
Ernest Sosa, *Knowing Full Well*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011, x + 163 pp.

Ernest Sosa's recent book *Knowing Full Well* presents us with an account of empirical knowledge which amounts to nothing less than a remarkable, sophisticated development of his well-known virtue epistemology. In his 1980 paper "The Raft and the Pyramid" Sosa maintained that the notion of intellectual virtue could help us break free from the stalemate created by the debate between foundationalism and coherentism about the nature of epistemic justification. Anyone who is familiar with this famous tug of war knows the respective arguments in their essence. On the one hand, coherentists always strived to reassure theoreticians of knowledge that coherent doxastic webs need not amount merely to barren abstract structures but rather are explanatory systems which, appropriately constructed, can account for actual agents' reliable cognitive connection with the mind-independent reality. Foundationalists, on the other hand, tried hard to overcome the challenging problem of explicating onto-epistemic mysteries revolving around the meeting point of our beliefs and the world. Sosa compellingly argued that if we want to understand "knowledge," we have to look beyond interrelations among beliefs as well as any naïve notion of epistemic foundations. Accordingly, we need a unified view by which it can be shown that our beliefs about the world are grounded in our intellectual virtues so that we are able to achieve an important *telos*, to wit, knowing truth in a justified fashion.

Knowing Full Well continues to carry out Sosa's familiar project in the direction of developing it further and bringing to full maturity. One chief reason why the project clearly occupies a distinguished place in the post-Gettier literature on propositional knowledge is that Sosa skillfully shifts the center of discussion from static, mental elements utilized for the purposes of conceptual analysis to the idea of *performance* both at the animal and reflective levels. The central epistemological question is put as follows: "What is the epistemic normativity that is constitutive of knowledge?" (2). To adequately understand the nature of that normativity, we need to grasp the concept of "performing well." Although "performance" lies at the heart of Sosa's theory of knowledge, it would be a mistake to suppose that it is a quality peculiar only to human cognition or that it alone can enlighten our epistemic reality. For instance, even a mechanical structure like a bridge can be said to perform well if it withstands a storm. An agent's performative success, by contrast, involves the execution of mental operations regarding knowledge, and equally impor-

tantly, the agent's possessing the higher-level capacity to do so in similar circumstances.

The striking idea of Sosa's account is that humans' performative achievements in epistemic contexts have a certain *triple-A quality*: In order to count as knowledge, a belief must be *accurate* (veridical), *adroit* (competent or skillful *qua* doxastic state), and also *apt* (arising out of the general competence of the agent himself). Sosa uses the analogy of an archer's shot to display different layers of the epistemic adequacy of a belief. The aim in archery is to hit the target, and this means that accuracy is an indispensable desideratum. Naturally, accuracy cannot be the end of the story; the shot is required to be skillful too. But a particular shot may just happen to be technically impeccable and yet not be performed by a sufficiently skillful archer. If the performer does not have that kind of a general skill, we have to say that despite being accurate and adroit, the shot is not apt. In a similar vein, the sort of epistemic normativity Sosa proposes has it that a true belief counts as knowledge only if the cognizer manifests a general competence in reaching the truth (more correctly, only if the belief's accuracy and adroitness stem from the fact that the agent is sufficiently competent or apt in producing such beliefs).

According to the epistemological picture Sosa draws in Chapter One, human knowledge has an animal aspect at the first level. (A cat's catching a mouse after chasing it is definitely a significant cognitive and physical performance in the sense of getting certain things right and realizing a certain end.) When such animal knowledge is aptly endorsed by the subject, we obtain the level of reflective knowledge. Sosa thinks, however, that in order to *know full well*, an agent must also have "meta-competence" which, as he explains, "governs whether or not one should form a belief at all on the question at issue, or rather withhold belief altogether" (12). Consequently, epistemic normativity is handled through a multi-layered performative structure which has sophisticated intellectual components as well as basic physiological building blocks.

We must mention at this point Sosa's understanding of the notion of *agency* and how it complements his view on epistemic normativity (Chapter Two). Sosa maintains that during belief formation we are mostly passive, which means that we do not consciously interfere with the natural process (imagine the formation of empirical beliefs like "This is a red rose," "Madrid is the capital of Spain," or "My parents love me.") But at the same time we are *in control* of our beliefs. For example, even though our beliefs may be influenced by wishful thinking which may lead us into thinking in a way that would suit our pragmatic needs or goals, we are in general well capable of employing our rationality (or, "epistemic compe-

tence”) and resist the temptation of non-epistemic influences. This may not always work ideally, but it is a notable feature of our cognitive life that, according to Sosa, deserves much credit and admiration.

That Sosa is cognizant of the actual limitations of flesh and blood agents shows itself frequently in his treatment of the concepts of “competence” and “meta-competence.” For example, he thinks that being epistemically apt is certainly not an all or none affair. Consider the following. It stands to reason that an agent can be deemed *fully apt* if he has not merely a good doxastic connection with a given particular truth but also has some meta-level awareness of his own competence or adequacy in holding the belief in question. Yet, meta-aptness cannot be a strict requirement on our ordinary epistemic endeavors. As Sosa puts it, when an agent acts “on automatic pilot” (51), it would be too strong a criticism to declare that he is epistemically culpable. Thus, we cannot reasonably demand that an epistemic agent display infallible competence. What can be demanded is that he carries out likelihood assessments at a meta-epistemic level where appropriate.

At this point Sosa addresses the highly important question of the value of knowledge. We are inclined to value knowledge over mere true belief. But why? What is wrong with settling for “getting things right” regardless of the way it is realized in the actual world? Consider again the archer example. Imagine an archer drawing extremely large circles on a board, then placing them nearby and hitting the target each time he tries. There is little doubt that in this example the *telos* (“getting it right”) is achieved, but at the same time few people would suppose that it is a remarkable accomplishment. This is the difference between “hitting the truth” and realizing that special state we call “knowledge.” Truths are innumerable; some of them are significant while many others are utterly trivial or worthless. Knowledge is different from mere true belief because the former is a result of practical engagements of the agent with the world and a reflection of the competence of the cognizer in a typical process of believing a proposition or deciding to withhold it. Truth does not involve aptness; knowledge does. Truth is the target of our onto-epistemic reality, and reaching it is arguably a sign of success; but success, by itself, may “not necessarily have some objective intrinsic value...” (63). Knowing truth is different from a belief that is true because the former, generally speaking, contributes to our flourishing as individuals and as a society.

Chapter 4 is titled “Three Views of Human Knowledge” where Sosa contrasts his virtue epistemology with indirect realism and knowledge-first approach, arguing that it has theoretical advantages over the latter two. Indirect realism holds that propositional knowledge is derived through ab-

ductive inferences from sensory data. Knowledge-first approach, on the hand, reverses the order of explanation and takes “knowledge” as the basic cognitive element in our ordinary experience of the world. And virtue epistemology, as one might expect, utilizes the notion of *aptness* to shed light on (the emergence of) human knowledge. Critical to this view is a distinction between “apt experience” and “apt belief.” Sosa remarks that “[o]nly apt believing is tantamount to knowing” (77). In an instance of, say, color perception, veridicality is related factors such as the competence of the agent’s visual system. The formation of the pertinent doxastic state and its epistemic aptness, however, is a logically distinct matter. Notice that unlike the knowledge-first approach, virtue epistemology retains the concept of “belief” and the classical form of epistemological analyses. But it goes beyond the traditional elements and discourses of the analysis and brings the notion of “competence” to the epistemic foreground. To see an application of this, consider the following. In a poorly illuminated large room I see a life-size photograph of a celebrity *S* from a distance and form the belief that *S* is in the room. Unbeknownst to me, *S* is really in the room immediately behind her life-size picture. Here one can talk about the veridicality of the experience; but it is clearly not a result of the competence of my vision. Since my perceptual belief is based on an experience that is not apt (due to perceiving objects in dim light), my belief cannot count as empirical knowledge. Now, consider the unlikely scenario that in that poorly illuminated large room I see a life-size photograph of a celebrity but, in a praiseworthy manner, recognize that it is not the real person using certain subtle perceptual cues and some background information regarding the possible whereabouts of the celebrity. Here one can talk about the veridicality of the experience which is obviously a *result* of my competence as an agent. By way of such examples and the pertinent discussion provided in Chapter 4, Sosa contends that virtue epistemology can be characterized “as the view that knowledge is belief whose success ‘creditable’ to the believer” (86). And this “credibility” includes aptness both at the first and higher levels of competence. In the next chapter he takes up contextualism, and, while admitting its significance, states that it is not to be considered as a fourth rival perspective along with the three mentioned above.

Chapter 6 addresses a highly important matter: the nature of propositional experience. Sosa raises a question about the exact nature of sense data (or *sensa*), frankly declaring that “[y]ears of . . . probing questions eventually left little life in *sensa*” (119). While the idea that non-propositional (“simple”) *sensa* lie at the bottom of propositional knowledge had always been a very popular among epistemologists, it is admittedly hard

to say that one can comfortably defend it in today's onto-epistemic zeitgeist. Yet, there is also the other side of the coin. Propositional states/entities (belief, hope, etc.) are fairly sophisticated entities or structures. Given that non-propositionality presents an issue in this context, are we really willing to say that *sensa* are also like belief or desire in terms of having a recognizable propositional content? Sosa comes up with the idea that, for example, visual experiences (i.e., image-like objects, not acts) are "vision-phenomenal propositions." The motivation behind this proposal is Sosa's conviction that any viable analysis of experience must be able to accommodate such mental states/entities. But how can this conviction be justified given the well known ontological problems and theoretical misgivings about the nature of sense data? Let us again think analogically. Consider the description of an island in a novel. Just as that description functions pretty well in our comprehension without necessarily there being an actual island, so we can talk about, say, a *sensum* like "red triangular patch" appearing before our minds as *a way of classifying our visual experience*. In a nutshell, Sosa tries to find a place for epistemic intermediaries like *sensa* in his theory without falling prey into unsavory ontologizing. The issue is an intricate one, and Sosa admittedly does not offer a sufficiently comprehensive account of *sensa* and their role in humans' knowing the world full well. Still, this lack is rather understandable in a book of such a modest length. In Chapter 7 Sosa talks about instrumental and testimonial knowledge within the framework of the account developed in the preceding parts; and the last chapter complements the discussion with important considerations vis-à-vis epistemic circularity.

The reader of *Knowing Full Well* is rewarded with a compact, easily readable and wholly competent account of contemporary virtue epistemology based on the notions of performance and aptness operating at different levels of human knowledge. This book, without any doubt, will provide ample argumentative material for the debates of epistemologists in the foreseeable future.

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