

# REVIEW OF E. SOSA'S "APT BELIEF AND REFLECTIVE KNOWLEDGE," VOLUMES I AND II

*J. Adam Carter*

## Part I. A Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge, Volume I

Ernest Sosa's (2007) *A Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge, Vol. I* is the first of two volumes originating from Sosa's 2005 John Locke Lectures at Oxford University. *Volume I* constitutes a significant achievement in not only the advancement of *virtue epistemology* as an approach to analysing knowledge, but also in epistemology more broadly; it is, as such, mandatory reading for anyone engaged with contemporary epistemology.

*Virtue epistemology*, which Sosa introduced to the contemporary debate in the '80s and importantly refined with his monograph *Knowledge in Perspective* (1991) takes as a crucial premise the idea that properties of *agents*, rather than merely properties of beliefs, are fundamental to analysing core epistemic concepts such as knowledge and justification. In order to qualify as knowledge on the virtue epistemology (hereafter VE) programme, a belief must not only be true but, moreover, its correctness must be appropriately connected to the agent's exercise of *epistemic virtue*. Epistemic virtues are, for Sosa, faculties or competences of an agent the deliverances of which are reliably truth-conducive.

*Vol. I* advances with a great deal of sophistication the sort of VE approach Sosa has defended in previous work, though with a few (arguably) significant departures.<sup>1</sup> My aim here will be to summarise some of the key ideas of the book after which I'll raise two main critical objections.

Firstly, it will be important to note a crucial distinction of Sosa's—one which plays a substantial role in nearly all of his theses concerning the nature and scope of human knowledge—which is that between *animal knowledge* and *reflective knowledge*. According to Sosa's "triple A structure", a belief qualifies as animal knowledge so long as it is *apt*—that is, *accurate* because *adroit*. More basically: a belief is apt just when it is correct *because* (epistemically) skillful.

Mere accuracy *and* adroitnes is insufficient here. Take here Sosa's analogy of an archer: suppose an archer fires a bow at a target. The archer's shot is highly

1 Most notably, Sosa no longer maintains that safety is necessary for knowledge (at any rate, for *animal knowledge*). I return to this point later in my discussion.

skilled, performed in a manner that reliably brings about bullseyes. Suppose also that the archer is successful: in this case it is skillfully released and successfully hits the bullseye. It is accurate and adroit. But imagine that, shortly after the archer released the shot, a gust of wind took the arrow off target. Suppose it would have missed, had a second, more fortuitous gust of wind not blown the arrow back on course. Here we have a case where the shot is accurate and adroit, but not accurate *because* adroit. The analogue epistemic case (i.e. a classic Gettier-style case, such as the Smith/Jones case) would, for Sosa, would fail to constitute apt belief (animal knowledge) for the reason that the target belief is not correct *because* of the agent's manifesting some epistemic competence, but instead, because of dumb luck.

Of an epistemically higher quality than animal knowledge, for Sosa, is *reflective knowledge*: apt belief, aptly noted. Put another way: *meta-apt belief*: a belief that is not only apt, but also aptly held to be such. Reflective knowledge, unlike animal knowledge, requires a meta-perspective—an endorsing perspective of the agent whereby one exhibits some meta-competence—that is, a competence in recognising (or perhaps in taking for granted) that the target (first-order) belief was generated by a faculty or competence that itself reliably brings about true beliefs.

There is, however, a more interesting problem that arises for Sosa's view—a problem that concerns closure over competent deduction, one which Pritchard (2008)<sup>2</sup> has alluded to in passing, but which I contend<sup>3</sup> has quite significant implications. The problem arises for Sosa once the following plausible principle is granted. That, if one has reflective knowledge (RK) that *p*, and one competently deduces that *p* entails *q* (while maintaining one's RK that *p*), then one has RK that *q*. After all, it's implausible to suppose that if one has reflective knowledge, it would somehow be downgraded across a competent deduction. However, the commitments of Sosa's position require that he fly in the face of this principle. Consider, after all, that it's implausible to suppose we can have reflective knowledge that a given sceptical hypothesis (i.e. the BIV scenario) is false. This is true even if we can have externalist, animal knowledge that such a sceptical hypothesis is false. That said, we can on Sosa's view have reflective knowledge of most everyday propositions that entail the falsity of sceptical hypotheses—for example, propositions such as “I have a hand.” The competent-deduction closure principle for reflective knowledge implies for Sosa's view

2 See Pritchard, D. (2008) “Radical Scepticism, Epistemic Luck and Epistemic Value,” Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume Volume 82, Issue 1, pages 19–41, June 2008.

3 I've argued a similar point in my paper “Radical Scepticism, Closure and Robust Knowledge,” forthcoming (2011) in the *Journal of Philosophical Research*.

that we can gain reflective knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses simply from competently deducing them from our reflective knowledge of everyday propositions. But such a move gets us reflective knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses too cheaply. Sosa must either allow, unhappily, for “bootstrapped” acquisition of reflective knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses or, alternatively, reject the plausible principle according to which the quality of one’s knowledge is not downgraded across competent deduction.

## Part II. Reflective Knowledge: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge, Volume II

In *Volume II* (2009), Sosa investigates a variety of puzzles surrounding epistemic circularity that have arisen over the course of modern to recent epistemology, most notably as explored in the writings of Moore, Chisholm, Wittgenstein, Strawson, Reid, Sellars and Davidson, among others. The book is divided into two parts: Part I comprises a critical discussion of various attempts by the authors mentioned to—without devolving into *vicious circularity*—establish the reliability of our belief-forming mechanisms, such as perception, memory, introspection. Part II consists in Sosa’s own argument on this score: one which, unsurprisingly, makes important use of the distinction between animal and reflective knowledge that Sosa defended in some detail in the first volume of this two-volume set.

### *0.1 Part I: Sosa’s discussion of historical attempts to overcome epistemic circularity*

What exactly is epistemic circularity, and when is it vicious? A good way for the reader to get acquainted with worries of epistemic circularity is by considering, as Sosa does in his opening chapter, G.E. Moore’s (1939) proof of the external world: a proof that reasons from the premise “Here is a hand” (based on the appearance of a hand) in conjunction with *a priori* reflection that hands are external things, to the conclusion that there is at least one external thing—and *ipso facto* an external world. A charge of circularity emerges: how can one establish a conclusion (i.e. there is an external world) by reasoning through a premise (i.e. *Here’s a hand*) that one’s evidence—i.e. the appearance of a hand—would support *only if* we already have truth of the argument’s conclusion as antecedent collateral? It would seem that, in order to prove our premise on the

basis of the appearance of a hand, we must first prove that there is an external world. But how do we prove *that* if not on the basis of premises like Moore's?

A common stance in epistemology has been to take certain putative items of knowledge (such as Moore's *Here is a hand*) as ones that enjoy *epistemically foundational* status, the enjoyment of which precludes any need for one to *base* these fundamental beliefs on any other beliefs in order that they be epistemically justified. In Chapter 2, Sosa argues that this sort of view, Classical Foundationalism, has a problematic weak spot at its core.

Toward this end, Sosa considers how it is that foundational beliefs gain their epistemic status in the first place. Foundationalists have traditionally appealed here to what is "given" in experience. Though, as Sosa notes, the foundationalist needs to explain "which sorts of features of our states of consciousness are the epistemically effective ones"<sup>4</sup>, the ones by corresponding to which specifically do our basic beliefs acquire their foundational status." (Sosa 2009: 27) Here Chisholm's (1942) Problem of the Speckled Hen is germane; "having a visual image with 48 speckles seems not to qualify, whereas having a visual image with 3 speckles may ... (2009: 27). To account for the disparity, Sosa thinks we must inevitably appeal to some causal or counterfactual connection between the character of the experience and the propositional content of the judgment, i.e., between the experience's having that character and the judgments having that propositional content. From here we can see how Sosa generates a surprising result: that Classical Foundationalism—an account of the structure of justified belief championed famously by internalists—actually requires, at a crucial juncture in the argument, a needed appeal to intellectual virtues.<sup>5</sup>

Chapters 3 and 4 examine two historically distinctive foundationalist-style attempts to block epistemic circularity. Chapter 3 takes as its focus a sort of

4 Sosa argues that it can't be "noticings" of states of consciousness, which he calls 'meta-awareness', for the reason that noticing itself is "epistemic in a way that ill suits it for the explanatory work that it is being asked to do" (26). He adds that "our explanation hence cannot rest with "noticings" that are supposed to have epistemic status already." (26).

5 Before discussing what he takes the further relation to be that must hold between the belief and the experience in order for the belief to be foundationally justified, Sosa exposes a gap in the view owing to its inability to account for *absences*—for example—believing that not-p as opposed to not believing that p, experiencing as if not-p and not experiencing as if p (2009: 30). Sosa claims that the fact that what explains one has foundational justificational status is unlikely to differ much from what explains why the other does, this becomes a problem for the classical foundationalist since "the explanation in terms of taking the given falls short if powerless to explain our foundationally justified beliefs about what is absent from our consciousness at the time, and yet the explanation of that foundational justification can hardly diverge radically from the explanation of our foundational justification for beliefs about what is present in our consciousness (2009: 30).

*epistemic naturalism* argument-style which Sosa attributes to Hume, Wittgenstein and Strawson. Epistemic naturalism does not attempt to *answer*, as it were, the sorts of questions to which answers might appear viciously circular so much as to provide philosophical grounds for ignoring such questions. The argument-style, as Sosa sees it, runs as follows:

1. Take a proposition P that we are convinced of.
2. Suppose a skeptic advances an argument A against P.
3. To take A seriously we would need to try to come up with a counter-argument C in favor of P.
4. Suppose, however, that P is a proposition that we accept beyond justification, perhaps as a framework conviction; suppose we accept it as an unshakeable commitment, one, moreover, that could never authentically be based on arguments or reasons.
5. In that case, it seems best to neglect argument A and any such skeptical argument. (2009: 52)

Sosa responds to this line of reasoning in a couple of ways. The most interesting is what I'll call the 'narrow scope' response. The narrow scope response argues that the epistemological naturalist's argument is only suited to a very narrow sort of scepticism: scepticism about framework propositions—i.e. Wittgenstenian “hinge propositions”—which Sosa distinguishes from the obvious sort of empirical propositions—i.e. Descartes' proposition “I am sitting in front of the fire” and Moore's “I have a hand”)—scepticism about which Sosa thinks would be immune to the epistemic naturalist's reply. Sosa is mistaken here, given that he overlooks that what *makes* framework propositions such is that we cannot offer reasons for them *because* our epistemic support for our reasons could be no stronger than is the epistemic support for these propositions themselves. But crucially, the same holds true for the obvious sort of empirical propositions (I have a hand) which Sosa thinks are not framework propositions, and thus, propositions the scepticism of which would not be countered by the epistemological naturalist's strategy.<sup>7</sup>

In this chapter, Sosa considers Wilfrid Sellars' well-known Myth of the Given argument—the alleged myth (endorsed notably by internalist foundationalists)

6 See Wittgenstein's (1969) *On Certainty*.

7 Sosa also argues, and I think convincingly, that the sort of practical quietism implied by epistemological naturalism (i.e. we cannot justify framework propositions) is compatible with what Sosa calls theoretical activism “of an epistemology aimed at explaining what gives our beliefs the cognitive status required to constitute knowledge.” (2009: 57)

being that perceptually based beliefs attain, in virtue of the experience whereby one identifies perceptual something as F, their foundational status. What Sellars pointed out in his essay *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* is that such beliefs aren't foundationally justified unless the agent has some further belief that is itself a generalisation about the reliability of the belief-forming process by which the agent identifies what he perceptually accounts for as an F. Such a generalised belief might be: "I identify things as F iff they are F." However, problematically, how can one have evidence that such a generalised belief about the reliability of the belief-forming mechanism (of identifying F things) being justified in the absence of *particular* foundationally justified F beliefs?

Sosa contends that Sellars' own settled-upon<sup>8</sup> defence, a pragmatic defence, of the principles fails because a pragmatic defense of accepting IPM T-principles<sup>9</sup> does not constitute an *epistemic* reason for accepting them, and in order to account for the justificatory status of foundational beliefs, epistemic reasons would be required for accepting the IPM T principles. Finally, Sosa contends—and I think rightly—that a Wittgenstenian defence of the principles—i.e. one according to which we'd accept the principles inevitably as a precursor to inquiry—fails because it doesn't explain why we must accept these *particular* principles, rather than others, and also why it is that we have to accept any principles at all.

What other strategies are available for non-circularly vindicating the methods, principles and mechanisms human knowledge owes itself to? A final proposal Sosa considers (Chapter 6) is Davidson's, one that consists in a transcendental, perhaps *a priori*, argument similar in vein to Descartes'.

Davidson's characterisation of the sceptical problem consists in a recognition that there is some logical chasm dividing the subjective and the objective. The idea is, roughly, that we can know *a priori* the contents of our own minds, but that knowledge about our own minds is insufficient to ground knowledge of the external world. And so, we cannot move deductively from the subjective to the objective. Nor can we propose some belief in an empirical proposition

8 Sellars attempts at first to get out of this problem by saying that so long as, later on, we can know that, at the time (when one identified an F thing as an F) the mechanism was (then) reliable, then this suffices. But Sellars later recanted this position because it overintellectualises in a way that yields to the sceptic. Sosa's next move is to consider a new sort of reply Sellars has offered, based on Chisholm's epistemic principles, where Sellars offers certain inference, perception and memory (IPM) "T" principles, according to which: beliefs based on IPM are likely to be true. Sellars reasons that if we can accept such principles, then we can explain foundationally justified beliefs. Unfortunately, as Sellars notes, a rule of the game is that IPM T principles can't be held on the basis of induction, on pain of vicious circularity.

9 See previous *fn*.

to stand alone as insulated from the sceptic because any given empirical belief, taken alone, could be false. Thus we are stuck with a sceptical dilemma. Davidson's way out of this dilemma is via an unusual though striking transcendental argument. His idea is essentially that, given how it is we come to acquire meanings of words—namely through contact with the outside world—we are justified in accepting that most of our beliefs are true. Sosa points out a flaw in this argument: even if we grant Davidson this much, we don't defeat the sceptic. Says Sosa:

True, we cannot reason that we might be generally wrong just because we might be wrong in any specific instance. But nor can we reason that we are safe from being wrong in any specific instance just because we cannot be generally wrong. (Sosa 2009: 117)

Further to that: Sosa points out that Davidson's argument has a “blanket” sort of quality that invites the astrologer/astronomer objection: “It would render all substantive beliefs presumptively justified, the astrologer's along with the astronomer's. And now the action would shift to what accounts for the difference, what accounts for the defeat of the astrologer's justification and the non-defeat of the astronomer's justification.” (118)

Another worry Sosa brings up concerns what he calls the sceptic's “Trojan Horse.” Sosa argues that if “we frame our debate with the sceptic as [Davidson does], the sceptic wins regardless of whatever success Davidson's transcendental argument may enjoy.” (2009: 118) This is because, as Sosa sees it, Davidson has us set up the terms of the debate with the sceptic much as Descartes does:

1. If we are to know realm W it must be via realm M.
2. The way to know a realm X via a realm Y is by knowing Y and reasoning validly from one's knowledge of Y to conclusions about X.
3. Only deductive reasoning is really valid.
4. There is a logical gap between M and W that no deductive reasoning could possibly bridge. (2009: 119)

The problem with Davidson's set-up, Sosa claims, is that there are *other possible ways* of acquiring dispositions to appropriate verbal behavior, other than contact with objects. And this makes Davidson's argument no longer *a priori*. Further, as Sosa notes, even if philosophers persuaded by Davidson's complex argument concerning the nature of mental and linguistic content gain some justification for their empirical beliefs, it wouldn't follow that the “justification that ordinary folk have for their empirical beliefs [is justified]...and so it will

not explain how it is that *these folk* are safe from the objections of the sceptic.” (2009: 119)

### 0.2 Reflective knowledge and virtuous circularity

In Part II, Sosa advances over the course of four chapters a general response type to the problem of epistemic circularity, several responses to which he has already now dismissed. His proposed response-type involves several moves, the first of which concerns revisiting his important distinction between animal and reflective knowledge. Animal knowledge, defined in *Vol. 1* as apt belief, is attained simply whenever certain facts hold—namely, whether the agent’s belief is accurate because adroit—and independent of whether the agent takes a perspective on the reliability of the faculties generating her belief. Reflective knowledge, however, requires such a perspective: it is apt belief, aptly noted: an apt belief that one’s first order belief is apt (or animal knowledge).

Suppose now that someone has animal knowledge that *p* (i.e. *S*’s belief that *p* is apt). How does one gain a perspective from which it is possible to non-circularly endorse the reliability of faculties *S* employed in aptly believing *p*? Sosa’s clearest answer comes at the end of Chapter 10, when he discusses the Problem of Easy Knowledge.

The problem, which Sosa discusses in great detail, is a centerpiece in mainstream literature. As a philosophical problem, it has two forks, neither of which seems like a good outcome. Consider the principle KR:

KR A potential knowledge source *K* can yield knowledge for *S*, only if *S* knows that *K* is reliable. (2009: 211)

Affirming KR—an apparent requisite for reflective knowledge—appears at first glance to incur the charge of *vicious* circularity. “How can we attain the required knowledge that our epistemic sources are reliable? Must we not have that knowledge already before the sources can deliver it to us?” (2009: 211) But denying KR, however, would seem to permit us to “bootstrap” from “the deliverance of a source on some occasion to conclusions about the safety of its operation on that occasion.” (2009: 211)<sup>10</sup> As regards reflective knowledge,

<sup>10</sup> For instance: if my speedometer can give me knowledge of how fast I am going without me having to know it is reliable, I can, on the basis of knowing how fast I’m going, say 79 miles per hour, bootstrap the additional item of knowledge that my speedometer was reliable on this occasion. But, as Sosa notes, this sort of result would be unacceptable. For one thing,

Sosa opts for the first horn, but in a way that is intended to embrace a variety of epistemic circularity that Sosa contends is *virtuous*, not vicious. Roughly, his idea is that we use our faculties to amass animal knowledge, which in turn generates for us a picture of ourselves in the world, one which generates for us the view that our faculties are reliable. As Sosa sees it, there is mutual dependence at play: our knowledge that our faculties are reliable depends in part on acquired animal knowledge, and reflective knowledge we have (over and above our putative animal knowledge) depends in part on our knowledge that our faculties are reliable. Is this coherentism? In a sense, yes. In §VIII, Chapter 10, Sosa clues us in to the structure of his programme by metaphor:

The right model for understanding reflective justification is not the linear model whereby justification is a sort of liquid that flows through some pipe or channel of reasoning, from premises to conclusion<sup>11</sup> ... A better model is that of the web of belief whereby the web is properly attached to the environment, while its nodes can also gain status through mutual support. (2009: 240)

Sosa comments further:

By basing beliefs on other beliefs that rational weaver weaves a web each member of which is held in place *in part* (perhaps in minuscule part) through its being based on certain others, directly or indirectly... Reflective endorsement may now take its place in the web without any apparent special problems. Through our growing commonsense and scientific knowledge of ourselves and of the world around us and of the relation between the two, we see our modes of rational basing and other belief acquisition as sufficiently reliable. (2009: 240)

### 0.3 Problems

Sosa's historical overview of responses to epistemic circularity, Part I, is especially illuminating and constitutes a major achievement in its own right. His proposal in Part II is novel and promising. There are, however, two critical notes to mention about *Vol. II*, mostly concerning Sosa's four-chapter Part II in which his own view is developed. The first worry is structural: at perhaps the most crucial juncture of his own argument—the end of Chapter 10 on the Problem of Easy Knowledge—Sosa devolves somewhat unhelpfully into metaphor. Sometimes, metaphors are useful, and I don't think they should be categorically

the reliability of my speedometer is something I must presuppose before believing what it says on the basis of the evidence consisting in what it shows me.

- 11 Sosa qualifies here: "(Such flow is linear, unidirectional; the pipe or channel "transmits" the justification— or warrant, or epistemic status.)" (240).

avoided by any means. But equally, I think that the carefulness with which Sosa has dedicated his attention to various aspects of problems of epistemic circularity (Chapters 1-6) merits more careful argument and less metaphor at such a crucial place in his argument. In particular here, I am referring to his metaphorical picture of weblike versus liquid justification (240). This aspect of his view, as well as the notion of partial dependence (crucial to his argument) would benefit from more considered attention. Some discussion of the basing relation would I think be germane insofar as we are to follow Sosa's lead in viewing partial-dependence as a mark of virtuous circularity.

Secondly, I think that a dialectical problem reveals itself in Chapter 9 (Reflective Knowledge in the Best Circles) as Sosa considers a disagreement between himself and Barry Stroud (see esp. §6 and §8). Sosa's response to Stroud could be argued to be question-begging for the reason that Sosa's externalist response is apt to the antisceptical task at issue between them only if the task is framed as *not* one that has to argue in a way that grants the internalist certain assumptions about what constitutes second-order knowledge. Equally fairly, Stroud's contention with Sosa's externalist response (§8) could be argued as question-begging for similar reasons. If Sosa is going to persuade folks like Stroud of an externalist anti-sceptical strategy, it will be needed that Sosa first either argue carefully either (i) that he does not need to begin with some assumptions about the what would constitute a legitimate solution that his internalist opponent agrees with, or (ii) that he has begun with the relevant assumptions. Neither of these seems adequately accomplished by Sosa in his dismissal of Stroud's critique. An upshot is that Sosa's argument might lack the persuasive force it might otherwise have against committed internalists.

J. Adam Carter  
Post-Doctoral Research Fellow  
Department of Philosophy  
University of Geneva  
Switzerland