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Review of Ernest Sosa, Knowing Full Well

Jason Baehr

Loyola Marymount University, jbaehr@lmu.edu

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Knowing Full Well, by Ernest Sosa. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011. Pp. x + 163.

The third chapter of Ernest Sosa's latest book bears the title 'Value Matters in Epistemology'. Interpreted as a declarative statement, this title captures a growing sentiment among epistemologists, many of whom have recently turned their attention to certain long-neglected and robustly normative dimensions of the cognitive life. This turn has resulted in an explosion of literature in recent years on topics like virtue epistemology, the epistemic value problem, epistemic luck, credit theories of knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. Sosa's work has been at the center of many of these debates. *Knowing Full Well* is the latest and most sophisticated and mature statement of his views on several of the relevant topics. It is a must-read for anyone with an interest in normative epistemology.

The substance of the book derives from Sosa's inaugural Soochow Lectures in Philosophy, delivered at Soochow University in Taipei in 2008. The overriding thesis of the book is that epistemic normativity is a species of a more general and familiar kind of normativity: viz. performance normativity. More specifically, Sosa's claim is that beliefs are cognitive performances evaluable in terms of norms and principles that apply to performances more broadly, and that knowledge is a cognitive performance that satisfies these norms. After laying out this account with characteristic care and precision, Sosa considers its bearing on several issues and debates in epistemology, including the Gettier problem, the value problem, contextualism, the nature of perceptual experience, testimony, and epistemic circularity.

Readers already familiar with Sosa's influential work in epistemology are likely to wonder how this volume figures relative to two of his other recent and similarly themed works: *A Virtue Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) and *Reflective Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). In *A Virtue Epistemology*, Sosa introduced the idea that knowledge is a cognitive performance and applied this model to a host of epistemological issues. In this regard, its project is similar to that of *Knowing Full Well*. However, the present account of the performative aspects of knowledge is more detailed and nuanced than what is found in Sosa's previous work. *Knowing Full Well* also extends this account in new directions and applies it to new problems. Sosa's other recent book, *Reflective Knowledge*, mainly addresses the problem of epistemic circularity. While *Knowing Full Well* contains a chapter on epistemic circularity that draws on some of this work, its overlap with *Reflective Knowledge* is minimal. In short, *Knowing Full Well* is best viewed as elaborating on, further defending, and extending positions that Sosa has gestured at or developed previously. It is worth reading even for those already well-acquainted with his work.

In Chapter 1, Sosa lays out a performance-based account of knowledge. He begins by noting that performances in general are 'apt' just in case they reach their goal in a way that manifests the performer's competences or virtues (rather than by luck, say). A performance is 'meta-apt' only if it involves a correct sense of the risk-related appropriateness of the performance and this sense is itself arrived at in a way that manifests certain meta-competences of the performer (p. 8). A performance is 'fully apt' when its aptness manifests its meta-aptness (p. 10). Thus an archer's shot is fully apt if: she hits her target; her hitting of the target manifests her archery skills; she has a correct sense of the appropriateness of her shot; this sense manifests a kind of archery-

relevant meta-competence; and this sense in turn is manifested by her competent hitting of the target.

According to Sosa, knowledge is a 'special case' of precisely this kind of normative structure (pp. 11-12). Again, Sosa thinks of beliefs as cognitive performances. Thus he holds that a belief is apt just in case it is true and true in a way that manifests the believer's epistemic competences or virtues. Such aptness is necessary and sufficient for 'animal' knowledge. A belief is meta-apt when it involves a correct second-order sense of the appropriateness of the belief (e.g. an accurate sense that it is appropriate for one to believe in the present case rather than to suspend judgment). A belief that is both apt and meta-apt amounts to 'reflective' knowledge. Finally, to reach the 'epistemic heights' or to be fully apt, a belief's aptness must manifest its meta-aptness, that is, the believer's competent reaching of the truth must manifest (e.g. by guided by) the believer's sense of its appropriateness. This amounts to 'knowing full well.'

In Chapter 2, Sosa articulates a sense in which belief aims at truth that fits with the model of knowledge developed in the preceding chapter. He argues that for a belief to count as knowledge the believer in question must *endeavor* to reach the truth. Knowledge, he claims, requires an agency-implicating 'pursuit of truth' (p. 22).

In Chapter 3, Sosa continues to elaborate on and explore the normative dimensions of his performance-based model. He defends an 'affirmative' (vs. a 'threshold') conception of belief, addresses the relation between apt belief and apt action, explores the connection between the intuitive value of knowledge and the knowledge norm of assertion, and offers an explanation of the sense in which knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief.

Chapters 4 and 5 situate Sosa's theory of knowledge relative to competing (or apparently competing) views. In Chapter 4, Sosa defends a virtue-theoretical, performance-based conception of knowledge against a 'knowledge first' account and against a traditional indirect realist account of perceptual knowledge. In Chapter 5, he argues that contextualism is best understood as a linguistic thesis concerning features of our ordinary usage of epistemic terminology and that consequently it fails to have direct implications for any substantive issues in epistemology proper.

The remaining three chapters involve elaborating on and defending aspects of the model laid out in Chapters 1-3. In Chapter 6, Sosa develops a conception of sensory experience intended to comport with a performative conception of knowledge. It involves thinking of experience as intrinsically propositional or as constituted by an experiential relation to phenomenal propositions. Chapter 7 examines the mechanics of knowledge acquired by way of instruments and compares this way of knowing to knowledge gained via the senses and testimony. In Chapter 8, Sosa distinguishes between vicious and non-vicious varieties of epistemic circularity and argues that the circularity involved in his notion of meta-aptness is non-vicious.

As this brief summary suggests, I take the heart of Sosa's book to be the material in Chapters 1-3. Thus my assessment of the book will focus on the discussion in these chapters. I begin with two general lines of applause.

Sosa's account of the normative structure of performances in general is illuminating and compelling. And his claim that knowledge is a cognitive performance that embodies this structure is ingenious. Indeed, the theory of epistemic excellence contained in *Knowing Full Well* is one of—perhaps the—most sophisticated and impressive in the literature. One attractive result of the theory is that knowledge comes off looking like a reasonably familiar and comprehensible phenomenon. If knowledge is essentially a kind of performance, and if Sosa's account of performance normativity is correct, then given our general familiarity with performances and their value, it turns out that we are already well-acquainted with the structure and value of knowledge. This is very different from and more appealing than the impression one gets from standard analyses of knowledge, many of which make knowledge look like an incredibly complex, foreign, and even impenetrable notion.

Thinking of knowledge in performative terms has a further advantage. Performances are intentional and active. Accordingly, Sosa's commitment to thinking of knowledge as a performance leads him to offer a psychologically more robust and rigorous account of knowledge than in previous work. This is especially evident in his treatment of epistemic agency in Chapter 2. Here he defends what might be referred to as an 'agency requirement' on knowledge (pp. 19, 22). As noted above, Sosa insists that one acquires knowledge only if one 'endeavors' to reach the truth. This requirement holds for animal and reflective knowledge alike. While such endeavoring need not be conscious, explicit, or deliberative, Sosa does insist that it be 'substantial' (p. 16).

This requirement brings Sosa's thinking about knowledge into closer proximity with that of 'virtue responsibilists,' who think of intellectual virtues as good intellectual *character* traits like fair-mindedness, open-mindedness, intellectual honesty, and intellectual courage. Some virtue epistemologists (e.g. Linda Zagzebski in *Virtues of the Mind*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) think of knowledge (roughly) as true belief that arises from intellectually virtuous motives like a desire for truth. While Sosa would likely stop short of embracing Zagzebski's motivational requirement, the language he uses to describe the agency requirement noted above is surprisingly similar. For instance, he describes the notion of 'endeavoring' to reach the truth in terms of 'a pursuit of truth' (pp. 19-20), 'caring' about reaching the truth (p. 17), a desire to 'get it right' (p. 21), 'weighing reasons' (p. 23), and 'a desire for truth' (p. 33).

Some kind of convergence between 'virtue reliabilist' and 'virtue responsibilist' theories is overdue. In this respect, Sosa's attention to the agential or characterological dimensions of knowledge is an important and welcome development. As Sosa himself points out, this broader focus allows him to overcome a familiar objection to virtue reliabilism that accuses the approach of giving insufficient attention to the knowing *person* or *agent* (p. 20).

I turn now to address three significant features of Sosa's account of knowledge that I think merit further probing. In each case, the issues involved are complex enough that, given the limits of this review, I can provide little more than a sketch of the relevant concern.

The first concern pertains to Sosa's 'agency requirement' noted above. While I applaud Sosa's attention to the agential or characterological dimensions of knowledge, the question arises whether he has gone too far in making something like an exercise of epistemic agency *necessary*

for knowledge. The most serious challenge for such a requirement is posed by cases of so-called 'passive,' 'brute,' or 'mechanical' knowledge (see my *The Inquiring Mind*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, Ch. 3). Such knowledge is the product of the natural or default operation of a person's native cognitive endowment. It might include my knowledge that, say, loud music is playing in the room, that there is a throbbing pain in my left foot, or that a large colored object has just entered my visual field. These and related beliefs seem like clear candidates for knowledge and yet their truth does not appear to 'manifest' even an implicit or subconscious 'endeavor' to reach the truth. What it manifests, rather, is the brute or default functioning of certain cognitive faculties (e.g. hearing, introspection, and vision). Such functioning is, for instance, the real reason or explanation of why the beliefs in question are true.

At one point Sosa considers an objection along these lines (p. 16). His response is that while at a conscious or explicit level the persons in question might not be 'endeavoring' to reach the truth, at a deeper, subconscious level they are. This reply strikes me as dubious, especially if it is intended to cover the full range of cases of mechanical knowledge. In any case, the plausibility of the reply depends ultimately on how exactly we are to understand Sosa's notion of 'endeavoring.' He takes pains to make clear that this should *not* be understood in a weak or metaphorical way (pp. 16, 64). This lends plausibility to the idea that knowledge is a genuine cognitive *performance*. But whether thinking of knowledge as a cognitive performance *requires* a demanding conception of 'endeavoring' may be an open question. Therefore, it may be open to Sosa to adopt a sufficiently weak account of 'endeavoring' while still thinking of knowledge in robustly performative terms.

A second area that merits further scrutiny concerns Sosa's attempt to handle what I shall refer to as the 'luck dilemma' in epistemology. The notion of epistemic luck has received a great deal of attention within epistemology in recent years (see e.g. Duncan Pritchard, *Epistemic Luck*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). One lesson that has emerged from the relevant literature is that knowledge is *inconsistent* with certain kinds of luck but *consistent* with others. Gettier cases, for instance, involve a kind of luck that undermines a belief's epistemic status. Accurate testimonial beliefs also involve a kind of luck: reaching the truth on the basis of testimony depends little on one's own cognitive efforts; rather, it depends primarily on the cognitive activity of one's informants (or on the activity of their informants, etc.). Unlike Gettier luck, 'testimonial luck' is compatible with knowledge. Accordingly, the requirements of a plausible analysis of knowledge must be demanding enough so as to preclude Gettier luck while nevertheless being weak enough to permit testimonial luck.

Sosa's takes pains to show that his conditions for knowledge are weak enough to allow for testimonial luck (pp. 86-90). He says that a person S can know that p on the basis of reliable testimony provided that the truth of S's belief *partially* manifests one of S's epistemic competences. He adds that S's contribution to the truth of his belief may in fact be 'quite limited or small' (89). While this seems like a plausible way around the problem posed by testimonial luck, the question naturally arises whether Sosa's conditions for knowledge are *demanding* enough to rule out Gettier luck. This depends, ultimately, on how exactly we are to understand Sosa's notion of 'manifesting'.

Suppose, for instance, that a person S forms a true belief that p on the basis of a perfectly intellectually virtuous (e.g. careful, thorough, honest, etc.) collection and assessment of a given body of evidence E. Suppose further, however, that E was fabricated and planted by someone with a vested interest in making S believe that p. S's belief is Gettiered and thus falls short of knowledge. Does it satisfy Sosa's manifesting requirement? That is, does the truth or correctness of S's belief at least partially manifest S's cognitive virtues? Suppose we stipulate, plausibly enough, that if S had *not* exercised these competences, if he had not inquired and formed his belief with such care and thoroughness, he would have formed a *false* belief. On this variation of the case, there would at least appear to be a sense in which the truth of S's belief manifests his cognitive virtues.

Sosa does not, to my mind, say enough about the notion of 'manifesting' to make clear whether his account of knowledge can handle cases of this sort. Consequently, I think it is at least an open question whether the account is capable of overcoming the luck dilemma.

A third and final issue concerns Sosa's reply to the value problem in epistemology. On the standard conception of this problem, an analysis of knowledge 'solves' the value problem just in case it makes proper sense out of the intuitive superiority of knowledge vis-à-vis mere true belief. Sosa's discussion of this and related issues in Chapter 3 is remarkably rich and illuminating. He identifies a wide range of dimensions of epistemic value and for each one considers whether or the extent to which it might explain the unique value of knowledge. Ultimately he settles on the view that knowledge—understood as successful cognitive performance—is always more valuable than mere true belief because knowledge but not mere true belief necessarily involves a second-order preference for the satisfaction of a certain first-order preference that is 'proper' to performances in general (viz. a preference for aptness). This combination of second- and first-order preferences is valuable, on Sosa's view, because its absence amounts to a kind of 'rational incoherence'. Sosa concludes that while knowledge may not always be more valuable than the corresponding mere true belief *all things considered*, it is always better in the respect just identified (pp. 61, 65-66).

I have two concerns about this response. First, even if knowledge is necessarily more valuable than mere true belief in the relevant respect, it is not clear that Sosa has solved the value problem. As indicated above, this requires making sense of what is supposed to be a substantive and widely held intuition to the effect that knowledge is superior to mere true belief. However, as will become clearer momentarily, the epistemic value pinpointed by Sosa is fairly narrow and thin. Consequently, I find it hard to believe that *this* is the value we have in mind when we judge, from the relevant intuitive standpoint, that knowledge is superior to mere true belief. This in turn leads me to wonder whether Sosa has in fact identified the sought after value. (For more on this point, see my 'Is There a Value Problem?' in *Epistemic Value*, eds. Adrian Haddock, Alan Millar, and Duncan Pritchard, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 42-59).

I think it is also worth asking whether in fact knowledge is always more valuable than mere true belief even in the limited respect identified by Sosa. Underlying Sosa's view is the idea that, for any first-order preference, it is always better, in respect of rational coherence, to have a second-order preference that supports the first-order preference than it is to have no second-order preference at all or a second-order preference that conflicts with the first-order preference. While

this principle is broadly plausible, it runs aground with respect to certain cases. Compare, for instance, a 'rationally coherent' abusive spouse with one that is 'a-rational' (no second-order preference) and another that is irrational (conflicting second-order preference). On Sosa's view, the rational coherence of the first spouse is a genuine good; therefore, in this respect, the first spouse is 'better than' either of the other two. This seems to me a dubious assessment. On the contrary, what cases like this seem to suggest is that a second-order preference is good only if the object of the corresponding first-order preference is good. Alternatively: the value of a second-order preference is parasitic on the value of the corresponding first-order preference, which in turn is parasitic on the value of the object of the first-order preference.

What bearing does this have on the value problem? Sosa argues at length and convincingly that some true beliefs are epistemically *worthless* (pp. 56-60). If the principle just articulated is correct, it follows on Sosa's view that some knowledge (viz. knowledge of 'epistemically worthless' facts or subject matters) lacks the kind of value that he claims is unique to it and thus that knowledge understood in Sosa's terms is *not* always more valuable than mere true belief.

None of the foregoing probing or critical remarks is intended to be decisive. The issues involved are subtle and complex; and Sosa's treatment of them is more extensive and nuanced than I have been able to do justice to here. I hope the discussion has, however, elucidated some interesting questions and loose ends that might profitably be taken up by Sosa's supporters and critics as they digest this very important work.

Philosophy Department
Loyola Marymount University
One LMU Drive
Los Angeles, CA 90045
USA

JASON BAEHR