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# Contextualism and the "Actual Meaning" of Words

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## Abstract

In his book, Skepticism: A Case For Ignorance, Peter Unger gives an ordinary language account of skepticism that goes past the traditional dream argument and onto a new frontier, by claiming that the way we use certain words in our everyday language may not be what those words actually mean. This involves a thorough examination of the way we use words in our everyday conversations, namely those that we do not have in a philosophical arena. Unger Uses this method in order to examine how we know things, and if we can ever say that we know anything for certain.  In this paper I will be focusing on Unger's claim that words and sentences have an "actual meaning" outside of the ways we use them in our everyday lives, and will compare it to DeRose's account of contextualism in order to refute Unger's account of knowledge.

Peter Unger, in his book, Ignorance: A Case for Skepticism, gives a new account in support of skepticism that involves a thorough examination of the words we use in our everyday sentences, and how we use these words. He does this in order to closely examine knowledge and its relationship to certainty in terms of how we know things and how we say we know things. In this paper I will be focusing on Unger's claim that words and sentences have an "actual meaning" outside of the ways we use them in our everyday lives, and will compare it to DeRose's account of contextualism in order to refute Unger's account of knowledge.

For this argument, I will be using Section 5 of Chapter II, titled "Meaning and Use."  I will argue that there is no "actual meaning" of words beyond their everyday use, and further, that his account of knowledge in conjunction with absolute certainty is one that is specialized and false. Unger, leading up to this section claims that there are two types of terms: relative and absolute. Absolute terms are those which denote an absolute limit. The absolute term he uses in this section is "flat." Here, Unger is trying to convince the reader that absolute terms apply to our everyday uses of language. He does so by picking up on the ways we use the word "flat" in our everyday lives. This can happen in sentences such as, "The street is some nice flat pavement to learn to

roller skate on," or "The walk to my house is a flat one." These sentences use "flat" to refer to things that are really not flat at all, the sidewalk on the walk to my house has dips and cracks, yet is still considered level in comparison to more hilly terrain. Unger claims that using absolute terms to refer to the street and the sidewalk do not mean that both of them have the property of flatness, but that they are both close to being flat, relative to other circumstances that the situation may have. Unger claims it is unclear his assertion is incorrect. These statements deal with revealing if the statements we utter in our everyday sentences are true, and how these terms function in terms of our ordinary conversations and interactions.

Unger then goes on to claim that when asking if something is flat, we are also asking about the properties of flatness, and therefore require an understanding of what flatness really means. From this, Unger asserts that his account of the word "flat" is the only clear account of what the word means. As support, he claims that when people think they can clearly state what "flat" means, in a manner differently than how he does, that they may in fact be incorrect, and be using false statements. Unger concludes this section by claiming that because there are no theories to check his own against, then we can suppose that his theories regarding absolute terms are correct, insofar as they explain the facts about the uses of words and their meanings. Unger believes that he has proven that there are facts about his correct theories of the word "flat" and that any other good theory will also turn up facts in agreement with his use of absolute terms.

Unger also takes into consideration the use of absolute terms application to the "real world." He does this by using the example of 'happy' as a defined absolute term. Defined absolute terms have "certain relative features, or relative dimensions, in its condition of application" (Unger 60). For an example he uses the phrase, "Martha is happy that there are rocks" (Unger 60). What Unger claims is also expressed in this sentence is "Martha is certain that there are rocks," for she is not merely "hopeful" that there are. As certainty is expressed as an absolute term, and Unger argues that Martha can never be truly certain that there are rocks, as described by previous arguments, then it seems that Martha can never really be happy that there are rocks. With this he makes the case that our language is "well stocked" with absolute terms.

A more significant defined absolute term he identifies is that of "knowing" or "knowledge." To know something is at first a relative term, as in, "Sherry knows more about mixed drinks than Terry does." With this statement, the truth value lies within the people expressed within the statement; Sherry can know more about mixed drinks than Terry, if Sherry can name two or three, and Terry can't name any. Furthermore, if Sherry can continue to name what is in the drinks, and even in what proportions, it would seem that the abovementioned claim is true, and that Sherry actually does know more about mixed drinks than Terry. This according to Unger, differs from the claim that "Sherry knows that there are mixed drinks." While the abovementioned "know"

was a comparison between Sherry and Terry's knowledge, the second version of "know" implies that Sherry is certain that there are mixed drinks. Since Unger believes that knowledge requires absolute certainty (the absolute here being redundant in his eyes, but rather necessary to prove a point), he can then make the claim that Sherry does not and cannot know that there are mixed drinks in the absolute sense, from the Argument from Ignorance.

What is problematic about this argument is the claim that the everyday ways in which we use terms like "flat" is somehow less clear than his theories of absolute meaning, and that this lack of clarity somehow prioritizes the meanings of words in the absolute sense. This plays into an idea he briefly mentioned earlier in the book, his strict and loose versions of words and language. Strict versions require that we follow Unger's model of absolutes, to say something like, "That table is absolutely flat." The loose version of language follows closer to relative terms, "The walk home is a flat one." In the first case, the word "flat" is used to denote an absolute limit, but the second use is relative to its environmental and contextual factors. It seems unclear to me that one of these definitions is more clear than the other, or more correct than the other. In terms of knowledge, it seems unclear to me that the loose sense of the term "knowledge" is not the word's absolute meaning. In the loose sense, the word "know" does not refer to absolute certainty, but to immediate sensory experiences, and ordinary knowledge. Sherry, from the earlier example, could say that she does know that there are mixed drinks, she has seen recipe books about them, has witnessed people ordering them at happy hour at the Alibi, and has had her fair share of them at fancy cocktail parties. It would seem after all her experience, it would be false for Sherry to claim she does not know there are mixed drinks. Say she has one in her hand and someone asks her about it, unless she was a skeptic, she wouldn't question whether or not she is actually holding a mixed drink, but instead would probably tell the asker what its contents are (if she knows) and how it tastes. Here, Sherry is demonstrating her use of "know" in its loose sense, one that applies to her everyday life and how she lives in the real world. This use of "know" is one that is practical, and allows her to navigate her own sphere of consciousness day to day, with little trouble in that regard.

Unger tries to address this when he discusses claims that some people may be able to clearly articulate what "flat" means in uses that contradict his theory on the actual meanings of words, but his reply is unsatisfactorily, "I have never seen any reason to suppose that we are so easily wise, or that matters of use are so simple" (Unger 70). Here, he is not providing any concrete reasoning to believe that the everyday use of language is not indicative of its actual meaning, but is claiming that he sees no reason why it would be. The lack of support renders his argument unconvincing, and as his arguments about knowledge rest on the "actual meanings" of terms, as it rests upon intuitions, and not everyone shares those same intuitions. Here, Unger could benefit

from supporting his claim that his argument is the best and clearest one, otherwise, the audience has little to no reason to believe him whatsoever.

An account of knowledge that opposes Unger's belief of absolute meaning is that of contextualism. In his paper, DeRose tries to get at the rules that govern the statement that "S knows P." With this DeRose isn't really trying to get at knowledge, but the conditions for obtaining knowledge. DeRose claims that these conditions are contextual, implying that "knows" and knowledge can have different meanings depending on the contextual situation. He does this by first assessing the Argument from Ignorance. This argument goes as follows:

> 1. I do not know that ~H.
> 2. If I do not know that ~H, then I do not know that O.
> C. I do not know that O (DeRose 482).

This argument is the form of the classically known "Dream Argument," where "H" is replaced with, "I am dreaming," and O is replaced with "I am standing in this room." Descartes, in his Meditations, tries to find out what we can know by using the Method of Doubt. The Method of Doubt occurs when Descartes starts by doubting everyday ordinary things, then goes deeper, questioning the foundations of all his knowledge, even his knowledge of himself. In doing so, he is accepting the skeptical premises and trying to argue from them that we can still have knowledge of things. The first of these skeptical arguments in the second Meditation goes as follows; there are dreams that I have in which I think that I am awake. While in the present moment, I do not think I am dreaming, because everything seems so vivid and realistic. This would be convincing if I did not remember that I have been deceived by dreams in the past. From here Descartes asks the reader to suspend their disbelief in order to entertain the idea that one could be dreaming that they are having the delusions of being awake, and of opening our eyes, looking around, and deciding we are awake, when we in fact are asleep. His argument is a tentative one, as he never claims that we are in fact having these delusions presently, but merely the idea that it could be possible that we are presently having delusions as of being awake when we are asleep, as it has happened in the past, and could be happening now. Descartes writes that "in sleep [he has] been deceived by similar illusions," mainly of those consisting of feelings of being awake (Descartes 145). This argument is meant to instill an uncertainty within us about our everyday lives and actions, to make us question if we are really sure that the life we are living is the one that we think it is. This stage in Descartes' argument ends with the claim that he has no certain distinguishing factors between the dreaming and the waking world, and the implication that we could in fact now be dreaming follows from the first premise.

To begin breaking down this skeptic argument, contextualists, like DeRose, must first begin to explain why both premises are true, yet how the conclusion is false. Their answer lies within a contextual shift, such that the standards of knowledge are changing even though it is the case that "I don't know that I am not dreaming" and it is still the case that, "I am standing." This represents a difference in the conditions for knowledge. The contextualist claims that the skeptic, in giving their argument, "manipulates the semantic standards for knowledge," in order to create a context in which they can truly say that we cannot know anything (DeRose 483). The O in the argument is not referring to the specialized account of the word "knowledge" that that is given with premise H, however, it is referring to a more ordinary sense of knowledge, one that does not require such truth conditions to satisfy. In this paper, I have taken the skeptic conditions of knowledge to be like those of Unger's when he refers to the strict versions of words, and the ordinary versions of knowledge to be like that of Unger's loose account of the meanings of words. From here on I will refer to them as such. In accordance with contextualism both claims of knowledge, one in the strict and one in the loose sense, are true, and are perfectly compatible with one another. In the skeptical context created by the Argument from Ignorance, It is the case that I do not know O, however this does not affect whether or not I know O in ordinary contexts. This is what DeRose calls the "abominable conjunction" (DeRose 491). The abominable conjunction is a demonstration that our belief of, "I don't know that I'm not dreaming, yet I still know that I have hands," doesn't make sense in conjunction. It serves to show that our inability to live up to the high standards of knowledge set by the skeptic do not have a reflection on our tendency to live up to the more relaxed standards that are present in our "ordinary conversations and debates" (DeRose 483). This strategy is significant because it derails any attacks that the skeptic poses on the truth value of our ordinary claims, and focuses it on the specialized version of knowing that the skeptic creates. The conclusion of the contextualist argument will then be that if the skeptic is successful in their argument, they are only so by raising the conditions for knowledge, and therefore their arguments have no grounds on our ordinary claims and whether or not they are true.

Unger's account of absolute terms does not take into account the "loose" and "strict" ways we use terms in our everyday language. In terms of knowledge, it doesn't seem clear that Unger's account of "absolute" knowledge is what is the "actual meaning" of the word. Furthermore, contextualism gives an equally clear account as to why the Argument from Ignorance, and as a byproduct, the Dream Argument, fail, as their definition of knowledge requires more conditions than that required in ordinary life. With this being said, the first premise of the Dream Argument could and does still hold true, that I don't know if I am not dreaming, however, the conclusion that I don't know that I am standing does not follow because to know that I am standing requires only an ordinary sense of the word knowledge. It is this distinction between the "strict" and

"loose" sense of the word knowledge that Unger fails to support his prioritization of the knowledge in the absolute sense, and leaves the door open for contextualism.

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