

# ERNEST SOSA

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## AND HIS CRITICS

*Edited by*

John Greco

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## PHILOSOPHERS AND THEIR CRITICS

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- ER “Existential Relativity,” in Peter French et al., eds., *Midwest Studies in Philosophy, 22: New Directions in Philosophy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
- FLT “For the Love of Truth,” in Abrol Fairweather and Linda Zagzebski, eds., *Virtue Epistemology: Essays on Epistemic Virtue and Responsibility* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
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- HDOM “How to Defeat Opposition to Moore,” in James Tomberlin, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives, 13: Epistemology* (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing, 1999): 141–53.
- HRPP “How to Resolve the Pyrrhonian Problematic: A Lesson from Descartes,” *Philosophical Studies* 85 (1997).
- KCSD “Knowledge in Context, Skepticism in Doubt,” in James Tomberlin, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives, 2: Epistemology* (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing, 1988).
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- PPR “Putnam’s Pragmatic Realism,” *Journal of Philosophy* 90 (1993): 63–84. Extracts reprinted with permission of the publisher.
- PSEC “Philosophical Scepticism and Epistemic Circularity,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol. 68 (1994): 263–90.
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- S&C “Skepticism and Contextualism,” *Philosophical Issues* 10 (2000): 1–18.
- SI “Skepticism and the Internal/External Divide,” in John Greco and Ernest Sosa, eds., *Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999).
- STB “The Status of Temporal Becoming: What is Happening Now?” *Journal of Philosophy* 76 (1979): 26–42.
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- TFD “Two False Dichotomies: Internalism/Externalism and Foundationalism/Coherentism,” in Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, ed., *Pyrrhonian Skepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- TR “Thomas Reid” (co-authored with James Van Cleve), in Steven Emmanuel, ed., *The Modern Philosophers: From Descartes to Nietzsche* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000).
- VE “Virtue Epistemology,” unpublished manuscript.
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# Preface

This book is a volume in Blackwell's "Philosophers and Their Critics" series. As such, it follows the usual format of the series: the book is composed of several critical essays addressing the work of Ernest Sosa (our philosopher), with a reply by Sosa. The book also has a few special features that are worth mentioning.

First, Sosa's replies are limited to those critical essays that deal with some aspect of his work in epistemology. This was decided in order to limit the length of the "Replies" and to expedite the publication of the book – a reply to the broad range of issues raised in the "Metaphysics" section of the volume would have required more words and more time than seemed desirable. Also, this allowed a more coherent and self-contained approach to the "Replies" essay. Rather than answering critics point by point, Sosa has written an essay divided among several themes of current interest in epistemology. We agreed that this would be the most valuable and most readable approach.

Second, the book handles references to Sosa's work in a way that is intended to be especially reader-friendly. In particular, each essay contains full references to each of Sosa's works cited in that essay. After a full citation, further references to the work are abbreviated and appear parenthetically in the text. For example, a reference to page 214 of *Knowledge in Perspective* would appear as (KP, 214). In addition to the references within each essay, a list of all cited works by Sosa, with abbreviations and in alphabetical order, appears at the beginning of the volume. Thus there are two ways to check the full reference information for an abbreviated citation: one can either go to the first citation of the work within a particular essay or go to the list of cited works at the beginning of the volume.

Finally, my introductory essay to the book does not try to summarize the critical essays or to otherwise summarize the contents of the volume. Rather, I thought it more helpful to provide a kind of introduction to Sosa's epistemology and to Sosa's approach to epistemology. Sosa's work in this area is rich and complex, and sometimes difficult. It is also divided among several essays, in various places, and across several years. Accordingly, it is not always easy to appreciate how the various parts of the system fit together, what is the motivation for a particular position, etc. The introduction is intended to help in this respect, by providing an overview and a context for some of Sosa's most influential views in epistemology.

I would like to thank Ernest Sosa and all of our contributors for their participation in the project. Thanks also to Ernest LePore, the editor of the series, and to Daniel Breyer, who was a great help with various aspects of the book, including the index. It has been a pleasure working with such an outstanding group of philosophers.

Volumes such as this one are always a kind of tribute to the philosopher under discussion – it goes without saying that not everyone's work merits or receives this sort of attention. This volume turned out to be a tribute to Ernest Sosa the person, as well. I say this on the basis of the wonderful response by our contributors. I can't imagine that it has ever been so easy to bring together such an outstanding group of philosophers, so eager to participate in the project and so generous in their efforts. This has been a great celebration of Ernie and his work.





# Introduction: Motivations for Sosa's Epistemology

---

Over the last four decades, Ernest Sosa has defended a complex and penetrating theory of knowledge – one that has consequences for every important issue raised in recent epistemology, and for many related issues as well. The essays in this volume, for example, address Sosa's positions regarding the nature of knowledge, internalism and externalism about justification, skepticism, foundationalism and coherentism, and the nature of intellectual virtue, but also his positions regarding realism, internalism and externalism about mental states, and the nature of reference.

I will not try to summarize Sosa's views here, or to otherwise give them adequate treatment. This I leave to the volume's capable contributors, who provide both useful summaries and critical discussions of many aspects of Sosa's work in their essays. Rather, in this introduction I will reconstruct what, it seems to me, are some of the most important arguments motivating Sosa's general position in epistemology. I take this general position to be "externalist," in that it makes positive epistemic status depend on factors relevantly external to the knower. Furthermore, Sosa's general view is correctly characterized as a virtue theory, in that it adopts a distinctive direction of analysis. Specifically, it defines the evaluative properties of beliefs in terms of the evaluative properties (or virtues) of believers. Finally, Sosa's view places central importance on the notion of an epistemic perspective, where this is understood as a set of second-order beliefs about one's first-order beliefs and the reliability of their sources. Hence the label "virtue perspectivism" for Sosa's view.

## 1 Three Options in Epistemology

It is fair to say that Sosa sees three broad options available in epistemology – not in the sense that these are the only ones logically possible, but in the sense that these are the ones deemed most plausible by those, past and present, who have thought carefully about relevant matters. The options are these:

*Classical foundationalism.* The central idea is that one knows only what is obvious and what can be deductively proved from the obvious. Descartes's rationalism is an example,

since “he concludes that we know only what we intuit or deduce: that our acceptance of a true proposition can have the epistemic justification (authority, warrant, status, call it what you will) required for knowledge only if it is either itself a rational intuition or the outcome of a logical deduction from nothing but rational intuitions as ultimate premises.”<sup>1</sup> Hume’s theory also counts, however, since he accepts as knowledge only what can be proved “on the basis of what is obvious at any given moment through reason or experience” (*KP*, 166–7).

*Coherentism.* The coherentist rejects the idea of foundational knowledge, or knowledge that is not dependent on further knowledge for its evidence. The central idea is that all knowledge (justified belief, warranted belief) depends on further beliefs for its status as such. More specifically, a belief qualifies as knowledge in virtue of its membership in a sufficiently coherent and comprehensive system of beliefs.

*Reliabilism.* A belief qualifies as knowledge (justified, warranted) in virtue of its deriving from a reliable (truth-conducive) process. Since some reliable processes depend on further beliefs for their inputs and some do not, there is no bar in principle to foundational knowledge. In fact, reliabilism is best understood as a kind of foundationalism. “Every bit of knowledge still lies atop a pyramid of knowledge. But the building requirements for pyramids are now less stringent. A belief may now join the base not only through perfectly reliable rational intuition but also through introspection, perception, or memory. And one may now erect a superstructure on such a basis not only by deduction but also by induction, both enumerative and hypothetical or explanatory” (*KP*, 89).

Sosa levels several objections against the first two options, some of them quite traditional. For example, classical foundationalism is criticized for allowing too narrow a foundation to preserve the bulk of ordinary knowledge, and coherentism is criticized for failing to assign a proper role to experience in the justification of belief. Such objections can be both powerful and instructive, especially in the versions that Sosa formulates. I will ignore these here, however, and instead focus on a different series of objections raised by Sosa. These latter are aimed not so much at technical flaws or theoretical lacunae, but at the very motivations for the two positions. Properly understood, I believe, these objections help us to recognize, and to some extent reconceive, what is at issue in the dispute among competing options in epistemology.

## 2 Against the Argumentative Account of Justification

Standing behind various arguments for coherentism, and behind various objections to foundationalism, is what Sosa calls the “argumentative account of justification” (*KP*, 253). According to Donald Davidson, “What distinguishes a coherence theory is simply the claim that nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief. Its partisan rejects as unintelligible the request for a ground or source of justification of another ilk.”<sup>2</sup> According to Richard Rorty, “nothing counts as justification unless by reference to what we already accept, and there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence.”<sup>3</sup> Such reasoning at once makes foundational beliefs absurd and coherentism the only live option in sight. Right

behind such reasoning, Sosa suggests, is the following argumentative conception of justification (AJ):

- (a) that for a belief to be justified is for the believer to justify it or to have justified it; and
- (b) that for one to justify a belief (really, successfully) is for one correctly and seriously to use considerations or reasons in its favor.

But why accept (AJ)? Of course one can point to common usage, and insist that to justify is to bring reasons in favor. And if that does not work, one can simply stipulate accordingly. However, Sosa points out, neither of these strategies will give the coherentist what he wants. For in that case it remains possible that some knowledge is not justified, and so nothing so far counts against foundationalism or in favor of coherentism. The substantive issue is raised again by talking about epistemic authority (or warrant, or aptness), and by asking whether all epistemic authority requires argumentative justification.

Moreover, Sosa argues, the argumentative account is in trouble as an account of epistemic authority in general. For to “correctly” use reasons in favor is surely to use *justified* reasons in favor, and in that case we are faced with a vicious regress. If a belief is knowledge only by being justified, and if being justified requires being based on further justified reasons, then there will be no end to the process of justifying.

A natural response by the coherentist is to say that justification ends in coherence: that ultimately a belief is justified not by further reasons brought in its favor, but by its membership in a coherent system of reasons. An alternative response is to say that justification ends with what our peers let us say: that ultimately a belief is justified because it meets the standards that society plus context fix in place. But either response gives up the argumentative account of justification, and the idea that epistemic authority is always won by virtue of giving reasons. On the contrary, each response specifies an alternative basis for justification (coherence or social standards), and in doing so enters into a dispute with the foundationalist on equal footing. In other words, each response claims that something else, not justified reasons, is the ultimate source of epistemic authority.

### 3 Supervenience and Normative Epistemology

The issues above are brought into clear focus by another important theme in Sosa’s work: that of the supervenience of the evaluative. In general, Sosa thinks, we should accept the thesis that the evaluative supervenes on the non-evaluative. In other words, we should accept the idea that a thing has its evaluative properties in virtue of its non-evaluative properties.

For example, suppose we think that a particular car is a good one. Surely this must be in virtue of other properties that the car has, for example the mileage that it gets, its ability to accelerate, its look, etc. To deny this would be to accept that two cars could be alike in all their non-evaluative properties (both intrinsic and relational) and yet differ in their evaluative ones. But this seems absurd. The same reasoning holds for epistemically evaluative properties.

Suppose S and Twin-S live lives indistinguishable physically or psychologically, indistinguishable both intrinsically and contextually, on Earth and Twin-Earth respectively. Surely there can then be no belief of S epistemically justified without a matching belief held by Twin-S with equal epistemic justification. Epistemic justification must accordingly supervene upon or derive from physical or psychological properties of the subject of belief, properties either intrinsic or contextual. (*KP*, 110)

An important aim of epistemology, Sosa reasons, is to specify the non-evaluative basis of supervenience, thus allowing a special sort of insight into the nature of justification and knowledge. In this respect, coherentists and foundationalists share a common goal: to specify such a basis in relatively simple and complete terms.

It is from this perspective that the argumentative account of justification seems clearly hopeless. According to (AJ), for one to justify a belief is for one “correctly and seriously to use considerations or reasons in its favor.” But again, how are we to understand “correctly”? The most obvious way is in terms of some epistemically evaluative property. Alternatively, “considerations or reasons” will have to be understood that way. And therefore the argumentative account fails to get beyond the epistemically evaluative. What is required for that, as we saw above, is that something else be considered more ultimate.

Also from this perspective, certain arguments against foundationalism can be seen in a new light. For example, “doxastic ascent” arguments charge that there can be no property F in virtue of which belief B is foundationally justified, unless one is justified in believing that B has F. But then B is not foundational at all, since its justification depends on B’: the belief that B has F. But this line of reasoning, Sosa argues, would implicate all of substantive epistemology with foundationalism, coherentism included. For anyone who accepts it would have to accept the following as well:

that a belief B is justified in virtue of membership in a coherent system only if one is justified in believing that it has such membership.

And more generally,

that a belief B is justified in virtue of *any property* X only if one is justified in believing that B has X.

Clearly, such commitments entail an infinite regress of justified beliefs. More importantly from the present perspective, however, they are inconsistent with the supervenience of the epistemically evaluative. No matter what we specify as a non-epistemic source of justification, coherence included, such commitments require that something else is needed; *viz.*, another justified belief. This “would then preclude the possibility of supervenience, since it would entail that the source of justification *always* includes an *epistemic* component” (*KP*, 183).

## 4 Against Internalism

Considerations about supervenience throw light on another important issue: the dispute between internalism and externalism about justification. In effect, the internalist claims

that justification (or warrant, or aptness) supervenes entirely on factors that are in some sense internal to the knower. From the point of view of coherentism, this includes only the knower's beliefs, and perhaps relevant relations among them. From the point of view of classical foundationalism, this includes other psychological states as well, including sensory experience and other relevant aspects of conscious awareness. If internalism is correct, then it is not possible for believers to be equal in these internal respects and yet different in their epistemically evaluative properties. But that seems wrong, as several thought experiments show.

Consider first the victim of a Cartesian deceiver. Such a victim might be your psychological counterpart, with a system of beliefs as coherent as your own. Now suppose some few of these beliefs are true. Surely they do not amount to knowledge, even though they are both true and coherent. The moral of the story, Sosa suggests, is that knowledge requires some epistemic excellence other than coherence.

Notice, however, that the same reasoning applies if we broaden our conception of the internal. For we can imagine that the demon victim is like you in *all* internal respects, including those deemed important by classical foundationalism. Hence we can imagine a victim who shares not only your beliefs, but also your sensory experience, and all other aspects of your conscious awareness. Again, the victim's beliefs are not knowledge even when true, and therefore something epistemically significant is lacking in his predicament. What might that be?

Compare this: Mary and Jane arrive at conclusion C, Mary through a brilliant proof, Jane through a tissue of fallacies. At present, however, they both have forgotten the relevant stretches of their respective reasonings, and each takes herself to have established her conclusion validly. . . . No doubt we normally would grant Mary justification and withhold it from Jane. Would we not judge Jane's belief unjustified since based essentially on fallacies?<sup>4</sup>

Sosa's point in the above passage is that aetiology matters for epistemic justification; i.e., it matters how a belief comes about, even if this is lost on the believer. But of course aetiology is an external matter. A belief's causal history is not something "internal" in any relevant sense.

Second case: You remember having oatmeal for breakfast, because you did experience having it, and have retained that bit of information through your excellent memory. Your counterpart self-attributes having had oatmeal for breakfast, and may self-attribute remembering that to be so (as presumably do you), but his beliefs are radically wide of the mark, as are an army of affiliated beliefs, since your counterpart was created just moments ago, complete with all of those beliefs and relevant current experiences. Are you two on a par in respect of epistemic justification? (SI, 153–4)

Clearly you are on a par in *some* senses of "justification"; for example, any sense that depends only on factors internal to the believing subject. Presumably you are also on a par in respect to doing your epistemic duty, believing with epistemic responsibility, and believing according to your own deepest standards. But all of these senses of justification, Sosa argues, fail to capture aspects of epistemic excellence that are important to knowledge. Most importantly, they fail to capture any involved in being appropriately related to the truth.

Knowledge requires coherence, true enough, but it often requires more: e.g., that one be adequately related, causally or counterfactually, to the objects of one's knowledge, to one's environment or surroundings, which is not necessarily ensured by the mere coherence of one's beliefs, no matter how comprehensively coherent they may be. . . . Knowledge requires not only internal justification or coherence or rationality, but also external warrant or aptness. We must be *both* in good internal order and in appropriate external relation to our surrounding world.<sup>5</sup>

The epistemically evaluative supervenes on states internal to the knower, such as her beliefs and experiences, but also on states broader than these, including external relations to the object known and to the wider environment. Internalism with respect to the epistemic justification, or the kind of justification involved in knowledge, is false.

## 5 Virtue Epistemology

Let us take stock of what we have so far: The argumentative account of justification motivates coherentism, while internalism motivates both coherentism and classical foundationalism. But considerations about the supervenience of the evaluative tell against both the argumentative account and internalism. Coherentism and classical foundationalism, therefore, are importantly undermined.

One might consider internalism to be inessential to classical foundationalism, however. For example, one might accept Sosa's characterization of rationalism as a limiting case of reliabilism, where the reliability that is required is infallibility. Still, there are problems with classical foundationalism other than internalism. We have already seen one such problem: the foundations that classical foundationalism proposes are too narrow to account for all of our knowledge. In this section I will introduce another as well. These problems are important to consider, because Sosa thinks that turning to a virtue epistemology solves them.

According to classical foundationalism, foundational knowledge is through intuition and introspection. A broader foundationalism allows observation as well. But how are we to understand these sources of knowledge? According to Sosa, there is an important problem here.

What is a rational intuition? Is it a true belief, without inference, in something logically necessary? Not necessarily, for such a belief can arise and be sustained by guessing or by superstition or brainwashing – and, in any of these cases, even if one believes something logically necessary, this does not imply that one knows what one believes. The question remains: What is a rational intuition?<sup>6</sup>

Similar questions arise with regard to introspection and observation.

The observer sees the white dodecagon and has two thoughts. He thinks, first, that his visual experience has a certain character, that of being a visual experience as if he saw a white dodecagon. And he thinks, further, that in fact he sees a white dodecagon a certain distance away. Although he is twice right, however, he is right only by chance, for he lacks

the capacity to distinguish dodecagons with a high probability of success – indeed he often confuses dodecagons with decagons. (BIF, 117–19)

The foundationalist might try to account for introspective knowledge by invoking the idea of direct awareness. But there is an ambiguity in the essential notion of awareness. In one sense, all conscious states are objects of awareness. In this sense, it is possible to be “aware” of something without taking note of it, as happens when we fail to attend to some aspect of our conscious experience. In another sense, however, awareness implies that the object of awareness is *noticed* – that it is the object of one’s conscious *attention*. Sosa calls the first kind of awareness “experiential awareness” (or e-awareness) and he calls the second “noticing awareness” (or n-awareness). The latter notion will not do in an account of introspective knowledge, however, since it is already epistemically evaluative. As Sosa notes, to be n-aware of something already implies a kind of positive epistemic status. If the notion of direct awareness is to explain the evaluative in terms of the non-evaluative, therefore, awareness will have to be understood as e-awareness.

But that puts us back where we started: How are we to explain the *lack* of introspective knowledge regarding the dodecagon, if introspection involves belief based on direct e-awareness, and if the observer has such awareness of the dodecagon quality of his experience?

As Sosa notes, the problem here is analogous to Chisholm’s “Problem of the Speckled Hen.” The classical foundationalist wants to say that we can have introspective knowledge of certain features of our conscious experience. But clearly not *all* features of our experience can be known by introspection – for example, we cannot know by introspection that the image of a hen has forty-eight speckles. So which features are the ones that we *can* know by introspection? And of course similar questions arise for rational intuition and observation: Which necessary truths are the ones we can know just by intuiting them? Which features of things can we know just by observing them?

Sosa concludes that to answer these questions we must invoke the notion of an intellectual virtue.

How will the classical foundationalist specify which features belong on which side of that divide? It is hard to see how this could be done without appealing to intellectual virtues or faculties seated in the subject. For example, an attribution of a feature to an experience or thought is perhaps foundationally justified only when it derives from the operation of a reliable virtue or faculty. (BIF, 134–5)

According to Sosa, an intellectual virtue is a truth-conducive disposition in the subject. It is a competence or power to reliably arrive at truth and avoid falsehood in a relevant field, when in relevant circumstances. It is with reference to such dispositions, he argues, that we can solve the Problem of the Speckled Hen, as well as the analogous problems for rational intuition and observation.

How then would one distinguish

- (i) an *unjustified* ‘introspective’ judgment, say that one’s image has 48 speckles, when it is a true judgment, and one issued in full view of the image with that specific character,

from

(ii) a *justified* ‘introspective’ judgment, say that one’s image has 3 speckles?

The relevant distinction is that the latter judgment is both (a) *safe* and (b) *virtuous*, or so I wish to suggest. It is ‘safe’ because in the circumstances not easily *would* one believe as one does without being right. It is ‘virtuous’ because one’s belief derives from a way of forming beliefs that is an intellectual virtue, one that in our normal situation for forming such beliefs would tend strongly enough to give us beliefs that are safe. (BIF, 138–9)

Finally, we may return to the problem of narrow foundations. By understanding knowledge in terms of intellectual virtue, Sosa argues, we can solve this problem as well. Because they are reliable, faculties such as rational intuition and introspection count as intellectual virtues, and thereby give rise to epistemic justification for their respective products. But so is memory reliable, as are various modes of sensory observation. Similarly, various faculties of inductive reasoning, including coherence-seeking reason, reliably take one from true belief to further true belief, and hence count as virtues in their own right. By defining epistemic justification in terms of intellectual virtue, we get a unified account of all the sources of justification recognized by classical foundationalism, and more besides.

## 6 A Kinder, Gentler Externalism

So far our discussion has left out a central theme of Sosa’s epistemology: that fully human knowledge requires an epistemic perspective, or a perspective on one’s beliefs as deriving from intellectual virtues. Such a requirement is needed, Sosa argues, to accommodate persistent internalist intuitions regarding knowledge and justification. Internalism is false, Sosa thinks, as the arguments above show. Nevertheless, “Such intuitions reflect a long tradition and still demand their due.”<sup>7</sup>

Such intuitions are brought out by two related problems.

*The New Evil Demon Problem.* Suppose that S is your cognitive twin, sharing an identical mental life, but in a possible world where his beliefs are in massive error due to the influence of a Cartesian deceiver. It seems wrong to say that S’s beliefs are in no sense justified, even if they are not reliably formed.

*The Meta-incoherence Problem.* Suppose that S’s belief is produced by a perfectly reliable faculty of clairvoyance. Suppose also, however, that S has no evidence in favor of the belief, or even has evidence against it. It seems wrong to say that S’s belief is justified, even if it is reliably formed.

These are problems for externalism in general and for reliabilism in particular, since they suggest that justification is indeed an internal matter.

Sosa addresses the two problems by noting that intellectual virtue, and hence justification, is relative to an environment and to an epistemic group. Accordingly, we may say that a belief is justified relative to an environment E and group G, only if it is produced by what is an intellectual virtue (i.e., a reliable cognitive faculty) relative to E and G.



Usually E and G will refer to a normal environment and normal human beings, although E and/or G could be different depending on context.

Regarding the New Evil Demon Problem, we can say that S's beliefs are justified relative to our normal G and E, since they are produced by cognitive faculties that are intellectual virtues relative to normal human beings situated in the actual world. Sosa reasons that "the victim of the evil demon is virtuous and internally justified in every relevant respect . . . for the victim is supposed to be just like an arbitrarily selected normal human in all cognitively relevant internal respects. Therefore, the internal structure and goings on in the victim must be at least up to par, in respect of how virtuous all of that internal nature makes the victim, relative to a normal one of us in our usual environment for considering whether we have a fire before us or the like" (KP, 143).

The same considerations, Sosa argues, solve the Meta-incoherence Problem as well. For justification requires that the subject be as internally virtuous as a "normal one of us," and this means, according to Sosa, that "the subject must attain some minimum of coherent perspective on her own situation in the relevant environment, and on her modes of reliable access to information about that environment" (KP, 143). This is what the clairvoyant lacks, and that is why his belief is not justified on the present account.

Sosa develops the above strategy by drawing two distinctions: (a) that between aptness and justification, and (b) that between animal knowledge and reflective (or fully human) knowledge. First, a belief is *apt* only if it is produced by what is, relative to the environment, an intellectual virtue. A belief is *justified* only if it fits within a coherent set of beliefs, including a perspective on one's first-order belief as deriving from an intellectual virtue. Second, a belief qualifies as *animal knowledge* so long as it is true and apt. A belief qualifies as *reflective knowledge* only if, in addition to this, it is justified as well; that is, only if it fits within the coherent perspective of the believer (KP, 144–5).

Here is Sosa on the value of such coherence:

Yet coherence is, of course, valued not only by philosophers but by the reflective more generally. One also wants faculties and virtues beyond reflective, coherence-seeking reason: perception, for example, and memory. Equally, internal coherence goes beyond such faculties, and requires reason, which counts for a lot in its own right. (RK, 421)

The resulting position, Sosa thinks, respects the internalist's intuitions about justification, while at the same time preserving both internalist and externalist insights about knowledge.

By way of concluding, I should stress that in this essay I have presented only some of the motivating arguments for Sosa's position.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, I have presented that position only in broad strokes – in actuality it is far more detailed and subtle, as are the arguments that Sosa brings in favor of it. All this will be apparent in the essays that follow, and in Sosa's replies to them. Nevertheless, I believe that the arguments above are some of the most important in shaping Sosa's epistemology, and in shaping contemporary epistemology as well.

John Greco

## Notes

- 1 *Knowledge in Perspective: Selected Essays in Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) (cited as *KP*), p. 88.
- 2 Sosa quotes Davidson's "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," in Ernest LePore, ed., *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992). Quoted in *KP*, p. 108.
- 3 Sosa quotes Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979). Quoted in *KP*, p. 108.
- 4 "Skepticism and the Internal/External Divide," in John Greco and Ernest Sosa, eds., *Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) (cited as *SI*), pp. 152–3.
- 5 "Reflective Knowledge in the Best Circles," *The Journal of Philosophy* 94 (1997): 410–30 (cited as *RK*), p. 430.
- 6 "Beyond Internal Foundations to External Virtues," in Laurence Bonjour and Ernest Sosa, *Epistemic Justification: Internalism vs. Externalism, Foundations vs. Virtues* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003) (cited as *BIF*), pp. 117–19.
- 7 "Virtue Epistemology," unpublished manuscript.
- 8 For example, Sosa argues that a distinction between reflective and animal knowledge, and hence the notion of an epistemic perspective, are needed to address a certain line of skeptical argument. See his "How to Resolve the Pyrrhonian Problematic: A Lesson from Descartes," *Philosophical Studies* 85 (1997). He also thinks that the notion of an epistemic perspective yields a solution to the generality problem for reliabilism. See *KP*, esp. pp. 278 and 281–4.

# Part I

## Critical Essays: Epistemology

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# Intellectual Virtue and Epistemic Power

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*ROBERT AUDI*

Virtue ethics is an old and venerable orientation in ethical theory. Virtue epistemology is a recent approach. Each is a kind of trait theory, by contrast with a rule theory. Virtue ethics construes moral action as action from moral virtue and has implications for the entire realm of practical reason, including rational action as the most general case in the domain of behavior.<sup>1</sup> Virtue epistemology, in the form in which it is closest to virtue ethics, construes both justified belief and knowledge as belief from intellectual virtue – as true belief in the case of knowledge. The theory has implications for the entire realm of theoretical reason, including rational belief as the most general case in the domain of cognition. There are now many philosophers developing one or another kind of virtue epistemology,<sup>2</sup> but the earliest epistemologically sophisticated statements of the position, and certainly as well-developed a version of it as there is now, have been constructed in a series of works by Ernest Sosa.<sup>3</sup> His virtue epistemology, moreover, is informed by numerous connections with other kinds and aspects of epistemology and by decades of cutting-edge research in the general field. There is much to be learned from his recent writings in virtue epistemology. They illuminate both the elements and explanatory power of virtue epistemology itself and some central epistemological problems. My aim here is to explore this orientation as we find it in some of his major works and to bring out some of its distinctive features and some of the problems it raises for the tasks of general epistemology.

## 1 Some Major Elements in Virtue Perspectivism

The overall epistemological view developed by Sosa in recent years is *virtue perspectivism*. It will soon be plain why it represents not only a virtue epistemology but also a perspectival theory. If any single notion is central in the position, it is that of intellectual virtue. In an early statement of what constitutes such virtue, he said that “[a]n intellectual virtue is a quality bound to help maximize one’s surplus of truth over error,” to which he immediately added a forecast of theoretical elements to come and a qualification: “or so let us assume for now, though a more just conception may include as desiderata also generality,

coherence, and explanatory power, unless the value of these is itself explained as derivative from the character of their contribution precisely to one's surplus of truth over error."<sup>4</sup>

This opening characterization, forecast, and qualification are quite important for the development of the overall theory. The characterization is highly refined and extensively developed; the forecast proves, on analysis, to be correct at least for well-developed intellectual virtues; and the qualification gestures toward a major question that we must still address in order to understand Sosa's virtue epistemology: the extent to which the notion of intellectual virtue is externalist and reliabilist.

Later in the same paper he indicates the importance of justification for the notion of intellectual virtue. Of a man who, by good luck, is correct as a result of believing his horoscope, Sosa says:

S does not know in such a case. What S lacks, I suggest, is *justification*. His reason for trusting the horoscope is not adequate – to put it kindly. What is such justification?

A being of epistemic kind K is *prima facie* justified in believing P if and only if his belief of P manifests what, relative to K beings, is an intellectual virtue, a faculty that enhances their differential of truth over error.<sup>5</sup> (*KP*, 239)

We now find that justification as well as knowledge is to be conceived as grounded at least in part in intellectual virtue. This in turn is conceived as a faculty, which is roughly an ability or power (*KP*, 234) or, better, a “virtue or a *competence*,” and virtue lies “in the general family of dispositions” (*KP*, 274).

The horoscopic belief, lacking as it does justification as well as reliable grounding, is not a candidate for knowledge even of the weaker of the two main kinds Sosa countenances. To see what the weaker kind is in contrast to the stronger kind, we must consider a distinction introduced late in this paper and figuring importantly in his subsequent work:

One has *animal knowledge* about one's environment, one's past, and one's own experience if one's judgments and beliefs about these are direct responses to their impact – e.g., through perception or memory – with little or no benefit of reflection or understanding.

One has *reflective knowledge* if one's judgment or belief manifests not only such direct response to the fact known but also understanding of its place in a wider whole that includes one's belief and knowledge of it and how these come about. (*KP*, 240)

Clearly, it is reflective knowledge to which we should aspire for much of our outlook on the world and which is crucial for the successful exercise of intellectual virtue. One way we achieve it (given favorable conditions) is quite natural: “A reason-endowed being automatically monitors his background information and his sensory input for contrary evidence and automatically opts for the most coherent hypothesis even when he responds most directly to sensory stimuli” (*KP*, 240).

In his later, major statement of virtue perspectivism, published in *Knowledge in Perspective*, Sosa develops the ideas we have been sketching. One major element is an aretaic (i.e., virtue-theoretic) conception of knowledge:

We have reached the view that knowledge is true belief out of intellectual virtue, belief that turns out right by reason of the virtue and not just by coincidence. For reflective knowledge you need moreover an epistemic perspective that licenses your belief by its source in some virtue or faculty of your own. (*KP*, 277)

If this conception of knowledge is even roughly correct, then we can achieve a good epistemological understanding of the concept of knowledge if we can provide, as a basis for it, an illuminating account of intellectual virtue. This is precisely what Sosa goes on to do in this paper and subsequent work. Later in the paper we are given the following account of *having* an intellectual virtue:

S has an intellectual virtue  $V(C, F)$  relative to environment  $E$  if and only if S has an inner nature  $I$  such that

- if
- (i) S is in  $E$  and has  $I$ ,
  - (ii)  $P$  is a proposition in the field  $F$ , and
  - (iii) S is in conditions  $C$  with respect to  $P$ ,
- then, (iv) S is very likely to believe correctly with respect to  $P$ , (*KP*, 286)

where  $F$  is the appropriate field (such as the realm of observables relative to a proposition ascribing color),  $C$  is the set of relevant conditions (for instance, normal lighting relative to a proposition ascribing visible properties at a distance), and believing correctly may be a matter not only of believing, but also of disbelieving or simply not believing. (Believing correctly with respect to  $P$  is not equivalent to believing  $P$  *truly*; the correct thing may be to disbelieve it or to withhold judgment.)

We are now in a position to see what it is to believe *out of* intellectual virtue:

S believes  $P$  out of intellectual virtue  $V(C, F)$  iff

- (a) S is in an environment  $E$  such that S has intellectual virtue  $V(C, F)$  relative to  $E$ ,
- (b)  $P$  is a proposition in  $F$ ,
- (c) S is in  $C$  with respect to  $P$ , and
- (d) S believes  $P$ .<sup>6</sup> (*KP*, 287)

Since knowledge is true belief out of intellectual virtue, we can account for it by adding truth to these conditions and specifying that the virtue is “sufficient,” in the sense that the ratio of true to false beliefs based on it is at least “up near the average” for the relevant reference group, such as human beings (*KP*, 287–8). In this way, intellectual virtue is relative. Visual acuity for human beings need not, for instance, be as great as for birds, and our virtue in forming visual beliefs may reflect this. Such *species-relativity* is not, however, the only kind for which Sosa’s position allows. The reference group in question can, for instance, be a sub-species as well.

From the case of horoscopically based belief, we can already see that the inner nature appropriate to achieving knowledge cannot be possessed by people who, upon believing in accordance with their nature, are not likely to be correct. There the believer, if correct, is simply lucky; the person’s norm would not be to believe truths in the relevant domain. Sosa uses the contrast between an ordinarily near-sighted person aware of the limitation and Magoo, who is comparably near-sighted but unaware of it, to bring out other elements in the notion of intellectual virtue. Perceivers of the former kind have an inner nature (perhaps as a matter of having achieved epistemic balance and caution) that determines them (at least for the most part) to believe, on the basis of vision, only those propositions that meet the conditions in question: roughly speaking, they believe, on the basis of visual sensations, only in appropriate environments and within the limits of their visual acuity.

There is an important distinction central for understanding Sosa's epistemology here. It is needed to account for the broadly "internalist" intuition that, epistemically, one might be highly responsible yet, in a world controlled by a Cartesian demon, likely to be incorrect in a majority of one's beliefs. Here it is crucial, for Sosa, to distinguish justification from aptness:

The "justification" of a belief B requires that B have a basis in its inference or coherence relations to other beliefs in the believer's mind – as in the "justification" of a belief derived from deeper principles. (*KP*, 289)

By contrast,

The "aptness" of a belief B relative to an environment E requires that B derive from what relative to E is an intellectual virtue, i.e., a way of arriving at belief that yields an appropriate preponderance of truth over error. (*KP*, 289)

Summarizing the former point, Sosa says that "'justification' amounts to a sort of inner coherence, something that the demon's victims can have despite their cognitively hostile environment" (*KP*, 289). Aptness is quite different: "Justification of a belief that *p* requires the (implicit or explicit) use of reasons. A belief can be apt, however, without being thus justified" (*KP*, 290). Indeed, aptness is exhibited by "animal knowledge," which need not be constituted by justified belief, and "[v]irtue perspectivism accepts a sort of reliabilism with respect to animal knowledge, and with respect to unreflective knowledge generally" (*KP*, 291).

For reflective knowledge, by contrast, more is required than reliabilism demands as a constitutive condition for knowledge: "For the exercise of virtue to yield [reflective] knowledge, one must have some awareness of one's belief and its source, and of the virtue of that source both in general and in the specific instance" (*KP*, 292). In his later "Reflective Knowledge in the Best Circles,"<sup>7</sup> the same distinction is stressed, with a similar willingness to allow that reliabilism, as opposed to virtue perspectivism, may account for some animal knowledge. Here Sosa holds that

(a) our broad coherence is necessary for the kind of reflective knowledge traditionally desired; and (b) such broadly coherent knowledge is desirable because in our actual world it helps us approach the truth and avoid error. This is not to deny that there is a kind of "animal knowledge" untouched by broad coherence. It is rather only to affirm that beyond "animal knowledge" there is better knowledge. This reflective knowledge does require coherence, including one's ability to place one's first-level knowledge in epistemic perspective. (*RK*, 67)

The distinction between animal and reflective knowledge is, in this later work, paired with Descartes's distinction between *cognitio* and *scientia*, but freed of the theological dependency of the Cartesian distinction and its associated infallibilism (*RK*, 71).

Sosa's epistemic perspectivism, then, combines elements from reliabilist externalism, epistemic internalism, Cartesian higher-level foundationalism, and the epistemological analogue of virtue ethics. The result is an account of knowledge that roots it in traits



of the knowing subject and distinguishes the natural, animal cognitions that come with our elemental responsiveness to the world from the higher-order beliefs we form when, as in achieving scientific knowledge, we believe what we do in the light of suitable self-understanding. I want to explore this epistemology mainly in relation to two questions: Why is intellectual virtue as Sosa conceives it *virtue*, and, assuming that reflective knowledge is indeed knowledge from virtue, is the ideal it indicates too demanding for normal knowers?

## 2 Virtue and Power

In the works I have discussed so far, Sosa does not devote much space to the general notion of a virtue operative in ethical literature and in everyday appraisals of persons. He does, however, cite two passages from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. In the first, Aristotle says that "[When] thought is concerned with study, not with action or production, its good or bad state consists [simply] in being true or false. For truth is the function of whatever thinks (1139a27–30).<sup>8</sup> In the second he says, "Hence the function of each of the understanding parts is truth; and so the virtue of each part will be the state that makes that part grasp the truth most of all" (1139b11–13). Here, however, Aristotle is speaking of the virtue of "parts" of the mind, not – or not directly – of the virtue of a person or of overall character. Compare some passages in which he is describing overall virtue:

Virtues, by contrast [with the senses] we acquire, just as we acquire crafts by having previously activated them . . . we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions. (1103a31–1103b2)

If it were not so, no teacher would be needed, but everyone would be born a good or a bad craftsman. (1103b11–13)

To sum up, then, in a single account. A state [of character] arises from [the repetition of] similar activities. Hence we must display the right activities, since differences in these imply corresponding differences in the state. (1103b21–3)

None of these claims of Aristotle's is inconsistent with construing what Sosa calls intellectual virtue as virtue in Aristotle's sense, but there are at least two points of apparent contrast. I take them in turn.

First, contrary to the picture we have in Sosa's work, the notion of virtue in Aristotle seems *historical*: it appears (in at least some passages from Aristotle) to be part of the concept of a virtue that it is acquired by repetition. This applies even to intellectual virtue: "Virtue of thought arises mostly from teaching" (1103a15). For Sosa (as for most contemporary epistemologists, I think), the notion of a virtue is not essentially historical, however commonly virtues are acquired in the way Aristotle described. The second point is related to the first: in part because, for Aristotle, virtues are conceived as acquired by proper habituation or by internalization of standards or practices one is taught (or from both), the Aristotelian virtues all seem to be the sorts of things for which one deserves praise. This may be mainly because having them reflects success in what is normally a series of effortful activities. Another reason may be that they constitute a source of desirable conduct. For Sosa, presumably a duplicate of me created at an instant would

have whatever intellectual virtues I do at the time; and similarly, a being with certain powers to acquire true beliefs would have such virtues whether any credit is due for their possession or not. In “Virtue Epistemology,” for instance, he contrasts his own view with a historical version of reliabilism and stresses, in characterizing virtue, not its developmental history but its stability.<sup>9</sup> That is not essentially a historical characteristic.

It may be, however, that the contrast with Aristotle here is not deep. Perhaps Aristotle can be read, not as conceiving the very notion of a virtue as historical, but as not clearly distinguishing his genetic account of virtue from his conceptual one. If we then distinguish retrospective praiseworthiness – roughly praiseworthiness for *acquiring* the virtue in which a belief is grounded – from contemporaneous praiseworthiness, which is roughly praiseworthiness for *having* this trait, Sosa’s view can account for both, nor need he deny that Aristotle is right about the normal path to acquisition of (at least many) virtues. To be sure, contemporaneous praiseworthiness may be essentially *forward-looking*, since one ascribes it partly in anticipation of good conduct in the future; but it could be possessed at the last moment of a life when no such future conduct is in prospect.

Whatever we say about the extent of the suggested contrasts, there seems to be a distinction between a virtue and a *power*. The former is perhaps a species of the latter, but not every power, even to do or achieve something desirable, is a virtue. In the intellectual domain, this can be seen by noting that someone could have the power to come to know the weather upon simply considering what it will be tomorrow without thereby having a virtue – or at least, in saying that one of the person’s “virtues” is an ability to foretell tomorrow’s weather just by considering the matter, we would be using ‘virtue’ in a sense that does not imply any praise for an accomplishment or any positive attitude toward one’s character as distinct from the set of one’s characteristics. The person might have no idea how the belief arises or why it should be true, and may be puzzled by holding it.<sup>10</sup>

Sosa’s perspectivism has a resource for dealing with this kind of case without unduly stretching the notion of a virtue. The kind of characteristic in question (a kind of epistemic power) can be considered a capacity for animal knowledge and hence taken not to be a virtue. If this line is the solution, however, then (as Sosa realizes) knowledge in general cannot be considered to be true belief grounded in virtue – unless perhaps we distinguish what might be called *animal virtue*, which would be a kind of epistemic power, from *reflective virtue*, which would be a trait for which one merits a measure of praise.

That there might be something plausibly called animal virtue is consonant with an idea Sosa has put forward in arguing that knowledge entails “credit” for true belief.<sup>11</sup> Credit is not the same as praise, but it is a positive attribution that shares with praise at least a presupposition that the action or other element in virtue of which a person merits credit is non-accidental. We might then say that virtues are creditable characteristics, but allow that there are creditable powers that are not virtues – even if we also allow that some of these are animal virtues. We might certainly allow that there can be epistemic credit for a belief that is not strictly grounded in an epistemic virtue. If we think in Aristotelian terms, we might add that in the normal course of developing virtue, creditable responses come first. It is only when one has achieved a *pattern* of credits that bespeaks a virtue of character – whether epistemic or moral or of some other normatively important kind – that one may be said to have a virtue.

So far, I have been mainly exploring Sosa's virtue epistemology and how, in the light of a conception of intellectual virtue, it accounts for one or another kind of knowledge or justification of interest to him. It is also instructive to consider what, independently of the theory, seem intuitively to count as intellectual virtues and to explore Sosa's resources for accounting for them so conceived. The paradigms are traits whose successful exercise issues in knowledge of certain kinds, for instance, perceptiveness, insightfulness, discernment, imagination, and rigor. Some of these are, to be sure, more "methodological," others more substantive, and all can be limited, as where one is insightful in psychological matters but not in philosophical ones.

Some of these traits overlap Aristotelian "productive" virtues; for instance, imagination can lead to creating artworks as well as to arriving at knowledge through framing intuitively plausible hypotheses that one then establishes. But consider being critical. This might lead to withholding belief as often as to forming it in a certain way. Being logical, moreover, might be possible for someone who is very poor at finding true premises from which to draw logically valid inferences. This deficiency could thus lead to multiplication of falsehoods more often than to finding truth or avoiding error. It is only when we have truth to begin with that using good logic guarantees our arriving at truths.

Sosa's epistemology has resources to provide an account of these cases. For one thing, he has distinguished between traits that produce true belief and traits that simply lead to believing appropriately, where this may entail withholding belief. He can thus applaud critical habits of mind that often lead to suspending judgment, provided they do not lead to overzealous skepticism. He can also note that some virtues, such as logicity, require as one of the conditions for their proper operation, combination with other virtues that give them appropriate *inputs*. His theory is in no way epistemically *atomistic*; it can be developed in an aretically holistic direction. This does not imply a version of the Aristotelian thesis of the unity of the virtues. To say that some virtues operate only, or best, in combination or interaction with others is not to imply that having any of them entails having them all.

There are, however, at least two problems we should consider here. First, there is some question of how to conceive the environment appropriate to explicating the notion of believing "out of intellectual virtue" (characterized by Sosa in the quotation from *KP*, 287). Second, some of what Sosa says concerning epistemic virtue leaves open how internal the notion is on his view. Let us take these in turn.

On a quite natural understanding of the notion of an environment in which one believes something, the environment is roughly the physical surroundings of the believer. But this notion will not do justice to what Sosa has in mind (indeed, his notion is not sharply separable from that of the conditions appropriate to believing the kind of proposition in question from the virtue, as he indicates on *KP*, 284–5). For one thing, in a given physical environment one has many beliefs, and for many of them, such as many that are stored in memory, one's physical environment is irrelevant. Recall the case of Magoo; here we are focusing on a visual belief, to which his physical surroundings are relevant, not on an arithmetic belief, to which they are not. Indeed, I would speculate that in characterizing intellectual virtue, Sosa has in mind mainly features of one's physical *or* psychological surroundings pertinent to one's justification for or reliability in believing, the proposition in question.