

PHILOSOPHERS AND THEIR CRITICS

General Editor: Ernest Lepore

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.

- 1 Dretske and His Critics
Edited by Brian McLaughlin
- 2 John Searle and His Critics
Edited by Ernest Lepore and Robert van Gulick
- 3 Meaning in Mind: Fodor and His Critics
Edited by Barry Loewer and Georges Rey
- 4 Dennett and His Critics
Edited by Bo Dahlbom
- 5 Danto and His Critics
Edited by Mark Rollins
- 6 Perspectives on Quine
Edited by Robert B. Barrett and Roger F. Gibson
- 7 The Churchlands and Their Critics
Edited by Robert N. McCauley
- 8 Singer and His Critics
Edited by Dale Jamieson
- 9 Rorty and His Critics
Edited by Robert B. Brandom
- 10 Chomsky and His Critics
Edited by Louise M. Antony and Norbert Hornstein
- 11 Dworkin and His Critics
Edited by Justine Burley
- 12 Ernest Sosa and His Critics
Edited by John Greco

ERNEST SOSA

AND HIS CRITICS

Edited by

John Greco

 **Blackwell**
Publishing

© 2004 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd
except for editorial material and organization © 2004 by John Greco.
Michael Williams, "Mythology of the Given: Sosa, Sellars, and the Task of Epistemology,"
PASS, vol. LXXVII (2003) and Ernest Sosa, "Reply to Williams," *PASS*, vol. LXXVII (2003).
Reprinted by courtesy of the Editor of the Aristotelian Society © 2004

BLACKWELL PUBLISHING
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, UK
550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

The right of John Greco to be identified as the Author of the Editorial Material in this Work
has been asserted in accordance with the UK Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a
retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic,
mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, except as permitted by the UK
Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act 1988, without the prior permission of the publisher.

First published 2004 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ernest Sosa and his critics / edited by John Greco.
p. cm. – (Philosophers and their critics; 12)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-631-21798-3 (hardcover : alk. paper) – ISBN 0-631-21799-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Sosa, Ernest. 2. Knowledge, Theory of. I. Greco, John. II. Series.
B945.S7274E76 2004
191–dc22

2003026676

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set in 10/12pt Ehrhardt
by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong
Printed and bound in the United Kingdom
by TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall

The publisher's policy is to use permanent paper from mills that operate a sustainable
forestry policy, and which has been manufactured from pulp processed using acid-free
and elementary chlorine-free practices. Furthermore, the publisher ensures that the text
paper and cover board used have met acceptable environmental accreditation standards.

For further information on
Blackwell Publishing, visit our website:
<http://www.blackwellpublishing.com>

Contents

Notes on Contributors	viii
Cited Works by Ernest Sosa	x
Preface	xii
Introduction: Motivations for Sosa's Epistemology	xv
Part I Critical Essays: Epistemology	1
1 Intellectual Virtue and Epistemic Power ROBERT AUDI	3
2 Structure and Connection: Comments on Sosa's Epistemology STEWART COHEN	17
3 Sosa, Safety, Sensitivity, and Skeptical Hypotheses KEITH DEROSE	22
4 Foundational Justification RICHARD FELDMAN	42
5 A Trial Separation between the Theory of Knowledge and the Theory of Justified Belief RICHARD FOLEY	59
6 Achieving Epistemic Ascent RICHARD FUMERTON	72

or whether all of the value that it imports is assignable simply to its inherent reliability as a source.

Why not join Habib and Lehrer at the opposite extreme, by agreeing that relevant coherence suffices on its own to explain all epistemic status, or at least all the epistemic status proper to a belief that constitutes reflective knowledge? Well, what is the coherence that for them is epistemically relevant? This turns out to be a coherence that satisfies their *defeasibility constraint* on epistemically relevant coherence: "that a target belief that coheres with a system of beliefs can be defended by the system against [all] objections to the belief."

I find these ideas congenial, and nothing commits me to rejecting every form that they might take. Once we understand what "objections" are and what is required for a proper "defense" against an objection, it may well be that there is a substantial overlap between these ideas and my own formulations. It all depends on how the key notions are understood. In order to see better into this issue, however, we do need to see what might figure as an "objection" to a particular belief, as held by a particular subject. In fact this concept is so understood by Habib and Lehrer as to raise some serious questions for their view.

Three things are suggested as potential "objections" against which a belief must be defensible if it is to constitute knowledge: first, that the belief is not formed in an appropriate way or derived from a reliable source; second, that the circumstances in which the belief is formed are not propitious to the formation of true beliefs; and, third, that the belief is not properly connected to experience. Accordingly, in order for the system to exhibit appropriate coherence, it must include the resources to defend against these objections. And this is said to involve its containing beliefs that counter the objections: beliefs in the respective negations of the three objections.³²

Two questions come to mind. First of all, objections can apparently be framed in epistemically normative terms: thus, see "appropriate way," and "propitious circumstances," and "proper" connection with experience. So, presumably it would be an epistemic objection to a belief that it does not constitute knowledge. (Someone says "*p*," expressing thus the corresponding belief. We *object*: "You don't know that.") But this would seem to trivialize the proposed account, according to which in order to know that *p*, in so believing, you must have within your belief system true denials of all potential objections to that belief. If, as suggested, it is a potential objection that you do not know in so believing, then of course your system must contain the true belief that you do know, and this *will* guarantee that once you satisfy the requirements of this account you will know. But this trivializes the account. Indeed, one could then replace it with a much simpler view: *One knows that p iff one can thus defend against the objection that one does not know in believing that p.*

On the other hand, there is a curiously opposed sort of problem. What is required in order to know that *p*, let us suppose, is that one be able to answer potential objections to the belief that *p*. And consider now a belief whose presence and truth are required for such successful defense against a potential objection. Objections to *this* belief would themselves seem objections to the original belief, as held then by that believer. But this threatens a vicious regress. For the system must now contain not only true beliefs that defend against first-level objections to the original belief, but also true beliefs that defend against (second-level) potential objections against the first-level defensive beliefs. And so

on. No belief will hence amount to knowledge unless it is embedded in an infinitely complex actual corpus. And this lies beyond human capabilities.

So my doubts about the proposal are (a) that it reduces to the trivial alternative that one knows that *p* iff one knows that *p*; and (b) that if in some non-*ad hoc* way Habib and Lehrer are able to rule out of consideration any such objection as "But you don't know that!", so as to avoid the triviality fate, they still face a potentially vicious regress. For consider one's defending beliefs against objections to one's belief that *p*, and call these "defenders." The problem is that objections to defenders would seem to count indirectly as objections to the original belief, so that a full defense of the original belief against all potential objections to it would require a mind housing an actual infinity of defending beliefs. None of our minds would seem spacious enough for that.

6 Philosophical Skepticism

Reply to Barry Stroud

Stroud doubts that we can attain a philosophically satisfying account of our knowledge of the external world if we think that our knowledge is based on but goes beyond what lies open to our direct awareness. If we view our perceptual knowledge as does the indirect realist, then we are hard put to see how we could gain any such philosophically satisfying understanding. This is brought home if we compare our situation with that of a crystal-ball gazer who thinks that what he can see in the ball enables him to tell about matters beyond. Such beliefs could be reliably acquired if their subject matter were suitably related to what can be seen in the ball. Similarly, on the indirect realist picture we can know about external reality if the experiential basis for such beliefs is suitably related to their subject matter. In each case, *if* there is a suitable relation between our basis and what we believe on that basis, then our beliefs repose truth-reliably on that basis. But if we do not know that there is such a relation between our basis and what we believe on that basis, then we attain no philosophically satisfying understanding of how we know on that basis.

It is hard to disagree with that analysis. If our acceptance of an account of a certain subject matter is to give us real understanding of that subject matter, then it must at a minimum be true, but more than that it must be something we know to be true. Mere beliefs about how people know what they do will not constitute understanding, will not give "a satisfactory explanation of human perceptual knowledge." Moreover,

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.

Or so we are told; and here we have reached the distinctive core of Stroud's particular form of skeptical doubt. About his distinctive view, we must ask: Why might it be that even our knowledge that people know things in a certain way would still not yield philosophically satisfying understanding of how they know? Why is it that the theory we know to be true as to how it is that they know still fails to give us any such understanding?

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 . . . , 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 so. What we get in sense perception therefore bears the same relation to the world we think we know by that means as what is seen in crystal-ball gazing bears to the world the gazers think it gives them knowledge of.

We do believe that our perceptual experiences are reliably connected with what we think we know on their basis.

But anyone who thinks that all it takes to have satisfactory understanding of perceptual knowledge is to conclude by *modus ponens* that we know by perception that there are external things would have to concede that the crystal-ball gazers have a satisfactory understanding of crystal-ball gazing knowledge. They could draw the corresponding conclusion equally confidently from what they believe about themselves.

Remarkably, this is said to be so despite the fact that, while the contents of our experiences are reliably connected with the beliefs that they yield, the contents of the crystal balls have no reliable connection with the truth of their deliverances. Thus "there are no reliable connections between what people see in crystal balls and what goes on in the world beyond them. If the gazers could raise their eyes from their crystal balls and see what is so in the world around them, they could see that too." So, while we can know our perceptual beliefs to be reliably formed, the gazers cannot know their gaze-derived beliefs to be thus reliable, and cannot know that they know things about the world around them by basing them on any such reliable basis.

Stroud's reasoning now is hard to follow. He had explicitly granted, at least for the sake of argument, my externalist account of knowledge. So his doubts do not target that account. He is willing to assume that perceptual knowledge is a matter of perceptual beliefs prompted truth-reliably by perceptual experiences. How then can he coherently suppose that if we conclude by *modus ponens* that we know about the world around us through perception, given that our perceptual faculties are reliable, then we would be in the predicament he alleges? He alleges that we then "would have to concede that the crystal-ball gazers have a satisfactory understanding of crystal-ball gazing knowledge. They could draw the corresponding conclusion equally confidently from what they believe about themselves." But this is refuted by a crucial difference that Stroud and I both recognize: namely, that we know our perceptual faculties to be reliable whereas

the gazers believe but do not know their gazing to be reliable. So, how can we be in an equally good epistemic position to understand how we know, if we *do* know but they *do not* know about the reliability of the faculties involved?

Stroud in any case rejects my appeal to a reliable sensory basis for understanding how our perceptual beliefs can constitute knowledge, and indeed traces to that particular feature of my account its failure as a philosophically satisfying account of our perceptual knowledge. His preferred account would explain rather that we can often enough just *directly see that we can see* some external fact to be so, and that we can in this way know how we know about the world around us. Circularity is here not a threat, since circularity occurs in reasoning, and here there is no reasoning, but only plain seeing.

I find three problems with this interesting approach. Let us grant, first, that some perceptual knowledge is direct in not depending on other perceptual knowledge or distinguishable perceptual experience. Even so, our knowledge that someone else knows something perceptually does not seem plausibly a case in point. Second, even if *sometimes* we know how others know the world around them because we *perceive*, for some external fact, *that they perceive it* (that they perceive that external fact), perception is not the only source of our knowledge of the external world. Unaided perception is, on the contrary, a very limited source of such knowledge, if we consider the vast bulk of our stored knowledge, and the dependence of this knowledge on the likes of inference, memory, and testimony. So it remains to be seen how we can know about our general possession of such knowledge, including our non-perceptual knowledge. We would hardly be able to perceive directly that we enjoy much of our mnemonic or inferential or testimonial knowledge.

That gives rise to a third problem for Stroud, whose reasoning culminates as follows.

The conclusion I would draw from all this is that in order to achieve a satisfactory understanding of our knowledge of the world we must set aside or overcome the idea that the deliverances of perception even at its best are limited to the character of one's perceptual experiences alone. . . . Perceptual knowledge of external things is seen [in externalist accounts like Sosa's] as a combination of some prior knowledge which is not knowledge of external things plus something else. That is what I think leaves us in the plight I have described.

The further problem concerns the vast bulk of our knowledge that, while based on perceptual knowledge concurrent or past, is not itself perceptual knowledge. A lot of our knowledge is after all in some way a "combination" of some prior knowledge plus something else. Moreover, the supporting facts now or earlier perceived to be so and the knowledge supported at one or another remove by our perception of those facts, are not generally connected in ways that we can see or otherwise perceive. If we recall the main objection brought by Stroud against externalist reliabilism concerning perception, his own view seems now ironically subject to that same objection. For the vast bulk of our knowledge of the external world presumably goes beyond the perceptual knowledge on which at some depth it is based, and yet we cannot just perceive that the content of that knowledge is related appropriately to the perceptual knowledge that forms its basis. It remains to be seen how, despite that fact, we do know all those things about the world around us that we know non-perceptually, and how we can know in a philosophically satisfying way that we do have any such knowledge.³³