DOES UNCERTAINTY REQUIRE CERTAINTY?

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In an earlier article I argued that Wittgenstein is mistaken in the following well-known claims from paragraph 115 of *On Certainty*:

> If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubt itself presupposes certainty.(1)

Given such an argument, we can conclude that Wittgenstein has failed to challenge proponents of skepticism regarding certainty. In Part I of what follows, I shall restate the gist of my argument, and then, in Part II, I shall develop the argument, and comment on its significance, in a way that I did not, and could not, in the earlier article.

Part I begins by setting forth an argument which shows that at least one proposition can be *un*certain for a person, even if that person is not certain of anything.(2) It should be noticed from the start that some of Wittgenstein's remarks would lead us to regard the certainty spoken of in paragraph 115 as a kind of indubitability.(3) There are, it seems, two basic kinds of indubitability: psychological and epistemic. Let us say that a belief is indubitable for a person in a psychological sense if he is psychologically incapable of refraining from holding it.

(1) See for similar remarks paragraphs 341-343 of *On Certainty*, eds. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969). My earlier argument against Wittgenstein's view in paragraph 115 of *On Certainty* can be found in "Justified Doubt Without Certainty," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 65, #1 (1984), 97-104.

(2) The argument will count against the anti-skeptical remarks of the following writers: H.A. Prichard, *Knowledge and Perception* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), pp. 78-79, 86; Norman Malcolm, *Knowledge and Certainty* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963), pp. 62-69; James Van Cleve, "Foundationalism, Epistemic Principles, and the Cartesian Circle, "*The Philosophical Review* 88 (1979), 63-66; and Michael Williams, "Coherence, Justification, and Truth," *Review of Metaphysics* 34 (1980), 253-54.

(3) See, for instance, *On Certainty*, paragraphs 337, 341f., 454. Cf. Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), p. 224.

And let us say that a belief is indubitable for a person in an epistemic sense if he cannot have (justifying) grounds for refraining from holding it. Although some of Wittgenstein's remarks suggest that he had in mind a psychological sense of certainty, and others suggest a nonpsychological sense, I shall begin by providing an argument which shows that paragraph 115 is wrong on either understanding of certainty.

I

One of the most powerful skeptical arguments employs the Cartesian Evil Demon Hypothesis (EDH), which states that due to a deceiving demon whatever proposition p is evidently true for a person S is actually false. The argument also uses this notion of epistemic possibility: p is epistemically possible for S at a time t if and only if S is not certain of -p at t. A familiar version of the argument is:

(I) 1. The following proposition is epistemically possible for S: $2 + 3 = 5$ is evidently true for S, and the EDH is true.(4)
2. If p entails q, and p is epistemically possible for S, then q is epistemically possible for S.
3. ($2 + 3 = 5$ is evidently true for S, and the EDH is true) entails ($2 + 3 = 5$ is false).
4. Hence: ($2 + 3 = 5$ is false) is epistemically possible for S.
5. Hence: S is not certain that $2 + 3 = 5$ is true.

The major problem with argument (I) is that premise 2 is false. We can instantiate the contradictory of 2 as follows: Consider a state of affairs in which S is entertaining a proposition q which is a remote inconsistent theorem of a certain interpreted axiomatic system. S has reflected carefully on q and therefore is certain that q is inconsistent. Hence, q is not epistemically possible for S. But S, we may assume, has not considered the theorem p which entails q, nor does S know that p entails q. On that assumption, p is epistemically possible for S, even though p is itself an inconsistent theorem. There is, therefore, at least one state of affairs in which p entails q and S is uncertain that -p

(4) The present sort of argument has been set forth in Van Cleve, *op. cit.* Note that in the text I eliminate the single quotes on '$2 + 3 = 5$' for purposes of simplicity.

while it is false that S is uncertain that -q; and thus 2 is false.

Given the falsity of 2, one might jump to the conclusion that the skeptic must be certain that p entails q in premise 2 in order to wield the EDH. I grant that we can derive 4 and 5 by replacing 2 and 3 with the following premises:

2B. If S is certain that p entails q and S is uncertain that -p, then S is uncertain that -q.

3B. S is certain that (2 + 3 = 5 is evidently true for S, and the EDH is true) entails the falsity of 2 + 3 = 5.

2B appears to be an unobjectionable premise, but it requires 3B as a consequent adjustment in 3 in order to preserve validity. 3B is of course troublesome for the skeptic because it makes a claim to certainty on S's part and thus conflicts with thoroughgoing skepticism. We need then to consider an alternative candidate for the second premise of the skeptical argument.

Since the following principle avoids the problems raised by principles 2 and 2B, it is a promising candidate for the second premise:

2C. If S is justified in believing that p entails q, and if S is not justified in believing that -p, then S is uncertain that -q.

2C is logically equivalent to:

2C1. If S is justified in believing that p entails q, and if S is certain that -q, then S is justified in believing that -p.

As it is based on an epistemic analogue to modus tollens, 2C1 appears to be unobjectionable. We can make the analogy to modus tollens more explicit by substituting the following principles for 2C and 2C1 respectively:

2D. If S is justified in believing that p entails q, and if S is not justified in believing that -p, then S is not justified in believing that -q.

2D1. If S is justified in believing that p entails q, and if S is justified in believing that -q, then S is justified in believing that -p.

2D can fill the role of 2C because if S is not justified in believing that -q, then S cannot be certain that -q. And for present purposes 2D is preferable to 2C, since 2D focuses more clearly on the key assumption

that justification is transmissible through justified entailments.([5]) Let us state this key assumption as follows:

2D2. If S is justified in believing that q entails p, and if S is justified in believing that q, then S is justified in believing that p.

In order to remove some likely doubts about 2D2, particularly those arising from lottery-style paradoxes, let us stipulate that p and q are single noncontradictory propositions rather than sets of propositions, and assume that S believes the consequent of the relevant conditional in light of its antecedent. Given these qualifications, 2D2 appears to be an unobjectionable principle. And since 2D is equivalent to 2D2, we can justifiably employ 2D as the second premise of the skeptical argument.

The next task is to instantiate the second conjunct in the antecedent of 2D, specifically as it concerns the first premise about the EDH. What we need are circumstances in which S is not justified in believing it is false that ($2 + 3 = 5$ is evidently true for S, and the EDH is true). The conjunct '$2 + 3 = 5$ is evidently true for S' does not raise any problems. For it is natural to assume first that most of S's evidence supports the proposition that $2 + 3 = 5$, and secondly that S justifiably believes that $2 + 3 = 5$ is evidently true for him. Under such circumstances S would not be justified in believing that the first conjunct is false.

Can we plausibly assume also, however, that S is *not* justified in believing that the EDH is false? It seems so. Consider, in this connection, a case where the probability of the EDH, on S's total evidence, is just as high as the probability of the denial of the EDH. Such a high probability, it seems, could be due to a number of factors, such as the unfortunate situation where S learns that almost all of the propositions which he was justified in believing in the past have been shown to be false, and so are unjustified now. Given such a situation, S could use an inductive inference to conclude that all of the propositions he is currently justified in believing are actually false. Thus, in the present sort of situation, it seems, S would not be justified in believing that a skeptical hypothesis like the EDH is false.

([5]) To see that 2D is equivalent to the assumption that justification is transmissible through justified entailments, see "Justified Doubt Without Certainty," p. 100.

Let us now reformulate the initial skeptical argument as follows:

(II) 1. S is not justified in believing it is false that ($2 + 3 = 5$ is evidently true for S, and the EDH is true).
2. If S is justified in believing that p entails q, and if S is not justified in believing that -p, then S is not justified in believing that -q.
3. S is justified in believing that ($2 + 3 = 5$ is evidently true for S, and the EDH is true) entails the falsity of $2 + 3 = 5$.
4. Hence: S is not justified in believing that $2 + 3 = 5$.
5. If S is not justified in believing that p, then S is not certain that p.
6. Hence: S is not certain that $2 + 3 = 5$.

Here we evidently have an argument showing that a person S can be uncertain of a proposition without being certain of anything. It seems clear that the premises of this argument do not logically presuppose that S is certain of something. Further, the premises obviously do not explicitly assign certainty to a belief of S's. Consequently, it appears, on the basis of the above argument, that a person can be uncertain of one proposition even if he is not certain of anything.([6])

II

Should we conclude, then, Wittgenstein's dictum at paragraph 115 of *On Certainty* is misguided? This question will lead us to assess the significance of argument (II) above. One difficulty in answering the present question is, as suggested above, that Wittgenstein does not provide an adequate explanation of his notion of certainty. But let us avoid this difficulty by construing certainty as epistemic indubitability.

Even if we grant that Wittgenstein's notion of certainty is equivalent to the notion of epistemic indubitability, there is still a significant

([6]) For replies to several likely objections to argument (II), which are different from the objections anticipated below in Part II, see "Justified Doubt Without Certainty," pp. 102-103. And for an elaborate defense of the assumption that justification is transmissible through justified entailments, see Peter Klein, *Certainty* (Minneapolis, 1981), chapter 2.

problem facing argument (II). Consider the Evil Demon Hypothesis referred to in premise 1:

EDH. Due to a deceiving demon, whatever proposition p is evidently true for a person S is actually false.

We have reason to believe that EDH, in conjunction with some plausible assumptions, implies a contradiction. Suppose, for instance, that it is evidently true for a person S that some books are blue, but that S's own book is not blue. (The present talk of a proposition's being "evidently true" for S is intended to be equivalent to talk of a proposition's being "justified" for S.) Given EDH, S could thereby infer that:

(i) It is false that some books are blue,

and that:

(ii) It is false that S's own book is not blue.

But (i), of course, entails that no books are blue, while (ii) entails that S's own book is blue. Thus, EDH generates a contradiction. Should we not therefore infer that any argument like (II) which relies on EDH is unsound? I think not.

Notice first that premise I of (II) does *not* assume that the EDH is true. It assumes, rather, that S is not justified in believing that the EDH is false. And S's lack of justification here does not, of course, entail that the EDH is true. It entails only that S has not been fortunate enough to possess at present good evidence for the denial of the EDH. Of course in light of the argument just presented against the EDH, some of us have good reason to deny the EDH. But this good reason does not transfer automatically to everyone. Many people, it is reasonable to believe, have not even entertained the above argument against the EDH, and thus it would be implausible to assume that these people possess the evidence against the EDH provided by that argument. The natural assumption here, then, is that evidence or justification, unlike truth, can vary from person to person.

But let us focus more closely on the key assumption that S is not justified in believing that the EDH is false. Could S really lack good evidence against the EDH? Note here that S's lacking good evidence against the EDH (i.e., for the falsity of the EDH) does not entail that S

has good evidence for the truth of the EDH. It is conceivable that S's evidence justifies *neither* S's believing the EDH to be false *nor* S's believing the EDH to be true. S's evidence could require that he be "agnostic" regarding the EDH, that he *withhold* (i.e., neither believe nor disbelieve) the EDH. The above illustration of such evidence is perhaps worrisome because of its appeal to an inductive inference on S's part to conclude that all of the propositions S is justified in believing are actually false. The possible worry is that for S to inductively infer that none of his justified beliefs is true, S must be justified in believing that his inductive inference is justifiable. But, of course, if all of S's justified beliefs are false, then S's inductive inference will *not* be justifiable. And, therefore, S will have no justifiable basis for the inference that all of his justified beliefs are false.

Does the present worry eliminate the possibility that S is not justified in denying the EDH? It seems not. For, first, it might be replied that S's reliance on an inductive inference does not require that S be justified in believing that induction is justifiable. Induction need only *be* reliable. Notice, in this connection, that if we require of every proposition p justifiably believed by S that S be justified in believing an inference q, which supports p, to be justifiable, then we will generate an endless regress of required justified propositions; for the present requirement would presumably apply also to q and to the ensuing infinity of required justified propositions. Secondly, the above illustration's use of induction is only incidental: it is not essential that we picture S as using an inductive inference to conclude that all of his justified beliefs are false. The important point is that we be able to conceive coherently of a case where S lacks justification to deny the EDH. And, once again, a case where S's evidence requires that he be agnostic regarding the EDH is sufficient for present purposes. Given an objective notion of "having justification", where "having justification" is equivalent to "there being justification", we shall perhaps have some difficulty in imagining such a case; for S will then have good reason to believe, in accordance with the earlier example, that the EDH generates an inconsistency and so should be rejected. But it seems implausible to assume that whenever there is a justification for a proposition, everyone *has* that justification. This assumption is especially implausible, of course, if we restrict a

person's evidence to his set of beliefs and his perceptual states.

However, the present considerations indicate that the EDH, in the context of argument (II), is threatening only to a person who is unfamiliar with what most of us are aware of (or, at least, *should* be aware of), *viz.*, that the EDH generates an inconsistency. Consequently, we cannot generalize on argument (II) to support universal skepticism regarding certainty. At most, (II) shows the mere logical possibility of uncertainty without certainty. Yet in showing this, (II) successfully undercuts Wittgenstein's dictum at paragraph 115 of *On Certainty*.

Argument (II), however, raises the general epistemological question of how a proposition a person S is not justified in believing or disbelieving (*e.g.*, the EDH) can play a role in precluding the justification, and thus the certainty, of other propositions for S. The answer, I believe, is provided by premise 2 of the argument. But let us grant premise 2 for now, if only for the sake of argument, and try to develop the worry underlying the present question. Note that the EDH, in conjunction with the assumption that S is justified in believing that $2 + 3 = 5$, entails that it is false that $2 + 3 = 5$. Does not the present entailment relation, however, enable S justifiably to reject the EDH? After all, we can imagine S's arguing plausibly as follows:

(III) 1. If I am justified in believing that $2 + 3 = 5$, then if the EDH is true, then it is false that $2 + 3 = 5$.
2. I am justified in believing that $2 + 3 = 5$.
3. Hence: If the EDH is true, then it is false that $2 + 3 = 5$.
4. It is not false that $2 + 3 = 5$.
5. Hence: The EDH is not true.

Premise 2 of argument (III) can be supported by the supposition that S is justified in believing that he is justified in believing that p, whereas premise 4 could be supported by the fact that S is justified in believing that $2 + 3 = 5$. If this is so, then a person who recognized that he is justified in believing that $2 + 3 = 5$ could plausibly employ argument (III) against the EDH. At any rate, it is doubtful that argument (III) is on any weaker footing than the skeptical argument (II).

The key lesson at this point is evidently that the skeptic's *modus ponens* is just the anti-skeptic's *modus tollens*. (This, of course, is a special case of the general philosophical platitude that one man's

modus ponens is another man's *modus tollens*.) The availability of argument (III) should, it seems, lead us to conclude that argument (II) does not provide a universal skeptical threat. At best, argument (II) illustrates what is merely logically possible: It illustrates that a person *can* be epistemically uncertain of one thing without being certain of anything else. But this possibility, it should be clear, is adequate to falsify the widely espoused dictum at paragraph 115 of *On Certainty*.

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