

Ernest Sosa, *Epistemology*, Princeton University Press, 2017, 256pp., \$24.95, ISBN 9781400883059.

J. Adam Carter  
*University of Glasgow*

Ernest Sosa's *Epistemology* is the best epistemology textbook for advanced undergrads I'm aware of. It certainly starts off with a bang: right from the first chapter, Sosa more or less tells you that much of what you've taken for granted about Descartes' epistemological project in the *Meditations* is mistaken—or at the very least, overlooks key pieces of the picture that, once in place, help to unlock Descartes' deeper agenda. On Sosa's preferred Pyrrhonian-style virtue-theoretic reading of the *Meditations* (one that turns out to be well buttressed with textual support and careful exegesis by Sosa), the notions of *judgment*, *aptness*, and *competence* inescapably take centre stage in Descartes' project, as does the distinction between two very different levels, first-order and second-order, of epistemic performance (and accordingly, different kinds of *beliefs*).

And with different kinds of belief (functional and judgmental) in play, the Cartesian epistemological project is accordingly interpreted as sensitive to interestingly different kinds of *error* (of which falsehood is but one sort) as well as different kinds of *knowledge*, animal and reflective, each which has a different role to play in the Cartesian methodology that Sosa takes as a starting point in the book.

Over the course of *Epistemology's* 13 chapters, a compelling case unfolds for thinking that grappling with properly epistemological questions *inescapably* requires two levels of analysis. And Sosa manages to advance this narrative (with a focus on his most recent angle of presentation in *Judgment and Agency* and its emphasis on judging—viz., affirming with the endeavour to affirm with alethic aptness) while threading in classical and contemporary epistemological problems ranging from dream and regress formulations of scepticism to the Gettier problem, the relationship between virtue reliabilism and virtue responsibilism, parallels to action and perception, the value of knowledge, Kripke's dogmatism puzzle, synchronic and diachronic rationality and the recent empirical challenge from epistemic situationism (among other relevant topics).

It is a real challenge to read this text without being lured into embracing wholesale Sosa's programme, even if doing so means giving up on the traditional project of analysing knowledge, construed in the standard univocal fashion. The all-things-considered explanatory power of Sosa's bi-level picture is really hard to ignore. This is, I think, at least in part because in *Epistemology*, Sosa brings together in clear view the key features of his overarching bi-level virtue epistemology which have—prior to the publication of this book—been spread out across decades, from 1991's *Knowledge in Perspective* through his 2005 John Locke Lectures published as *A Virtue Epistemology* (2009, 2011), 2010's *Knowing Full Well* and 2015's *Judgment and Agency*.

That said, I want to spend the remainder of this review registering in some detail three key points of criticism which concern (i) Sosa's critique of Zagzebski's theory of knowledge; (ii) the place of non-epistemic factors in competence possession and how Sosa's thinking on this topic connects with his thinking about background conditions; and (iii) Sosa's conception of the relationship between drugs, enhancement and fully apt performance. Each criticism is intended in the spirit of encouraging further development of what is on the whole a rich and explanatorily powerful view that hangs together remarkably tightly.

### *Sosa vs Zagzebski*

An initial issue I'd like to raise is Sosa's critique of Zagzebski (1996), who insists that intellectual character virtues (e.g., epistemic conscientiousness, open-mindedness, etc.) must play a central role in accounting for all human knowledge. In the tricky case of immediate sensory knowledge (e.g., that lightning has just struck, that the lights have just

gone off), which—given the easiness and (perhaps) inevitability of acquiring it when one does—doesn't seem essentially due to any obvious praiseworthy character trait, Zagzebski suggests in response that one's getting it right in such cases is nonetheless a matter of appropriate *non-negligence*. Sosa's reply here is interesting:

However, we cannot explain the appropriateness of a belief that a room has suddenly gone dark as a matter of non-negligent agency if that belief is not at all a product of intentional agency, which is the sort of agency important to character epistemology. *Surely motivation relates to agency, not to passive reactions that approximate or constitute mere reflexes* (148).

Sosa then develops this point further with a contrast case:

Suppose one's locomotive stays on track, despite one's having actively intervened not at all. One might still deserve credit even so if there have been junctures where as conductor one could have intervened, where one was free to intervene, and, without negligence, freely opted not to do so. Unfortunately, this will not do. The problem is that in the cases urged by the critics, there is no freedom to intervene in what seems clearly to be a belief, and even an instance of knowledge, as when one knows that the room has gone dark (148).

This looks initially like a promising line to press against Zagzebski. However there are two potential worries with Sosa's reply. For one thing, Sosa's discussion in the first passage seems to run together the notions of agency and voluntariness in a way that will be contentious at least to some. For example, John Hyman (2015), has recently argued that "[a]gency and voluntariness are different phenomena, and the distinctions between active and passive and between voluntary and involuntary cut across each other" (2015, 7). I lack the space here to engage with Hyman's reasoning, but simply want to register that against a background concession to (*a la* Hyman) possible combinations of *involuntary activity* and *voluntary passivity*, it's debatable whether Sosa's argument (with the contrast case of the locomotive) establishes a lack of *agency* in the dark room case of the sort he needs against Zagzebski.

But setting that more general issue aside, it's worth focusing in on the claimed disanalogy Sosa presses in the second passage between

- (i) the presence of the freedom to intervene (in the locomotive case) when one does not in fact intervene; and,
- (ii) as Sosa characterises the case of believing the room goes dark, a lack of the freedom to intervene.

But is there really *no* freedom to intervene in the latter case, unlike in the locomotive case? On a first pass, it seems the person in the dark room was free to do *something* that would bear on how she would form the target belief—e.g., had a person a standing epistemically vicious motivation (e.g., had she wished to have been altogether insensitive to whether the room had gone dark when it did), she was free to have worn sunglasses or otherwise to have perceptually incapacitated herself. A relevant question then becomes: is *this* freedom (to have perceptually incapacitated herself) sufficiently enough like the freedom to have intervened in the locomotive case to close the gap between Sosa's claimed disanalogy? Sosa might insist it is not because the agent in the dark room case (and unlike in the locomotive case) was not free to intervene *vis-à-vis* the formation of the belief *at the relevant time*—i.e., when the room goes dark, and that on this basis the belief (unlike in the locomotive case) can't be due in any way to non-negligent agency. But a counter-reply waits: it does seem possible to exercise non-negligence *and* not be free to intervene *at the time*, as in the case of Ulysses pacts—viz., as when one freely chooses to constrain herself at some future time. Sosa may well be right that easily acquired knowledge poses a problem for Zagzebski's proposal (in fact, I think he is) however, the details of the argument might need further work.

Competence, knowledge and pragmatic encroachment: a tension?

A belief whose correctness manifests competence is apt belief (animal knowledge); a fully apt belief is not merely apt, but it's also guided to aptness by the believer's assessment of risk through a competent view of his own (first-order) competence.

Taking a step back: what, generally speaking, *is* a competence? It is, on Sosa's view, a disposition to succeed (reliably enough) when one tries (see esp. Chapter 6 and 12). What Sosa calls a *complete competence* has a triple-S constitution—*seat, shape* and *situation*—with reference to which three kinds of dispositions can be distinguished: the innermost competence (*seat*), the inner competence (*seat + shape*), and the complete competence (*seat + shape + situation*).

Consider the illustrative example Sosa offers concerning driving competence:

With regard to one's competence in driving, for example, we can distinguish between (a) the innermost driving competence that is seated in one's brain, nervous system, and body, which one retains even while asleep or drunk; (b) a fuller inner competence, which requires also that one be in proper shape, that is, awake, sober, alert, and so on; and (c) complete competence or ability to drive well and safely (on a given road or in a certain area), which requires also that one be well situated, with appropriate road conditions pertaining to the surface, the lighting, etc. The complete competence is thus an SSS (or an SeShSi) competence (191-2).

What shape counts as the *proper* shape and what counts as being *well situated*? Who decides? Relatedly, is there a competence that corresponds with every conceivable seat/shape/situation pairing? Sosa's answers to these questions are related. He says that

Not every disposition to succeed when one tries constitutes a competence [...] although every competence will be constituted by a disposition to succeed when the agent is within certain ranges of shape and situation. A disposition to succeed is thus plausibly made a competence by some *prior selection* of shape/situation pairs such that one seats a competence only if one is disposed to succeed reliably enough upon trying when in such a shape/situation pair. Whether a particular shape/situation pair is appropriate will, of course, vary from domain to domain of performance (195, my italics).

The relevant pre-selection here is a matter of (in short) what we care about. We don't test for an (innermost) driving competence by asking whether one is reliable enough at driving when one has drunk a gallon of wine and would be driving underwater because we are not embedded in a community that values reliable performance in such a shape/situation pair.

Sosa's claim that what a community values circumscribes the kinds of shape/situation combinations that feature in distinguishing genuine competences is a plausible one. This is a point he's made elsewhere (e.g., 2010b) in a convincing way. That said, I want to highlight a potential tension in Sosa's thinking (I say potential because it is possible he has a principled answer here) that emerges when we combine the line just sketched with two other aspects of Sosa's wider view as outlined in *Epistemology*: (i) his metaphysical claim about what *constitutes* knowledge (e.g., Chapter 9; cf., Chapter 4); and (ii) his thinking about how background conditions interface with knowledge (Chapter 13).

The metaphysical claim I have in mind, in particular, is one Sosa appeals to in Chapter 9 when arguing that a difference between trait virtues (e.g., epistemic conscientiousness) and competence virtues is that, while the former can (merely) reliably put one *in a position to know*, exercising the latter actually *constitutes* knowledge (e.g., 140-144; cf., Ch. 4 on metaphysical analyses). Interestingly, when we combine *this* claim, viz., that knowledge is partly constituted by the exercise of competence, with the previously noted claim that competences themselves are partly distinguished by the kinds of seat/shape pairs that we value (which is why not all imaginable SSS disposition profiles map on to complete

competences), what follows is an interesting, albeit nonstandard, form of *pragmatic encroachment* on knowledge. Sosa doesn't use this term himself, but he seems to recognise such a result when noting that knowledge (and other kinds of human achievements) are 'inherently normative' (205) in the sense that

they are successes that manifest competences, where competences are dispositions involving *pre-selected* shape/situation combinations wherein specifically human accomplishment is prized (or otherwise of special interest) (205)

Regardless of whether 'pragmatic encroachment' is the right term to be using here (cf., Fantl and McGrath 2002), knowledge is on Sosa's view partly constituted by social or non-epistemic factors, such as those factors that play a role in pre-selecting the relevant seat/shape pair with respect to which a given knowledge-constituting competence is distinguished.

As I mentioned, I think there is a possible tension in Sosa's thinking, and it involves the kind of pragmatic encroachment his view implies, just described, in conjunction with a certain kind of 'purism' Sosa opts for later on in chapter 13.

To appreciate the kind of purism I have in mind, consider an example Sosa offers concerning a *night time athlete*—viz., a basketball player who performs in conditions that require lighting (e.g., a gymnasium that is lit up to compensate for the lack of windows and sunlight). On Sosa's view, the player's shot is *fully apt* (and thus the quality of the shot is beyond reproach, fully creditable, etc.) if it not only manifests a first-order shooting competence (i.e., that the shooter's shot manifests a competence of the shooter to shoot reliably enough in that situation—e.g., from that distance at which it is taken) but moreover that it is guided to aptness by the shooter's assessment of risk through a competent view of his or her own shooting skill, shape and situation. But what does such a *competent view* of one's skill, shape and especially situation involve, for the performance to be fully apt? What kinds of specific things must the shooter be able to competently take into account and which things can the shooter simply ignore *without* subjecting herself to credit reducing luck when such things happen, beyond her ken, to go right? Here's Sosa:

The athlete needs to consider various shape and situation factors: how tired he is, for example, how far from the target, and so on, for the many shape and situation factors that can affect performance. *But there are many factors that he need not heed.* It is no concern of an athlete as such whether an earthquake might hit, or a flash tornado, or a hydrogen bomb set off by a maniac leader of a rogue state, and so on. As an athlete, he is not negligent for ignoring such factors (191, my italics).

Interestingly, then, we have a distinction *within* the class of things that could cause a performance to fail, between (i) the kinds of things a fully apt performer must heed in order to safeguard against credit reducing luck; and (ii) the kinds of things he or she is free to non-negligently assume are already in place. Sosa calls the kinds of things performers can non-negligently assume to be in place *background conditions*. As he defines these conditions:

A background condition is a condition that must hold if the relevant S is to be in place at the time of performance. Thus, the presence of the pertinent skill, shape, or situation will entail respective background conditions that must then hold. What makes such a condition a mere background condition is that, although it must hold, the performer need not know that it will hold. Nor need it hold safely. Reducing the safety of that condition *would not reduce or in any way affect performance quality* (218, my italics).

So the basketball player shooting at night in a lit gymnasium can perform fully aptly (as could her epistemic analogue) even if this athlete simply presupposes but does not know that the lights in the gymnasium will not suddenly go off when she takes her shot, and (provided the shot is apt and guided by competent risk assessment *vis-à-vis* her first-order

SSS conditions) the shot can be *fully apt even if the lights very nearly went off* but happened not to do so. But, by contrast, the shooter would *not* shoot fully aptly even if shooting in good shape and within her threshold for sufficient reliability were she unaware of this fact such that she very easily could have shot outside of her threshold of sufficiently reliability, and thus very easily could have (but did not) shoot inaptly (cf., 2015, Ch. 3 for fuller discussion).

So what, exactly, makes the *difference* between what counts as a background condition *vis-à-vis* the shooter's first-order situation and what does not? What makes, for instance, the lighting system that lights the gymnasium different from, say, the fact of how far away the shooter is from the basket? A clue here is that, as Sosa says, 'It is no concern of an athlete *as such*' whether an earthquake might hit or (for our basketball player) whether the electricity grid powering gymnasium's lights might suddenly shut down. Likewise, in the epistemic case, it is no concern to the knower *as such* whether (say) the world could easily have ended but did not. As Sosa captures this idea in an illustrative example toward the end of Chapter 13, suppose a maniac equipped with a large enough hydrogen bomb could easily have caused *all background conditions* for all performances, epistemic or otherwise, to fail to hold. On the assumption that the maniac decides whether to ignite the bomb by flipping a fair coin, the lucky result of which leads him to refrain from mass destruction, Sosa says it 'seems implausible that human performance would be spoiled across the globe when the maniac's coin flip could so easily have gone the other way' (216).

It looks then like what is guiding Sosa's thinking about what distinguishes situational features of one's first-order SSS competence from mere background features that must already be in place for (first-order) SSS-relevant situational features to hold is that the former are in some way pertinent to the performer or performance *as such* and the latter are not pertinent to the performer or performance *as such*. (Thus, the basketball shooter, when shooting fully aptly, must heed basketball-relevant details relevant to his first-order SSS shooting profile (e.g., distance to goal), but not non-basketball-related details that must be in place for those details to hold). And *mutatis mutandis* in the case of epistemic performance—as Sosa puts it, 'the quality of a brilliant belief by Sherlock, or by a lookout at the top of a mast, would be similarly unaffected by any similar need to trust knowledgeably that his pertinent background conditions were likely enough to hold' (220).

On the basis of what, though, is a condition not pertinent to, as Sosa puts it, the 'epistemic player' viz., the knower, *as such*? Here is where I think the tension between Sosa's form of pragmatic encroachment and his remarks in Chapter 13 materialises: for if what makes a given condition a mere background in the epistemic case (such that ignoring it is compatible with there being no credit-reducing luck in the epistemic performance) is that it is not pertinent to the knower *as such*, then—if such thinking is generalised more widely—we'd expect non-epistemic features such as what a community values to not be pertinent to a knower *as such*. And yet, as we've seen, for Sosa such features play a role in *pre-selecting the relevant seat/shape pair* with respect to which a given knowledge-constituting competence is distinguished. It would be helpful to see more clearly how these points could be clearly reconciled with one another.

### Drugs and enhancement

Being in proper *shape vis-à-vis* driving competence requires that one be, at least, 'awake, sober, alert' (192). Being in proper shape with respect to other kinds of competences will be comparatively more demanding—take for example the performance domain of competitive cycling. Lance Armstrong, for instance can enhance (and has enhanced) his complete SSS disposition to succeed in competitive cycling through being in *drug induced shape*. Is he equally competent as he would be absent the enhancement? Sosa thinks not.

He says that while Armstrong enhances his complete SSS disposition to succeed, this SSS disposition does not remain a competence once Armstrong's shape is drug induced (195n2). Furthermore, he says Armstrong's enhanced disposition to succeed does not remain a way for him to attain a fully apt performance, a performance creditable to (proper)

athletic competence and thus creditable to the athlete's relevant competence' (195n2). Sosa makes a similar point concerning Alex Rodriguez who he describes as having a 'drug-derived seat' of his baseball competence.

To be fair, I think Sosa probably intended the above remarks as more or less a throwaway point—his comments on Armstrong and Rodriguez were relegated to a footnote and are hardly a central feature of his book. But as we continue to rely (and in increasingly new ways) on the latest science and medicine to improve our athletic and cognitive capacities (see e.g., (e.g., Sandel 2009; Bostrom and Savulescu 2009; Persson and Savulescu 2012), I think that cases such as those of Armstrong and Rodriguez—and their epistemic analogues featuring cognitive enhancing drugs and technologies—will be increasingly more relevant to address for any epistemologist who gives aptness and competence a central theoretical role. As Sosa has diagnosed things in passing, it looks as though (for example) Armstrong's drug-induced shape has as a consequence that he performs *not at all* fully aptly, because he lacks the first-order competence (despite possessing the relevant SSS disposition to succeed). This might be so. Though it might also be plausible that *whether* a given drug-induced shape can feature in a genuine competence and by extension a fully apt performance isn't going to be settled by the mere fact of enhancement but also partly by how the enhancement is being used, and—in the epistemic case—whether the enhancement (whatever it involves) is being responsibly integrated into the subject's cognitive architecture (Carter and Pritchard Forthcoming; cf., Pritchard 2010).

Setting aside the three criticisms raised now, *Epistemology*, to reiterate, is a fantastic book. It is a great model of careful and deep epistemology, and it synthesizes a comprehensive and sophisticated framework developed by what is arguably the world's foremost epistemologist. *Epistemology* should be of great value to advanced undergraduate and postgraduate students, and it should be mandatory reading for professional epistemologists as well.

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