

# Sosa's Way

*Ernest Sosa interviewed by João Carlos Salles<sup>1</sup>*

*Ernest Sosa is one of the most important contemporary philosophers. His work constitutes its own field of reflection that recently took the form of a theory of telic normativity in his *Epistemic Explanations: A theory of telic normativity, and what it explains* (Oxford: OUP, 2021). Telic normativity is inherent to actions, to attempts that characterize human performances, being telic because they are aimed at ends and often normative because we say they are better if successful and, therefore, if they reach their objective. It is also better for attempts to manifest competence and attain success through competence and not by chance. That is why we prefer persuasion to the use of force, an excellent diagnosis to mere guessing, the expert's advice to the charlatan's opinion. Also, we attribute merit to regular athletic performances rather than casual successes. After all, as Sosa reminds us, "to reach Larissa through ignorant luck is not to flourish."*

*The philosophical community still grasps all the subtleties his recent position implies, and Sosa has another step in turning his reflection into a Dawning Light Epistemology. This capacity to constantly improve his position is not surprising. Indeed, since 1964, Sosa's presence in the epistemological field is the most relevant, both as a deep thinker whose work evolves and elaborates its identity amidst an intense dialogue and as an academic worker who deals with the complex activities related to the organization of the philosophical community. In this Interview, Sosa allows us to glimpse intricate aspects of his epistemology (e.g., epistemic modalities, philosophical methodology, and the Dawning) and exciting facts of his personal life and academic trajectory (e.g., people that contribute to his career and those he debated over the years). The interview is, per se, a clear example of his generosity, the richness of his trajectory, and the scope and profundity of his thoughts. His words, as we all can see, clearly illustrate a trajectory and thinking that opens us to philosophical flourishing.*

**Question:** Some philosophers make their history (sometimes full of spectacular episodes) a part of the presentation or demonstration of their theses. On the contrary, others barely let us glimpse more personal data in their texts, except when these are directly related to academic issues. You seem closer to this last attitude, thus leaving us quite curious about your more personal history, family, and cultural ties. Please, Ernesto, first tell us a little about your story.

**Ernest Sosa:** Both my parents were lifted out of poverty in Cuba by Presbyterian missionaries. The Church gave them a fine education, both elementary and secondary, sent

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him to high school in the USA and to seminary in Puerto Rico, and gave him a church upon graduation. The two of them, for their part, devoted their lives to church service. After their marriage, they formed an excellent pastoral couple and together had much success, which included founding schools that thrived at churches that they pastored.

He was rewarded with the first sabbatical awarded to Cuban ministers, so off we went to a wonderful year in Princeton, where he held his sabbatical at the Presbyterian seminary, the Princeton Theological Seminary.

In that autumn of 1948, Fidel Castro came for lunch in our Princeton humble abode. He was honeymooning in Manhattan with his young wife, as it happens a philosophy student and member of a leading Cuban political family, strongly Presbyterian (the Diaz Balart family, which has continued their influential prominence, now in Florida and USA politics).

A few years later, we returned permanently to this country that we had come to love in that earlier visit. I went to high school in El Paso, Texas, where my father had a church. Then came the Cuban exodus to Miami, when he was assigned to Miami for refugee mission work.

This meant they were even busier than earlier, with continued success. They were fine parents and gave my sister and me a good home, even if their mission work left them little time for family life and school guidance.

They did not pressure me on school work or career choice. Left thus on my own, I followed my natural teenage inclinations and did not adhere closely to any official curriculum. In fact, I remember my Algebra teacher, Mrs. Hanson, saying to a colleague as I entered her classroom: "You see that little kid. Never does his homework, and aces every test." Unfortunately, I had no such success in my other high school subjects. But I scraped by and got into the University of Miami. There I came to philosophy only in my senior year, after some undistinguished years. I remember being dissatisfied with what to me seemed limited objectives, bounded by questionable assumptions. That pre-senior summer, I came across writings of Bertrand Russell, which led me to a full year of courses in the fine philosophy department. That was transformative. I had discovered what I wanted for my future. *However*, I did not have much substance for grad school applications, with not a single philosophy course to my credit by that point.

So, I got into what was then perhaps the lowest program in the country, the Pitt program, though by the time I left that program two years later, it had ascended dramatically, with the arrival of Nicholas Rescher, Adolf Grunbaum, Kurt Baier, and a good portion of the Yale department, including Wilfrid Sellars. Equally important to me during my two formative years in the program were the very bright grad students who were attracted by the rise of Pitt, many of them from Oberlin or Reed. Brian Skyrms came in the same entering class with me, and was particularly helpful. Bas van Fraassen came near the end of my stay in the program but it was still helpful to see him close up in action. It was an exciting and formative graduate education for me.

Why then did I leave after only two years, having had such a limited undergraduate education before that? While sitting in a Sellars seminar at the very start of my third year at Pitt, I was tapped on the shoulder and told "Rescher wants to see you. Now!" Rescher, my dissertation advisor, greeted me with an offer: "Ernie, do you want a job? You'll need to pack and go. Tomorrow." That was in early September and the school year had just begun a day or two earlier.

In those years, North American universities were growing explosively, jobs were plentiful, and graduate careers could be short. So, off I went to Western Ontario in London, Canada, where I learned a lot of philosophy by teaching it full-time, just a few pages ahead of my students. Somehow, I had a dissertation at the end of the next summer, which I needed for my postdoc at Brown's excellent program.

**Question:** I read your excellent doctoral thesis, *Directives*, defended in 1964. Your reflection on the logic of commands presents relationships with the Gettier problem – for example, your thinking on the notion of “obedience” seems to reproduce a Gettieresque obstacle course, with examples and counter examples. And this is not by chance. In the same year as your thesis defense, you published one of the first answers to the problem of knowledge analysis – a text that became, with some changes, the first chapter of *Knowledge in Perspective*. How did your formation and your inclination toward epistemology come about?

**Ernest Sosa:** I had no course in epistemology during my one undergraduate philosophy year, nor did I have any in my two years of graduate work at Pitt. Only in that year of teaching at Western Ontario did I encounter a question in epistemology that gripped me immediately and would never release its grip. The question was that of the nature of knowledge, which had aroused only passing interest when I read the *Theaetetus* in a Plato course.

I came across Gettier's paper while leafing through the pages of *Analysis* at the Western Ontario library. The first few sentences went by swiftly, as I stood next to the periodicals shelf, but I was soon struggling with the counterexamples, testing in my head successive revisions of the “justified true belief” analysis. The problem was not to be solved as I stood by those shelves, however, so I was soon settled into a comfortable library seat for some extended thought. Eventually, I had a solution to propose (the second published attempt, appearing in the 1964 *Analysis* volume).

Having sent my paper off, I awaited on tenterhooks the Editor's eventually favorable response, but another bit of excellent news preceded that: I was granted a two-year post-doctoral fellowship at Brown University. Upon arrival at Brown, with my Pitt diploma in hand, I immediately came under the spell of someone with a philosophical style and persona the likes of which I had never come across: Roderick Chisholm, then at the height of his creativity. I soon joined several excellent graduate students, and some young faculty, including Jaegwon Kim, in auditing Chisholm's seminar every semester. I still had taken no course in epistemology but had been thinking about epistemology in my solitary struggle with the Gettier problem.

Chisholm's seminars were my first formal introduction to epistemology. He did not by then teach the subject often, as his teaching had switched to metaphysics. But he was still at work in the field, and still occasionally offered an epistemology seminar. Soon, to my delight, he would regularly invite me to discuss his ideas with him. At that point, we still did not have individual computers, so our conversations were either through regular mail, in person, or, most often, by telephone. That did not prove much of an obstacle: we discussed philosophy frequently, epistemology in particular; for a long stretch, we would do so daily as he worked on the first edition of his great epistemology text, *Theory of Knowledge*, published in 1966. And eventually we also published some jointly authored papers.

That is how I was initially drawn to the field.

**Question:** Since the beginning of your career, your production has been at the center of the epistemological debate, combining, in everyone's eyes, extreme acumen and technical refinement. Tell us how you became a professor and see the current hiring and renewal processes in Philosophy Departments in the United States.

**Ernest Sosa:** Research Universities in the United States have a default assumption that faculty members will contribute in three ways: as researchers in the pursuit of knowledge, as teachers at undergraduate and graduate levels, and in the administration of their department and university. Various adjustments *can* be made for particular faculty members or departments, but these are exceptional. Each faculty member is a free agent, however, treated mostly without any direct comparison with department colleagues. Improvements in one's situation come mostly through outside offers by other departments in this country or elsewhere in the world. The most weighty factors include the quality and promise of that researcher and the effect on the department's prestige in the discipline, which has a major bearing on the ability to attract fine graduate students. But it also matters how well the candidate will fit with other department faculty through mutually beneficial research and discussion

**Question:** More about your institutional trajectory. You contributed significantly to strengthening philosophy in the United States, always advocating a high standard of academic production and collaboration. You also had prominent institutional performance inside and outside the United States, particularly in the American Philosophical Association. By the way, it was because of your relationships with philosophical associations that I was able to meet you, and your support for the construction of a large Interamerican Philosophical Society congress in Brazil was decisive. How do you see the work of organizing the academic community in the United States and the coexistence here between different matrices of philosophical work? Are the different matrices incommensurable, or do we have recognizable quality measures beyond diversity? From a global perspective, do you notice changes in how relationships develop within the academic community, including the participation of new countries, for example, in the International Federation of Philosophical Societies environment?

**Ernest Sosa:** Yes, João, collaborating with you for that huge and excellent Interamerican Congress in Brazil was a highlight of my administrative and organizational work over the course of my career. It was a great pleasure to see your leadership for that congress and to collaborate with you so closely and extensively.

I also worked for many years as an international APA representative in various capacities, including years of joint projects with Soviet philosophers, with mutual yearly visits very generously supported by IREX, an American organization for international academic collaboration that supported our ACLS/Soviet Academy multi-year project.

Very early, I had become active in the American Philosophical Association (APA), first as Secretary-Treasurer and then sequentially in numerous leadership positions, culminating with election to an APA Presidency and then as Chair of the Board of Officers.

I served as Chair for five years of the APA International Cooperation Committee. It was in that capacity that I became so active in international philosophical activity through the worldwide Federation Internationale des Sociétés de Philosophie (FISP). This led to election as Vice President of FISP and Chair of the Program Committee for the World Congress held in Boston in 1998. (I had a co-chair, who was happy to let me do all the work.)

FISP has its own ways and has run world congresses with success for many decades. When that congress was held in the States, however, I had a chance to superimpose the APA model, which American philosophers would find quite familiar and comfortable. I had long worked with that model as APA Secretary-Treasurer and as a member of APA program committees, so I knew what would work well, which I thought international colleagues would also find attractive. The key components were the very numerous *invited* sessions with excellent active philosophers drawn from across the world with no travel support. The attraction would be a very rich set of meetings, where you would meet lots of fellow philosophers with similar interests, for interesting sessions and for informal discussions in socially inviting settings.

I knew Americans would accept such invitations in large numbers for a world congress in Boston, and I expected that others would be attracted as well. So, the Boston Congress had quite a program and was a great success in attendance and in philosophical quality. My own originality of contribution was minimal. I simply applied the well-tested American template that was so familiar to me.

**Question:** Let us turn more directly to your work. The path of virtue epistemology remains relatively independent of the Gettieresque program of knowledge analysis. However, this distance does not lead you to reject the relevance of this program. Recently, in fact, in a beautiful text of just two pages, you reacted to the summary condemnation of the analysis project as made by Timothy Williamson: “epistemologists interested in Gettierology were addressing interesting philosophical explanations of how knowledge comes to be, of how it is metaphysically grounded.” (“Philosophical Methodology,” unpublished manuscript, p. 2). In short, we were not in the game of mere analysis but in that of philosophical explanation – a game that shall never cease. What, then, is your assessment of Gettier’s program, which usually offers us an introduction to epistemology? And how do you see the “knowledge first” project?

**Ernest Sosa:** Thank you, João, for your kind assessment. I do agree on this much: It’s true that my works exhibit an unusually sustained focus on a particular interrelated set of issues: on the nature, conditions, and extent of human knowledge, on questions like the following.

What is knowledge? What is epistemic justification? What are the conditions in virtue of which knowledge and justification come to be? What conditions constitute such epistemic phenomena? How much and what sorts of knowledge and justification can and do humans normally attain?

I conceive of traditional epistemology as sustained engagement with those questions, a project traditionally pursued in analytic philosophy through our distinctive armchair methods of individual reflection and collective dialectic, pursued in discussion groups, seminars, conferences, and journals. A central method used in all of those settings is that of thought experiments and possible (and actual) counterexamples. So, it is a method of conjectures and potential (and actual) refutations, where we conjecture an answer to one or more of the foregoing questions, and we deliberate, individually or collectively, on possible explanatory answers, on philosophical explanations.

In response to your welcome prompt, allow me now to elaborate a bit.

1. I first sketch a view of analytic methodology with the following outlines.
  - a. Analytic philosophy has indeed broadly featured in its methodological self-conception that the purpose of analysis crucially includes the discovery of necessary biconditionals of the form <Necessarily, C if and only if XYZ>, or the like of that.
  - b. The ensuing vast methodological effort of analytic philosophy has been to subject such proposed necessary biconditionals to thought-experiment analysis, to the consideration of examples that might clearly enough feature the presence of either side of a proposed analysis along with the absence of the other side.

That is plausibly enough true of the self-conception of analytic philosophy over these many decades.

2. By contrast, I suggest a different tack, a different assessment of the course of analytic methodology, one more complimentary to our analytic tradition. My suggestion is that, our self-conception has been largely off in its focus on necessary biconditionals. We analysts, many of us anyhow, have implicitly pursued a quite different objective. Our implicit objective in fact has its place in a tradition that goes back to Plato and is not just a tradition of conceptual or linguistic analysis.

The focus in that alternative, ancient tradition is rather on phenomena themselves, beyond concepts or words.

First of all, the focus is on knowledge itself, or virtue, or justice.

Secondly, the objective is to attain an understanding of what grounds such phenomena, of what explains why they hold when they do hold.

This emerges in the dialectic featured in the Platonic dialogues.

3. So, what we want to test in much philosophical analysis, and what we do test, is not just a necessary biconditional of the form <Necessarily, K if and only if JTB>. Rather, what we test is the explanatory proposal that if someone justifiably and correctly (with truth) believes that *p*, they *thereby* know that *p*. And we can indeed see in a typical Gettier example how the protagonist acquires justified true belief without thereby acquiring knowledge. That strikes us as clearly correct.

That same pattern is found, moreover, across the vast expanse of analytic effort. The lesson that I urge us to draw is that we are misled if we see analytic philosophy as pursuing mainly just necessary biconditionals. That turns out to be close but not quite right. For a better conception of our methodology and of its success, we need to return to the Platonic conception of philosophically explanatory principles rather than just necessary biconditionals.

4. So, I submit in conclusion that our practice across the field reveals that this has in fact been our objective, if only implicitly.

Attributing to ourselves this implicit objective is the best way to make sense of our method of thought experiments and counterexamples. That is the way in which armchair philosophy can best illuminate the phenomena of human flourishing.

5. Here then we have a method plausibly distinctive and prominent in one of the main humanistic disciplines, our own discipline of philosophy.

This is clearly not science. From the time of those ancient dialogues, this is a method of reflection and dialectic that does not rely on empirical theorizing based on sensory

observation. Nor does it rely on formal methods and model building. But please note well: That is not to overlook the important formal work that philosophers and logicians have done.

Philosophy is large in scope and multifaceted. So, I am focused on one part, though I would argue that perennial philosophy is a main part, a very prominent part already among the ancients. Finally, this is a part where philosophy relies on solitary armchair thought and lively dialectic with others similarly minded.

Such traditional armchair philosophy is not a scholarly method of the sorts familiar in other humanistic fields of endeavor. Rather, it involves curiosity about certain phenomena themselves, about the nature—or constitution, or grounding—of phenomena such as knowledge, causation, freedom, right action, justice, and so on, main concerns of perennial reflection and dialectic, from Plato's dialogues to the most recent issues of our journals.

6. Again, the aim of our inquiry is not just interpretation, not interpretation of products of human creativity, nor of human historical accomplishments, individual or collective. That may in fact be true in all our sister disciplines in the humanities. And it is of course what goes on in the parts of philosophy that share such objectives with those sister disciplines, as does the history of philosophy.

Nevertheless, consider the phenomena that have attracted philosophical attention. What we want is true explanatory principles that will reveal the source of such phenomena.

And that, I submit, sets philosophy distinctively apart from all of the empirical sciences and also from all other humanistic disciplines.

**Question:** It seems to me that an emphasis on compelling debate on well-defined issues is a trait of analytical philosophy, which tends, however, also to limit the individual contribution of the participants in the discussion and restrict the scope of the texts to the moment of their publication. A side effect of this intense and constantly accelerated movement can be the fading of the continuity and singularity of the individual works. In your case, however, it is evident that it is not an extensive set of papers and books but rather a unique theoretical corpus, a work that you tend to present as being in permanent evolution as if it were a sum of first approximations. Being close to celebrating 60 years of continuous academic activity at the highest quality standard and, as I believe, being close to celebrating 50 years of specific elaboration in the Virtue Epistemology field, what are the essential characteristics of Ernest Sosa's work? In addition to the main theses that distinguish your work, what are the features of your style, that is, your way of doing philosophy? What are your most significant continuities and ruptures in these decades?

**Ernest Sosa:** I have made use of the armchair methods of reflection and dialectic, along with publication in journal articles and in books, in the sort of way explained in my long answer to your previous question. But that is nearly universal among analytical epistemologists.

More distinctive of my particular approach are the following features.

First, I have for many decades led dissertation workshops for my students writing epistemology dissertations. This has generally been helpful to them, judging by persistent testimony, as they form ongoing communities where everyone is familiar with the ongoing work of the others. In my workshops, student work is presented repeatedly at various stages of development, which eventuates in chapters of a dissertation. Such

ongoing, deepening dialectic has certainly been helpful to me, as I have gained awareness and understanding of the issues and arguments at the forefront of ongoing epistemic controversy.

Second, that awareness has also been broadened and deepened beyond epistemology by my editorship of two prominent generalist journals: *Nous* and *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.

Third, my decades of teaching epistemology and other traditional philosophy, at both undergraduate and graduate levels, have given me a broad understanding of the historical sweep of our discipline. I am by nature an extremely patient and close reader, willing to return again and again over the years to the same classic texts. This has brought home to me how often and how seriously even our greatest predecessors have been misinterpreted, how seriously misunderstood. As I have argued extensively in print, I believe that to be true of two of my most admired among the greats. I mean GE Moore and Rene Descartes, the former in his supposed attempt to refute skepticism, including a famous and influential paper, "Proof of an External World." As for Descartes, he has been sadly and deeply misinterpreted in the accusation of an outrageous fallacy of vicious circularity, which he is near-universally thought to commit in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. I have tried to disabuse us of such terrible misunderstandings in seminars, lectures, and published texts.

Fourth, my work has been characterised by finding the best on each side of various familiar and longstanding controversies in epistemology: foundationalism versus coherentism and internalism versus externalism. I repeatedly approach such controversies with appreciation and respect for the insights on each side. And I accordingly try to accommodate both sets of insights into my own irenic positions.

**Question:** I return to some elements of your work for emphasis or greater detail. A characteristic trait that greatly pleases me is your attention to the classics without placing yourself in the condition of a mere commentator. This care also materializes in your writing for its elegance and argumentative rigor. How do you see your dialogue with the history of philosophy? It is important to note that references to classics such as Aristotle, Descartes, Reid, Moore, Wittgenstein, Austin, and Strawson are frequent in his work.

**Ernest Sosa:** I have reached extensive and deep agreement with those listed, on the whole. Most of all with Descartes, least with Austin, who was focused much more than I on epistemic language, though I still find a lot of what he has to say both illuminating and correct.

With Descartes, the agreement is really very great (and very gratifying, as I found it only retrospectively, after having fully developed my own view with its distinctive structure). That view reserves a central place for aptness, clearly and distinctly present in that great thinker, and I believe this central component to be prefigured in Aristotle as well.

More recent agreement, with Wittgenstein's response to Moore's foundationalism, is still coming into clearer focus, as is a Wittgensteinian take on Strawson's epistemic "naturalism," with forthcoming work where I go into details.

**Question:** Another notable feature of your work is that you followed the epistemological debate, being aware of the production of the most relevant texts when they were



published and, sometimes, taking stock of state-of-the-art, as in a text like “Epistemology Today” (1981) or your presentation of the two volumes of *Knowledge and Justification* (1994). If you were to make a similar assessment of the current state of the art, what aspects and conflicting positions would you highlight? What are the central theoretical tensions in today’s field of epistemology?

**Ernest Sosa:** One most central supposed tension I find to be illusory. This is the alleged tension between intellectual ethics, which deals with issues such as whether people can be harmed by the content of one’s beliefs and thus properly resentful.

The tension would be real if we could then conclude that the belief’s purely epistemic standing is thereby negatively affected so that it might even follow that the believer does not really know what he thus offensively believes to be true. But this is just a confusion. One can grant that the belief is harmful and even that it should not be sustained, all things considered, without revising one’s view that it constitutes knowledge.

That generalizes, since the theory of knowledge is a domain concerned just simply with what it takes to know, with what is required for a belief to qualify as knowledge. (I call this theory of knowledge ‘gnoseology’ for convenience, as this is shorter and also provides the adjective and the adverb). I say that a belief can constitute knowledge simply by being apt, and can qualify as higher knowledge by being aptly apt. And I allege that a belief can indeed attain the gnoseological standing of qualifying as knowledge, even if it is a deplorably offensive or intrusive belief that egregiously violates someone’s right to privacy.

**Question:** Your attention to important academic episodes has shown itself in your ability to highlight important work, so to speak, in the heat of the moment. Thus, for example, in 1964, you wrote one of the first reviews of Gettier; in 2000, a review by Williamson. Furthermore, every moment of your production has caused a great stir, with debates with important interlocutors, to which you respond with the appropriate replies, as if this process of collective construction were the most suitable for deepening your reflection. In short, dialogue is a characteristic feature of your academic performance. How do you see your connection with some prominent philosophers of your contemporaries? And also with those intellectuals that you trained or influenced? The list of names you discuss in your texts is impressive: Chisholm, Davidson, Goldman, Lehrer, Harman, Quine, Sellars, Rorty, Bonjour, Nozick, Alston, Foley, Nagel, Stroud, Gettier, Greco, Lackey, Pritchard, Williamson.

**Ernest Sosa:** There is a public record of my interaction with all of those epistemologists, along with Peter Klein, George Bealer, Linda Zagzebski, Hilary Kornblith, Richard Fumerton, Richard Feldman, Michael Williams, and Jason Baehr, and others yet.

I have often come to the conclusion that an *apparent* disagreement is only verbal, deriving as it does from ambiguities in our rich epistemic vocabulary, or contextual variations in the application of that vocabulary.

My focus is not so much the semantics of epistemic language, nor even the conceptual analysis of ordinary epistemic concepts.

Thus, my own reflections presuppose understanding of what is already available less controversially in ordinary English (*attempt, affirmation, truth*) in order to delineate a domain of phenomena that seems both interesting and interestingly relatable to the philosophical tradition of thinking about knowledge and skepticism. And I have reflected also on how to *engineer* a few concepts that might help cast some light on that domain of interesting

phenomena (adroitness, aptness, full aptness, hipness of attempt, judgment, animal versus reflective varieties of knowledge, gnoseology, etc.).

As it turns out, those phenomena are just a special case of a far wider set of phenomena of substantial interest and importance in human flourishing across its many domains of assessable performance.

**Question:** Let us turn our attention to some moments of your work. "The Raft and the Pyramid" (1980) is a landmark for contemporary epistemological elaboration. How do you understand this moment concerning your work as a whole?

**Ernest Sosa:** When I published that paper, the issue of foundationalism versus coherentism had raged in analytic philosophy, with passionate engagement by the positivists of the Vienna Circle. And this issue then continued to divide formidable philosophers, such as Schlick versus Neurath, and later Chisholm and Hempel versus Sellars, and also Moore versus Wittgenstein.

My paper is an extensive, detailed attempt to clarify the issue, and to go beyond it through a virtue-theoretic turn. This struck a chord and has been my central philosophical focus ever since, with many later developments.

**Question:** "How to defeat opposition to Moore" (1999) is another important milestone and is probably your most cited text. However, you abandon the central thesis about the place of 'safety,' which would have offered a sufficient answer to Nozick's modal solution. However, this retreat, stated in the text "The Place of Truth in Epistemology" (2003), does not seem to mean a simple abandonment of the notion, which reappears strategically in the service of your classification of knowledge and your explanation of how we know. Could you explain how you now see 'sensitivity,' 'safety' and 'security'?

**Ernest Sosa:** 1. These are notions with much broader scope than just epistemology. They apply in any domain with an organizing telos, where participants in the domain's practice attempt to attain that telos with their performances.

So, an archer's shot *succeeds* if it hits the target, and it does so *aptly* if the hit manifests the complete competence exercised by the archer, with its Skill/Shape/Situation structure. The attempt to hit the target can manifest a reliable enough competence to succeed on the part of the archer, even without being safe, since the archer's *possession* of the SSS complete competence might be highly fragile, given the high probability of spoiler gusts across the line of fire.

So, a shot can be safe relative to the continued possession of that complete SSS competence, while, compatibly, it may be highly unsafe because that competence is so fragile. Thus we can distinguish the competence-relative *safety* of a shot from its *security*, which requires that the competence itself be safely in place.

Correspondingly, we can distinguish between two things:

*First*, a mere attempt (to hit an archery target, say).

*Second*, a Hippocratic, "hip" attempt, in which the agent aims not just to attain the basic objective (hitting the target) but also to hit the target *aptly*, with success that manifests competence.

Such a hip attempt is made by a doctor who aims to provide a diagnosis not just by guessing but through proper competence.

2. The oath that medical doctors have taken since Hippocrates thus contains the notion of a distinctively “hip” sort of attempt.

- a. The oath commits you as a medical doctor to treat patients “to the best of your ability and judgment.” And this requires you to aim not just for true diagnoses but for apt ones. A mere guess would violate the oath. A proper diagnosis must be better than a guess.
- b. In keeping with your oath, you would normally listen attentively to your patient’s complaints. Appropriate testing might then be required, even if test results are days away. Very often, testing is the right thing to do and what you must do in keeping with your oath. Otherwise, you wrong your patient and risk a malpractice lawsuit. As a properly responsible doctor, you must prescribe the lab work and await the results.

Normally, the doctor must aim to *judge* on the patient’s condition. The aim must be to get it right, but with a diagnosis that gets it right *aptly*, not just by guessing.

- c. Accordingly, we can define a “judgment” as a hip alethic affirmation, one more ambitious than a contestant’s pure guess in a quiz show. That does seem a familiar phenomenon in ordinary human life and agency, where we distinguish between guesses and hip answers in that sort of way. The distinction is pervasive not only in medical practice and sports but in domains of human performance generally.

**Question:** The philosophical community is still reflecting on your recent elaboration of a Telic Virtue Epistemology, as you presented it to us in *Epistemic Explanations* (2021), and you have already advanced us a new theoretical step, moving now towards a Dawning Light Epistemology, to which the dialogue with Wittgenstein becomes very relevant. Why is this step necessary, and what are its unique characteristics?

**Ernest Sosa: 1.** We ascend to a more demanding level once we turn to hip attempts, whether on the part of an archer or on the part of a medical doctor. Now the aim is not just to succeed on the lowest order of performance, whether it be that of hitting a target with an arrow, or that of hitting the truth with a mere alethic affirmation, a mere guess.

The full hip objective is not just to succeed on that lower order but to *confidently succeed aptly*. So, now the objective is to attain the lower order success—namely, a target hit or a true affirmation—and to confidently do so in a way that *sufficiently manifests pertinent competence*.

The key idea is that competence may be attained on the first level without being attained on the second level. And that imports a notable difference. Second-order attainment requires sufficient *proper* assurance that no spoilers will affect the first-order performance. So, your *hip* attempt to hit a given target requires more than your mere attempt to hit that target.

Your mere attempt to hit the target can be effective provided you possess the proper SSS competence, no matter how vulnerably. For that attainment, your attempt to hit the target and its success must derive from that competence, which you must possess and exercise.

However, your hip attempt aims not only at hitting the target but also at doing so *aptly*. So, the competence pertinent to a hip success—the competence that makes a hip attempt

apt—must ensure something about the conditions required for the aptness of your attempt to hit that target. The higher-order competence required for your hip success must be sensitive to whether those conditions will be in place reliably enough.

2. And we now we need a crucial distinction.

Suppose the probability of an interfering gust to be extremely high. This would not affect the aptness of your mere attempt to hit the target so long as no gust interferes in actual fact. However, if that probability is so high, would that not affect the level of competence that you bring to your relevant hip attempt? Such higher competence requires sufficiently competent assurance *that you will succeed in your first-order attempt*. You must be thus assured without any problematic negligence.

This further concern that arises on the second order drives an interesting wedge among two sorts of human performances. The distinction emerges plausibly if we compare archery with medicine. An archer might exercise their archery competence quite free of any relevant negligence if they shoot away while assuming by default that no spoiler gusts are in the offing. So, the archer's hip shot might succeed fully and without negligence.

3. Not so the doctor in our example, because of the negligence that attaches to the insufficient, desultory check on the equipment known to be glitchy.

The idea of default assumptions gains allure when we appreciate their role across a broad span of performances, with the noted contrast between our archer and our medical doctor. The archer can properly assume that no spoiler gust will intervene, thus protecting the competence and aptness of their hip attempt to make a good shot, even when spoiler gusts are nearly certain to intervene, threatening thus to spoil their shot. By contrast, a medical doctor can make no such assumption without competence-precluding negligence.

**Question:** Your dialogue in the broader field of virtue epistemology seems to involve two attitudes. On the one hand, an aggregating spirit (sometimes even condescending) leads you to value more distant contributions, such as some from the field of responsibility. On the other hand, there is a clear distinction between what is typical of gnoseology and what would be typical of intellectual ethics. How do you see evolution and dialogue within the broader field of the epistemology of virtues?

**Ernest Sosa:** A key idea can be drawn from WK Clifford's passionate *moral* demand for *epistemic* probity, which I understand as follows, even if this may not all lie obviously on the surface of his sermon. Given how we depend so heavily on each other and on our own past selves for all kinds of practical flourishing, individual and collective, we let down our fellows and our communities and even our own future selves if we fall into epistemic negligence or recklessness when we adopt beliefs, with corresponding storage, and then act accordingly. A ship owner who negligently or recklessly believes his ship to be seaworthy and acts accordingly is not just epistemically but morally blameworthy. The best way to understand Clifford, I submit, is to understand his sermon as normatively structured. In his view the shipowner is blameworthy twice over. He is *morally* blameworthy *because* he is *epistemically* blameworthy. Correlatively, we are subject to a clear *moral* demand to hold ourselves to sufficiently high *epistemic* standards.

**Question:** Philosophers can be distinguished by how they view the relationship between philosophy and science and their belief about what we should expect from their

different methodologies. Some theorists, such as Wittgenstein, consider philosophy and science immiscible, even though they are always in contact. Others, like Quine, believe that philosophical problems would be dissolved through a scientific perspective or the introduction of scientific methods. Do philosophical questions have a distinct and legitimate status, and does it thereby make sense to cultivate a specific philosophical method, even if it never disregards the good fruits of science?

**Ernest Sosa: 1.** In my opinion, traditional foundationalism has misled analytic methodology. Analytic philosophy depends essentially on “intuitions,” as when an intuitive counter-example supposedly refutes a philosophical theory. But this leads many astray, to the postulation of some special “eye of the mind” aided by some “light of reason.” But, in such postulation, we set ourselves up for a fight we are unlikely to win against our naturalist critics. Where exactly is that “eye” located? What is that supposed organ and how does it operate so as to enable us to “see” the foundational truths upon which we must then build through foundationalist structures of reasoning? Thinkers cannot live by metaphors alone.

This, in my view, has led to a spreading pessimism about the armchair and to a view of philosophy as a handmaiden or even just as a collaborator within one or another of the natural or social sciences.

When we are led to postulate such mythical eyes and light, we are really speculating out of our element. Psychology is not in our intellectual remit as armchair philosophers.

2. Please allow me to clarify.

Far be it from me to suggest that we philosophers need to respect strict borders, requiring demanding visas, for any intellectual move from philosophy to any of the sciences to which we might be intellectually drawn, with the thought that there are important relations between science and philosophy.

Rather, my thought is that we need no deeper or more scientific conception of the intuitive than just that of knowledge that we are confident enough we possess in the armchair, without knowing *how* in psychological detail we manage to possess it.

In particular, we should question any armchair foundationalist account of this. When I join GE Moore in scanning our commonsense knowledge of ourselves and the world around us, I am struck by our deep ignorance of how, specifically, we manage to know so much. The foundationalist story I find increasingly unpersuasive. Surprisingly, though, we need not be cowed as we continue our armchair reflections. There is an enormous amount that we know “intuitively” in the armchair. And this does not mean that we know it all through foundations provided by any mythical eye of the mind or light of reason.

Rather, all we need to mean when we appeal to “intuitions” and to “intuitive knowledge” in the armchair, all we need as a basis for proper armchair theorizing is facts that we properly take ourselves to know even in the absence of any detailed, convincing account of *how* we know them.

As far as I know, scientific psychology remains deeply unsure of how, in empirically accessible detail, we know so much about the world around us, about each other, and especially about our mother tongue. And it seems incredible that we will be able to satisfy such general curiosity just by closing our eyes and thinking hard in our armchairs. Given this, a more proper response is not to spin some story based on our powers of imagination. More properly, I suggest, we must suspend and await further notice from scientific study

beyond the armchair. Yet that has no tendency to deny us the ability and the right to theorize, as we always have done, based on whatever it is that we are sure enough we know, even without knowing *how*, in scientific detail, we do know it. This might well encompass much common sense about the external world, about our minds and those of our fellows, and even much about the domains of normativity, such as the content and structure of the reasons that guide us.

Moreover, equally far be it from me to criticize fellow philosophers who wish to join in scientific efforts to understand how we know about the world around us and about our own minds. Nor do I deny that, through such scientific deepening, we can address questions of traditional philosophical fascination, including science-aided approaches to traditional questions of metaphysics, epistemology, and praxis, individual and collective.