Unger's Epistemic Condition for Illocutionary Acts and Hinge Certainty

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Abstract This paper explores Peter Unger's scepticism, focusing on his analysis of knowledge and his articulation of knowledge as a condition for assertion. The paper pursues two primary objectives: first, to provide a comprehensive and charitable interpretation of Unger's radical claims, contextualizing them within the initial phase of his work spanning the seventies and early eighties. Second, it aims to shed light on the problematic implications arising from a knowledge condition for assertion, particularly when certainty – as characterized in Unger's view – is considered necessary for knowledge. The concluding remarks suggest a strategy to avoid these challenges, by proposing an alternative understanding of certainty and knowledge, aligning with recent developments of hinge epistemology.

0. Introduction

Peter Unger is one of the few contemporary philosophers who explicitly define themselves as sceptics. His position is neither well-known nor mainstream, so I will first summarize some of the main aspects of his arguments and the theses they aim to establish. In doing so, I will highlight the importance of what I call the *semantic approach* which, in my opinion, characterizes Unger's scepticism. This approach is fundamental to understand his main argument for universal ignorance and the radical sceptical outcome he derives, particularly concerning our use of language.

Next, I will present Unger's scepticism about the possibility of performing illocutionary acts and participating in our linguistic practices at large, based on his *epistemic condition* for the use of language. Finally, I will propose a possible response to Unger's arguments, developed using the hinge epistemology framework. This framework, I believe, is particularly well-suited to address the sceptical challenge as presented by Unger, especially given the central role played by his semantic approach. Specifically, I will underline how the notion of objective certainty, as outlined within the hinge epistemology framework, can counter Unger's sceptical conclusions about knowledge and language.

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1. Unger on Certainty and Scepticism

To understand Peter Unger's sceptical stance, it is necessary to consider *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism* (Unger 1975b), where the author offers various arguments supporting his sceptical theses, all rooted in the analysis of what Unger presents as the real meaning of central terms in epistemology. Despite our seemingly unproblematic use of such expressions, Unger contends that they are characterized by extremely demanding conditions of applicability, rendering them unsuitable for describing reality. Unger articulates his scepticism through three fundamental theses. The first, which can be called the thesis of universal ignorance, states that «no one ever *knows* anything about anything» (*Ivi*: 1). According to Unger, this thesis logically implies a second sceptical thesis, positing a form of universal irrationality (*Ivi*: 197 ff.), where «no one is ever *justified* or at all *reasonable* in anything. In particular, then, no one will be justified or at all reasonable in believing anything» (*Ivi*: 1). Finally, the third thesis asserts the impossibility of truth, understood as the object of knowledge (*Ivi*: 272 ff.).

We shall focus on the first thesis, largely the most discussed, since Unger's reflections in support of it form the core of his position and reveal his distinctive philosophical approach. Unger begins by revisiting the traditional Cartesian sceptical argument found in the *Meditations*, specifically the evil demon hypothesis. To explain the effectiveness of the argument and the intuitions it elicits, Unger introduces two explanatory hypotheses. First, he emphasizes the role of the «*attitude of (absolute) certainty*» (*Ivi*: 30), which he outlines in these terms: «No matter what any experience may *seem* to show or suggest as to whether or not something is so, I will now *reject as misleading* any experience which seems to show or suggest that the thing is *not* so» (*Ibidem*). The absolute character of such an attitude, which makes it deeply dogmatic, lies in an irrational component – the uncritical rejection of counterevidence (*Ivi*: 105 ff.). Second, Unger posits a connection between knowledge and certainty, asserting that «If one *knows* that something is so, say, that *p*, then it follows that it is (perfectly) *all right* for one to be absolutely *certain* that *p*» (*Ivi*: 33)[1]. According to the author, certainty is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for knowledge.

Unger delves deeper into the concept of certainty by analyzing the semantics of what he defines as «*absolute (limit) terms*» (*Ivi*: 49), marked by extremely demanding conditions of applicability which prevent their veridical application. Since it denotes an «absolute *limit*» (*Ivi*: 55), an absolute term *T* can be applied to an object *O* only if "nothing could be more *T* than *O*", since "being *T*" is equivalent to "being absolutely *T*". These absolute terms are placed in contrast to so-called «*relative terms*» (*Ivi*: 54), which denote instead properties that are a matter of degree. This analysis of the logical conditions governing the meaning of absolute terms, along with the connection between knowledge and certainty, underlies Unger's «Argument for Universal Ignorance» (*Ivi*: 92 ff.):

(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 (*Ivi*: 95).

Unger contends that the absolute and dogmatic character of certainty is related to the semantics of the term "certain", an absolute term denoting the total absence of doubt. Asserting "S is certain that *p*" is equivalent to asserting "S is absolutely certain that *p*": certainty admits of no degrees (*Ivi*: 114 ff.). Unger's linguistic observations seem to support the «analytic connection» (*Ivi*: 98) posited between knowledge and certainty:

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[1] On the connection between knowledge and certainty see *Ivi*: 30-36 and 98 ff.

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"know" is, according to Unger, a defined absolute term, partially defined by "certain" (which is, instead, a basic absolute term)[2].

In summary, Unger argues for universal ignorance by asserting that, since sceptical doubts can always be raised about what we are certain of, the term "certain" cannot be correctly applied. Since certainty is a necessary condition for knowledge, and "know" is an absolute term partially defined by "certain", a veridical use of the term "know" is also precluded. According to Unger, disregarding sceptical possibilities results in an illegitimate assumption of the attitude of absolute certainty. Since certainty is necessary for knowledge, and absolute certainty is unattainable, we never truly know anything.

2. A "Semantic" Scepticism

Unger's scepticism purports to expose the inadequacy of our language and, by extension, of the concepts expressed through linguistic means. The conclusions drawn in *Ignorance* extend beyond the boundaries of epistemology, demonstrating the impracticality of absolute terms and depriving us of essential expressive tools. This negative result encompasses the use of adjectives, verbs (*Ivi*: 152-196), nouns (*Ivi*: 214-226), and hinders the performance of illocutionary acts (*Ivi*: 250-271). Unger argues that our language embeds an ancient theory of things, which «is always on the tips of our tongues» (*Ivi*: 274) and yet is inadequate to describe reality and our epistemic relationship with it. This theory, rooted in «an impossibly demanding concept of knowledge» (*Ivi*: 246), underlies our commonsensical worldview and ordinary epistemic practices.

Unger extends the implications of his view to linguistic behavior and communicative practices at large, focusing on some fundamental illocutionary acts, particularly *stating*, *asserting* and *declaring* (*Ivi*: 250 ff.). According to him, these acts entail a normative connection to knowledge: «If 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*» (*Ivi*: 253). This idea aligns well with certain linguistic intuitions[3], especially those regarding the inappropriateness of these illocutionary acts. Unger provides a vivid example to illustrate this. If an individual straightforwardly asserts that you will get a raise of salary, yet lacks certain knowledge of this fact,

> Assuming that he was rather aware of what he was doing, he was, I think, even open to some blame for having done it. The reaction to what this man has done is not that he has just made a mistake, misused language, or broken any particular rule or convention […] in a more fundamental way, he has acted wrongly. What he did, in so far as it was intentional, was of a piece with lying […]. On our condition for asserting, this man represented himself as knowing something which he did not in fact know […] the man falsely represented things and, in particular, quite consciously *he falsely represented himself* as knowing the thing. (*Ivi*: 261-262).

Unger suggests extending this «epistemic condition» (*Ivi*: 268) to the performance of other kinds of illocutionary acts. «In each (kind of) illocutionary act, the subject must represent himself to know a different thing, or different set of things; what is represented as known in each case is characteristic of that act and, thus, in some sense, serves to define the act» (*Ivi*: 269). Unger also posits that an epistemic condition is

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[2] Unger defines as basic absolute terms the absolute terms «not (naturally) defined in terms of some other absolute term, not even partially so» (*Ivi*: 56). Instead, the defined absolute terms are partially defined by the basic ones, presenting some relative dimensions.

[3] In particular, Unger focuses on Moore's paradox and on the challenge-and-retreat dynamic that can be observed in more ordinary cases of conversation patterns (see Austin 1946, Unger 1975b: 256 ff.).

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ingrained in the core of our linguistic practices, constituting «informal rules, or 'nests of expectations'» (*Ibidem*), demanding individuals to represent themselves as knowing something when engaging in language-based communication. For instance, when uttering or writing any meaningful expression, individuals would represent themselves as knowing that their statement has a meaning, and that they comprehend this meaning. However, Unger's scepticism, particularly the thesis of universal ignorance, presents a profound challenge to these linguistic practices. As knowledge becomes unattainable due to its association with an absolute limit, Unger argues that our language manifests a problem of false representation at its core. In this sense, «our ignorance enjoins our silence» (*Ibidem*).

3. The Significance of Unger's Conclusion

In response to this radical outcome Unger calls for a «linguistic reconstruction» (*Ivi*: 6), advocating either the construction of a new language or a fundamental revision of the existing one. He argues that philosophy should engage in a creative activity aimed at modifying the theory embedded in our language, thereby altering our conception of reality, and devising new linguistic expressions that avoid incoherence (*Ivi*: 313 ff.). To grasp the essence of Unger's position and approach to philosophical inquiry, it is crucial to consider his broader writings from the seventies and early eighties. These writings reveal his attempt to construct a single, internally consistent philosophical project.

One especially captivating aspect of Unger's reflections is that they are deeply rooted in the analysis of language. According to his view, the apparent intuitiveness and naturalness that lead us to accept sceptical conclusions stem from the perception that these conclusions are somehow implicit in our language. Unger's argumentation adopts a semantic approach, focusing on the logical conditions governing the meaning and applicability of epistemic terms and associated concepts (involving matters of «*descriptive semantics*», Unger 1979a: 149). The same approach is evident also in later papers (Unger 1979a, 1979b, 1979c, 1980), where Unger advocates for a radical nihilistic position. In these "nihilistic papers" Unger challenges common sense beliefs about the existence of objects (Unger 1979a), other people (Unger 1979c), and even the first-person subject (Unger 1979b). He again emphasizes the necessity of introducing new terms to replace inconsistent ones (Unger 1979c: 220 ff., 1980: 544), within the framework of «*prescriptive semantics*» (Unger 1979a: 149).

The prospect of linguistic reconstruction envisioned by Unger appears hardly feasible, and he modified his position in subsequent works, acknowledging the possibility of a contextualist approach more aligned with common sense (Unger 1984, 1986). However, a charitable interpretation of Unger's position reveals it to be not merely an absolute (and seemingly absurd) denial of our capacity to consistently conceptualize and make sense of reality. His critique of language and common sense beliefs gains significance when understood in light of Unger's rejection of prevailing philosophical trends of his time. Specifically, he criticized the prevalent approach that confined philosophy to the examination of ordinary language terms and of the belief system that they express, without questioning it, but rather assuming its correctness from the outset (Unger 1975b: 3 ff.).

Unger complaints that this tendency to accommodate the common sense view of reality, without challenging or enriching it, has rendered philosophy «a quite insubstantial discipline» (*Ivi*: 318), that ultimately leaves «our view of the world unchanged» (*Ivi*: 4). These remarks align with the pessimistic tone of his last book, *Empty Ideas: A Critique of Analytic Philosophy* (Unger 2014), demonstrating the consistency of Unger's conception of philosophical discourse throughout his whole production. Unger's call for a «constructively substantial» (Unger 1975b: 319) philosophy urges active engagement in

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enriching our worldview and common sense beliefs through a renewal of language, an active engagement in *making sense* – a transformative contribution to our evolving comprehensive view of reality.

4. Scepticism and Illocutionary Acts

Unger's scepticism has naturally attracted strong criticism, and his own partial revision of his stance indicates the difficulty of consistently maintaining such a radical position. However, Unger's argumentation in *Ignorance* and his linguistic observations in particular provide valuable insight into the interplay between linguistic and epistemic practices. As mentioned earlier, Unger introduces an epistemic condition for illocutionary acts and linguistic behavior in general, suggesting that our expressive and communicative performances involve representing ourselves as knowing specific things (*Ivi*: 269).

In the case of assertion, this knowledge condition suggests that when someone asserts that p, they are representing both that p is the case, and that they know that p. Unger uncovers this condition while addressing why it feels intuitively wrong or inappropriate for a sceptic about knowledge to state their own thesis, namely that "Nobody ever knows anything to be so". The author further observes that it also seems inappropriate, for the sceptic, to assert simple declarative sentences such as "It is sunny outside" (*Ivi*: 250-251). According to Unger, the explanation for these intuitions lies in the epistemic condition that he proposes for assertion. In these cases, the sceptic is *representing* something inconsistent, even though the content of their assertions is not overtly inconsistent.

The hypothesis of an epistemic condition is of interest for an account of assertion, even independently from the original context in which the author proposed it. As Unger notes, the knowledge condition appears to align well with linguistic intuitions regarding appropriate and felicitous assertions, seemingly receiving support also from ordinary examples and conversational patterns. A notable case concerns the ways in which we typically challenge assertions, which include "How do you know?", "Are you (absolutely) sure/certain?", and "Do you know that for certain?" (*Ivi*: 263). On Unger's account, this variation between knowledge and certainty is not problematic, as absolute certainty is a necessary condition for knowledge. The fact that these phrases are effectively used to challenge assertions, and that a common and appropriate «assertive retreat» (*Ivi*: 264) involves replacing the first assertion with a hedged one, stating for example «that [one] at least thinks or believes that the thing is so» (*Ibidem*), suggests that something stronger than mere belief is required for an appropriate assertion.

The thesis that knowledge plays a fundamental role with respect to assertions has attracted considerable attention and has received significant recognition in the literature. Notably, Williamson (2000) argued for a knowledge norm constitutive of the speech act of assertion, contrasting it with alternative epistemic norms (such as the truth norm, or the warrant norm)[4]. Unger's proposal does not focus on a knowledge *norm* for assertion; instead, the epistemic condition he suggests involves a form of *representation* that agents put forward in using language. Indeed, this idea of an epistemic condition was first introduced by the author in a paper published before *Ignorance* (Unger 1975a), where he posited it as «a necessary condition for any representation which has any close connection with matters of truth or, at least, a condition for anyone's ever providing any such representation» (*Ivi*: 141). This epistemic condition applies to any representation of something as being the case, that is, for any representation that can be correct of

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[4] See Benton (2024); on assertion among the speech acts and its norms, see Pagin and Marsili (2021). For a critique of the truth norm, see Williamson (2000); for a critique of the certainty norm proposed by Stanley (2008), see Pritchard (2008).

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incorrect: «If someone represents it as being the case that *p*, then he (or she) represents himself (or herself) as *knowing* that *p*» (*Ivi*: 142). Assertion, therefore, is understood as a specific instance of representing something as being the case «*using language*» (*Ivi*: 144), thereby entailing an epistemic condition.

As noted by Pagin and Marsili (2021), Unger is not the only proponent of this kind of epistemic condition, which involves the asserter representing themselves as holding a specific epistemic stance with respect to the asserted content *p*. Michael Slote and Donald Davidson, both cited by Unger, also put forth similar views. Slote argues that «when we state or assert something, we represent ourselves as being sure and having knowledge about it, not merely as believing what we have asserted» (Slote 1979: 178). Similarly, Davidson states that «[s]omeone who makes an assertion represents himself as believing what he says, and perhaps as being justified in his belief. And since we want our beliefs to be true [...] he represents himself as intending to say what is true» (Davidson 1984: 5-6).

5. Epistemic Conditions on Assertion

Unger outlines this epistemic condition programmatically, leaving many details undeveloped. While this condition someway defines each speech act, Unger does not seem to understand its satisfaction as essential to the performance of the act itself, in the sense that asserting that *p* without knowing that *p* does not mean that one hasn't thereby actually performed a speech act recognizable by the audience as an assertion. Violating this condition, according to Austin's framework, might be considered an abuse rather than a misfire. Austin himself described abuses as insincerities, remarking the «obvious parallel with one element in *lying*, in performing a speech-act of an *assertive* kind» (Austin 1962: 40).

Unger's reflections raise important questions about the role of epistemic conditions or norms in assertion and language more broadly. In communication, a crucial aspect involves the mutual recognition and negotiation of the participants' epistemic status, through the epistemic stance expressed in the conversational exchange (Heritage 2013). The connection between linguistic and epistemic practices is particularly salient in the case of assertion, explaining the relevance of epistemic conditions as a topic of interest in the study of assertion. One might question whether these conditions merely serve as sincerity conditions, or if they also encompass and elucidate other types of infelicities.

Searle's framework, for instance, incorporates an epistemic requirement within the preparatory conditions for the illocutionary act of asserting, namely that «*S* has evidence (reasons, etc.) for the truth of *p*» (Searle 1969: 66). Unger focuses on the "insincerity case", as illustrated by scenarios like the raise of salary example, yet he acknowledges other forms of infelicity. He distinguishes between two cases: the first involves individuals who assert what they do not know, fully aware of their lack of knowledge, which he criticizes as a form of dishonesty. The second scenario concerns «speakers [who] *think* they know, or are otherwise innocent about the facts», in which «the worst we think of them is that they are unduly incautious: they do not mean to represent themselves falsely; they should then take the proper precautions not to do so» (Unger 1975b: 262).

As noted earlier, there is a widely shared agreement that «[a]rguably there is a norm with epistemic content which typically governs unqualified assertions [...], where such a norm specifies the required epistemic position one must be in with respect to a proposition in order properly to assert it outright [and that] provides a necessary condition on proper assertion» (Benton, van Elswyk 2018: 248). Understanding assertion also as a form of self-representation, or self-expression, might better

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accommodate the diverse normative roles that epistemic conditions play in the case of assertion.

1. «[A]ssertion presupposes a robust epistemic position of the speaker» (Sbisà 2018: 175), entitling them to *assert* that *p*, that is, entitling them to the specific force of an «assertoric commitment» (Green 2007: 166). In this sense, assertion expresses the speaker's epistemic stance.

2. Assertion «[c]ounts as an undertaking to the effect that *p* represents an actual state of affairs» (Searle 1969: 66), conveying that something is the case, and thus it has a bearing on our understanding of reality. In this sense, assertion «can operate a change in the knowledge status of whoever receives it» (Sbisà 2018: 171), serving as a means to share and transmit epistemic content.

3. The asserter is responsible for their communicative action. Hence, assertion can be understood as «committing the speaker, not merely to consistency, but also to the defense of the assertion by evidence or argument» (*Ibidem*). When making an assertion, the speaker is committed to demonstrating – if requested – that the epistemic stance expressed through their linguistic performance aligns with their actual epistemic status (for instance, by providing reasons to support the assertion, indicating the source of the information asserted, etc.).

A position like Unger's accommodates the idea that asserting involves committing not only to the truth of the asserted content, but also to the recognizably social role of being a reliable epistemic source, guaranteeing knowledge transmission and communication.

However, consensus is lacking on the specific epistemic position required by the normative conditions in force for assertion. Truth and belief norms appear to be too weak to capture the linguistic intuitions considered by Unger and other philosophers working on related issues, as they fail to clearly differentiate assertion from other similar illocutionary acts that require weaker epistemic commitment.

Nevertheless, disagreement persists over which stronger epistemic status is required for assertion, whether knowledge or justified belief. Empirical data favoring a knowledge norm (Turri 2017) have been discussed and partly reinterpreted in light of the success of experimental findings favoring a non-factive norm (Marsili, Wiegmann 2021; see also Pagin, Marsili 2021). Recently, Marsili (2018, 2024) has argued for a distinction between the rule and the aim of assertion, which could explain both the permissibility of "unlucky assertions" (i.e. false assertions that are nonetheless admissible, since the speaker asserted something false only inadvertently) and the intuition that false assertions are generally criticizable. While truth may still be interpreted as the aim for optimally successful assertions – making false assertions improper because they fall short in fulfilling this aim – assertability seems to demand instead only warranted or justified belief on the part of the asserter, potentially *«justified at a level appropriate for knowledge»* (Green 2007: 73). New insight into these complexities might arise from a deeper consideration of qualified and hedged assertions (Slote 1979, Benton, van Elswyk 2018) and speaker trustworthiness (Pozzi, Mazzarella 2024).

Further exploration of Unger's programmatic suggestions could reveal the extension of the interconnection between epistemic and linguistic practices, emphasizing the central role of *knowledge* in navigating reality and interpersonal interactions. However, the primary focus of this paper is on the sceptical implications that Unger draws from his epistemic condition for illocutionary acts, which seemingly hinders a truthful and sincere use of language. This outcome arises not merely from the central normative role assigned to knowledge within our epistemic and linguistic practices, but rather from Unger's specific analysis of knowledge, certainty, and their relationship. The critical issue with Unger's conception does not lie in the link he establishes between certainty and knowledge, but rather in relying solely on an undifferentiated notion of certainty

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akin to personal subjective certainty[5]. Defined as an absolute state of complete absence of doubt, certainty is deemed legitimate only if all possibilities of mistake are excluded. Unger maintains that sceptical error possibilities are always relevant, and that is why absolute certainty is never epistemically warranted in his framework.

6. Hinge Epistemology against Scepticism

There is a sense in which certainty is a necessary presupposition for knowledge, and in this sense is linked to the exclusion of sceptical scenarios. Recent developments in hinge epistemology propose a fundamental distinction between subjective and objective certainty, the latter only being a condition of possibility for our ordinary epistemic practices, due to the role it plays within them[6]. Hinge epistemology, largely inspired by Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein 1969, transl. 1972 = OC), argues that there are some «everyday commitments» (often referred to as hinge propositions, see OC 341) «that we are optimally certain of but which are completely lacking in rational support. Nonetheless, it is entirely legitimate for us to have these commitments» (Coliva, Pritchard 2022: 78-79), as they need to be in place for us to carry out our ordinary epistemic and linguistic practices[7].

Wittgenstein's investigation into the hinge elements of epistemic practices was inspired by reflection on Moore's truisms, particularly by the inappropriateness of claiming to *know* such propositions (Coliva 2010, Moyal-Sharrock 2004). Wittgenstein's discussion includes varied examples, ranging from the Moorean "Here is one hand" to "This color is called 'blue'", reminiscent of an ostensive definition, and "No one has ever been on the moon". Regarding these propositions, Wittgenstein observes that «not everything that has the form of an empirical proposition *is* one» (OC 308): they stand out because of the role they play in the system of empirical judgements (OC 136-137), functioning as «the substratum of all […] enquiring and asserting» (OC 162). "Hinges" serve a grammatical, logical role in our language games, anchoring the meaningful use of words in linguistic and epistemic practices: «propositions of the form of empirical propositions, and not only propositions of logic, form the foundation of all operating with thoughts (with language)» (OC 401).

Hinges are deeply rooted in our worldview and practices, without being explicitly learned or formulated. They can be discovered «subsequently like the axis around which a body rotates. This axis is not fixed in the sense that anything holds it fast, but the movement around it determines its immobility» (OC 152). As «inherited background against which [we] distinguish between true and false» (OC: 94), hinges are neither true nor false (OC 205), justified nor unjustified (OC 359), reasonable nor unreasonable (OC

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[5] Unger repeatedly identifies *personal* certainty as central to his arguments, distinguishing it from *impersonal* certainty. Both are defined as involving «the complete absence of doubt» (Unger 1975b: 63. On personal certainty, see also *Ivi*: 112-123). He explicitly links this idea to knowledge: «it is natural to think that, except for the requirement of the truth of what is known, the requirement of 'attitude', in this case of personal certainty, is the *least* problematic requirement of knowing» (*Ivi*: 89). Moreover, Unger's central descriptions of certainty focus on the individual's *attitude* (see *Ivi*: 30-36, 105-136), characterized as involving the absence of «any *openness* on the part of the man to consider new experience or information», as well as the absence of hesitancy «to risk what he deems valuable or of worth on the truth of that thing [of which he is certain]» (*Ivi*: 116).

[6] See Coliva (2021: 231, note 5): Wittgenstein «distinguished between objective and subjective certainty. The former, which is the object of *On Certainty*, is not an epistemic category, for him, but a grammatical one; the latter, in contrast, is a psychological category and has no special philosophical relevance, for him (see especially OC 194, 270, 273; see also 15-16, 203)». Danièle Moyal-Sharrock has thoroughly explored the connection between objective certainty and hinges, see Moyal-Sharrock (2004).

[7] For an overview of hinge epistemology as an anti-sceptical strategy, see Coliva and Pritchard (2022: 78-92). For Wittgenstein's distinction between subjective and objective certainty, see OC 194, 203, 270, 273, 415.

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559). They are ultimately groundless (OC 166), since epistemic evaluation does not go "all the way down" (Moyal Sharrock, Pritchard 2024: 4, 28) but must terminate somewhere (OC 34, 110, 164, 192, 204, 612). Hinges are the conditions of possibility for linguistic and epistemic practices. As enabling conditions[8], they are not irrational – a term implying a misplaced evaluative judgment – but rather a-rational. Attempting to assess them in terms of rationality would constitute a category mistake (Moyal-Sharrock 2004, Coliva 2015), as they lie at the very foundation of epistemic evaluation itself.

7. Hinge Certainty

Contrary to Unger's undifferentiated notion of certainty, the framework offered by hinge epistemology allows for the differentiation of uses of terms like "know" and "certain" (Coliva 2021, Schönbaumsfeld 2021). In particular, the central distinction contrasts their employment in ordinary epistemic inquiry (involving gathering evidence, providing reasons or grounds for one's claims, and testing them) with their grammatical or logical use, which conveys instead the fundamental commitment to hinge propositions. There are significant differences in the articulation of this proposal, as there is no consensus on the characterization of the fundamental commitments. This lack of agreement is partly due to the unfinished nature of Wittgenstein's text, the inquiring and exploratory tone of his reflections, and the wide variety of examples of hinges provided, which defy a single, shared interpretation[9]. Beyond these exegetical challenges, hinge epistemology has developed not only as a reconstruction of Wittgenstein's thought, but also as an epistemological proposal informed by it, branching out in independent and autonomous directions[10].

Nevertheless, the anti-sceptical relevance of this framework is evident, as it establishes a distinction between the grammatical, logical use of epistemic terms regarding hinge propositions and their ordinary use within epistemic and linguistic practices, where hinges function as enabling conditions. In his reflections on the notion of certainty[11], Wittgenstein distinguishes between subjective and objective certainty. We have subjective certainty when «[w]ith the word "certain" we express complete conviction, the total absence of doubt, and thereby we seek to convince other people» (OC 194). However, this is not the sense of certainty Wittgenstein is interested in, and he repeatedly differentiates it from the uses of "certain" and "know" concerning hinges (OC 194, 245, 415). As Moyal-Sharrock (2005) notes[12], Wittgenstein seems to identify a third use of "certain", aligned with the use of "know" in ordinary epistemic practices, thus connected to the practice of doubting claims and providing reasons for or against them, observable in cases where "making sure" is possible (OC 8, 23, 30, 66, 77, 245, 270, 648). Nonetheless, Wittgenstein's primary focus lies on the objective, logical or grammatical sense of certainty, which underpins the fundamental certainty of hinges.

Wittgenstein's outlining of the use of "certain" and "know" in relation to hinge propositions, and of his notion of objective certainty, shares some similarities with the characterization that Unger offers of the attitude of (absolute) certainty, which plays a crucial role in his sceptical argument. Wittgenstein describes the relevant attitude toward a hinge as one where the individual is not ready to accept anything as a disproof of the

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[8] Coliva (2010, 2015) describes hinges as conditions of possibility of our epistemic practices, Schönbaumsfeld (2016, 2021) as enabling conditions.

[9] On varieties of hinge epistemology, see Coliva (2016, 2022), Coliva and Pritchard (2022: 145-174), Moyal-Sharrock and Pritchard (2024), Schönbaumsfeld (2016).

[10] See Coliva (2016).

[11] On hinge certainty, see Kober (1996, 2005), Moyal-Sharrock (2004, 2005), Moyal-Sharrock and Pritchard (2024), Wolgast (1987).

[12] See also Moyal-Sharrock and Pritchard (2024: 11 ff.).

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proposition (OC 173, 245, 577, 636), not being disposed to give it up or to be convinced of the opposite (OC 251, 380, 497, 573).

However, Wittgenstein significantly emphasizes that this «[…] is obviously an attitude which one hasn't got towards everything one believes or is certain of» (OC 381), but is specific to the fundamental commitments expressed by hinge propositions, which are immune to doubt as the logical enabling conditions of our epistemic practices (Schönbaumsfeld 2021). In this sense, objective certainty is presupposed by these practices, and only within them we can speak of doubt, knowledge and certainty in the ordinary sense. This distinction is crucial to avoid the radical scepticism proposed by Unger. If hinge propositions were subject to doubt or questioning, our condition would resemble the one outlined in Unger's radical conclusion about language: «If you are not certain of any fact, you cannot be certain of the meaning of your words either» (OC 114)[13].

Certainty, as in Unger's account, is identified with absence of doubt, but this "absence of doubt" assumes two different senses within the distinct contexts of the ordinary epistemic practices and of the enabling conditions of these practices. Wittgenstein warns us against the «false picture of *doubt*» (OC 249) that can arise in philosophical discussion. In ordinary epistemic practices, doubt is both possible and intelligible; when present, it is addressed by conducting a relevant inquiry on the matter. Focusing on how doubt is «introduced into the language-game» (OC 458), Wittgenstein argues that doubt can «get a foothold» (OC 356) only when there are grounds or reasons for doubting – thus, when a mistake is possible and conceivable (as a sort of counterpart to the epistemic use of "know")[14].

The absence of doubt must be conceived in an entirely different way at the level of hinges, the enabling conditions of epistemic practices. Doubt concerning hinge propositions is precluded because of the grammatical role that hinges play[15]; here «a mistake is not possible», being «*logically* excluded» (OC 194)[16]. Absence of doubt, understood in this sense (hinge certainty), is essential for the possibility of epistemic practices, language games, the very activity of judging, and the learning of such practices[17].

The difficulty in precisely framing hinge certainty should not be surprising, given Wittgenstein's exploratory approach, focusing on particular cases and examples, highlighting differences and similarities in an attempt to follow deep insights, without ever crystallizing into formal definitions. A further difficulty arises from the very nature of hinge certainty, which resists verbal expression. Hinges are usually neither formulated linguistically nor learned in an explicit form (OC 95, 152, 159). As conditions of possibility enabling language-games, they are not «moves *within*» them (Coliva 2010: 61). Conforming to hinges demonstrates linguistic competence, and bringing them to light merely clarifies their grammatical status: «they are not empirical and informative propositions» (*Ibidem*). The objective certainty concerning hinges cannot be defined in epistemic terms, which is why referring to hinges in terms of knowledge (as Moore did)

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[13] See OC 69-70, 369-370, 456-457, 490, 492, 494, 506-507, 514-515, 613-614.

[14] See OC 4, 24, 92, 122-123, 288, 322-323, 516, 652. Doubting hinges, by contrast, is always unreasonable (OC 219-220, 261, 325, 334, 416, 452-453, 607), if not unintelligible or a sign of madness (OC 10, 56, 58, 257, 281). In this sense, Wittgenstein seemingly contrasts scientific (*wissenschaftlich*) doubt with philosophical (*philosophisch*) doubt. The former refers to epistemic doubt, that is, doubt as it is ordinarily conceived in epistemic practices, while the latter refers to the misguided attempt to doubt hinges (OC 259, cf. OC 20).

[15] See OC 56, 58, 87-88, 308, 341-342, 387, 391, 394, 454, 492, 494-495, 628, 653, 666.

[16] See OC 15-17, 25-26, 43-44, 51, 54, 138, 155, 572, 574, 624, 630-634 ff., 659-663, 673-675.

[17] See OC 115, 150-151, 160, 185, 231-232, 234, 247, 283, 308, 310, 315-317, 329, 337, 354, 370-371, 375, 490, 497, 524, 625.

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or asking for grounds or evidence in favor of them seems out of place (OC 481-482). This certainty is exhibited performatively in linguistic and epistemic practices and in our very "being in the world"[18].

8. Hinges and Language

Hinge epistemology provides a strategic response to Unger's sceptical arguments, steering clear of their radical outcome. This framework is particularly apt to addressing Unger's scepticism due to its ability to engage directly with his semantic approach and linguistic observations. At the same time, hinge epistemology retains Unger's insight into the crucial role of knowledge and certainty in ordinary epistemic practices and linguistic behavior, re-interpreting this significance along the lines of a grammatical, logical notion of "know" and "certain", thereby avoiding the sceptical risks posed by Unger's undifferentiated conception of certainty. According to hinge epistemology, certainty is indeed required for knowledge, but not as an *epistemic condition* on knowledge claims. Instead, it is the kind of certainty *presupposed* by epistemic practices, the certainty of hinges. This framework preserves the serviceability of ordinary language, explaining why sceptical challenges like Unger's misconstrue the fundamental role hinges play in the system of language and knowledge.

Besides the anti-sceptical relevance of the hinge epistemology framework, it is interesting to explore the implications of Wittgenstein's reflections specifically on language. Although *On Certainty* focuses mainly on epistemological themes, the analysis of knowledge, certainty and related concepts provides insightful hints about linguistic practices, aligning with the main tendencies of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Perhaps due to this aspect of the text, the suggestions presented in *On Certainty* have proved particularly fertile even beyond the specific domain of epistemology, inspiring, among others, Searle's notion of the background (Searle 2011). I would like to conclude by suggesting two main respects in which Wittgenstein's reflections on hinges have a more explicit connection with linguistic practices. The first concerns the examples of "linguistic" hinges; the second concerns the infelicity of assertions of hinges.

As Moyal-Sharrock (2004) noted in her taxonomy of hinges, it seems possible to identify, among Wittgenstein's examples, hinges that have a specifically linguistic content. «Here, hinges are *strictly* grammatical rules that precisely define our use of individual words and of numbers. So as to differentiate it from the generic class of *grammatical rules*, I call this species of hinges: *linguistic*» (*Ivi*: 102). The examples indicated are various (OC 36, 126, 158, 340, 455, 545, 565, 624)[19], and they seem to be rooted in the kind of rules and instructions that are transmitted and received during linguistic training. They express the kind of certainty that characterizes our linguistic performances once we have mastered a language. It is particularly interesting how Wittgenstein does not trace a sharp distinction between learning the meaning of words and being able to identify and relate appropriately to the corresponding objects, or being able to use these words correctly in ordinary communicative and epistemic practices. Learning a language is learning a variety of linguistic games, thus learning how to participate in wider human practices, including epistemic practices[20].

At the same time, hinges are something that usually goes unmentioned, unsaid, and, for some interpreters, even ineffable (Moyal-Sharrock 2004: 43-48, 65-68, 94-99). Stating hinges in the context of an ordinary conversation results in odd, infelicitous assertions.

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[18] See OC 7, 10, 45, 110, 148, 174, 204, 232, 284-285, 287, 331, 358, 360, 371, 395, 397, 404, 411, 427-431, 501, 510, 519, 564, 601.

[19] See also OC 371, 450, 511, 522-531, 542, 544, 566, 625-626.

[20] See OC 61-65, 128-129, 140-144, 229, 374, 472-473, 476, 519, 522-524, 534-538, 560, 566, 586.

«The articulation of our objective certainties, *qua certainties*, in the stream of the language-game does not result in a display of certainty, but in their being perceived as queer (OC 553); incomprehensible (OC 347); a joke (OC 463) or a sign of the speaker's being demented (OC 467). And far from contributing to the language-game, such articulation simply blocks it» (Moyal-Sharrock 2004: 66)[21]. The explanation of this phenomenon lies in the fact that the kind of certainty we manifest towards hinges is a form of performative certainty, «operative only *in action*, not in words» (*Ivi*: 96). It is in our use of language, in our actions, in our relating with objects and other people, that hinge certainty finds its proper expression and manifestation.

9. Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined Unger's scepticism, highlighting the importance of a semantic approach in his arguments on scepticism and nihilism. I emphasized the consistency of this approach throughout his earlier work and traced some lines of continuity into his later writings. Secondly, I discussed Unger's notion of an epistemic condition for illocutionary acts, particularly for assertion, assessing its soundness and situating it within the contemporary debate on assertion and its norms. Finally, I offered a possible strategy against Unger's scepticism, aligning with recent developments in hinge epistemology. In explicating the notion of hinge certainty, I highlighted some of its connections with linguistic practices at large. While many of the points I raised remain preliminary suggestions, I hope they will inspire further exploration of the relationship between scepticism, hinge epistemology, and language.

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[21] See OC 159, 167, 243, 348-353, 379, 393, 403, 423, 433, 460-469, 554.

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