

Unger's Defense of Scepticism

In part of a 1971 paper entitled "A Defense of Skepticism," Peter Unger argues for a distinction between two types of terms used in language: absolute terms and relative terms. Unger argues that while both of these are related in certain ways, and appear to be the same type of term upon cursory investigation, they are in fact quite clear and distinct. Unger uses a process of paraphrase for distinguishing between the two types, a process which I will here elaborate on.

First, Unger describes the ways in which absolute and relative terms are related. The first way in which these two types of terms are related is via definition. Unger proposes that absolute terms are defined by appropriate relative terms, or rather a lack of them. Taking the absolute term "flat" and the appropriate relative term "bumpy" as examples, Unger says that "To say that a surface is flat is to say that some things or properties which are matters of degree are not instanced in the surface to any degree at all. (pg. 6)" In this example bumpiness is the matter of degree which is not instanced to any degree at all.

The second, more troublesome way in which absolute and relative terms are related is syntactical in nature. To be specific, both relative terms such as bumpy and absolute terms such as flat can be modified by terms which serve to indicate matters of degree. Thus, a person sounds just as cogent saying "The table is very flat" as he does saying "The table is very bumpy." The term "very" here is the term which serves to indicate a matter of degree. Other terms such as "pretty," "nearly," and "somewhat" work to this end as well.

The reason the second way in which the two types of terms are related is troublesome is because it serves to make the two types of terms appear as only one type – terms that can be present in matters of degree. To resolve this problem, Unger employs

a process of paraphrase to clarify the meaning of the phrases and to cull out fundamental differences inherent in absolute and relative terms. Take for example the phrase "The table is very flat." Unger uses his paraphrastic method to expose the meaning of the phrase, resulting with the phrase "The table is very close to being flat." Notice that in the paraphrase, it is implied that the table is in fact not (absolutely) flat, only close to being so. This meaning is inherent in the original phrase as well. In contrast, Unger looks at the phrase "The table is very bumpy," and by employing the same paraphrastic procedure, ends up with "The table is very close to being bumpy." This paraphrase implies that the table is not in fact bumpy, which is in direct contradiction to the meaning of the original phrase – the paraphrastic procedure did not work for the relative term.

It is because of this difference in the phrases resulting from the paraphrases that Unger argues that the two terms, flat and bumpy, are in fact two different types of terms. Unger's reason for calling one type of term absolute and the other relative is relatively (pardon the pun) simple. According to Unger, absolute terms may always be modified with the term "absolutely," so naturally so that he thinks such an application would be redundant. Similarly, relative terms easily take on the modifier "relatively."

Unger's method of paraphrase makes a very clear case for the difference between absolute and relative terms. This same method of paraphrase can be applied to any term which is a candidate for either relativeness or absoluteness, and resolve the dilemma rather succinctly. Further, it is my opinion that Peter Unger has done the epistemological world a great service by attempting to formalize common language to an extent that it can be studied, while at the same time allowing the language to retain the flexibility most people will agree is inherent in it.