

PHILOSOPHERS AND THEIR CRITICS

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ERNEST SOSA

AND HIS CRITICS

Edited by

John Greco

 **Blackwell**
Publishing

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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

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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

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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
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of the causal and the rational order in the cognitive sphere, insisting that "these 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 antedate Davidson's John Locke lectures (let alone McDowell's response to Davidson in *Mind and World* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994].)

- 19 The epistemological program this essay sketches out combines ideas set out in considerable detail in several of the author's publications: *The Coherence Theory of Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), *Plausible Reasoning* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1976), *Scepticism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), *Human Knowledge in Idealistic Perspective* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), *A Useful Inheritance* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994). The discussion has benefited from constructive comments by Alexander Pruss.
- 20 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 precincts 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 human knowledge. 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 in this way to know such 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

"legitimately and with rational justification" arrived at a theory of knowledge of the kind Sosa has in mind, I think there is a way in which we would not thereby attain a satisfactory general understanding of how we know what we know. I will try to explain why not. This is something I have tried to bring out before, apparently with little success.² It is worth trying again; I think something important about the philosophical understanding of human knowledge is at stake.

Sosa starts with a question of the kind he thinks a successful theory of knowledge should answer: "Is the existence of external things just an article of faith?" (RK, 410). He takes the question from G. E. Moore, who understands external things as things to be met with in space. Tables, trees, socks, mountains, even soap bubbles, are things of a kind to be met with in space. And they occupy their positions in space, and so exist, if they do, whether anyone ever encounters them or perceives them or thinks about them or not. The question is to be understood so that if any such things exist, then there are external things. That, of course, would not settle the epistemological question. There could be such things even if no one knows that there are. Nor would everyone's believing that there are external things settle the question of knowledge; belief can be a matter of faith. But if anyone knows or has good reason to believe that tables, trees, socks, or mountains exist, then that person knows or has good reason to believe that external things exist; he is not just taking it as an article of faith. That would be a positive answer to the question about human knowledge of external things.

If many people knew that there are external things, but no one knew that anyone had that knowledge, then no one would know the answer to the epistemological question. There would be a positive answer – the existence of external things would be something known and not just an article of faith – but no one would know it. If many people after epistemological investigation came to believe that human beings know that there are external things, that would not be enough for a satisfactory outcome of their epistemological investigations, just as everyone's believing that there are external things was not enough to settle the question of their knowledge. Even if the investigators' belief were in fact true, that still would not be enough. The truth of the answer they accept would not give them the understanding they seek unless they could recognize that they know or have good reason to believe that answer. Rightly finding themselves with knowledge or good reason to believe that the answer they accept is true would give them a satisfactory understanding of human knowledge.

One way in which the existence of external things would be something that we know, and not just an article of faith for us, is if we could often see that there is a table in the room, a tree in the garden, socks on our feet, and so on. That would be knowledge by perception of the existence of external things. I think we can and do see such things to be true, and so thereby know that there are external things. That is one answer to a question about our knowledge of external things; what might be called the most straightforward answer.

If perception is indeed a way of coming to know something about external things, then I can also know by perception that that answer to that epistemological question is correct. I can often see that someone right in front of me sees that there is a table in the room and thereby comes to know that there is a table in the room. I see what he does and I see that he knows. So I can see, and thereby know, that that is how people come to know that

there are external things. The truth of that straightforward epistemological explanation is something I can know to be true by perceiving that it 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 p is to know that p . It is not that one infers that one knows that p from the fact that one sees that p . Whoever sees that p thereby knows that p . 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 so no room for circularity. It is true that I 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 see 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

lingering suspicion of circularity. But we saw that there is no room for circularity when that answer is rightly understood.

The straightforward answer would be found dissatisfying by some philosophers because they believe that no one ever does see that p , where what takes the place of ' p ' implies the existence of an external thing like a table or a tree or a sock. They think certain general reflections about sense-perception should be enough to convince anyone of that fact. So they think the straightforward answer is not, strictly speaking, true. For such philosophers, this presents a deep and challenging epistemological question: how do we get knowledge by perception of the existence of such external things, given that we never, strictly speaking, see or otherwise perceive that they exist?

This is perhaps what has come to be called the philosophical problem of our knowledge of the external world. But with this understanding of the restricted deliverances of unaided perception, the word 'external' takes on new significance. It no longer just denotes things to be met with in space, like tables and trees. It now applies to everything that is not, strictly speaking, perceived to be so; and what is perceived turns out to be much less than might originally have been thought. The problem then is how we can come to know or have reason to believe anything about what is "external" to, or beyond, the limited domain of what we strictly speaking perceive.

It is to this kind of question that Sosa appears to think the theory of knowledge he has in mind can give a satisfactory answer. The question he addresses is one to which he thinks it is at least possible to give an answer that fails through circularity or regress. That is what he says is true of all "internalist" theories of knowledge. In attempting to show how we have perceptual knowledge of something beyond what is perceived, either they rely at some point on knowledge of something beyond what is perceived, and so are "epistemically circular," or they appeal only to what is perceived and so to a regress of perceptions which establish nothing beyond themselves (EC, 267–8, 286). Sosa accordingly favors a form of "externalism" that he thinks is invulnerable to that charge. But he appears to regard his "externalism" as providing a satisfactory non-circular answer to the same question that "internalism" fails to answer.

Sosa thinks the reason "internalist" theories fail is that they try to explain knowledge of facts which we do not, strictly speaking, perceive as knowledge arrived at by inference or reasoning from something we do perceive or are aware of in experience. Accepting the restrictions on unaided perception which create the epistemological challenge, the most we can strictly perceive or be aware of is what Sosa calls "the character of our experience" (RK, 412), or perhaps its "qualitative character" (RK, 413), not facts which hold independently of our experiencing them. "Experience as if there is a fire before us does not entail that there is a fire there, experience as if here is a hand does not entail that here is a hand, and so on" (RK, 413), he says. And that is the most that experience alone provides us with. But he regards it as "doubtful" that "any allowable form of inference . . . will take us from the character of our experience to the sort of knowledge of our surroundings we ordinarily claim" (RK, 412).

On this too I agree completely with Sosa, demurring only at his understated 'doubtful.' I think it is not just doubtful that such inferences could support our beliefs about the independent world, but impossible. I think Sosa would not disagree. That is precisely his case against "internalism." Some philosophers would draw from this dead end the skeptical conclusion that therefore perceptual knowledge of an independent world is

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). 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).

This 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 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 experience are the qualities or character of his perceptual experiences. Of course, he believes in those human beings and other 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 issue

in the plight of Sosa's "externalist" epistemological theorist. 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 theorists 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

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.

What we believe about the world goes well beyond the restricted domain of experience, and, if the connections are right, it is something we know. But to know of the reliability of the connections which must hold in order for us to know, we can do no more than attend to what then comes within the restricted domain of our experience and, if we believe it, and if the connections are right, thereby come to know that those connections are reliable. So we can understand the position we are in only as follows: if there are reliable connections between our perceptual experiences and what we think we know, then we know by perception that there are external things. And we believe that there are such connections. But anyone who thinks that all it takes to have a 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.

No comparable doubts affect the straightforward answer to the epistemological question we considered earlier. It says that we know that people know that there are external things by perceiving that there are external things. That is something we can see, and thereby know, to be true of human beings and other external things. So we have no trouble seeing and so knowing that 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. It might seem that Sosa's "externalist" theorist is in a superior position in this respect, because if he could see what is so beyond his limited perceptual experience he would see that what he believes to be so is reliably connected with his getting the experiences he gets. But no such vindication is available to him. It would be possible only if he could see or otherwise perceive what is so in the world around him, not only the character of his perceptual experiences. And anyone who can do that thereby knows what is so in the world; he has no need for an "externalist" theory of knowledge to explain how his experiences enable him to know what he knows.

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. Sosa appears to regard that idea as unthreatening as long as knowledge of the wider world is not thought of as a result of *reasoning* from that prior knowledge. But even without invoking reasoning his "externalist" account still leaves us with something that is epistemically prior to any knowledge of an independent world. If there are no reliable connections between the perceptual experiences we receive and the world we believe in as a result of them, we know nothing of the wider world even though we know what experiences we are having. Perceptual knowledge of external things is seen 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.

Perhaps I am wrong to attribute to Sosa without qualification the view that we perceive at best only the character of our perceptual experiences. That seemed necessary

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 be both 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 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

- 1 Ernest Sosa, "Philosophical Scepticism and Epistemic Circularity," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* supp. vol. 68 (1994) (cited as PSEC), p. 285.
- 2 See my "Understanding Human Knowledge in General," in M. Clay and K. Lehrer, eds., *Knowledge and Skepticism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989). Sosa found the alleged shortcoming illusory in PSEC. I replied in my "Scepticism, 'Externalism', and the Goal of Epistemology," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* supp. vol. 64 (1994) that he had not correctly identified the difficulty I have in mind. In his "Reflective Knowledge in the Best Circles," *The Journal of Philosophy* 94 (1997): 410-30 (cited as RK), he appears to understand it as a charge of circularity. Both papers by me are now reprinted in my *Understanding Human Knowledge: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).