PHILOSOPHERS AND THEIR CRITICS

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Philosophy is an interactive enterprise. Much of it is carried out in dialogue as theories and ideas are presented and subsequently refined in the crucible of close scrutiny. The purpose of this series is to reconstruct this vital interplay among thinkers. Each book consists of a temporary assessment of an important living philosopher’s work. A collection of essays written by an interdisciplinary group of critics addressing the substantial theses of the philosopher’s corpus opens each volume. In the last section, the philosopher responds to his or her critics, clarifies crucial points of the discussion, or updates his or her doctrines.

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ERNEST SOSA

AND HIS CRITICS

Edited by

John Greco
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of the causal and the rational order in the cognitive sphere, insisting that "two orders must be grasped together in their systematic unity." (On the character and interrelationship of the mental and physical orders of concepts see the author's Conceptual Idealism (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973), especially pp. 184 ff; the quote is from p. 191.) Based on lectures given in Oxford in 1971, these deliberations anticipate Davidson's John Locke lectures (let alone McDowell's response to Davidson in Mind and World [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994].


I am grateful to John Greco for some constructive criticism.

Perceptual Knowledge and Epistemological Satisfaction

BARRY STROUD

Ernest Sosa has written so well about so many different topics that there is no hope even of expounding, let alone examining, the full range of his contributions in a single essay. Even within the theory of knowledge he has directed his careful scrutiny to such issues as the definition of knowledge, contextualism, foundationalism, coherence theories, epistemic virtues, and different pictures of knowledge behind apparently intractable epistemological controversies. Recently he has been attending to a general question about the very possibility of a philosophical theory of knowledge. He finds a form of subjectivism or relativism or skepticism rampant both in the general culture and within the apparently stricter precension of philosophy that would bring the whole enterprise to ruin. It is based on recognition of an inevitable circularity, perhaps in all intellectual endeavor, but certainly in the search for a philosophical theory of human knowledge.

Sosa wants to defend the traditional epistemological enterprise against such charges. A successful philosophical theory as he understands it would show that, and how, we know the sorts of things we think we know, and so would provide a general explanation of how we know. It would be established by careful study of what human beings are like and how they use the abilities they are endowed with to come to know the things they know. He insists that there is no difficulty in principle with human beings coming to know things about human knowledge. "We can legitimately and with rational justification arrive at a belief that a certain set of faculties or doxastic practices are those that we employ and are reliable," he says. 1

I want to take up Sosa's defense of the traditional epistemological enterprise. I think there remains a question about its philosophical prospects that he does not consider or put to rest. In fact, I believe the kind of theory he favors is vulnerable to the difficulty I see. But I do not think it is a question of circularity. As a general objection to the possibility of understanding knowledge, I think the charge of circularity is without force.

Sosa's optimism about the epistemological project is expressed in what he appears to regard as a rhetorical question. If we have "legitimately and with rational justification" arrived at an explanation of human knowledge, he asks, "Why could we not conceivably attain thereby a general understanding of how we know whatever we do know?" (PSEC, 285). I think this raises a real question which can be given a good answer. Even if we
there are external things. The truth of that straightforward epistemological explanation is something I can know to be true by perceiving it that is true, just as I can know that there are external things by perceiving that there are.

I think there is no suspicious circularity in this way of coming to know that there are external things. Circularity can enter the picture only where there is a chain of inference or a course of reasoning by which a conclusion is reached. But the straightforward answer says nothing of a chain of inference or reasoning. It says that one sees that there is a table in the room, not that one infers that there is a table in the room from something else. And to see that it is to know that it. It is not that one infers that ones knows that it from the fact that one sees that it. Whoever sees that it thereby knows that it. Whoever sees that there is a table in the room knows that there are external things.

Just as there is no circularity in coming to know in that way that there are external things, so there is no suspicious circularity in coming to know in that same way that this answer to the epistemological question is true. This straightforward answer does not say that one reaches the "conclusion" that people know by perception that there are external things, and so perception is reliable, by inferring it from something else one sees or knows. It says simply that I can see and thereby know that people see and know in that way that there are external things. There is no inference or chain of reasoning, and no room for circularity. It is true that I may use my eyes in finding out how people find out about the things around them, and I find that they use their eyes, but there is nothing circular or illegitimate about that. There is no illegitimacy or paradox in using our eyes to find out how the human eye works, or using the larynx to lecture on the workings of the larynx. It is no different in this case, given that we can see that there are external things.

So the straightforward explanation involves no circularity, and it is something I can know to be true by seeing that it is true. If that is the answer Sosa would give to the question about our knowledge of external things from which he begins, there is no disagreement between us, either about circularity or about our knowledge of external things. We can "legitimately and with rational justification" arrive at a belief that knowledge of external things is acquired by perception, and we can "attain thereby a general understanding" of how we know many of the things we know.

Many philosophers will grant that perhaps there is nothing wrong with that answer as far as it goes, but will feel that there is a deeper and more challenging question about perceptual knowledge to which it is not a satisfactory answer. One source of this feeling is the demand that it should somehow be established that human beings ever do see that there is a table in the room, a tree in the garden, or any other fact involving the existence of an external thing. The straightforward answer, it is thought, simply assumes or takes it for granted that that is so. On that assumption, the answer is perhaps unobjectionable. But for a serious and satisfying theory of human knowledge, it is felt to be something that must be shown to be true, not simply assumed.

I think this familiar reaction, as stated, is based on a misunderstanding of the straightforward answer. That answer does not simply assume or take it for granted that people can see that there is a table in the room or that other external things exist. It says that is something that almost anyone can so to be true right before his eyes; it is not something that is or must be assumed. So it can be established that people can see that there are external things. The expressed dissatisfaction with the answer appears to rely on a
impossible. Sosa concludes only that perceptual knowledge of facts which go beyond what is perceived cannot be understood as inferential knowledge. The appeal of his "externalism" is that it offers "a way to explain how we can know that p without reasoning from prior knowledge" (RK, 418).

We do not have to enter into the precise details of what Sosa thinks is the most promising formulation of this "externalist" theory in order to assess it as an answer to his epistemological question. "The key idea exploited is this: you can know something non-inferentially so long as it is no accident or coincidence that you are right" (RK, 418).

Applied to perception, this means that one will have perceptual knowledge of certain facts if there is a non-accidental or reliable connection between one's perceptual experiences and the facts that one believes in as a result of them. The reliability of perception for Sosa is a matter of there being "experience/belief connections" of that kind. "Good perception is in part constituted by certain transitions from experiences to corresponding beliefs - as is the transition from the visual experience characteristic of a tomato seen in good light to belief in the tomato" (RK, 421). For in order for those who enjoy that characteristic visual experience to know that there is a tomato there, and so for perception to be a reliable source of knowledge of the independent world, perceivers do not need to know that the "transition" is reliable; it is enough for it to be reliable (RK, 426).

The conception of knowledge is what Sosa sees as the key to his answer to the question how we get perceptual knowledge of the existence of things like tomatoes, given that we never, strictly speaking, perceive them; their existence is never entailed by our having the perceptual experiences we have.

That presents no obstacle to knowledge if there are reliable connections between the perceptual experiences we enjoy and the independent world we believe in. This view says that human beings then know by perception that there are tomatoes and other external things. That human beings get such knowledge in that way is also something that we can come to know by observing human beings. If there are reliable connections between the perceptual experiences we enjoy while engaging in such epistemological investigations and the world of people and other external things that we are studying, and we come to believe under those circumstances that human beings have perceptual knowledge of external things, then we know (on this conception of knowledge) that Sosa’s answer to his epistemological question is true. We have "legitimately and with rational justification" arrived at "a belief that a certain set of faculties or doxastic practices are those that we enjoy and are reliable."

Having fulfilled in this way what the "externalist" view says are sufficient conditions for knowing how human beings get perceptual knowledge of external things, have we thereby attained a satisfactory general understanding of how we know what we know about the independent world? I think there is still a way in which we have not. Sosa’s account leaves us in what I think is still an unsatisfactory position for understanding whatever knowledge we have. But it is not unsatisfactory because it suffers from some kind of circularity. There is no circularity involved in fulfilling the conditions Sosa says are sufficient for perceptual knowledge. Nor do I protest that those conditions are not sufficient for knowledge. That is a complex question which turns on the precise formulation of the "externalist" definition of knowledge. But the difficulty I think we are left in would remain even if we grant that people know just the things Sosa’s theory implies that they know.
Someone who accepts Sosa’s theory knows (on that conception of knowledge) that the human beings he observes know by perception that there are external things. He knows that because he knows that there are reliable connections between the perceptual experiences those people receive and the external things they believe in. It is not simply that he believes that there are such connections. The theorist would concede that his believing alone would not be enough for him to know how people come to know the things they do by perception. He thinks that he has a satisfactory explanation of their knowledge because he thinks that explanation is something he knows to be true. And if it is true — if there are reliable connections between people’s perceptual experiences and the facts they come to believe in as a result of them — the theory implies that the theorist who accepts that explanation does know that those people know in that way that there are external things.

But that theorist, in light of his own theory, must acknowledge that he does not, strictly speaking, ever see or otherwise perceive that those human beings and other external things that he is interested in are there. Nor does he ever perceive the reliability of the connections that he believes hold between them. The most he is perceptually aware of or presented with in his experience are the qualities or character of his perceptual experiences. Of course, he believes in those human beings and external things, and in the reliable connections between them, even if he never sees that they are there. He comes to believe in them as a result of undergoing certain perceptual experiences. And his theory says that he thereby comes to know of them by perception if there are reliable connections between those perceptual experiences he has and the facts he comes to believe in as a result of them. Of course, he believes that theory of knowledge, and he believes that there are such reliable connections, so he will confidently assert that he knows what he thinks he knows about the world, and in particular that he knows that human beings get knowledge of the world by perception in the way he thinks they do.

Any theorist of this kind who reflects on his position will concede, as before, that his merely believing is not alone enough for him to know how people know what they do. He would not thereby achieve a satisfactory explanation of human perceptual knowledge. And I think he must also concede that even knowing that people know things in that way would not be enough, if knowing is simply a matter of fulfilling the conditions Sosa’s theory says are sufficient for knowledge. All the theorist can appeal to in accounting for his own knowledge as more than confident belief are the perceptual experiences he knows he has had, the beliefs he holds, which he believes to be the result of those experiences, and the theory of knowledge that he also believes. That theory says that if one further condition holds, then he does know what he thinks he knows. And he believes that that further condition holds. But still he remains in no better position for understanding himself as knowing what he thinks he knows than someone who reflects on his knowledge with equal confidence and in an equally satisfactory way and yet knows nothing at all.

Sosa in his concern for circularity imagines beings who do not resort to ordinary sense perception but consult a crystal ball to find out about the world. He wonders whether they could show without circularity that that practice is reliable, and if not, whether ordinary sense perception is any better off in that respect. If the idea is to establish the reliability of sense perception as a source of knowledge of the world by appeal only to what is here taken to be, strictly speaking, perceived, then the answer seems to me “no,” just as the reliability of crystal-ball gazing as a way of knowing cannot be established by appeal only to what is seen in crystal balls. But again, I do not think circularity is the same as perceptual knowledge and epistemological satisfaction. What matters is the poverty of the resources available to him for understanding his own knowledge. Crystal-ball gazers help make the point.

A committed crystal-ball gazer could reflect on what he takes to be his crystal-ball gazing knowledge of the world and claim to understand it in a way parallel to Sosa’s imagined “externalist” theorist. He believes many things about the independent world, but he has never seen or otherwise perceived anything except what he finds on gazing into his crystal ball. But he believes a theory of knowledge to the effect that if there are reliable connections between his seeing what he does in the ball and facts in the wider world that he believes in, then he knows what is so in the wider world. Often, when he gazes into the ball, he sees certain things and then finds himself believing that many other crystal-ball gazers know things about the world around them by gazing into their own crystal balls. He believes that because he believes that there are reliable connections between those people’s seeing what they do and the world they come to believe in as a result of it. So, given the theory he also believes in, he takes himself to know that crystal-ball gazers know things about the world in that way.

In reflecting on his knowledge and explaining to himself and others how he knows what he knows, he will concede that his merely believing what he does about his knowledge is not alone enough for him to have a satisfactory explanation of it. He thinks he has a satisfactory explanation because he thinks he knows what he claims to know about crystal-ball gazing knowledge. He recognizes that he has certain experiences, and certain beliefs which he believes to be the result of them, and he believes a theory which says that if those experiences and beliefs are connected in a certain way with facts in the wider world, then he has crystal-ball gazing knowledge of that world.

The difference between the positions of the two theorists lies only in the believed-in connections between the relevant experiences and the wider world. The theory says in each case that if such connections hold, that theorist knows. Each theorist, confidently sticking to his own story, believes that they hold in his case and not the other. Each might even try to settle the matter by consulting his own experience and his own theory, and find himself content with the discovered result. In that respect, the two positions are equally satisfactory, or unsatisfactory.

It is perhaps tempting to say that what distinguishes them is only something that lies beyond the knowledge of either theorist; it is a matter only of what is actually so. But on Sosa’s “externalist” conception of knowledge, that is not right. If reliable connections hold in one case, then according to the theory that theorist knows; the difference is not beyond his knowledge. But the question is not whether one of those theories knows. The question is whether holding such a theory leaves anyone in a position to gain a satisfactory understanding of knowledge of the world, even if he fulfills the conditions Sosa’s theory says are sufficient for knowledge. Could someone in such a position come to recognize himself as knowing, and not merely confidently believing, perhaps even truly, that sense perception is a way of getting knowledge of the world and crystal ball gazing is not?

I think that, on the understanding of perception that appears to be involved in Sosa’s question about perceptual knowledge, the answer is “no.” On that view, what we are aware of in perception is restricted to features of our perceptual experiences. The external facts we know as a result of those experiences are nothing we ever perceive to be
to make sense of him as trying to answer the kind of question his "externalist" theory is meant to answer. He insists that knowledge requires "that one be adequately related, causally or counterfactually, to the objects of one's knowledge" (RK, 430). He thinks that would be so if there were reliable connections between one's perceptual experiences and the wider world, so he appears content with a severely restricted view of the objects of perception. But one is also "adequately related ... to the objects of one's knowledge" if one sees, and in that way knows, that there is a table in the room, or a tree in the garden. One could not see that such a thing is so unless it were so; there being a table, or a tree, there is a condition of anyone's seeing that there is a table, or a tree, there. This is a form of "externalism" too, but not in the sense of Sosa's epistemological theory. Of course the table, or tree, alone is not sufficient. As Sosa points out, "we must both be in good internal order and in appropriate relation to the external world" (RK, 430) in order to have knowledge of it. But seeing that there is a table, or a tree, is a highly "appropriate" relation in which to stand to the world in order to know that there is a table, or a tree. It is sufficient for knowing such facts.

It would be no simple matter to say what "good internal order" a person must be in in order to see that there is a table in the room, even when a table is right before him in good light. It is a question of what it takes for him to be capable of having the thought, and so being able to recognize, that there is a table in the room. Exploration of those conditions would contribute to an explanation of how perceptual knowledge of external things is possible. But it would not explain it as a combination of some knowledge that is prior to any knowledge of external things plus something else. It would leave us in a position to say: "The existence of external things is not just an article of faith; it is something we can see and thereby know to be true." If Sosa would give that answer to his question, then again there is no disagreement between us. But that is just the straightforward answer; something everybody knows. It does not look like an answer to a deep and challenging question that we need an "externalist" or any other kind of philosophical theory of knowledge to answer.

Notes