uncontroversial idea. Because I believe that the issue is complex, difficult, and controversial, I do not hold my position about the existence of such a truth dogmatically. Rather, I think that whatever conclusion we finally reach regarding the question must come only as the result of careful and exhaustive analysis and argument. If Unger could show me, by suitably convincing arguments, that my view on the matter is mistaken, I should be prepared to abandon it. So we need to look further into Unger's case to see just what arguments he has to offer for his negative view concerning the whole truth about the world and how persuasive these arguments prove to be.

At this point the divergence between Unger's perception

[41]Unger, pp. 308-309.

of the situation and my own becomes starkly apparent. He does not even take the issue up in the text of his book but relegates the whole matter to a footnote. And in that footnote he writes: "I provide no argument for thinking that there is no such entity as the whole truth about the world ..."[42] It is hard to know just how to respond to such a statement. Either Unger or I radically misperceives the situation, and its need or lack of need for further argumentation. About all I can do here is throw the issue into the reader's lap. Is the statement "There can be no whole truth about the world" so simple and uncontroversial, as Unger says, as to need no substantiation or is it sufficiently difficult and controversial, as I say, to require the support of a substantial argument?

Since I have no way of coming to grips with Unger on the question of why he thinks there can be no whole truth about the world, I shall have to dismiss that point. But I do not intend to dismiss his minor premise itself. The premise reads: "There can be no whole truth about the world." Is this premise true (as Unger maintains) or is it false (as I believe), and is there any way in which we can decide the issue? Before we address these questions, perhaps we should determine what kind of a truth the premise is, if it is true. (Of course, if it is false its denial "There can be a whole truth about the world" or "The whole truth about the world is possible" is true.) As Unger has noted, truths (if there were any) can be categorized into two groups: (1) the whole truth about the world and (2) particular truths (or parts of the whole truth about the world). So, setting aside Unger's own views on the matter for the moment, we can ask ourselves: Can the minor premise be (1) the whole truth about the world? If so, what it states is false, because the premise, in being the whole truth about the world, entails that the whole truth about the world exists. Therefore, if we assume the minor premise to be the whole truth about the world, we can conclude that the statement "The whole truth about the world is possible" is true *a fortiori*. And this statement, combined with the major premise of Unger's argument, yields the conclusion "Truth is possible." If, again, we consider the minor premise to be an attempted statement of the whole truth about the world which is false, we can conclude that its denial "The whole truth about the world is possible" is true. This premise, combined with the major premise, also yields the conclusion "Truth is possible." Thus, whether we consider the minor premise--assumed to be a statement of the whole truth about the world--to be true or to be false, the implications of such an assumption, when combined with the major premise, yield the conclusion

[42]Unger, p. 309, n. 8.

"Truth is possible."

But the minor premise can be viewed as (2) a particular truth--a part of the whole truth about the world. Considered in this way, if the premise is false, its denial "The whole truth about the world is possible" is true, from which the conclusion "Truth is possible" follows. If, however, the premise is true, it is an instance of a particular truth. But then it is inconsistent with the conclusion of the syllogism which states that truth is impossible. If we consider the minor premise to be true, we must reject the conclusion as false. And, as we have just seen, if we consider this premise to be false, the conclusion is also false. If the minor premise is viewed as a particular truth, then, whether it be true or false, it entails the conclusion "Truth is possible."

The minor premise, if it is true, must either be the whole truth about the world or a part of that truth, for no other possibilities exist. Having canvassed its implications as both, in each instance assuming it first to be true and then to be false, we have found that on each assumption we make we are forced to the conclusion that truth is possible. Furthermore, our canvass has been complete; we have exhausted the possibilities. So we can deduce the following: The conclusion that the first syllogism of Unger's Argument from the Impossibility of Truth entails is: *Truth exists necessarily*.

We are now ready to turn to the second syllogism of Unger's fourth argument. Nothing by way of argument need be said about this syllogism. Rather all that is necessary is to *reformulate* the syllogism in the light of the conclusion which we have just reached. When we do so we find it to read as follows:

(1) Truth is a necessary condition of knowledge.

(2) Truth is possible (because it exists necessarily).

(3) Knowledge is possible (*i.e.*, not rendered impossible by the impossibility of truth).[43]

[43]Although, for purposes of contrast, I have stated this conclusion in the same form in which Unger states the conclusion of his second syllogism, it should be noted that the correct conclusion of my argument appears within the parentheses. The possibility of truth does not in itself establish either the existence or the possibility of knowledge. For knowledge does, I think, have other necessary conditions besides truth and it *may* be that not all of these can be satisfied.

Thus Unger's final argument for scepticism offers no grounds for doubt about the anti-sceptical conclusion that knowledge is possible.

To sum up this chapter, we have examined the four arguments Unger offers in support of his thesis that we are all necessarily ignorant, or his scepticism about knowledge. Although each of his arguments suffers from its own peculiar defects, none of them is cogent. Since we found in Chapter II that Unger derives scepticism about rationality from scepticism about knowledge, the destruction of his arguments for the latter removes his support for the former. So we can reject his case both for ignorance and for irrationality. Before we can make that rejection final, however, we must examine an argument of an entirely different kind that Unger offers in behalf of scepticism in his *Ignorance*. I shall turn to this argument in the next chapter.

IV

The Ancestor Language Hypothesis

1. *The Complication in Unger's Argument*

The argument Unger presents in *Ignorance*, as I have described it so far, seems much like other philosophical arguments, in the sense of being just about what it appears to be. There are, it might be said, no hidden agenda in it. Having reached the conclusions about it that we have, therefore, is to be done with it. Nothing more need be said.

All of this, however, is wrong. *Ignorance* does have an additional agendum, which, although not hidden, might easily be overlooked. To be specific, *Ignorance* contains a second line of argument that lies in the background behind the main argument, a line of argument which provides a context in terms of which Unger's main argument must be understood and appreciated. Unger does not spend much time on this background argument; it occupies perhaps a dozen pages of his book. Yet he takes the argument very seriously. At the end of *Ignorance* he writes: "... I think that hypotheses at least a lot like these [like the one I am now going to present on behalf of Unger] will offer our best bet for a scepticism which may be widely accepted and long maintained."[44] In this chapter I shall examine Unger's background argument for scepticism, which I shall call the "ancestor

[44]Unger, p. 316.

language" hypothesis.

Although Unger offers his ancestor language hypothesis in bits and pieces scattered throughout *Ignorance*,[45] his most complete statement of it appears in Chapter VII. To get the theory before us in Unger's own words, I have selected two passages, one from the beginning and the other from near the end of *Ignorance*.

> If the meanings of our key terms are impossibly demanding so that the terms don't really apply, the question arises of how things ever developed to this point. How did we come to be in such a conceptual mess, to be, as it were, trapped in it? ... there occurred to me the idea of a theory of things embodied in our language, inherited from an ancestor language, or languages.[46]
>
> I often continue to conceive of these things along the following bold, shall we say, anthropological lines. This embodied theory, with its rigid theorems, was the developed view of certain persons who were instrumental in creating an important ancestor, or ancestors, of our language, of English. I place no strict limit on how far back these thinkers go, but I should be surprised if they did not operate, and complete (at least most of) their contribution, a very long time before the Greek thinkers who are commonly taken to represent "ancient" philosophy. In trying to make sense of things, and in trying at the same time to satisfy certain other deep needs or drives, they developed a theory which in certain respects badly failed in various places, of necessity, to fit the world.... even if it is without our realizing the fact, their incorrect theory is always on the tips of our tongues. When we make statements we often give expression to it. And, more important, what we state, through analytic connection with the theorems of this theory, always will have entailments which are not true and which fail "to fit the world." Thus, what we state is never true and fails "to fit the world."[47]

[45]Unger's main references to the hypothesis can be found on pp. 5-6, 195-196, 246-247, 273-274, 303-304, and 314-317.

[46]Unger, p. 5.

[47]Unger, p. 274.

Unger's ancestor language hypothesis provides him with an explanation of his radical scepticism. The reason why we are all ignorant and irrational does not lie in any defect in our own capacities; it lies in errors embodied in the language we use (*i.e.*, in English), which, in turn, has inherited these errors from a language developed in the distant past. Those who developed our ancestor language, in their attempt to understand the world as well as to satisfy other basic needs, gave meanings to certain central terms--like "truth," "knowledge," "reasonable," etc.--which were so rigid and demanding that no statement anyone might make could meet the requirements necessary to have one of these terms applied to it. Even though with the passage of time our language has changed in many ways, these changes have been relatively superficial; in the meanings it gives to such central terms contemporary English has not changed substantively from its remote ancestor. As a result, because we speak English we cannot say anything true, know anything, or reasonably believe anything.

2. *Evaluation of the Ancestor Language Hypothesis*

I think it must be acknowledged that Unger has, in his ancestor language hypothesis, given his case for scepticism a new twist. But just what does the hypothesis add to his case? More specifically, does this new twist vitiate the arguments I levelled against his sceptical thesis in Chapter III? Can it resuscitate his view that no one can know anything about anything? I shall attempt to answer these questions by raising a number of critical points about the ancestor language hypothesis.

(1) Unger characterizes his ancestor language hypothesis as "anthropological." This seems to be fair; it is the sort of theory that anthropologists might develop as a result of their researches into ancient civilizations. But this is to imply that it is an empirical hypothesis based on *evidence*. Yet Unger offers no evidence for it at all in *Ignorance*. Does any evidence that would support it actually exist? If so, why doesn't Unger cite this evidence? If no such evidence exists, the hypothesis must be judged gratuitous. Unger himself seems to be a bit uneasy about the credentials of his hypothesis. On page 274 he describes it as "bold"; later on he implies that it may be *too* bold, because it may not be true.

> ...I suggest that we actually look into the historical roots of our contemporary language. My hunch is that as we go further and further back, the sorts of analytical connections for which I have had to dig so hard will be more apparent.... While I have been at great pains to make an embodied theory appear for

> us, I of course realize that present-day English has no obvious look of containing any such theory, much less an entire metaphysics of knowledge and truth. Indeed, with hardly any exception, those who speak our language, and who think in its terms, have had no conscious thought of any theory here. Indeed, for such reasons as this, I am not all that confident that many of my offered propositions are true ...[48]

(2) Nevertheless, let us assume for purposes of argument that errors in some ancestor language have corrupted the English we use in the ways Unger claims. According to the best evidence we now have from etymologists, the different languages spoken throughout the world today do not have a common origin--although the number of root languages is probably small. For example, Chinese has not developed from the same source as English and other Western languages. Would Unger agree that the Chinese, not having been corrupted by our ancestor language, are neither ignorant nor irrational? If so, what happens to his *universal* scepticism? Furthermore, if *our* inability to know anything results from the fact that we speak English, we could overcome this deficiency by learning to speak Chinese.

(3) But let us focus our attention on English. Unger contends that certain key concepts in this language have inherited such strict and demanding meanings that no statements we make using these concepts can satisfy the meanings they have. He writes, for example, "... our language embodies a theory which makes much depend on an impossibly demanding concept of knowledge."[49] I think we must look more closely at these demanding concepts. The three that most concern us are "truth," "knowledge," and "reasonable." We can eliminate the last from consideration, because the fact that we cannot exemplify it is derived from the fact that nothing we believe can fulfil the impossible demands made by the concept "knowledge." Just what are these demands? They are contained in the definition of "knowledge," as this word is used in English. So the issue that must be resolved results from the definition of that term. Once we recognize this, it becomes clear that we *already have resolved* the issue. That was what much of Chapter III was about. There I argued (a) that Unger's "definition" of "knowledge" does not capture what we who speak English mean by the term, hence is a mis-definition, and (b) that definitions can be given which succeed in truly reflecting the

[48]Unger, pp. 314-315.

[49]Unger, p. 246.

accepted meaning of the term and allow us to know things. Late in the same chapter I offered a similar kind of argument about "truth." Now, if my arguments were sound, Unger's ancestor language hypothesis is rendered redundant. There is nothing for it to explain. The problem does not lie in the English language; rather it lies in Unger's distortions of that language.

(4) When one reads through *Ignorance*, one senses a certain ambivalence in Unger's scepticism. On the one hand, he emphasizes, over and over again, that our ignorance and irrationality are universal and necessary. He writes, for example, "... the full form of our Principle of Identifying Knowledge may be coupled to our thesis of universal ignorance. These two jointly entail that there never is any reason for anyone ... to believe anything.... They establish this as a necessary truth, of course, as both of them are necessary propositions."[50] And, as I have already made clear earlier, many additional passages in the same vein could be cited from *Ignorance*. Yet, on the other hand, one can find in *Ignorance* passages like the following: "Instead of despairing in the face of these results, instead of feeling bad when thinking ourselves irrational, the thing for us to do, I suggest, is to devise alternative locutions to do the jobs of appraisal which, willy nilly, it appears that we in fact use our impossibly troublesome locutions to do."[51]

What should we conclude from this? Does Unger believe that we are *necessarily* ignorant and irrational or does he believe that we can overcome these deficiencies by revising the language we use? If we consider his ancestor language hypothesis to be an historical theory it would appear that we must interpret him as holding the latter, for it would seem impossible to derive a necessarily true conclusion from an empirical hypothesis. Put in another way, Unger, by making us aware of the critical shortcomings of our language and explaining how these originated, has put us on the alert. Not only should we be wary of current locutions, we should take steps to revise our language or even replace it with one that is better. And this we apparently can do.

> A second area of inquiry is perhaps the most creative; and the most trying. The need for it will depend on whether there is available to us a natural language, present or past, which, while rather rich in the ways we should want, avoids the difficulties we encountered without, of course, having others

[50] Unger, p. 242. See also pp. 92 and 214.

[51] Unger, p. 247.

> which are at least rather nearly as bad. If there is at least one such language, and we can find it and show it to be so good, then there is no very creative task left in connection with our present problems. But I suppose it more likely that no rich natural language is all that much better than English in the relevant respects. Accordingly, to solve our problems, either a new language should be developed and made available or at least an existing language should be radically changed in creative ways.[52]

The moral of all this, I conclude, is that Unger's ancestor language hypothesis *does not* support the sceptical thesis that he has reiterated throughout *Ignorance*, that our ignorance and irrationality are universal and necessary. At best, it supports a contingent, linguistic scepticism that we can overcome. So, if we take Unger's ancestor language hypothesis seriously, we must recognize that he is not really arguing for the extreme kind of scepticism that he appears to be in such statements as the following: "... I will say that the sceptical conclusion we now seek to yield may be put like this: Everybody is always *ignorant of everything*.... And, intending to establish our conclusion as a necessary truth, I will say, finally, that this argument means to show that ignorance is necessary, or inevitable, as well as universal, or complete, or total."[53] Indeed, we should have to conclude that Unger is not a sceptic at all, in the way in which most of us understand that term and in which he has himself repeatedly claimed to be in *Ignorance*.

(5) Finally, I should like to look more closely at Unger's statement of the ancestor language hypothesis, as he elaborates it in the long passage that I quoted earlier. My interest in the passage here is on the conclusion with which it ends, in which Unger states: "Thus, what we state is never true and fails 'to fit the world.'"[54] As a critic, I find myself almost at a loss here. The question is whether

[52]Unger, pp. 316-317.

[53]Unger, pp. 93-94. On page 92 he writes: "We do not think that if no one knows anything, that it is just an unfortunate feature of the way the human condition happens to be."

[54]A comment needs to be made about Unger's use of quotation marks around the phrase "to fit the world" in the passage I have just quoted. It is clear from the context that he has inserted these marks because he is repeating this phrase after having used it earlier in the same passage, without quotation marks.

I should take Unger's statement ("What we state is never true") at its face value or whether I should search for some other, hidden meaning in what he says. The reason for my dilemma should be clear: The statement provides an unalloyed *reductio ad absurdum* of Unger's ancestor language hypothesis.

I find myself reluctant to end my discussion of the hypothesis by pointing out an obvious self-contradiction in it, yet I do not see any alternative to accepting Unger's words as they stand. However, rather than concluding on so abrupt a note, I think we can profitably pursue Unger's view about the truth of our statements a bit further. He contends that what we state is never true. I believe this contention to be false. For one thing, Unger's statement "What we state is never true" is written in English. If I am right that this statement is false, its denial "Some things we state are true" is true. And, since this statement is also written in English, we have in it a truth, in English, which someone (myself) has stated. But what if I am wrong in claiming that Unger's statement is false? If I am wrong, his statement is true, hence it becomes an example of a true statement made in English by someone (Unger), thus entailing the truth of the statement, in English, "Some things we state are true." We have now exhausted the possibilities--Unger's statement is either true or false--so we can conclude that the statement, in English, "Some things we state are true" is itself true, and *necessarily* so. Unger to the contrary, we *know* that some things we state are true, because we have demonstrated this to be so. Hence, no ancestor language can possibly have subverted English in the way Unger's hypothesis claims.

V

From Irrationality to Knowledge

Unger devotes a good part of his *Ignorance* to tracing out the implications of his scepticism about knowledge. He refers to these, collectively, as the "wages of ignorance." One of the most important of these wages--scepticism about rationality--I have discussed in Chapter II. Many of the others I have referred to briefly, in § 1 of Chapter I. I think Unger has, by emphasizing these wages of ignorance, made a valuable contribution to the literature of scepticism. He has made it clear that scepticism is not simply an academic issue, with no relevance to "real" problems of life, but has far-ranging practical consequences. If, as he states, epistemological scepticism implies that "it is never the case that anyone *ought* to do anything, or that anyone

ought not to do anything," it would seem hard to avoid the conclusion that he then draws: "Such a result would completely undermine ethics and morals ..."[55] Whereas these wages of ignorance are destructive, others that he draws are, at least by implication, constructive. Since much of my essay to this point has been negative in tone, I should like, in my concluding chapter, to offer some positive remarks. So I shall concentrate on certain implications of Unger's scepticism that will permit me to do so. In order to reach a point at which I can become constructive, however, I shall first have to work my way through a valley of destruction.

1. *Scepticism and Theory*

I shall begin my discussion by inquiring into the nature of a theory. I do not intend any highly technical notion by the word "theory"; I could just as well have used some other, similar term, like "thesis," or "hypothesis." Two characteristics of a theory need to be noted: (1) A theory is an attempt to explain something; to make a true statement about the nature of things. Einstein would not have said: "I offer the theory that $E=mc^2$ but, in fact, energy is not equal to the product of mass times the velocity of light squared." No more would Unger say: "I offer the theory that knowledge is impossible but, in fact, people know many things." (2) A theory is not a self-existent entity, but is a product generated by some originator; it must be created by a theoretician, ordinarily by a human mind. My main concern is with the second characteristic of theories. If a theory must be created by some theoretician, we can say that, if a given theory is to exist--*if it is to be a theory at all*--someone must state it. Einstein's theory would never have been a theory if Einstein (or someone else) had not formulated it. With this understood, we are ready to turn to one of the wages Unger derives from his scepticism about knowledge. He writes: "Nothing ... can be asserted or even said to be so; no one can assert or even say that anything is so or not."[56] But it then follows that no theories can exist, for no one could assert them. *A fortiori* it follows that there can be no such theory as scepticism about knowledge. Put in another way, Unger's statement implies that, if no one can know anything, then no one can assert the sceptical theory that no one can know anything.

Before pursuing the implications of this conclusion, let us look at the reasons Unger gives for reaching it. The basis of his argument lies in the following contention: "If

[55]Unger, p. 243n.

[56]Unger, p. 311.

S asserts, states, or declares that *p*, then he not only represents it as being the case that *p*, but he represents it as being the case that he *knows* that *p*."[57] I shall not here pursue the reasoning that Unger uses to reach this conclusion; suffice it to say that I believe his argument to be sound and the conclusion true. Unger then proceeds to put this conclusion together with his sceptical theory of knowledge to get the following result: "If someone asserts, declares, or states that something is so, it follows that he represents himself as *knowing* that it is so. From this, in conjunction with our thesis of universal ignorance, it follows in turn that whenever anyone asserts, states, or declares anything to be so ... of necessity he falsely represents himself in so doing."[58] Since these remarks can be applied to theories as well as to assertions, statements, and declarations, we can formulate the following argument, as an application of Unger's general conclusion to the special case we have been considering:

(1) To state any theory *p* one must represent himself as knowing that *p*.

(2) No one can know anything.

(3) To state any theory *p* one must falsely represent himself.

We must next determine what Unger means by the locution "falsely represents himself" in this context and why he uses it. Unger's thinking can be expressed in the following terms: When someone asserts something to be so he is not only making a truth claim but a knowledge claim as well; he is representing himself as knowing that what he asserts is so. In this second claim he must falsely represent himself, because such a claim to know is inconsistent with Unger's sceptical theory. His recognition of the inconsistency that results from the very attempt to assert something leads Unger to acknowledge that the sceptic, who embraces the theory that knowledge is impossible, is in trouble whenever he tries to speak *meaningfully*. "... there is something wrong where a sceptic about knowledge, not just states or asserts something, or where he tries to put something forward as true or possibly true; but even wherever he might try to speak or write meaningfully in any way at all."[59] This passage obviously applies to Unger himself and to his

[57] Unger, p. 253.

[58] Unger, p. 265.

[59] Unger, p. 270.

own writings; so we are invited to accept the conclusion that, although Unger could (physically) write *Ignorance*, he could not give it any meaning.

Unger does not stop with this somewhat disconcerting admission but goes even further. The same conclusion he has reached about our attempts to assert, declare, or state that something is so can be drawn about all of the "illocutionary acts" we perform. He writes: "In the performance of any of these acts, a subject must represent, not only that something is the case, but that he knows that something is the case."[60] In performing any such acts, therefore, the sceptic about knowledge lapses into inconsistency, hence into meaninglessness. Having broadened his theory to cover a very wide range of acts in which we mouth some kind of content verbally (or put it in writing), Unger is led to draw a final conclusion: "In a very general way, then, our ignorance enjoins our silence."[61]

2. *Two Responses*

The last section, which follows out the line of Unger's own thought, has produced perhaps as decisive a refutation of scepticism as can be found anywhere in the literature. Logically--and, in my opinion, irrefutably--Unger, in the argument I have just traced, reduces himself to silence. Yet I have some feeling that he might not be content with the present state of affairs. On his behalf I should like to raise two objections to the case as Unger and I have presented it to this point.

(1) It might be argued that I have misrepresented Unger's case. Although he does imply that the *sceptic* cannot speak meaningfully, throughout the discussion in Chapter VI of *Ignorance* he makes it quite plain that the conclusions he reaches apply to *everyone*, sceptic and non-sceptic alike. Because we are all ignorant, we should all keep our silence. To conclude, as I have done, that the sceptic alone is reduced to silence is to distort the point of his entire argument.

This argument would have a lot more weight if Unger had established that we *are* all ignorant. But I think I have amply shown earlier that his attempts to establish the thesis of universal ignorance end in failure. Let us, however, put that aside for the moment and look at the

[60]Unger, p. 267. On the same page he gives a long list of such "illocutionary acts."

[61]Unger, p. 269.

situation afresh, from the vantage point we have now gained. Unger's line of argument leading to silence can be viewed from two perspectives--that of the sceptic and that of the non-sceptic. The latter, because he does not accept the thesis of universal ignorance, is able to recognize that, if we were all ignorant, we truly would all logically be reduced to silence. The argument beginning from an assumption of ignorance and ending in silence is one whose implications he can follow and whose cogency he can appreciate. But he can also recognize that, because he is able to understand the argument, he cannot himself be ignorant, for no being ignorant in the sceptics' sense could do that. So none of the argument applies to him; therefore he can reject the thesis of universal ignorance, along with its consequences. The sceptic, however, is in a quite different situation. Believing himself ignorant, he cannot say anything meaningful. Hence, he cannot produce the argument leading to silence that appears in Chapter VI at all. Nor could a sceptic have produced Unger's *Ignorance* either. Only a non-sceptic could have done so. So we are led to the odd conclusion that Unger, in order to formulate the sceptical theory and to work out its implications leading to silence, has to know something. He must, therefore, (to use his own words) "falsely represent himself" throughout. To sum up, we might formulate what we have been saying in the following terms: The argument from ignorance to silence can be articulated only in the form of a conditional: "*If* everyone were ignorant, then everyone logically would have to remain silent." Further, this conditional must be contrary to fact because its successful articulation can be accomplished only by a being who is not ignorant. Hence, its hypothetical clause must be false, so we can safely affirm: "Since we are not all ignorant, we do not all have to remain silent; only sceptics like Unger do."

(2) The second objection is of a different kind. It might be claimed that I have pushed Unger's conclusion further than he himself does. Although he argues that our ignorance enjoins our silence, he makes a qualification to that conclusion which I have not mentioned. Universal silence, he believes, can be avoided. "... our ignorance enjoins us, rather than give expression to our thoughts in any familiar way, to be silent. An alternative, of course, is to find new ways to express our ideas."[62]

The point Unger is making in this statement is already familiar, from our discussion in Chapter IV. The reason for our inability to know anything and, hence, for the injunction to silence, must be sought in the language we use.

[62]Unger, p. 250.

Since the root of the problem lies in the fact that such concepts as "truth," "knowledge," and "reasonable" have entirely too demanding meanings in English, we need to revise our language in such a way that these terms can no longer exercise their destructive effects. Following up this idea Unger takes the term "reasonable" as an example, suggesting that, although we can never be reasonable in believing anything because "reasonable" is too demanding in its meaning, we might substitute for it the term "queasonable," defining this term in such a way that we could be "queasonable" about many things. Thus the problem would be solved.[63]

Since I have dealt with this issue at length already, I shall not spend much time on it here. Three comments should suffice. (a) Unger's theory that our inability to know results from the impossibly demanding meanings certain key words have in English is mistaken; rather his conclusion is based on his own mis-definitions of these words. (b) Even if he were correct about meanings, the result would not be a scepticism that is universal and necessary, but only a contingent English-language scepticism. (c) The belief that we can resolve the problems raised by his scepticism by replacing troublesome words like "reasonable" with new words like "queasonable" is futile. For "queasonable" must mean the same thing as "reasonable" or it must mean something else. If it means something else, we are left with no word to use when we need to say that someone is reasonable in his beliefs. So we should have to devise some other word, which, to do the necessary work, must give rise to the same problems as "reasonable" does. If, however, "queasonable" means the same as "reasonable," it too is impossibly demanding and the problem remains as unresolved as ever.

3. *Theory and Knowledge*

In § 1 I talked about theories and the conditions that any "theory," to be a theory, must fulfil. In philosophy, as in other disciplines, the realm of discussion consists of the various theories that people offer as explanations of some subject-matter and solutions to the problems it raises. Philosophers evaluate these theories and, although they come to different conclusions as a result, they attempt to base these conclusions on the weight of the supporting reasons that are offered on behalf of the different theories that are offered. And if some theory is so strongly supported by reasons that no objections can be raised against it, they come--and, I think, reasonably--to judge it true. In his *Ignorance* Unger has advanced the sceptical theory that no

[63]See Unger's discussion in § 11 of Chapter V.

one can know anything. Logically opposed to this is the theory of the anti-sceptics that we can know things. How are we to evaluate the respective merits of these opposing theories? Which is the stronger, which should we accept? It is at this point that Unger comes to our aid and thus makes his most important, constructive contribution to epistemology, although I do not think he does so intentionally.

One of the criteria that a putative theory must fulfil is that it be statable; one cannot advance a genuine theory if one cannot articulate it. But this is precisely what Unger correctly sees to be impossible about his sceptical "theory." Although he can *say* the words "No one can know anything," these words must be meaningless and he should remain silent. As Unger himself writes, "... there is no appropriately accepted way for a sceptic about knowledge to express his view without falsely representing himself in the process."[64] He must falsely represent himself because he inevitably traps himself in an inconsistency whenever he attempts to formulate his sceptical "theory." Logically, therefore, scepticism, because it cannot be articulated, cannot fulfil the conditions necessary to qualify as a theory, so cannot be a theory at all. It is a paradigm case of a *non-theory*. But, if we can reasonably accept as true a theory against which no objections can be raised, can we not, with even more reason, accept as true a theory whose opposing "theory" cannot even *be* a theory? If the sceptical "theory" that knowledge is impossible is really a non-theory, then the anti-sceptical theory that knowledge is possible is the *only possible* theory about the possible existence of knowledge. Since it *is* the only theory that is logically possible, we have every reason to believe, and none to doubt, that it is true. Finally, since the implications we have just drawn follow as surely from the more moderate sceptical "theory" that knowledge *does not* exist as they do from the extremely sceptical "theory" that it *cannot* exist, we can draw the further conclusion that the theory that knowledge *does* exist must be true as well. We *do* know things, and this we *know*.

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[64]Unger, p. 268.