

Sosa's Epistemology in Perspective

Ernest Sosa (1940-) is a central figure in contemporary epistemology. He is best known for pioneering the subfield of *virtue epistemology*, as well as developing across four decades his own distinctive framework in this tradition. Besides providing an overview of this work, this article offers a guide to Sosa's other contributions to epistemology, stretching back to his first publication in 1964. The organization is as follows. §1 reviews Sosa's distinctive brand of virtue epistemology and its development since 1980. §2 provides a fuller synopsis of Sosa's contributions to epistemology in five parts, covering his work on (i) the structure of justification and knowledge, (ii) the dawning of knowledge and understanding, (iii) skepticism and the possibility of empirical knowledge, (iv) methodology and the possibility of philosophy, and (v) the relationship between mind and world. Our aim is to encourage renewed appreciation of the full scope and depth of Sosa's epistemology. We hope the reader will benefit from (re)exploring Sosa's work guided by the map detailed below.

1. Virtue Epistemology

Sosa's earliest expression of virtue epistemology appears in his (1980b) 'The Raft and Pyramid', though only in its final few paragraphs. There he considers—in response to an envisioned dilemma for classical foundationalism—a strategy that had by that point not yet been explored, namely, that:

[...] primary justification would apply to intellectual virtues, to stable dispositions for belief acquisition, through their greater contribution toward getting us to the truth. Secondary justification would then attach to particular beliefs in virtue of their source in intellectual virtues or other such justified dispositions (1980b: 23).

The theoretical novelty in the above passage, which Sosa would continue to develop and refine over four decades, is that intellectual virtues are *normatively prior* to justified beliefs and knowledge. When beliefs have positive epistemic status, that status *derives* from their source in epistemically good (i.e., truth-conducive) dispositions. Having introduced this idea, under the description then as a kind of *reliabilism*, Sosa (1980b) closed with the remark that:

This is a large topic, however, to which I hope some of us will turn with more space, and insight, than I can now command. (23)

He returned to it the next year, in 1981's 'Epistemology Today: A Perspective in Retrospect'. Whereas the initial 1980b discussion focused just on the importance of the *reliability* of intellectual virtues, the 1981 paper introduces a further idea that was preserved in Sosa's later developments of virtue epistemology. In his 1981 criticism of infallibilist forms of foundationalism, Sosa writes:

Why make so strong a requirement? Why not require only that the belief in question have its source in an intellectual virtue, in a way of forming beliefs that leads to the

truth, given the subject's normal state and surroundings (normal relative to that sort of belief). (1981: 329; our italics)

The 1981 idea that the reliability of intellectual virtues is indexed to the subject's 'normal state and surroundings' was the earliest expression of the view—familiar now as a core part of Sosa's virtue epistemology—that competences are dispositions seated in an agent to perform reliably when in proper *shape* and properly *situated* (Sosa 2015a: 104). Already by the early 1980s, the main components of Sosa's distinctive 'Seat/Shape/Situation' (SSS) picture of the structure of epistemic competences, as well as their explanatory priority in epistemic evaluation, is already in place.

The next notable development in Sosa's picture appears a few years later in his (1985a) 'The Coherence of Virtue and the Virtue of Coherence'. This paper anticipates an idea that is then developed further and launched in full in 1991 (with further refinements in 1997c), which is that the value of coherence in one's beliefs is in some way parasitic on the value of their being reliably sourced. 1985a's presentation of this idea is the first place we find it put this way (though a companion argument is already present in Sosa's criticism of coherentism in 1980b).

This point about coherence introduced in 1985a reappears as an element of a more ambitious project—the *bi-level* picture that appears most clearly for the first time in 1991's *Knowledge in Perspective*. According to the 1991 view (290-3), true belief attained through the exercise of reliable competences suffices to give us apt belief, or *animal knowledge*. But we can then use these same competences to gain a second-order assuring perspective (a perspective improved through broad coherence, even though such coherence isn't *required* for apt belief), one through which we may appreciate those faculties as reliable and in doing so place our first-order (animal) knowledge in a competent second-order perspective—thereby attaining *reflective knowledge*.

Because Sosa's bi-level view permits the use of competences to gain a perspective from which we can know those very competences are reliable, it licenses a kind of circularity that Sosa is aware of in 1991 (e.g. pp. 282, 284) but maintains it is not a problematic kind of circularity; this point (framed later as 'virtuous circularity') is then developed in much more detail in 1997c's 'Reflective Knowledge in the Best Circles', which favourably contrasts virtue epistemology's anti-skeptical credentials with Moore's indirect realist approach to perceptual knowledge, and further later in 2009c.

The next major development in Sosa's virtue epistemology, which brings it closer to its recent form, occurred in his 2005 John Locke Lectures, which were the basis for his pair of books *A Virtue Epistemology* (2007a) and *Reflective Knowledge* (2009c). The central innovation in the 2007a picture is the idea that epistemic normativity is a species of *performance normativity*; just like archery shots can be evaluated for accuracy, adroitness, and aptness (AAA), so can beliefs (2007a: 22-4). This view retains the 1991 idea that animal knowledge is apt belief, but the performance normativity framework introduced in 2007 (applied at both the first and second order) elucidates the structure of aptness qua a kind of achievement,¹ or success through competence.

¹ The fact that apt belief is a kind of achievement, insofar as it involves a 'success through ability' structure, helps explain the value of knowledge over mere true opinion.

A second key component of the 2007a picture is the explicit denial of *safety* as a condition on knowledge, which marks a transition from Sosa 1999b. The 2007 picture retains the idea (from 1999b) that sensitivity is too strong in comparison with safety as a modal condition on knowledge (see 2007a, Ch. 2). However, in 2007a (Ch. 2), it is argued for the first time that *safety* is also too strong,² given that it threatens to render our perceptual beliefs unsafe and therefore unknown given the nearness of the dreaming scenario (2007a: 22-3)—the nearness of which is incompatible with the safety of our perceptual beliefs, even though *compatible* with the specific kind of safety (i.e., SSS-safety)³ implied by aptness.

Reflective knowledge on the 2007a picture still requires (as per 1991) that one place one's knowledge in perspective. However, by 2007 the importance of broad coherence to this perspective is minimized. Reflective knowledge is now understood as an apt belief aptly grasped as such⁴; the focus at the higher order is on *apt* meta-belief (or apt taking for granted) at the second order that one's first-order belief is apt. If we use 'K' to designate animal knowledge (i.e., apt belief) and 'K+' to designate reflective knowledge (i.e., apt belief aptly believed to be apt), the 2007a formula is: $K+(p) \leftrightarrow K(K(p))$ (2007: 32).

2009c's *Reflective Knowledge* goes much further than before in explaining how the *bi-level* virtue epistemologist can avoid a kind of circularity that seems to threaten the idea that you can rely on your faculties to come to know that they are reliable (implicit in the transition from animal to reflective knowledge).⁵ While Sosa had already tackled this problem in 1991 and 1997, he had previously relied on coherence at the second order, along with illustrative analogies with Descartes' reasoning (1997c), to show how the (anti-skeptical) bi-level virtue epistemologist avoids vicious circularity. What's innovative about the essays in 2009 is that he now attempts to show how such circularity can be avoided by availing himself of the resources of the AAA framework, which hadn't appeared yet in 1997c.

The years following the 2007a/2009c volumes were fruitful ones for Sosa and were marked with continued improvements to the AAA/SSS framework. Sosa's (2010b) 'Competence Matters in Epistemology' answers an important question: which of potentially infinite SSS triads (which we could give names to if we wanted to) deserve the title of 'competence'? Here Sosa (2010b: 466-7), for the first time in detail, maintains explicitly that the conditions under which a society values good performance play a role in circumscribing the specifics of the shape/situation parameters that correspond with competence, a point he returns to in 2017 (see p.195). This is why, for instance, the reliability of visual-perceptual context is indexed to conditions under which one is, e.g., sober and alert and in good lighting conditions rather than to some other possible shape/situation pairings.

² This idea was anticipated in Sosa's 2005 APA presidential address 'Dreams and Philosophy', which later appears as Chapter 1 in (2007a). The idea there was that the nearness of the dream scenario wouldn't render our waking perceptual beliefs unsafe so long as in dreams we don't form false beliefs, but merely *imagine* we are doing so. Ch. 2 of (2007a) then maintains that, bracketing the idea that dreaming is imagining, safety will be too strong a condition on knowledge given the nearness of dreaming scenarios.

³ The kind of SSS-safety implicated by aptness is the following: a belief is SSS-safe iff in close worlds where S believes p from the same skill, and in similar shape and situation, p is true.

⁴ (2007a)'s characterization of reflective knowledge in this way is consistent with (2021)'s, even though the 2021 formulation includes many new developments. On the 2021 formulation, 'Animal knowledge requires that one get it right through competence rather than just luck. Reflective knowledge goes beyond that by requiring not only apt attainment of truth but also apt attainment of aptness' (2021: 169).

⁵ For more detail on this point, in the context of Sosa's wider engagement with skeptical arguments, see §2.3(a).

The next key innovation in Sosa's virtue epistemology appears in 2011's *Knowing Full Well*, the first version of which was the basis for Sosa's 2008 Soochow Lectures in Philosophy, delivered in Taipei, and the core idea of which was previewed in Sosa (2009a). This innovation concerns *guidance*—viz., how one's reflective knowledge can be not merely 'stacked' upon animal knowledge, but can guide one to first-order aptness, thereby improving performance quality; this idea allows Sosa to ascend to a higher level of performance-theoretic status (full aptness) and to envision beliefs that are not just apt or meta-apt, but *fully apt*:

Apt belief aptly noted, reflective knowledge, is better than mere apt belief or animal knowledge, especially when the reflective knowledge helps to guide the first-order belief so that it is apt. In such a case the belief is fully apt, and the subject *knows full well*. (2009a: 12-3; our italics)

The hierarchy of animal knowledge vs. reflective knowledge vs. knowledge full well remains important to Sosa, however an important change appears in the picture in *Judgment and Agency* (2015a). Sosa's virtue epistemology already countenances a stratified picture of knowledge (with knowledge full well at the top). However, up until this point, stratified knowledge is built out of a nonstratified view of belief as a kind of truth-aimed affirmation. A key innovation in 2015a is to stratify not only knowledge but also beliefs, viz., our knowledge *attempts*. *Judgmental belief*, the hero of *J&A*, involves (alethic) affirmation in the endeavour to affirm not just correctly, but with *apt* correctness; this is characteristic of how we might attempt to answer a 'whether p' question: we aim *intentionally* at aptness. By contrast with judgmental beliefs, some of our beliefs are merely *functional* (e.g., our implicit representations of what is around us in our ambient environment); these beliefs are not accessed through a conscious response to the relevant 'whether' question, even though they guide everyday behaviour. Such beliefs aim (teleologically) at accurate representation, rather than (like judgmental beliefs) intentionally at apt correctness. In this way, judgmental belief is distinguished as a special case of (intentional) action.⁶

(2015a)'s distinction between functional and judgmental belief allows for an updated characterisation of high-grade knowledge as *fully apt judgment*, itself a species of the more general kind of *fully apt performance*. On (2015a)'s view, a performance is fully apt if and only if it is guided to aptness through the agent's reflectively apt risk assessment (2015a: 69). The idea is that the agent must perform not only in the light of her apt belief that she would perform aptly, but also *guided* by that belief (in this way, guidance remains important).

A second key innovation in 2015a is Sosa's distinction between *gnoseology* and *intellectual ethics*—viz., between the kind of performance assessments we make of beliefs, and the kind of norms that would bear on, e.g., *shot selection*. In epistemology, gnoseological assessment lines up with our assessment of beliefs (or forbearances) as accurate, adroit, apt, and fully apt. These are assessments of *performances* we in fact make, but not of *performance selection*. We can know trivial or otherwise all-things-considered disvaluable truths *full well* but it might still be that we ought not to have inquired into them in the first place. *Judgment and Agency* explains this by designating the kind of norms implicit in the latter kind of assessment as part of a different domain of normativity (intellectual ethics).

⁶ This position is developed in new detail in Sosa's (2024a) UNESCO World Philosophy Lecture 'Knowledge is Action' (ms).

The gnoseology/intellectual ethics distinction features at critical junctures throughout Sosa's *Epistemic Explanations* (2021), which retains much of the picture from *Judgment and Agency*, though with several important additions. These include (i) a new virtue-theoretic account of suspension of judgment (Ch. 4) and (ii) a new theory of background conditions (conditions that must obtain for the seat, shape, and situational component of competence to be in place) and of our (default) *assumptions* that these background conditions hold; this theory explains what (in any performance domain) can be non-negligently taken for granted by those performing fully aptly (Ch. 7). A third novelty is the introduction of 'secure knowledge full well', a form of knowledge even higher yet on the epistemic hierarchy than fully apt judgment.

Two course-changes from the 2015a picture appear in Sosa 2021, one mostly terminological, the other more substantive. The terminological change concerns the theory of *performance normativity*; whereas from 2007 to 2021 epistemic norms are understood as *performance norms*, (2021) repackages the framework within which we locate gnoseological assessment as one of *telic normativity*, understood as the normativity of *attempts* as *attempts* (2021: 18). A more substantive change in Sosa 2021 concerns a revised diagnosis of barn facade subjects. With reference to the new theory of default assumptions that appears in (2021), it is now claimed that barn facade protagonists⁷ attain not merely animal but also reflective knowledge despite lacking safe belief. Since the 2021 view withholds neither animal nor (as earlier views did) reflective knowledge in barn facade cases that feature unsafe belief, the earlier 2007 (Ch. 2) argument that safety is too strong a condition on knowledge for any plausibly anti-skeptical epistemology of perceptual knowledge given the nearness of dreaming scenarios gains special relevance.

The theory of default assumptions from Sosa 2021 is a connecting point between his 2021 and *dawning light epistemology*, which we will discuss at length in §2.⁸ Many default assumptions (assumptions that the conditions that must be in place for SSS conditions to hold obtain) include Moorean commonsense propositions (e.g., snow is white, the external world exists, perceptions are usually veridical, etc.). Dawning light epistemology asks how we *know* such commonsense propositions, and such a vast amount of them? The answer seems to be: we learn such facts very early on when we acquire a language; it's accordingly acquired through a combination of biological and psychological development and enculturation, and this process is even if not infallible clearly a reliable one.

This offers a way to make a kind of concession to internalists in epistemology. Sosa had earlier conceded to internalists that coherence has epistemic value, at least in our world (where our faculties are reliable). Dawning light epistemology adds the idea that ordinary perceptual knowledge is *inferential* knowledge—i.e., supported by inferential basing on facts about appearances in conjunction with commonsense knowledge.⁹ We will see some deeper roots of this idea in §2.

⁷ The updated (2021) diagnosis of the barn facade subject is also extended to other cases of unsafe belief on account of the fragility of SSS conditions.

⁸ See Sosa (2024c) for a recent development of his theory of background assumption as reconcilable with Strawson's approach to framework commitments.

⁹ Cf. the 'indirect realist' strategy from (1997b) that Sosa attributes to Moore and criticizes on the grounds that we can't reason abductively from appearances without illicitly presupposing what is to be inferred.

2. Sosa's Wider Epistemology

Although Sosa is rightly celebrated for his contributions to virtue epistemology, he has made a very wide range of contributions to epistemology, besides also contributing to philosophy of mind, value theory, philosophy of philosophy, (meta)metaphysics, logic, and the history of epistemology (including non-Western epistemology). We think Sosa's other contributions to epistemology deserve at least as much attention as the ones discussed in §1.

Below we give special attention to Sosa's papers in epistemology, which number over a hundred and stretch back to 1964. Focusing only on the shape that Sosa's epistemology takes in his books risks undervaluing the full range and depth of his contributions. We encourage renewed exploration of Sosa's papers in epistemology and adjacent areas like philosophy of mind and (meta)metaphysics, which make contributions far beyond virtue epistemology.

The discussion will cover Sosa's work on five topics:

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| (1) the structure of justification and knowledge | (§2.1) |
| (2) the dawning of human knowledge and understanding | (§2.2) |
| (3) skepticism and the possibility of empirical knowledge | (§2.3a) |
| (4) methodology and the possibility of philosophy | (§2.3b) |
| (5) mind-world relations | (§2.4) |

By the end, we will see that Sosa offers something that has become rare in epistemology: a comprehensive system for thinking about all questions in individual epistemology and some questions in social epistemology, which fits into a wider (meta)philosophical system. For this reason, Sosa's interlocutors in epistemology include historical figures like Aristotle, Locke, Hume, and Kant, not just 20th-21st century academics.

2.1. *The Structure of Justification and Knowledge*

1980 marked not only the emergence of virtue epistemology but also an intermediate stage in Sosa's thinking about the *structure* of justification and knowledge, a topic to which he has contributed insights stretching back to Sosa 1964.

Sosa 1980b, already highlighted in §1, is at least as well recognized as a contribution to this topic as it is to virtue epistemology. What is less recognized is that in the same year, Sosa published another paper that crystallizes his insights about epistemic structure—'The Foundations of Foundationalism' 1980a. Sosa 1980a explains and explores the implications of two distinctions that greatly aid reflection about epistemic structure.¹⁰ The first is a distinction between *formal* and *substantive foundationalism* (pp.549ff). Formal foundationalism about epistemic justification proposes a recursive characterization of the class of justified beliefs, analogous to recursive definitions in mathematics. The template for formal foundationalism consists in three schematic thoughts:

- i. 'every belief with a certain non-epistemic property F is justified,
- ii. if a belief bears a relation R to a set of justified beliefs then it is itself justified,

¹⁰ Sosa 1980b also draws these distinctions, but the discussion in Sosa 1980a is more abstract and in some ways more detailed and subtle.

- iii. every belief that is justified is so in virtue of (i) or (ii)' (550)

The most ambitious kind of formal foundationalism would demand 'not only that the conditions for justified belief be [recursively] specifiable, in general, but that they be specifiable by a simple, comprehensive theory' (1980b: 15). This opposes *pessimism*, which denies that there is an illuminating recursive specification of the class of justified beliefs.

Sosa notes (p.551) that the best argument for formal foundationalism is from the supervenience of the evaluative on the non-evaluative. Sosa also observes (p.554) that the standard regress argument for foundationalism is not a good argument for formal foundationalism, drawing attention to the possibility of infinite regresses of justification that track infinite sequences in mathematics: 'I can think of no compelling reason why there could not be a sequence of justified dispositional beliefs in P1, P2, ..., such that each member of the sequence is justified by its successor'. For example, one might justifiably believe that there is one real number in [0, 1] on the basis that there are two, two on the basis that there are three,...*ad infinitum*.

Sosa 1980a also anticipated later discussions of the possibility of blending foundationalism and coherentism in mixed views like *foundherentism* (Haack 1993) and *foundational holism* (Sher 2016):

Coherentism is opposed not to formal foundationalism but at most to substantive foundationalism. The conflict here is over what basis to choose in the recursive definition of justification. Obviously, there are grades of coherentism and foundationalism. Radical coherentism holds that *only* coherence can serve as a basis. Radical foundationalism holds that coherence *never* serves as a basis, that the basis property which gives a belief B access to the foundation never makes reference to other beliefs of the subject, except of course such beliefs as B itself may refer to. And various intermediate positions are clearly possible. (553-4)

As we will see more in §2.2, the possibility of combining insights from foundationalism and coherentism in a unified compromise view helps Sosa's overall epistemology distinguish itself from Goldman's reliabilism, which is a pure version of externalist foundationalism.¹¹

A second key distinction is between *epistemic* and *metaepistemic* foundationalism. Epistemic foundationalism concerns the justification of beliefs about the non-epistemic. Metaepistemic foundationalism concerns the justification of beliefs about the epistemic. Sosa highlights the possibility of mixing and matching: besides pursuing a mix of foundationalism and coherentism for some class of justified beliefs, one might pursue a mix between classes. One could, for example, favor a coherentist methodology of epistemology while accepting a foundationalist account of empirical justification. The status of such mixes will depend on the status of *naturalism*, since naturalists may hold that beliefs about the epistemic are just empirical beliefs (p.557).

This distinction helps define another key debate between *particularism* and *methodism*. Particularism is a kind of *intuitionist* metaepistemic foundationalism, which holds that theories about the principles of justification and knowledge are ultimately justified by appeal to intuitive examples. Sosa notes that particularism may appear weak when confronted with

¹¹ See (1983: 59) for an early exploration of this point.

Kantian questions about the possibility of knowledge. *Methodist* views which seek an independent account of principles may appear more satisfying. As is often the case, Sosa favors a compromise, similar to reflective equilibrium in ethics.

While Sosa 1980a provides a pioneering map, many other works explore the map and highlight neglected locations on it. Sosa's earliest publication (Sosa 1964) discovered a neglected location on this map that came to be associated with the work of Goldman and Armstrong—viz., a kind of *externalist (formal) foundationalism* about knowledge and justification.¹² While Sosa 1964's primary aim was to offer an analysis of knowledge, it contains structural insights that anticipate several of Sosa's later trademark themes.

Sosa 1964 proposed that basic beliefs require no justification (3) and that non-basic beliefs are evidentially based on basic beliefs. In this early work, Sosa had a radical externalist account of the epistemic status of basic beliefs: they are true beliefs in basic propositions (6-7). The examples Sosa gave of basic propositions and the way he described them anticipate recent work of his inspired by Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*. Basic propositions include known propositions one intuitively 'never found out' (3), such as 'what [one's] name is and where [one] live[s]'. Given this account of basic beliefs, Sosa offered a hybrid evidentialist account of non-basic beliefs. To be *objectively* justified, these must be derived from possessed evidence (ultimately rooted in basic knowledge) and not defeated by unpossessed evidence that the subject 'could reasonably have been expected to have found out' (7).

Sosa 1964 hence offered a formal foundationalist account that draws a qualitative distinction between basic and non-basic justification. This anticipates his later bi-level epistemology. So, while Sosa abandoned the analysis of knowledge in this early paper, it was an advance in thinking about epistemic structure whose insights were retained and further developed. Other early papers anticipate key later ideas in Sosa in the context of this structural picture. Sosa (1974a-b)'s early remarks on the need for 'adequate cognitive equipment' and suitable embedding in 'an epistemic community' (1974a: 117) suggest a richer account of how a subject can know what she does not 'find out'. Sosa (1979, 1986b)'s discussions of *epistemic presuppositions* is a fuller exploration of the implications, which anticipate his current work on the structural implications of the SSS-conditions for full aptness. And Sosa 1980b's virtue epistemology is also an elaboration of this template.

While Sosa's work from 1964 to 1980 is rich with neglected insights about the structure of justification and knowledge, every decade since has brought papers that further explored the map from Sosa 1980a. We will mention a few that we think merit renewed attention.¹³

Sosa (1981: 318-321) discusses the possibility of getting from formal foundationalism to substantive foundationalism in a way remarkably analogous to recent debates about whether the supervenience of the moral justifies a *principled* ethics (e.g., Dancy 2004, McKeever and Ridge 2006). Sosa argues that foundationalists should not 'multiply epistemic principles in order to provide for the sources of justification required for our rich knowledge in its various

¹² Although Sosa 1964's view was not billed in this way, it can also be understood as the first example of *externalist evidentialism* about justification, a position that has only recently been appreciated as a dialectical option. While Sosa allowed that there is basic knowledge not derived from evidence, he also held that non-basic knowledge and all *justification* is derived from basic knowledge, which he followed Chisholm in describing as 'the evident'. Other works in the 1970s continued to occupy this position (e.g., 1974a,b, 1979), which fits with the take on the place of reasons in Sylvan and Sosa 2018.

¹³ Many papers in Greco 2004 clarify the reception of Sosa's work on structure. Several papers we will discuss in the next two subsections are also rich with insights about structure. We bracket them here because we want to highlight their role in even more neglected parts of the story of Sosa's epistemology.

dimensions’, on the grounds that this will result in a ‘wide scattering’ of principles. Sosa 2003b’s discussion of Chisholm’s foundationalism further develops this problem, which Poston 2007 helpfully dubbed the ‘problem of scatter’.

Sosa 1997a, 2004 and 2011c converge on a new insight about the rapprochement of foundationalism and coherentism that Sosa exploits in an innovative response to skepticism (see §2.3(a)). Suppose—as Sosa has argued since 1964—that there is a distinction in cognitive grade between attitudes that manifest rationality (‘judgmental’ attitudes in Sosa 2015a) and attitudes that do not manifest rationality (‘functional’ attitudes in Sosa 2015a). If so, there is no clear vicious circularity in using cognitive episodes delivered by well-functioning faculties to help make sense of how these faculties work from a rational point of view. Moreover, once one achieves such understanding (or, as Sosa 1997c puts it, ‘broad coherence’), it would seem only rational to increase one’s trust in the deliverances of those faculties in conditions that one has learned to be suitable for their use. Without a distinction in grades of cognition, there will appear to be a circle here: one will in effect rely on p to justify q and then use q to justify reliance on p . But with two levels of cognitive relations—call them 1-cognition and 2-cognition—the circle disappears. One’s 2-cognition of q can be based on one’s 1-cognition of p while one’s 2-cognition of p is in turn based on one’s 1-cognition of q .¹⁴

Sosa (2014: 204-209) further explores the map of Sosa 1980a by considering the possibility of a rapprochement between INFINITISM and foundationalism. He embraces the infinitist claim that the epistemic value of some first-order knowledge can always be increased by reflection, even though infinite reasoning is not required for outright justification. If one combines this observation with Sosa 1991’s earlier rapprochement with coherentism, Sosa’s work appears to offer the only published example of *infinifoundherentism* in epistemology.¹⁵

2.2. *The Dawning of Human Knowledge and Understanding*

In the neglected Introduction to *Knowledge in Perspective*, Sosa opens by positioning his epistemology in contrast to rationalism and empiricism, which he treats as the two main versions of (substantive) foundationalism (1991: 1). This framing indicates that Sosa’s epistemology is intended not just as a contribution to the analysis of knowledge and the theories of epistemic normativity and agency (as it has lately been received), but also to a debate about the *roots* of knowledge that was central to historical giants like Aristotle, Locke, and Kant. In this subsection and the next, we will vindicate this way of framing Sosa’s epistemology. We will first (§2.2) highlight a central part of his system that has been overshadowed by his contributions to the analysis and value of knowledge, and then explain its role in his work on skepticism (§2.3a) and methodology (§2.3b).

It is not immediately obvious what part of Sosa’s epistemology is a relevant alternative to rationalism and empiricism. To say that *virtue epistemology* is the alternative is not especially helpful. VE answers a handful of questions at once: it explains the nature of knowledge, the value of knowledge, and the source of epistemic normativity. Rationalism and empiricism were never intended to do these things. Hence a more compelling reading is that

¹⁴ This generalizes the central observation of Sosa (1997a: 239), who makes it in the special case where 1-cognition is Descartes’s *cognitio* and 2-cognition is Descartes’s *scientia*. A similar point could be made in other Indo-European languages with similar contrasts—e.g., *jñāna* vs. *pramā* in Sanskrit, *gnosis* vs. *episteme* in ancient Greek, *erkenntnis* vs. *wissen* in German.

¹⁵ This term was coined by Dommett 2023.

some other part of Sosa's epistemology provides the relevant contrast, where this part bears some intimate relationship to VE but is distinct from VE.

We take this other major part of Sosa's epistemology to be what he has come to call 'dawning light epistemology' (as we previewed in §1). This part of Sosa's epistemology takes a more nuanced stand on the same question to which pure rationalism and pure empiricism take dogmatic stands—namely:

The Epistemic How Question (EHQ): From an epistemological (not merely psychological) point of view, how do we know what we know?

Before seeing how Sosa approaches EHQ, we'll note that one can use a distinction inspired by the epistemic/metaepistemic distinction in Sosa 1980a to generate some narrower questions and possible views. One narrower question is:

First-Order EHQ: From an epistemological (not merely psychological) point of view, how do we know *about the non-epistemic*?

This is a traditional question in first-order epistemology that has an interesting historical relationship to ancient skepticism. The Pyrrhonian skeptics argued that the unavailability of a non-circular answer to this question in terms of a *criterion* rationally requires suspension of judgment. For this reason, Sosa's answer is contained in his work on skepticism (see §2.3(a)). Another narrower question is:

Meta-Level EHQ: From an epistemological (not merely psychological) point of view, how do we know about the epistemic?

This is a question in one part of meta-philosophy—viz., the epistemology of philosophy. Sosa's answer to it is contained in his work on philosophical methodology (see §2.3(b)).

But there is also an overarching question to consider:

Über EHQ: From an epistemological (not merely psychological) point of view, how do we know what we know *period* (or *überhaupt*, in a Kantian phrase)?

We will construe EHQ as equivalent to Über EHQ. If dawning light epistemology is treated as an answer to this question, Sosa's early work provides some excellent tools for understanding its distinctive commitments and relationship to VE.

To bring this out, let's consider some substantive foundationalist answers to EHQ. One approach to EHQ is *monist how-foundationalism*, which proposes that some distinguished way of knowing (e.g., perception) is the sole non-derivative way of knowing, and all other knowledge is derived from a bedrock of how-foundational knowledge via some distinguished methods (e.g., inference).¹⁶ *Pure intuitionism* and *pure empiricism* are traditional versions that appeal respectively to *intuition* and *experience* as non-derivative ways of knowing, and *deduction* and *induction* as distinguished methods. One could also have a non-traditional

¹⁶ 'Non-derivative' ways of knowing are often called 'generative' and derivative ways 'transmissive', but we prefer the more general terminology, which does less to bias intuition toward certain ways of thinking about the correct form of an answer to the EHQ.

version that invokes not folk psychological ways and methods, but rather ones identified by cognitive science. Dawning light epistemology contrasts with all these views, we'll see.

There are also pluralist options. *Pluralist how-foundationalism* would say that there are several non-derivative ways of knowing, and some distinguished list of methods of derivation. Chisholm's epistemology is an example. As Sosa emphasized, it faces the problem of scatter. One could have a more scientific pluralism that appears more principled. But it would add little philosophical satisfaction, one might worry.

In addition to these substantive foundationalist answers to EHQ, we can follow Sosa 1980a-b in identifying a formal version. *Formal how-foundationalism* would merely say that there is some interesting and reasonably concise answer to EHQ that explains the supervenience of the epistemic on some non-epistemically individuated base, via some generative principle(s). *Pessimism* about EHQ would then be the denial of formal how-foundationalism.¹⁷

The formal how-foundationalist's base need not consist in familiar 'ways of knowing' like experience or intuition, and the generative principles needn't correspond to traditional 'methods' like deduction and induction. To take one interesting possibility that will be a useful foil, one could imagine a formally foundationalist view analogous to 'best systems' accounts of laws, on which the non-epistemic property of interest is *constituting a body of principles for systematizing experience*, and the generative property is *cohering with that body and experience*. Kant's epistemology may illustrate this possibility.

Dawning light epistemology (henceforth 'DLE') is an overlooked alternative approach to EHQ. The early version of DLE, which Sosa 1991 called 'virtue perspectivism' and which we will call *perspectivist DLE*, took the following form. Firstly, it rejected standard substantive monist and pluralist how-foundationalism. Part of the reason was that these views are *chauvinistic*, requiring certain capacities that are not obviously essential for having the capacity for knowing.¹⁸ In doing so, they overlook the striking diversity in how people can know (see, e.g., Sosa 1991: 3-4's discussion of savants). Pluralist views in turn face the problem of scatter. In rejecting the standard arguments against foundationalism and for coherentism as not touching *formal* foundationalism, Sosa left open the possibility of treating perspectivist DLE as a formal foundationalist view. His claim to avoid the problem of scatter and to explain the supervenience of the epistemic suggests that he understood virtue perspectivism in this way.

If perspectivist DLE is understood in this way, it shares at least some ambitions of grand historical systems. It offers an externalist alternative to Kant's epistemology, one that also transcends pure rationalism and empiricism and combines the insights of substantive foundationalism and coherentism while avoiding their flaws.

Sosa's virtue perspectivism especially resembles Aristotle's epistemology on some plausible interpretations (e.g., Gasser-Wingate 2021's). On such interpretations, Aristotle was

¹⁷ Pessimism so understood is similar to what Cassam 2007 calls *minimalism* about the Kantian question of how knowledge is possible, and formal foundationalism is a version of what he calls *anti-minimalism*. It is also similar to Nāgārjuna's skepticism about the possibility of a theory of ways of knowing like the one pursued in Nyāya epistemology. We recommend more exploration of the intersection of Cassam 2007 and Sosa 1980a-b, as well as Sosa and Sanskrit epistemology. We hope that future epistemologists will take note of the fact that the early Sosa was concerned with the Kantian question (hence, e.g., Part I of Sosa 1991 has the title: '*What is knowledge, and how is it possible?*').

¹⁸ We use this term in the sense that Block 1978 had in mind in discussing the identity theory.

not only the first externalist virtue epistemologist, but also the first virtue perspectivist. Like Aristotle in the *Posterior Analytics*, Sosa proposes that typical humans start from some initial state of unreflective *gnosis* but have the capacity to transform it into reflective knowledge. For typical humans,¹⁹ the initial transformation happens in early development through the shaping of intuition by (a) maturational processes and (b) socialization (see Sosa 2013a). Hence Sosa (1985: 242) plausibly suggests that reason is almost always at least a ‘silent partner’ in belief-formation: even when it appears unreflective, human knowledge is rarely *mere* animal knowledge. He also suggests (2013a: 605) that there is hence no need for *ascent* to an at least minimally reflective perspective.

Sosa has also long thought that it is possible for philosophical reflection to take the transformation further, converting ordinary reflective knowledge into philosophical understanding (*episteme* or *scientia*). His recent work (e.g., Sosa 2021) suggests in line with the classical understanding of philosophy that this is a *liberal* aim of philosophy as a humanistic discipline. And plausibly, the fact that this aim is a *regulative ideal* rather than a realistic goal enables Sosa’s view to capture the ancient infinitist insight that reflection can in principle *indefinitely* enhance human understanding.

We take the outlook described in the previous few paragraphs to represent the core of dawning light epistemology. Interestingly, it is not obvious that dawning light epistemology at its core *must* be construed as a version of formal foundationalism, or for that matter *must* be incompatible with a sufficiently sophisticated monist substantive epistemology. If the relevant initial state already includes *gnosis* and the capacity to develop *episteme*, then it is not a *non-epistemic* base on which the epistemic is *built*. It is already cognitive in actuality and epistemic (narrowly construed) in potentiality.

Of course, given that the human mind is realized in an animal brain through development from prenatal non-cognitive origins, there must be some story about how that state is reached. Maybe this story could even be an *a posteriori* substantive foundationalist story. But it would not be the job of the epistemologist to settle whether *this* kind of substantive foundationalism is true. We take this occupational fact to be the reason why Sosa now explicitly withholds judgment *qua* epistemologist on *a posteriori* foundational empiricism and rationalism rather than, as in Sosa 1991, rejecting them.

Why suspend judgment on *a priori* foundationalism if it can merely take the form of formal foundationalism? Some of Sosa’s work between 1991 and 2021 helps explain his resistance to billing his view as foundationalist. Sosa (2003c, 2009b, 2013) suggests that even perceptual beliefs manifest implicit commitment to principles of taking experience at face value under certain conditions, where this implicit commitment must be apt in order for the perceptual beliefs to constitute knowledge. He also suggests for this reason that particular and general beliefs often come together as a package deal with extensive mutual support, contra substantive foundationalism. Sosa also suggests that these implicit commitments *constitute* our faculties (2009b: 186). If so, the property of manifesting a cognitive faculty cannot be invoked in the base clause of a formal foundationalist account, since it will already pass epistemic muster if it is a suitable basis for knowledge. Sosa (2015: 100)’s suggestion that competences are not merely reliable dispositions but are rather a ‘very special case’ of

¹⁹ Sometimes Sosa writes in a way that suggests this normal course of development is the only possibility for the epistemologist to recognize as dawning. But we take his recognition of the possibility of *bona fide* knowledge in Swampman (see 2001: 56) to indicate that this is not required, in keeping with Sosa (1991: Introduction)’s respect for cognitive diversity.

dispositions that cannot be helpfully specified in non-normative terms also suggests that competences are not suitable bases for a formal foundationalist account.

With dawning light epistemology in view, we can see why it is important to distinguish it from the core projects of virtue epistemology described in §1. Dawning light epistemology is the culmination of a conceptually distinct research programme. This research programme is conceptually distinct because it investigates different questions: namely, EHQ and associated questions about the *structure* of knowledge. Sosa's contributions to these questions are at least as central to understanding his overall epistemology as his contributions to the analysis of knowledge and the value of knowledge.

So, although Sosa develops dawning light epistemology as part of a complete system that also includes virtue epistemology, it is a distinct achievement. Indeed, it is not obvious why one needs to be a virtue epistemologist to be a dawning light epistemologist, or at least not why the label 'virtue epistemology' is crucial. Aristotle, Kant, and Wittgenstein would all seem to accept distinctive versions of dawning light epistemology. While it might be right that they were all virtue epistemologists, their focus in epistemology was not on the analysis of knowledge or the value of knowledge, but rather (inter alia) on *structure*.

Apart from putting Sosa in conversation with historical epistemologists who worked on the origins of knowledge, dawning light epistemology also helps clarify Sosa's take on the place of reasons in epistemology and why it differs from that of reliabilists like Lyons 2009 and Kornblith 2015. On the one hand, Sosa has since 1964 denied that all knowledge requires the capacity for *reasoning* and has sometimes been open to denying that justification is necessary for knowledge (see especially Sosa 1988b: 415, 425). On the other hand, Sosa has principled reasons for holding that human knowledge requires a capacity of *reason* understood more broadly, not essentially as a capacity for *reasoning* but rather as a capacity for *sense-making*, which can manifest in *intuition* (2013a: 196-7), and whose workings can be realized in developmental processes and not just spontaneous cognitive activity. He also has principled reasons for holding that in humans, unreflective cognition is only a proleptic initial state rather than being a *bona fide* cognitive achievement. These reasons suggest that *knowing full well* (Sosa 2009a) is indeed reflective, and that animal cognition in humans is only 'proto-knowledge' (1991: 12). Similar reasons are not available to Lyons or Kornblith, for whom reason can only play a *technological* role in realizing some human knowledge, not a constitutive role.

2.3. *The Possibility of Knowledge and Philosophical Understanding*

a. *Skepticism and the possibility of empirical knowledge*

Sosa has responded to skepticism on many occasions, sometimes in very different ways, and often with a different emphasis even when related points are made. His best-known and most celebrated responses are in Sosa 1999b and Sosa (2007a: Chs.1-2; 2009c),²⁰ which defend a Moore-inspired response to skepticism from the perspective of virtue epistemology.

²⁰ It's worth noting that Sosa, in the opening chapters of 2007a, presents two distinct but complementary responses to dream skepticism. The first relies the imagination model of dreaming to challenge a key dream-skeptical premise: namely, that while dreaming, we form false beliefs. However, Sosa's second response (Chapter 2) takes a different tack. Setting aside the imagination model of dreaming, it demonstrates how his virtue epistemology can counter dream skepticism even if we accept the orthodox view that dreaming is compatible with

While Sosa 1999b is his most-cited paper, we will bracket it. The main reason is that its response relies on an analysis of knowledge Sosa no longer accepts.²¹ And since the roots of Sosa (2007, 2009c)'s response to skepticism can be found in papers before Sosa 1999b and have also been enhanced in papers after 2009c, we will only discuss it at the end of the section. We will emphasize discussions in pre-1999 and post-2009 papers, including not only a well-cited paper 1997c, but also less well-cited papers (1988a, 1997a, 2011c).

Sosa's responses to skepticism all share the aim of vindicating the commonsense thought that we can know that there is an external world by just exercising innate and acquired abilities to know in ordinary ways. In this respect, Sosa's approach is similar to other commonsense and externalist responses. What is more distinctive is that Sosa does not rest content with a commonsense or externalist dismissal. He seeks to explain how it is possible for us to be entitled to this commonsense externalist response using other tools.

The tools are best appreciated in light of insights from §§2.1-2.2. Taking a cue from the organization of Sosa 2011c, we will distinguish *architectural* and *transcendental* vindications of common sense in Sosa, and also mention a *providential* vindication that emerged from trying to understand Descartes's theism as more than a *deus ex machina*.

Sosa's architectural vindications apply and deepen his insights about structure. The *locus classicus* is Sosa 1997a, but Sosa 1988a and 2011c add crucial points. The central idea of the architectural vindication is to suggest that *cognitio* can be used without vicious circularity to attain *scientia*. The question is why this works. One possible answer, which is Sosa 1997a's, is a special case of a point about structure from §2.1: namely, that once the two levels of cognition are distinguished, the apparent circularity *disappears*. But Sosa (1988a: 175-183) and (2011c: §2) show that one can go farther given a further assumption about the nature of *cognitio*—namely, that it is not ratiocinative (i.e., based on reasoning).

To bring this out, consider the unreflective use of vision to see that there is an apple here. Plausibly, one can *just see* that there is an apple here. In doing so, relies on the reliability of vision. But one can rely on the reliability of vision without *reasoning from the assumption* that vision is reliable.²² This is because visual cognition is not (relevantly) a *rational* achievement. For this reason, one is also not guilty of *bootstrapping* if one uses vision as usual in the course of studying vision: for this is not a case of reasoning from the assumption that vision is reliable. Yet if so, one can without vicious circularity come to realize that vision is in some cases misleading and in other cases not through a partly visual study of vision. Hence, as Sosa (2011c) puts it, drawing an architectural distinction between *reasons-based* and *non-*

hosting false beliefs (while dreaming). This second (Ch. 2) response acknowledges that while the nearness of the dreaming scenario might make many everyday perceptual beliefs fail an unqualified safety condition, it does not threaten the specific type of safety implied by aptness (known as SSS-safety).

²¹ In particular, the response relies on the thought that the intuitions behind skeptical arguments trade on a confusion between *safety* and *sensitivity* conditions on knowledge.

²² Sosa explicitly acknowledges, in 1997c and again in 2009c, that a dialectical burden he faces—and which he takes himself to meet—is to be able to distinguish the epistemic situation of an ordinary perceiver who relies on visual-perception in the course of coming to have a view about its reliability from 'a crystal ball gazer who thinks that what he can see in the ball enables him to tell about matters beyond' (2009c: 135) and whose crystal ball indicated to the gazer a favourable view of the epistemic credentials of the crystal ball. Sosa emphasised that 'The gazers are by hypothesis in a very different position. Gazing, being unreliable, cannot serve as a source of knowledge. So the perceivers have a good source or basis for their knowledge, but the gazers, lacking any such source or basis, lack knowledge' (2009c: 200-201).

reasons-based competences allows us to see how one can use the latter without circularity as inputs to ratiocination that reveals the latter to be reliable.

But how does this square with Sosa's suggestion that a full-fledged capacity to perceive is constituted by default presuppositions? A distinction between high-level and low-level perception may partly help. But how can we learn that high-level perception is reliable? Here Sosa 2011c makes explicit a further thought which was implicit in earlier work. He notes that in addition to the architectural distinction between rational and non-rational *competences*, there is a distinction between two kinds of *basing*, which can be helpfully expressed as a distinction between *intuitive* and *ratiocinative* basing. Even if there is a logical or probabilistic relation between the contents of two cognitive attitudes C1 and C2 and one manifests sensitivity to it in arriving at C2 given C1 as input, it does not follow that one is *reasoning* from C1 to C2. The basing relation could be intuitive even if the transition is in a broad sense 'rational'. If this is right, then though the use of reasons-sensitive competences may presuppose propositions about reliability by *treating* them as true, this also involves no objectionable circularity if the operation manifests *intuitive* competence. It has the right kind of normative status simply in virtue of being a competence. This point helps to explain why one can use (e.g.) deduction to enhance trust in one's deductive competences without bootstrapping: the normative status needed to get started is not a rational status.

Wouldn't it be better to avoid relying on our reliability, even if doing so involves no bootstrapping? Not if there is no alternative! If so, circularity is our best option. Indeed, it is the *only* way to achieve the highest epistemic goods. This brings us to a *transcendental* argument.²³ The *only fully coherent* attitude to take about our reliability is a positive attitude: disbelief and suspension are incoherent, at least to some degree, and taking no attitude ensures that one will fail to achieve *scientia*.²⁴

A final kind of response to mention is providential (in a broad sense). This response emerged from trying to make sense of the role of Descartes's belief in the existence and goodness of God in his response to skepticism.²⁵ This aspect of Descartes's response to skepticism may seem obviously circular. But Sosa suggests that it is best understood as structurally similar to doing vision science with the help of one's eyes to establish the circumstances under which vision is reliable. Of course, given the difference between theology and science, Descartes's response may fail. But not for *structural* reasons. If so, then the science of perception could play the same providential role that theology played for Descartes!

Highlighting these less well-known responses to skepticism better contextualizes Sosa 2007a's reply to dream skepticism. This reply rests on distinguishing between aptness and safety rather than, per Sosa 1999b, safety and sensitivity. To fully appreciate both why we can aptly believe we are awake when awake, and why we can have *reflective knowledge* that we are not dreaming, it helps especially to bear in mind the architectural vindication, which we suggest is especially important, and partly explains why another book (2009c) revisiting some of Sosa's earlier work on skepticism appeared after Sosa 2007a.

²³ The point here anticipates some of Rinard 2018's ambitious anti-skeptical arguments from coherence-requirements.

²⁴ This transcendental vindication, helpfully summarized in (2011c: §4), is much less well-known. But versions or relatives appear less centrally in numerous early papers (see e.g. 1988a, 1993c: 220-221, 1994: 283-284, 1997c: 427, 1997a: 240, 1997b: 130).

²⁵ Here 1997c is the *locus classicus*.

b. *Philosophical methodology*

Several themes that appear regularly in Sosa's epistemology, but which have ramifications beyond just epistemology, fall under the banner of *philosophical methodology*. We will highlight three subthemes: (i) his work on the role of *intuitions* in philosophical methodology, (ii) his view of the project of *analysis*, and (iii) his *metaepistemological* views about the terrain we evaluate when making epistemic evaluations.

(i) *Intuitions*. Sosa has weighed in on intuitions across various debates, including in connection with discussion about how intuitions relate to *a priori* justification (Sosa 1996, 2007a: Ch. 3), competence (2007: Ch. 3), and experimental critiques of armchair philosophy (Sosa 2011a, 2007b). His views of the nature of intuition have been relatively stable across these discussions: intuitions are a special kind of intellectual seeming, which involves an *attraction to assent* triggered by understanding a proposition.²⁶ Intuitions are justified only when they derive from competence, in particular, from a competence to discriminate, among contents that one understands well enough, the true from the false. Intuitions competently derived (i.e., justified) can then provide justification.²⁷ This virtue-theoretic account of the epistemic import of intuitions is an alternative to both Cartesian and perceptual models.²⁸ Sosa's idea that intuitions manifest competence plays a role in strategies he employs to defend the place of intuition in philosophy against experimental critiques of intuition-driven philosophy which appeal to, e.g., disagreement and diversity of intuitions reported across cultures.²⁹

(ii) *Analysis*. Those purporting to give an *analysis* of knowledge (often by filling in the English schema 'S knows that p iff ___') leave unspecified what kind of analysis they purport to give. One thing one might do is investigate meaning; this would be to give a *semantic* analysis of 'knows'. A different kind of analysis is *conceptual*, where the direct objective is to elucidate the concept of knowledge. Sosa is clear that his primary objective is to give a *metaphysical analysis*. As he puts it:

[...] our focus is on an objective phenomenon that need be neither expression nor concept. Our focus is rather on a state that people host or an act that they perform. This is the phenomenon whose ontology we now wish to understand. What is the nature of such a state or act, and how is it grounded? (Sosa 2015: Ch. 1)

The idea that metaphysical analysis requires explaining what grounds knowledge fits with his view of (animal) knowledge as type identical with apt belief; what (metaphysically) grounds

²⁶ See, e.g., Sosa (2006, 1998).

²⁷ In Sosa's most recent thinking (e.g., 2024b), intuitions are located methodologically with his Dawning Light epistemology: reliance on intuitions, on his more recent pictures, is best understood as 'just a reliance on things that we definitely know without knowing how we know them, not in scientific detail'.

²⁸ For Sosa 2007's criticism of the perceptual model, see pp. 45-50; for the Cartesian model, see, e.g., pp. 56-9.

²⁹ See, e.g., Sosa (2007b, 2011a, 2007a: 64-69), where his common stance is that: 'It is not at all evident [...] that or how the extent of experimentally revealed divergence in responses would create a serious problem for the continued use of armchair methods in philosophy' (Sosa 2011a).

knowledge is the exercise of competence, the exercise of which features in the AAA (metaphysical) analysis of knowledge Sosa provides.³⁰

(iii) *The subject matter of epistemology.* A point of philosophical methodology that is distinctive of Sosa's approach to *epistemology* specifically concerns the way he views epistemology as 'two sided' (Sosa 2021).³¹ The two sides are (as noted in §1) *gnoseology* and *intellectual ethics*. This distinction is often (in secondary literature) raised in passing to clarify that *gnoseology* is where Sosa's telic virtue epistemology is to be located. But it is a mistake to think that Sosa thinks intellectual ethics falls *outside* epistemology proper; this point is clear when Sosa emphasises how the two 'sides' of epistemology interact with each other in cases where one faces a zetetic choice point: in seeking to find out whether p, one often may have the option to simply defer to an epistemic superior, or instead to press on in an effort to gain *firsthand* knowledge, or³² relatedly, whether to *terminate* one's inquiry at (mere) knowledge, at (mere) reflective knowledge, or to seek higher yet achievements. How one navigates these zetetic choice points defines the (telic) boundaries within whichgnoseological assessment then applies.

Thegnoseology/intellectual ethics divide is interesting, methodologically, for further reasons. For Sosa it not only tracks a divide when it comes to whether practical or (morally substantive) non-epistemic factors are relevant to the kind of evaluation at issue: this divide also lines up neatly with the kinds of things (performance types) that get *evaluated*. When engaged ingnoseological (telic) assessment, we're evaluating constitutive (alethic) attempts (attempts that might (metaphysically) *ground* the (alethic) success). When engaged, qua theorist, in intellectual ethics (intellectual ethical evaluation), we are evaluating *instrumental alethic attempts*, attempts that involve the taking of merely preliminary means that all being well put us in a position to attain the relevant aim, but which would not ground the success.

In this way, we can see a tight link in Sosa's philosophical methodology between (i) the kind of *analysis* he takes himself to be giving in analysing knowledge in terms of aptness—viz., metaphysical analysis—and (ii) the type of *attempts*—viz., constitutive attempts—which is the proper study ofgnoseology, attempts that when apt serve as the metaphysical grounds his analysis of knowledge seeks.

This tight link is further developed in Sosa's most recent material (2024d), which develops more fully his picture of inquiry, understood as a multi-stage activity of taking up a question with the aim of answering. On Sosa's most recent view, there are three levels or stages to this activity: stage one (inquiry), the *preliminary* stage, involves attempts one makes to secure a position to know that answer (stage one is thus the stage where we locate instrumental attempts at answering a given question). At stage two, one seeks not just good moves in *inquiry* but constitutive success attained aptly: that is, stage two involves actually *answering* the question with an apt alethic affirmation. Stage three (constitutive success attained fully aptly) is explained in terms of what Sosa now calls 'Hippocratic (hip) intent'. Sosa here draws an analogy to the Hippocratic medical oath:

³⁰ For the latest characterisation of Sosa's views on metaphysical analyses, see his (2024d, §A).

³¹ See for earlier expressions of this divide, see Sosa (2015, 2017).

³² Sosa 2021's use of a crossword puzzle analogy (Ch. 1) is illuminating here: in doing a crossword puzzle, one seeking the truth would achieve this goal most expediently by simply copying the answer sheet; but this is bad intellectual ethics.

The oath commits you as medical doctor to treat patients “to the best of your ability and judgment.” And this requires you to aim not just for true diagnoses but for apt ones. *A mere guess would violate the oath.* A proper diagnosis must be better than a guess. (2024d, 4, our italics)

At stage three, as Sosa puts it, ‘your inquiry attains a Hippocratic (‘hip’) intent, as you aim *constitutively* at *aptly* attaining aptness’. *Judgment* may now be framed in terms of this stage 3 activity: it is a *hip alethic attempt*. Emphasis on stage three is important (vis-à-vis the relationship between gnoseology and intellectual ethics) given that hip attempts generally are closely related to considerations of negligence and blame, as we may criticise a doctor even if they cure the patient, and they do so aptly, but not to the best of their ability and judgment. The explicit connection between judgment and hip attempts offers a new vantage point to bring epistemic negligence (previously largely a topic in intellectual ethics) into closer contact with gnoseology.

2.4. *Mind-World Relations*

As flagged earlier, Sosa has published many papers in philosophy of mind and (meta)metaphysics. While some of this work is independent of Sosa’s epistemology (e.g., his papers on the mind-body problem), a significant portion is continuous with his epistemology and worth reading alongside it. In this final subsection, we briefly explore this intersection and its importance for understanding Sosa’s epistemology.

To appreciate the relationship, it is worth noting that many publications that have been received as works in epistemology contain explicit and well-integrated commitments in philosophy of mind and (meta)metaphysics.³³ Once this point is borne in mind, it becomes easy to reframe some publications that have been received as works in philosophy of mind as also being contributions to epistemology.

To make this clear, we will start with a paper that is equally a contribution to epistemology and philosophy of mind, and then consider its relationship to publications that have been received as work in philosophy of mind. Consider ‘Mind-World Relations’ (2015b), which argues that the tools of telic virtue epistemology can also be used to give metaphysical analyses of *action* and *perception*. If so, telic virtue epistemology is a special case of a wider telic framework for philosophy of mind, philosophy of action, and epistemology.

³³ It is worth registering one easy misinterpretation here. To appreciate the potential misinterpretation, it’s useful to compare Sosa with Goldman (1986). The latter explicitly commits himself to a thesis we can call *epistemic individualism*, viz., the view that the epistemic difference-makers between mere true belief and knowledge are fixed by properties of cognitive processes and states that are internal to the agent. Goldman embraces this, for example, here: ‘One thing we do not want to do is invoke factors external to the cogniser’s psychology. The sorts of processes we’re discussing are purely internal processes’ (1986: 51). A natural assumption to make is that Sosa, a reliabilist in the virtue-theoretic tradition, will also accept a strong kind of parallel commitment, viz., that the exercise of knowledge-grounding competences is grounded in individual-level brain-based cognitive processes. It’s worth at least registering that Sosa in several places (e.g., 2007a: 93–98; 2011b; 86–90) develops ideas that appear more flexible than such a commitment would allow; in particular, he allows some cases of testimonial knowledge for the possibility of complex competences that are socially seated, or seated in a group collectively. This flexibility however is compatible with *paradigmatic* cases of individual-level knowledge as fitting within the epistemic individualist’s model.

While this framework is especially salient in Sosa's work since 2015, it has old roots. For example, key elements of the framework were present in a philosophy of mind paper from the early 1990s—viz., 'Abilities, Concepts, and Externalism' (1993a). In this paper, two of the central building blocks of telic virtue epistemology—*competences* and their associated *seat-shape-situation* triplets—were explained in a fine-grained way similar to Sosa's post-2007 presentations. And in a discussion of proper functionalism from the same year, Sosa 1993b invoked the supervenience internalism about the seats of competences defended in 1993a to explain internalist intuitions in epistemology. This is a strategy he has continued to use in recent work (e.g., 2017). Sosa (1993a: 322) also observes that the supervenience internalism he defends about the bases of conceptual abilities is a special case of a wider supervenience internalism that also applies to justification. This supports his accommodations of internalist intuitions in epistemology: they have independent motivations and are not add-ons merely meant to respond to objections from internalists.

The traffic goes both ways: Sosa's epistemology can help forestall misunderstanding of his work on reference, concepts, and experience. If one examines Sosa's papers on these topics in isolation, they appear very traditionalist. Sosa is a supervenience internalist about experience and concepts (1986a, 2009c), a Fregean about reference (1970, 1995), and an indirect realist about perception (1986a). This combination of positions supported his reaction to Williamson 2000's externalism in Sosa 2009c, which rests on the thought that knowledge is not mental in its own right but only by courtesy of being analyzable in terms of belief. Yet on closer inspection, he has a sophisticated *externalist internalism* about the mental that harmonizes with telic virtue epistemology. For although the purely mental is internal in a traditional way, it aims at the external. Hence, just as full-fledged epistemic competence is not internal because it requires appropriate pairing with suitable shape and situation, so also full-fledged conceptual abilities are not internal for the same reason. Hence, while Sosa has a traditional view about the mind, he has a non-traditional view about its *importance*: it matters largely because of its telic relations to the world and potential for aptness.

Other aspects of Sosa's philosophy of mind harmonize with dawning light epistemology. Sosa independently argues that experience is not passive enjoyment of the sensory given: it has propositional content (1986c) and aims at the world. Partly for this reason, *full-fledged* experience is no more internal than knowledge—hence the 2015b view that perception structurally resembles knowledge. This combination of views explains Sosa's response to BonJour's internalism in Sosa 2003a.

A final aspect of Sosa's philosophy of mind helps fortify his overall package of views in epistemology: his commitment to mentalism in the philosophy of psychology and rejection of behaviorism and Ryle's view about the mind (see 1984, 2003a, 2004). More importantly, Sosa endorses rich mentalistic explanations of behavior, a move partly secured by his Fregeanism and (2003a: §§6.1-6.2) view that propositional knowledge is prior to non-propositional knowledge. These commitments in philosophy of mind help unify telic virtue epistemology, dawning light epistemology, and Sosa's synthesis of foundationalist, coherentist, and infinitist insights. Without these commitments, telic virtue epistemology could have taken a less compelling *anti-intellectualist* form.

While we don't have space to explore the thought, we will end by registering that similar points go for Sosa's metametaphysics. Sosa's versions of ontological plenitude³⁴ and

³⁴ For a helpful introduction to plenitude, see Fairchild (2020).

conceptual relativism (see 2009a) play an important role in his virtue epistemology. This was clear in his 1988 discussion of why some dispositions to believe truly are esteemed as virtues and others aren't.³⁵ His answer fits with plenitude and conceptual relativism: it's not because of what they are like in themselves, but rather reflects the human interests that make concepts of these dispositions important to us. This persists in Sosa's recent work (e.g. 2015a: ch.8).

* * *

Whether one becomes an adherent of Sosa's epistemology or not, this much at least is clear: light shines over the whole of Sosa's philosophy. This whole is worth exploring anew in assessing his epistemology.

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³⁵ This position made explicit in 1988 reappears in Sosa's more recent virtue epistemology; consider for example his 2017 remarks: 'Not every disposition to succeed when one tries constitutes a competence...although every competence will be constituted by a disposition to succeed when the agent is within certain ranges of shape and situation. A disposition to succeed is thus plausibly made a competence by some *prior selection* of shape/situation pairs such that one seats a competence only if one is disposed to succeed reliably enough upon trying when in such a shape/situation pair' (2017: 195).

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