

Knowledge and Certainty

Preliminaries

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9.4.14

Outline

- 1 Knowledge, factivity and certainty
- 2 Unger's In defense of Skepticism
- 3 Questions for discussion

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Knowledge and certainty

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- 2 Knowledge requires **true belief**.

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- 2 Knowledge requires **true belief**.
- 3 Does this mean the same as saying that knowledge requires absolutely certain evidence?

Knowledge and certainty

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- 3 So factivity and certainty are different claims about knowledge.

Certainty versus Factivity

CERTAINTY

In order to know P , your evidence has to be maximally good. It has to be so good that no one could have that evidence without P 's being true.

FACTIVITY

Knowledge that p entails p .

A subtle distinction

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Knowledge and Certainty

In "A Defense of Skepticism"
(Philosophical Review 80 1971), Peter
Unger mounts an argument for
Skepticism.



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- 2 So skepticism about the perceptual domain is the view that we know close to nothing in the perceptual domain.
- 3 Unger tries to show that skepticism is true for most of our beliefs.

Unger's argument

- 1 If you know that p , then you have to be absolutely certain that p .
(CERTAINTY)



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- 2 For most propositions p that you believe, you're not absolutely certain that p .



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- 1 If you know that p , then you have to be absolutely certain that p . (CERTAINTY)
- 2 For most propositions p that you believe, you're not absolutely certain that p .
- 3 So for most of the propositions p that you believe, you don't know that p .



Knowledge and Certainty

But “certainty” may mean different things:

PSYCHOLOGICAL CERTAINTY To say that you're certain that p might mean that you're especially confident, that you have no lingering doubts about P running through your mind. Call this the psychological sense of “certainty.”

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But “certainty” may mean different things:

PSYCHOLOGICAL CERTAINTY

EVIDENTIAL CERTAINTY Alternatively, to say that you're certain that p might mean that you have really good evidence for p , evidence which is so good that there's no chance of your being wrong. It's not possible to believe that p on the basis of that kind of evidence and be mistaken. Call this the evidential sense of “certainty.”

Knowledge and Certainty

- 1 PSYCHOLOGICAL CERTAINTY and EVIDENTIAL CERTAINTY may come apart.
 - 1 Can you think of a case of EVIDENTIAL CERTAINTY without PSYCHOLOGICAL CERTAINTY?
 - 2 Can you think of a case of PSYCHOLOGICAL CERTAINTY without EVIDENTIAL CERTAINTY?

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- 2 The bridge might be **ideal rationality**.
- 3 An ideally rational agent would be psychologically certain that p is the case only when evidentially certain that p is the case.

Unger's argument

- 1 If you know that p , then you have to be absolutely (psychologically) certain that p . (CERTAINTY)



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- 3 So for most of the propositions p that you believe, you don't know that p .



Second premise

Why does Unger think that we are hardly ever certain of anything? How can one support premise (2)?

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- 2 He thinks that emptiness requires a thing to have nothing in it whatsoever—however small. And he thinks that, in order to be flat, a thing must have no bumps or curves whatsoever—however small.

Second premise

- 1 The answer is that he thinks that “being certain” is an absolute term, like “empty” and “flat.”
- 2 He thinks that emptiness requires a thing to have nothing in it whatsoever—however small. And he thinks that, in order to be flat, a thing must have no bumps or curves whatsoever—however small.
- 3 If “certain” were an absolute term, too, then being certain would require having no doubts whatsoever.

Knowledge and Certainty

- 1 Unger argues that if “flat” is an absolute term, then:

Knowledge and Certainty

- 1 Unger argues that if “flat” is an absolute term, then:

Flatter

Necessarily, if x is flatter (or more near to being flat) than y , then that must mean that x has fewer bumps or curves than y , so y must have some bumps or curves; so strictly speaking, y is not really flat.

Knowledge and Certainty

- 1 Similarly, if “being certain” is an absolute term, then:

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- 1 Similarly, if “being certain” is an absolute term, then:

More Certain

Necessarily, if you are (or should be) more certain of p than you are of q , then that must mean that you have (or should have) fewer doubts about p than about q , so you must have (or should have) some doubts about q ; so strictly speaking, you're not really certain of q .

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- 2 Hence, if he's right that "being certain" is an absolute term, then—since there is something which is more certain for you than q —it follows that, strictly speaking, you're not certain of q .

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- 1 Unger thinks that for most propositions q , the proposition that you exist is, and should be, more certain for you than q .
- 2 Hence, if he's right that "being certain" is an absolute term, then—since there is something which is more certain for you than q —it follows that, strictly speaking, you're not certain of q .
- 3 And if knowledge requires absolute certainty, then you can't know that q .

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- 1 For example, Unger claims that it is plausible that one is more certain that one exists than that there are automobiles.
- 2 If that is correct, **More certain** tells you that one cannot be certain that there are automobiles.
- 3 And if knowledge requires absolute certainty, then you can't know that there are automobiles.
- 4 Since the same reasoning can be run for most p , Unger argues that for most p , we do not know that p is the case.

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- 1 Does it sound plausible to you to say that you're not certain of propositions like "There are automobiles"? Do you have any doubts about propositions like these? Do you have more doubts about propositions like these than you do about your own existence?

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- 1 Does it sound plausible to you to say that you're not certain of propositions like "There are automobiles"? Do you have any doubts about propositions like these? Do you have more doubts about propositions like these than you do about your own existence?
- 2 If you think that we are certain that there automobiles, then we should probably reject Unger's criterion **More certain**.

More Questions for Discussion

- 1 Do you think it's true that knowledge requires psychological certainty? What if you believe that p , but you have some doubts running through your mind—doubts you recognize to be irrational and baseless. Would that prevent you from knowing that p ?

More Questions for Discussion

- 1 Do you think it's true that knowledge requires psychological certainty? What if you believe that p , but you have some doubts running through your mind—doubts you recognize to be irrational and baseless. Would that prevent you from knowing that p ?
- 2 If you think that knowledge cannot plausibly require psychological certainty, you should probably get off the board at premise (1).

Example

Mary

Mary has studied European history and has learned the main facts concerning the French Revolution. She is however highly under-confident by nature, and so she would not think of herself, nor present herself as knowing all those facts. Is that a good reason to think that she does not know them? Do more confident people know more just because of their confidence?