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Postgraduate/Distance Learning Assignment coversheet & feedback form

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although, consistent with Heraclitus' seeming inconsistency, he also points to his quote 'Whatever comes from sight, hearing, learning from experience: this I prefer' (p. 43). Is this preference at odds with his supposed emphasis on introspection? Unfortunately Gottlieb does not address this directly. Perhaps the two can be reconciled if emphasis is placed on *learning* from experience with the outside world providing the *basis* for the important inner process of learning. ✓ Yes, and sight being the preferred sense for that learning

Learning appears crucial for Heraclitus, and Gottlieb highlights his claim that people fail to correctly learn the true nature of things due to their ignorance of 'the true *logos*' or principle underlying nature (p. 44). Two features of this nature are identified (p. 44). First, that everything is in a continuous process of change and conflicting opposites, while the second maintains that despite this turmoil of opposites, everything is actually unified as one: a 'double truth' as Gottlieb puts it (p. 44). The first feature, of flux, is summed up succinctly by Gottlieb, using the examples of a barley and cheese potion separating unless stirred and that of stepping into the same (and different) river. Just why opposites are seen as warring opponents, as Heraclitus suggests, is questioned by Gottlieb and he draws a useful link with Anaximander's view of a 'perpetual battle' of physical elements (p. 55), although Heraclitus took this further. His reference to Heraclitus' view regarding high and low (opposite) musical notes is apt, given the sense of conflict and war such notes generate. ✓

The importance Heraclitus attaches to fire persuades Gottlieb to dub him 'an intellectual pyromaniac' (p. 46) and he highlights some of the possible interpretations and problems regarding Heraclitus' fire claims, with the occasional tongue-in-cheek quip such as 'no regular universal bonfires' (p. 46). More seriously he draws out the significant distinction between a divine fire and human made fire, emphasising a possible link between a rational, divine ✓ 'world-soul' of hot, rarefied aether and the 'guiding *logos* of nature' (p. 46). Fire, associated with this *logos*, is therefore viewed in a positive, stabilising light rather than a negative, destructive one. Not only does it have the key role in balancing hot and cold and wet and dry, it seems also to be linked to the cyclical process of life and death as degrees of moisture rise and fall in the human soul, which as Gottlieb usefully highlights, illustrates a way that opposites can be linked together (p. 47). Hot Soul / dry - wise on
Wet - feeble

Gottlieb's next step is to consider how such links lead to a view that opposites can, despite appearances, be seen as different aspects of the same thing – a unity. He views Heraclitus' examples of sameness (the same way up and down, and others) sympathetically

before suggesting that, apart from the more straightforward same way up and down example, Heraclitus unjustifiably concluded that a connection between two related things or opposites meant they were the same. He does, though, cite Heraclitus' example of the same river having 'many waters' (p. 49) as illustrating well the harmony resulting from the 'strife and unity' (p. 49) duality which Gottlieb thinks may reflect the *logos* that Heraclitus believed others had failed to see. He notes how the continuous flux and change aspect of this account was seized on by the philosopher Cratylus, who concluded knowledge of anything in such constant change was impossible, a view that appears to have influenced Plato's later rejection of the ultimate reality of things perceived by the senses and his notion of immaterial forms (p. 51).

Gottlieb concludes his chapter by acknowledging that many other ideas of Heraclitus were overshadowed by this question of what can be known of such a constantly changing world. Unfortunately the shortness of the chapter comes at a cost, as Gottlieb neglects the dual sense of *logos* as something pertaining to Heraclitus' narrative task as well as to external events, a sense detected by other philosophers.¹ Also, given Heraclitus' revolutionary, if idiosyncratic views, Gottlieb's dismissive comment at the end about it serving Heraclitus right for being misunderstood can seem churlish. Nevertheless, he attempts in this short chapter to convey in a clear way the idiosyncratic manner of Heraclitus' thoughts, illustrated by selected fragment quotes, while also managing to summarise well the central notion of Heraclitus' unity of flux and stability. Overall, the chapter is a succinct, if necessarily selective, introduction to Heraclitus and a useful point of departure for those wishing to use his endnotes for further study.

A.J. Ayer, 'Philosophy And Knowledge', in *The Problem of Knowledge*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956), Ch.1.

Ayer's intention was to write a book for professional philosophers as well as being 'of interest to the general reader', without making the subject 'appear more simple than it is' (p. 6). Whether this ambitious task is achieved in this first chapter will be considered below. The book investigates philosophical issues relating to the theory of knowledge, including

¹ Catherine Osborne, 'Heraclitus', in *From the Beginning to Plato*, ed. by C.C.W. Taylor (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008 [1997]), p. 97.

scepticism, perception, memory and the knowledge of other minds. Chapter 1 sets the scene by considering philosophical methodology, common features of knowledge, whether knowing something requires a special state of mind, the importance of language and a concluding claim about what conditions need to be in place for knowing something to be the case.

Ayer tackles methodology by considering questions, claims and supporting arguments that philosophers use. Differentiating typical questions philosophers ask from those engaged in other areas of the arts and sciences, he highlights the non-empirical nature of enquiry of philosophers, claiming philosophical theories are 'neutral' (p. 7) with regard to facts and outside the scope of experimental testing. While a dictionary will provide numerous ways by which the verb 'to know' (p. 8) is used (Ayer usefully sets some of them out), a philosopher may examine them with a view to determining what, if any, commonalities exist and the relationship between any that are found. Ayer suggests a number of questions that arise from such an examination; a list that usefully introduces the reader to, and encapsulates, many of the key issues within a theory of knowledge. ✓ Well put.

He next addresses the question concerning common features of knowledge, tackling this through examples of a group of red objects, with the relatively unproblematic common feature of red, and games, where the matter may be less straightforward. Not convinced by Wittgenstein's claim that games have similarities like family resemblances rather than having one thing in common, Ayer identifies an issue of language use arguing a sufficient degree of resemblance in this case justifies the judgement of there being something in common; yet the matter does not rest there. He accepts ^{that} degrees of resemblance highlighted by Wittgenstein's argument do make the issue less straightforward in many cases. He also raises further questions about the varied ways in which knowing something, (knowing something is the case, knowing how to do something, knowing as a behavioural disposition) and acknowledges difficulties in identifying a common feature. ✓

Ayer also examines whether a special state of mind is necessary to know something, arguing against philosophers who claim this. Claiming a person can know something from previous learning without entering a special state of mind, Ayer suggests that the *potential* to demonstrate knowledge is what is necessary. Although he gives some ground, accepting that being suddenly convinced of something is 'in a sense, to be in a particular state of mind' (pp. 16-17), he is not persuaded it involves any special 'mental occurrence' (p. 17). He asserts it is

logically impossible that a particular mental state of knowledge guarantees a fact to be the case (p. 19), arguing some philosophers conflate a condition of mind with a state of knowledge. He does recognise there are arguments for cognitive states of mind in knowing something and concedes that the experience can be viewed as cognitive if meant as having a 'cognitive experience' (p. 21). However, he is adamant that truths of logic, for example, cannot be established by describing any mental state whatsoever as they are independent of persons and the veracity of any mental state requires independent argument. Ayer identifies "truth" as problematic when it is claimed that 'if one knows something to be true one cannot be mistaken' (p. 27) pointing to the ambiguity of the claim, when it could mean if something is known it must be a 'necessary truth' (p. 25), which is generally false.

Describing his examinations so far as reflecting the philosophical method, he concludes there is no very clear resemblance between the various ways of knowing something, and notes the difficulties inherent in language particularly regarding how the verb "to know" is used. The classification of various examples and counter examples brings into focus the language used to do this, particularly how the word "know" functions in its different usages. As his considerations so far have not revealed a satisfactory account of what it is to know something Ayer explores what necessary conditions might be needed. The truth of what is known is not sufficient on its own, even adding the fact of being sure will not suffice, as his example of a superstitious person walking under a ladder shows, when their prediction of an incident was not knowledge, as there was no entitlement for being sure because of unreliable reasoning (p. 31). This begs the question: what standards would apply in order to justify such an entitlement? Explaining how one knows satisfactorily could be problematic in general, even if reasonable in specific situations, as it would require a list of conditions specifying forms of evidence needed for reliability. So is ongoing success at lottery predictions knowledge or lucky guesses? Ayer suggests that determining how sure someone is about the matter in question may help resolve this, noting that sceptical reservations about knowing something to be the case are less about the meaning of "to know" and more about the standards that determine when its application is justified.

He concludes that in addition to it being true and being sure of it, a third necessary and sufficient condition for knowing that something is the case should be 'having the right to be sure' (p. 35). But on what basis can someone demonstrate their right to be sure in a particular case? Ayer acknowledges the sceptical challenge regarding the standard needed for the term

3 conditions -
necessary &
sufficient when
taken together

knowledge to be applied in such a case. In other words he concludes, perhaps disappointingly for some readers looking for the meaning of "knowledge", that the questions raised about knowledge will not be settled by agreeing what knowledge is, but by examining in what ways the term is applied and justified in particular cases. A negotiable, pragmatic position has been reached rather than a more definitive account of knowledge.

Ayer's clear, questioning style gives a sense of direction for the reader to follow with any technical terms explained well along the way. This helps him achieve his aim of engaging the general reader without oversimplifying matters. Perhaps a weak area is his treatment of states of mind, when it becomes rather confusing just what he is ready to accept or reject (pp. 16-17). On the other hand, this does reflect Ayer's readiness to sympathetically consider other arguments against his own which can be viewed positively. Finally, the chapter prepares the reader well for his examination of skepticism and certainty which follow.

Well summarised

Peter Unger, 'A Defence of Skepticism', *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 80, No.2, 1971, pp. 198-219.

Unger's paper, in an academic periodical, was intended for an audience of philosophers and students of the subject. The reader might therefore wonder how serious Unger is when they discover in the first footnote that he has written three recent articles *against* skepticism (p. 198). Perhaps Unger, like the Greek sophists, was demonstrating how he could rhetorically argue both sides of an argument with equal skill and persuasiveness. Further reading of the paper, however, reveals he had previously believed that his present thesis was false; he has changed his mind, at least regarding this form of skepticism (pp. 217-218).

In defending skepticism Unger draws on related fields including epistemology, analytic philosophy, philosophy of language and elements of logic. His opening claims, are succinct and provocative in equal measure. They relate to how little, if anything, most people know to be the case regarding anything and even more specifically that hardly anyone - if anyone at all - knows that two numbers such as 45 and 56 added together are equal to 101 (p. 198). Given such skepticism, Unger admits his claims and argumentation cannot themselves be

shown to be true; his more modest aim being it would be at least reasonable to assume the possibility of his thesis being true.

Unger introduces the words "know", "believe" and "true" and much of his argumentation focuses on language, highlighting difficulties in its usage when addressing the question of what can be known. Taking "know" and "knowledge" as terms of knowledge and assuming the skepticism he is defending is correct, Unger asserts their usage leads to erroneous judgements of believing something to be true when it is actually false. Such a conclusion is why he thinks some philosophers, described sardonically as 'sophisticated', (p. 199) are not taking skepticism seriously.

A key element in his argument is the notion of 'absolute terms', containing a subset of 'basic terms' such as 'flat' and 'certain' (p. 199). These, when used in positive assertions, cannot map accurately onto a world with its inherent imperfections (nothing is *absolutely* flat and when can someone be *absolutely* certain of something, such as when it is raining?). Even absolute, but non-basic, terms, will be problematic, as when a real object is described as a cube, or when it is asserted that someone knows it is raining. The terms "cube" and "knows" rely partly on the absolute basic terms of *flat* (sides) and *certainity* (knows) respectively. He stresses that the problems caused by assertions using such language are actually built into narratives – systematically undermining claims to know something (p. 200).

Unger acknowledges two counter-arguments. The first that everyday experience should highlight any systematic falsity of claims to know something, yet this is not the case; experience seems to support correctness of knowledge claims. The second, more serious, counter-argument asserts that if true, the skepticism he defends about knowledge terms makes them unique exceptions to all the other terms of language, which is implausible. Unger dismisses the first of these objections briefly, appealing to what counts as false or true in practice, arguing if a strictly false belief has no significant practical consequences (for example a possibly false belief that you *know* elephants exist) then experience will not be at odds with this belief and better to have a false belief rather than none in such practical situations (p. 201).

His response to the second objection distinguishes between absolute and relative terms showing that knowledge terms are not exceptional, isolated examples of language leading to error and that the problem is more widespread (pp. 202-207). Starting with the terms "flat" and "bumpy" he argues that saying something is flat is to mean it is absolutely flat (hence an

absolute term) whereas describing something as bumpy is to mean a degree of bumpiness or curvature (hence a relative term). But could flat be seen as a relative term if something is described as quite flat or nearly flat? Unger's argument however rests on demonstrating that flat is actually an absolute term and he shows that a paraphrase of someone saying something is nearly flat is that it is close to being an absolute flat surface. The same paraphrase test does not work with "bumpy" as it makes no sense to say something has a surface bumpiness close to that of an absolute bumpiness. Furthermore flatness implies an *absence* of something (bumps/curves) and can always be prefaced by the modifier "absolutely", neither of which can be applied to the relative term "bumpy".

Crucially Unger maintains that every absolute term can be defined partially by relative terms which are negative: something is flat only if it is 'not at all bumpy' (p. 203). He further claims these negative modifiers are logically necessary for absolute terms and will apply to many other such absolute terms including "certain", as when his paraphrase test comparing it to "confident" shows "confident" to mean '*not so much as certain*' (p. 209). Having raised questions about the use of absolute terms Unger, again invoking logical necessity, asserts that an absolute term cannot be exceeded in what it purports; if a surface is flat, no other surface can be flatter than it, likewise if someone is certain about something they cannot be more certain about anything else. Unger juxtaposes feeling certain that $45 + 56 = 101$, of the existence of cars and of one's own existence, concluding it is doubtful people can be more certain of the arithmetical sum and existence of cars than their own existence, even as they assert their certainty that cars exist (pp. 212-213). Judgement should therefore be suspended regarding whether anyone is certain of anything, or hardly anything at all.

His penultimate move is to link certainty with knowledge by adopting a traditional claim that knowing something means being certain of it, as opposed to the view that justified belief is sufficient. By examining examples of casual exchanges that appear to indicate certainty is not required he applies a principle that puts stress on a term like "knows" and links it with "certainty". Unger suggests 'we might feel nothing contradictory at first in saying "He knows it is raining, but he isn't certain of it"', but by applying emphasis, the statement 'He really knows that it is raining, but he isn't actually *certain* of it' (p. 216) uncovers the inconsistency of the first statement, demonstrating that knowledge requires certainty. Unger now pulls the threads of argument together. Having shown that it is plausible to assume that there is hardly anything that anyone can be certain of, and someone can only know something if certain of

Are you convinced by this?

or, that what counts as knowledge - based on standards/norms in particular contexts

it, he concludes 'That, in the case of every human being, there is hardly anything, if anything at all, which the person knows to be so' (p. 216).

Good ✓
Unger's paper is tightly argued, using paraphrase and the notion of logical possibility to do much supporting work especially when considering implications of using absolute terms such as flat and crucially, the term "certain" when related to knowledge. However, his important, plausible claim that if someone is certain of something, they cannot be more certain of something else, does not address the situation where they are *equally* certain of more than one thing which is at least as plausible unless one has a radical "Cartesian doubt" regarding one's own existence as opposed to motor vehicles. This weakens his chain of argumentation. Unger's use of paraphrase when laying stress on "know" and "certain" (p. 216) is also not very convincing. To claim "'He knows that it is raining, but he isn't certain of it'" does not sound contradictory (unless the key terms are stressed) lacks plausibility. Finally, if his defence of skepticism appears overly reliant on language use, logical finesse, (particularly logical possibilities) and arguably far removed from real-world practicalities, he does admit in a later paper 'Perhaps practical matters will not be much affected'² while still maintaining that the consequences of skepticism should be further explored rather than dismissed.

that 'Ep' perhaps... (otherwise it reads as if he bit in inverted commas is the title of the paper.)

Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) [1912], Ch.9.

Russell's short book examines some of the problems of philosophy which he could treat in a positive and constructive way and is viewed generally as being accessible to an interested non-philosopher and those familiar with the subject. Although he considers some metaphysical issues, the problems of epistemology take up most of the book. Russell's examination of "Universals" in Chapter Nine follows a consideration of how knowledge of general principles is possible in Chapters Seven and Eight. In these chapters he shows such principles cannot be proved or disproved by experience; these include those of inference, self-evident logical principles and a priori knowledge. Having established to his satisfaction

² Peter Unger, 'An Argument For Skepticism', *Philosophic Exchange*, Vol. 5: No. 1, Article 3, (1974), 131-155. ✓

that these types of knowledge are possible without dependence of experiential proof, he nevertheless acknowledges that experience is the essential first step or catalyst for discovering them. One such principle is relation and Russell's example of 'I am in my room' (p. 51) highlights the problem of the word "in" as it clearly does not exist in the same sense as "I" and "room" even though we have no problem understanding its meaning. Asserting that such a relation belongs to neither the mental or physical world (p. 51) he will, in Chapter Nine, explore the nature of this world and that of things such as relations which appear to exist in it.

Good summary introduction.

Russell begins by considering what things or 'entities' (p. 52) share this world with relations, before examining the nature of their existence. Plato's theory of "forms" or "ideas" is used by Russell, not only to show how old this philosophical problem is, but also to highlight Plato's efforts to discover what "justice" is by examining distinctions between specific examples of "just" acts and the attempt in extracting from such acts the actual nature of justice itself; that which is shared by the individual acts. This nature, or 'essence' (p. 52) is what Plato terms a "form" or "idea" which, unlike particular things existing in the physical world and subject to change, exists in a non-physical world with an unchanging and permanent nature, considered more real than the physical world perceived by the senses. Russell points out misconceptions regarding the term "idea" (as existing in the mind, for example), and uses the word 'universal' (p. 53) to stand instead for what Plato meant. He further clarifies the distinction between those things, namely 'particulars' (p. 53), which are perceived by the senses, and universals as anything that is shared in common by particulars, as just acts were distinguished from what they shared, namely justice. The same distinction holds between white objects and the 'whiteness' they share (p. 53). ✓

Russell considers various views about universals, prompting him to criticise the view of philosophers like Spinoza who rejected (or failed to recognise) universals pertaining to relations because their attention was focussed on questioning the universals of qualities or properties of particular things. Language is significant for Russell, with adjectives and common nouns usually denoting qualities and properties whilst prepositions and verbs express relations between things (p. 54). He concedes it may not be possible to actually prove that universals exist for properties but argues persuasively, contra Berkeley and Hume, for the crucial role of resemblance (a form of relation) in judging whether two or more objects

↳ Could you evaluate this claim here?

are triangular or white. The question remains: how, or in what way, such a universal exists if not as something in our mind?

Russell argues the case for mind independence using the proposition 'Edinburgh is north of London' (p. 55) to show the relationship holds even if we were ignorant of the fact, and appeals to logic in claiming that as nothing mental is presupposed in the fact, it follows that because the relational universal 'north of' is part of this fact it also cannot be dependent on thought - even if it is *recognised* through thought. Russell now becomes much more speculative as he struggles to pin down the nature and being of the universal that does not exist in space, time, material or mental worlds, concluding it exists 'Nowhere and nowhen' (p. 56) while maintaining it *is* something. If this sounds like a step towards mysticism, his suggestion that universals 'subsist', 'have a timeless being', and are unchangeable and a delight to those who 'love perfection more than life' (p. 57), certainly suggests the otherworldliness associated with the mystical. However, Russell tries to bring the reader back down to earth by insisting that at least the world of the physical and mental existing in time is indeed real, while contrasting its fleeting, disorganised nature with that other real world of universals.

Earlier in the chapter Russell warned about Plato's "ideas" leading to mysticism with the temptation to think these ideas 'exist in heaven', (p. 53) and that he will examine the theory (substituting universals for ideas) logically. Despite his effort, the timeless, eternal and perfect world in which universals seem to have their being bears more than a little resemblance (itself a universal) to many people's view of heaven. So although his declaration in the book's Preface (p. xvii) that theory of knowledge will occupy more space than metaphysics, the reader discovers at the close of Chapter Nine that a metaphysical mystery and conundrum lies at the very centre of the nature of universals.

Russell's writing and argumentation is clear and mostly jargon-free, a style suited to a general introduction to universals. His substitution of "universal" to stand for what Plato meant by "idea" (p. 53) might be expedient but does assume he knows what Plato meant, which is arguably an assumption too far³. Overall, however, the chapter is a good grounding

³ See 'Does Plato change his mind about Forms?' <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato/> Accessed 26/11/2020.

Author?

and preparation for the next which deals with the ways knowledge of universals is gained and clarifies the notion of a *priori* knowledge.

TOTAL WORD COUNT (Excluding page references, footnotes and titles) = 4,364