

JAMES PRYOR

COMMENTS ON SOSA'S "RELEVANT ALTERNATIVES,
CONTEXTUALISM INCLUDED"

There is much I agree with in Sosa's paper. His discussion of Stine and Peirce is quite useful; so too his discussion of Dretske in Appendix II. A further issue he focuses on concerns how Contextualists are to give full endorsement to the knowledge-claims of ordinary subjects. Just saying, metalinguistically, that:

When an ordinary subject says "I know I am sitting," she expresses some true proposition

doesn't seem to be a full enough endorsement. We also want to know what proposition it is she's expressing. And to be able to describe that proposition, Sosa argues we have to resort to expressions like "knows by ordinary standards," which are no longer contextual. Sosa thinks it is those expressions, rather than any resources special to Contextualism, that enable us in philosophical contexts to explain what is plausible in the Moorean position.¹ I agree with nearly everything Sosa says here.

I want to raise trouble only for one strand in Sosa's paper, his discussion of the relative virtues of safety versus sensitivity. Some accounts of knowledge (like Nozick's and Dretske's) make sensitivity a necessary condition for knowledge. Some contextualist accounts, like Keith DeRose's, say that, *at least in contexts where someone is asserting "S knows that p,"* it's necessary that S's belief be sensitive, if it's to count as knowledge. These appeals to sensitivity are supposed to explain what makes it so plausible that we can't know we're not dreaming, not brains in vats, and so on.

Sosa on the other hand prefers a story that makes *safety*, instead of sensitivity, a necessary condition for knowledge.² He claims that a requirement of safety will do just as good a job as sensitivity in explaining our intuitions about familiar examples, like fake-barn cases (p. 44). And a safety-requirement has several advantages over a sensitivity-requirement. For one, it doesn't raise difficulties about



Closure. For another, although our beliefs that we are not brains in vats are not sensitive, they are safe. So if knowledge only requires safety, we may very well be able to achieve knowledge that we're not brains in vats.

The issue I want to take up in these comments is whether a requirement of safety *would* really be able to explain our intuitions about fake-barn cases. I'm not convinced it would. I'll leave aside the question whether a requirement of sensitivity would be better placed to explain these intuitions; it may be that *neither* requirement does a good job on this score.

If we confine our attention to our ordinary, pre-reflective understanding of the notion of "safety," Sosa's claim does have some plausibility. For example, suppose that Carl is driving through fake-barn country, and that his having false perceptual beliefs about barns would have dire consequences. Let's say that Carl is likely to stop and walk around when (he thinks) he's at his first barn of the day; and suppose further that the fake barns are populated by man-eating tigers. When I think about such a case, I can get myself to have the intuition that *just by being* in fake-barn country, Carl is not safe from having false beliefs, and hence from being eaten; even if, as it turns out, the barn he's stopped at this time is a true barn, and so he won't get eaten today. (I can *also* get myself to have the contrary intuition, though: that since Carl happens *now* to be getting it right, at the moment he's in no danger.)

"Safety" is one of a family of folk notions – including also "sensitivity," "reliability," and various dispositional notions – that all clearly have some modal import. If we're going to use these folk notions when doing analytic epistemology, we'd like to know better what the modal import is. That is a tricky business.

Sosa does not try to analyze our folk notion of safety. Rather, he introduces "safety" as a technical notion, which he explains as follows:

Your belief that P is safe iff it's based on a reason R such that: $R \rightarrow P$.

This conditional " $R \rightarrow P$ " is basically a counterfactual with a true antecedent, of the sort that Nozick employed in his fourth condition for knowledge. (Nozick used a different counterfactual, " $P \rightarrow$ You believe P," but it was also a counterfactual with a

true antecedent.) Now the standard Lewis/Stalnaker accounts of counterfactuals make counterfactuals with true antecedents true if the corresponding material conditionals are true. But Sosa, like Nozick, wants his conditional to require *more* than those material conditionals require. So we need some philosophical explication of these Nozick/Sosa-style conditionals.

Sosa glosses his safety-conditional “ $R \rightarrow P$ ” as follows:

- It would be so that R only if it were so that P (adapted from pp. 39–40); or
- R would be true only if P were true (adapted from p. 44); or
- R would not have been true without P’s being true (adapted from “Skepticism and Contextualism”, p. 14).

His idea seems to be that you have your reasons R, and P is true, not just in the actual world, but in a range of nearby possible worlds as well. What we need to know is: *which* nearby possible worlds?

When Nozick explained his fourth condition for knowledge, he suggested that we understand these counterfactuals with true antecedents to require the truth of the consequent in *all of the worlds where the antecedent is true that are closer than the nearest world where the antecedent is false*. (Nozick refined this proposal to accommodate cases where worlds where the antecedent is false were as close as any world where the antecedent is true. For our purposes, though, we can work with this simpler account.)

If we understand Sosa’s safety-conditionals in *that* way, then they seem *not* to be violated in many fake-barn cases.

To see this, let’s think again of Carl driving through fake-barn country. Just now, he happens to be driving by a true barn, and on the basis of his experiences, he believes he’s driving by a barn. A bit further down the road is pen of sheep. Still further down the road, around a corner, is one of the area’s many fake barns.

As I described the case, Carl’s reasons for his barn-belief are that he has certain experiences. There are some nearby non-actual worlds where he has these same experiences. For instance, there are worlds W_{left} , where Carl is looking at the same barn, but is driving a bit further to the left. There are also worlds $W_{\text{around corner}}$, where Carl has been driving much faster, and is right now looking at the fake barn around the corner. There are also various nearby worlds where Carl *doesn’t* have any experiences of a barn. The closest of

these might be worlds W_{sheep} , where Carl has been driving a little bit faster, and is right now looking at the sheep pen.

Now, contextual factors can affect our ordering of how close possible worlds are in a variety of ways. But I think there are *many* natural contexts where some of the worlds I called W_{left} are closer than any of the $W_{\text{around corner}}$ worlds, and some of the W_{sheep} worlds are located between them.

If so, then in all the worlds where Carl has barn-experiences that are closer than the nearest world where he does not, he'll be looking at the same true barn, and his belief that he's driving by a barn will be true. Hence, if we understand Sosa's safety-conditional in the way Nozick proposes, Carl will satisfy it. Hence, we couldn't explain our intuition that Carl lacks knowledge by saying that he violates a safety-requirement.

Perhaps there are better ways to understand these Nozick/Sosa-style counterfactuals with true antecedents, though, which make Sosa's safety-conditionals come out false in the case I described. Perhaps we should consider, not just the worlds where Carl has barn experiences that are closer than any world where he lacks them, but also worlds further out, where he's looking at the fake barn, too.

That may be. We'll need to hear more about how to understand these conditionals, to tell.

One natural thought is that we can rely on *the context* to supply a threshold. In some contexts, it would only matter what's going on in close-by worlds where Carl has barn-experiences; in other contexts, it would matter what's going on in worlds further out. This would be a contextual contribution *additional to* contributions we already recognize for other counterfactuals. For ordinary counterfactuals, context is already recognized to affect the domain of worlds we're quantifying over, and what closeness-ordering is in place among those worlds. This would be a new, further kind of contextual contribution.

Perhaps such a story can be made to work. I think though that we should be *reluctant* to accept a story which gave Nozick/Sosa-style counterfactuals with true antecedents this extra dimension of context-sensitivity – unless we thought there was good reason to postulate it for ordinary counterfactuals with false antecedents, as well. It's natural to expect these different conditionals to be context-

sensitive in the same ways. (This expectation may of course turn out to be wrong.)

Until I know better how to evaluate Sosa's safety-conditionals, I just can't see that they would be violated in all those cases where a person lacks knowledge because of driving through fake-barn country.

I'll close with a further worry about whether Sosa's safety-conditionals can explain our intuitions about fake-barn cases. This last worry does not turn on subtleties about how to interpret the conditionals. Rather, it turns on cases like the ones that Kripke employed against Nozick's sensitivity-based analysis of knowledge. I think these raise troubles for Sosa's claims for safety, as well.

Let's go back to the story about Carl. This time, suppose the true barn he's looking at is red, and all the fake barns are yellow. Carl of course knows nothing about this color scheme. Imagine him forming the two perceptual beliefs: *I'm driving by a red barn*, and *I'm driving by a barn*. (I'm imagining the second belief to be an immediate perceptual belief, not to be inferred from the first. If you like, you can think of two Carls, one forming the one perceptual belief, the other the other.)

Now, no matter *how* we interpret Sosa's safety-conditionals, Carl's belief that he's driving by a *red* barn will presumably come out safe. For there are no nearby worlds where he believes that for the same reasons, but his belief is false.

I assume that Sosa wants Carl's belief that he's driving *by a barn* to come out unsafe, however. (The fact that his experience is of a *red* barn is not among his reasons for *this* belief. His reasons for *this* belief only include his having an experience as of a barn; the fact that it's of a *red* barn is evidentially irrelevant. There are other nearby worlds where Carl has experiences as of *barns*, and his belief that he's driving by a barn is false. Sosa thought those worlds were near enough to render Carl's belief unsafe in our earlier examples; so I assume he will do so here, as well.)

Now, I don't know about you, but I'm reluctant to grant Carl perceptual knowledge that he's driving by a red barn, while withholding perceptual knowledge that he's driving by a barn. To the extent that fake barns render him unable to know the latter, and, as far as Carl knows, there's nothing special about a barn's color, it

seems that the fake barns should equally destroy his ability to know that he's driving by a red barn. If they do, then here we'll have a case where someone lacks knowledge due to fake-barn-type considerations, but his belief is nonetheless safe. So I think this is further evidence that we can't explain our intuitions about Carl lacking knowledge in the fake-barn cases – at least, not *all* our intuitions – by saying that Carl is violating a safety-requirement.³

NOTES

¹ He develops this point at greater length in his “Skepticism and Contextualism”, *Philosophical Issues* 10 (2000).

² In addition to his essay in this volume, see also his “Postscript” to “Proper Functionalism and Virtue Epistemology”, in Jonathan Kvanvig (ed.), *Warrant in Contemporary Epistemology* (Lanham, Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield, 1996); “Skepticism and Contextualism”, *op. cit.*; “How To Defeat Opposition to Moore”, *Philosophical Perspectives* 13 (1999); “How Must Knowledge Be Modally Related to What Is Known?”, *Philosophical Topics* (1999); and “Tracking, Competence, and Knowledge”, in Paul Moser (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Keith DeRose's article “Sosa, Safety, Sensitivity, and Skeptical Hypotheses,” forthcoming in John Greco (ed.), *Sosa and his Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell) has some excellent commentary.

³ If you thought that the experiences which were Carl's reasons for his belief had *de re* content, then a similar argument would show that Sosa's safety requirement permits Carl to have perceptual knowledge that he's driving by *that barn*. (In any world where he has the same *de re* experiences of that barn, his belief is true.) It permits him to know he's driving by *that barn*, but precludes him from knowing he's driving by a barn. This is equally counter-intuitive. However, the example I gave in the text does not require controversial assumptions about experiences with *de re* content.

Department of Philosophy

1879 Hall

Princeton University

Princeton, NJ 08544

USA

E-mail: jimpryor@princeton.edu