

Sosa on Circularity and Coherence

by Allen Habib and Keith Lehrer

The exceptional contributions of Ernest Sosa to epistemology make it an honor to discuss his work. Sosa, while appreciating the role of coherence in a theory of knowledge, especially reflective knowledge, has contended that coherence among beliefs, however important a role it might play in knowledge and a theory thereof, will not suffice for knowledge, even if the cohering beliefs turn out to be true. He has argued that coherence must be supplemented with his illuminating theory of virtue perspectivism. While appreciating the merits of the proposed supplement, we wish to examine the possibility that coherence among beliefs which are true might embrace those merits and suffice for a theory of justification and reflective knowledge.

The crux of our argument is that beliefs about the relationship between internal representational states, most notably beliefs, and external conditions, most notably the truth of the beliefs, will be essential to any coherence theory that might suffice as a theory of knowledge. Examples of such beliefs are ones to the effect that the cohering beliefs are reliably connected with truth. Such beliefs about the reliability of the cohering beliefs insure a truth connection and gain the advantages of externalism when those beliefs are true. The circularity of such an argument is transparent.

Sosa has recognized the inevitability of circularity in a full or complete theory of reflective knowledge, however. Those who, contrary to Sosa, think that circular arguments are vicious, and thus irrelevant, to justification might argue as follows:

Circular arguments fail to have any justificational weight because they fail to have any dialectical force against a skeptic. A circular argument is of no use in a dialectic with a skeptic, it cannot move a rhetorical opponent, since it appeals to the conclusion that the opponent contests. This failure in a dialectic results in a general failure of circular argument to provide justification at all. If circular arguments completely lack justificational weight, then they cannot serve as a justification. If justification is to be a matter of providing good reasons with dialectical force to support or defend a belief, then circular arguments cannot provide any justification because they cannot provide us with reasons having dialectical force against a skeptic. If arguments are to be admitted as justifications for beliefs, they must have sufficient dialectical force to refute potential skeptic opponents.

We may reasonably abandon the skeptical dialectic as the primary method of evaluating theories of knowledge and justification, however. If we instead evaluate our theories of knowledge and justification in terms of the explanations they provide, we lose our motive for construing justificational weight as requiring dialectic force and the objection to circularity falls away. To see why, imagine that you form the belief that the cat is on the mat because you see it. You now have an argument for your belief that the cat is on the mat:

P1 I see a cat on the mat

C: There is a cat on the mat.

But now imagine that you also believe that your eyesight is epistemically reliable. If we add this belief to the argument, we get:

P1 I see a cat on the mat

P2 My eyesight is reliable

C: There is a cat on the mat.

The second argument is superior to the first. Of course, the defense of second premise of that argument will ultimately become circular by appealing to our reliability. But does this detract

from the second argument? Does it make the conclusion less coherent, or does it rather make it more so? Does the first argument or the second offer a better explanation of why we are justified in our belief that we see a cat on the mat? The second, clearly.

Sosa agrees that circular argument can increase explanatory effectiveness through rational coherence. In discussing how we might be justified in our beliefs about the reliability of our epistemic processes, Sosa affirms that an argument, even a circular argument, would result in more overall coherence:

“ . . . [O]nce we had an argument A for W [our overall way of forming beliefs] being reliable from premises we already accepted, we would embed our faith in W’s reliability within a more comprehensively coherent whole that would include the premises of the argument A.’ And it must be granted that such an argument *would* bring that benefit.”
[original emphasis] (1994, 283)

However, he finds coherence, even supplemented with truth, insufficient as a theory of knowledge. He says in his article about Stroud (1994),

A. “Suffice it to say that the most comprehensive coherence accompanied by the truth of what one believes will not yet amount to knowledge. (1994, 268)”

His argument is that in an evil demon world we may have justification resulting from coherence and the addition of truth of what one believes is insufficient for knowledge.

B. “However, if by sheer luck one happened to be right in the belief that one faces a fire, one’s being *both* thus justified *and* right still would fall short of one’s knowing about the fire. So whatever is to be said for coherence, or even for comprehensive coherence, one thing seems clear: none of that will be enough just on its own to explain fully what a true belief needs in order to be knowledge.” (1994, 268)

This is not to say that Sosa fails to appreciate the importance of coherence. On the contrary, in his more recent work he remarks:

C. “Broad coherence adds to a subject’s intellectual work or merit, first, because of the integration and harmony that it imports, but, also, because it is truth conducive: that is to say,

broad coherence is valuable and admirable in subject because it increases the likelihood that the subject will have true beliefs and avoid false ones.” (ms, 93)

This kind of coherence must include something beyond coherence among beliefs, however. As he clarifies the matter,

D. “For example, it must be coherence not only among one’s beliefs, but among one’s beliefs *and* experiences. And, further it must be coherence that turns perspectival and includes some view of the sources of one’s beliefs and reliability of the these sources.” (ms, 91)

He concludes,

E. “In conclusion, I claim that: (a) our broad coherence is necessary for the kind of reflective knowledge traditionally desired; and (b) such broadly coherent knowledge is desirable because of the integration it imports and also because in our actual world it helps us approach truth and avoid error.” (ms, 100)

There is much agreement, consequently, between Sosa and coherentists like Lehrer (2000) who claim that coherence supplemented with the truth of what one believes is sufficient for knowledge. However, there is an important wedge of distinction, according to Sosa, between the coherence theory restricted to coherence among beliefs supplemented with a requirement of the truth of what one believes and the virtue perspectivism that Sosa advocates. Our purpose is to question whether that wedge of distinction is a difference that makes a theoretical difference. It would be no objection to Sosa’s account if were to be equivalent to a coherence theory, especially from the point of view of one of the present authors, but Sosa stresses the importance of the distinction, and so it worth testing the power of the wedge to effect the distinction.

First of all, it is important to avoid a verbal dispute based on claim (A) above. Sosa appears to be claiming that if the sort of justification arising from coherence is supplemented by only the truth of a target belief, then this will not suffice for knowledge. With this we agree. However, the further remarks, especially those in the later work and (D), suggest that coherence among beliefs must be supplemented by something other than beliefs and the truth thereof. One

must add, for example, experiences.

Now consider, *pace* Lehrer, a kind of coherence that is sufficiently constraining so that it requires of coherence that a target belief which is justified by a coherent background system of beliefs, or which coheres with that system, must be so strongly supported by the system that all objections to the belief can be answered. Thus, if it is an objection to the belief that it was not formed in appropriate way or derived from a reliable source, then the system must contain the belief that the forming was appropriate way or the source reliable. Similarly, if it is an objection to the belief that the circumstances in which it is formed are not propitious for the truth of the belief, then the system, to be coherent with the belief, must contain the belief that the circumstances are propitious. Finally, if it is an objection to the belief that it is not properly connected to experience, then, if the belief coheres with the system, it must contain the belief that the belief is so connected to experience. So let us call this constraint, one requiring that a target belief that coheres with a system of beliefs can be defended by the system against objections to the belief, the *defensibility constraint*.

Thinking about coherence in this manner, constrained by demand that objections be answerable, seems compatible with Sosa's intuitions about coherence. Sosa allows that the circularity of a belief system which contains beliefs about one's reliability is necessary for reflective knowledge. Both Sosa and Lehrer agree that there is a kind of knowledge, what Sosa calls animal knowledge, that does not require such beliefs about reliability which would be required to meet the defensibility constraint. However, reflective knowledge, intended as it is to provide us with an understanding of what we know seems to require a kind of coherence that satisfies the defensibility constraint. Sosa might not agree with this, and we should like to be informed if he demurs, but he appears to propose a view consistent with it.

In defense of this interpretation, note his remarks above that the kind of coherence required "must be a coherence that turns perspectival and includes some *view* (our italics) of the sources of one's beliefs and reliability of these sources." If coherence must include a *view* of

such matters, then, it seems it must include a belief to that effect. For what is a view if not a belief? And what is the motivation for requiring such a view if not to provide defense against a possible objection? We think that the attribution of the defensibility constraint to Sosa is a reasonable one concerning reflective knowledge.

However, these simple reflections suggest to us that Sosa's virtue perspectivism is contained in the coherence theory restricted to coherence among beliefs provided only that the beliefs are true. For a system sufficiently coherent to defend a target belief against objections to it, which seems required to yield reflective knowledge, must contain the beliefs concerning reliability and connection with experience which virtue perspectivism supplies. Moreover, if those beliefs be true, their truth appears sufficient, when added to coherence satisfying the defensibility constraint, to yield knowledge. To be sufficient for defense of the target belief, the beliefs with which it coheres must affirm that the context and our perspective are truth conducive. So, if the beliefs with which a belief coheres are fully adequate to the reflective defense, then, if they are true, they will insure what is required in terms of ways, means and circumstances by virtue perspectivism.

We thus propose a question to Sosa. What is supplied by virtue perspectivism that is not required for the defensibility of the belief by a coherent system to yield reflective knowledge? Perhaps Sosa has a positive answer we have not discerned, and we would be glad to be instructed by him. If the answer is negative, and nothing additional is supplied, then why does a highly coherent system, one with a high enough grade of coherence to provide for the defensibility of the target belief, fail to suffice for knowledge when the beliefs in the system are true? Notice, to return to the new evil demon problem, that coherence with a system plus the truth of the target belief alone cannot be expected to suffice. Far too many of the beliefs belonging to the system could be false, and thus the system might fail to yield knowledge despite the truth of the target belief. That is to be expected. If we think of the beliefs belonging the system as supplying premises to support or defend the target belief, then, of course, the support or defense will only

suffice if the premises are true. Our suggestion is that the truth of cohering premises, if adequate for the defense of the target belief, suffices for knowledge.

We can anticipate one reply concerning the supplementary role of experience. It is that it is the experience itself rather than a belief concerning it that plays the crucial role in knowledge. Now construed in one manner the answer to this objection is simple. For a belief about the existence of an experience (or about the relation of a belief to an experience) to be true, more is required than the belief. The truth of the belief that I am experiencing a fire requires the experience of the fire and not just a believing attitude. So, the truth requirement imports the reality of the thing believed to exist, the experience, and that is something beyond the believing attitude.

Another way of construing the objection that it is the experience itself rather than belief that is crucial, and a stronger one, is to say that no belief at all is required for the experience to be crucial. I might have some experience which plays a role in justification and knowledge without ever having any corresponding belief that it exists. Here there is a possible ambiguity. Many things of which we have no conception may play a causal role in our beliefs and so, indirectly, in our knowledge. But the existence of such things is not our justification for the belief, though it may play a crucial role in etiology of the belief. Of course, sometimes etiology constitutes part of the justification for a belief, in perception, for example, but then the truth of beliefs concerning the etiology, that an object causes my experience, for example, and their coherence with the target belief suffices for reflective knowledge.

It should be allowed, moreover, that the word "belief" covers many different states from the weakest impression of something being the case to the most careful and certain conviction. It is important not to let ambiguities in the doxastic vocabulary generate verbal dispute and philosophical confusion. So, let us use the term in the broadest manner and think of those representations of sense which we quickly reject, e.g. of the water on highway ahead on a sunny day, as weak short-lived beliefs, as well as the most reflective judgements. I think we may then

say that experience is either represented, in which case it is at least a kind of short-lived belief that may play a role in justification, or it is unrepresented altogether, in which case it is no belief at all and plays no role in justification. No justification without representation.

Thus, to rephrase our question for Sosa: Suppose that coherence among beliefs is broad enough to provide justification for a target belief in a demon world. In the demon world, the justification is defeated by the falsity of the cohering beliefs providing the defense of the target belief. Now consider the target belief defended by a coherent system of beliefs providing a justification that is undefeated by error in the actual world. Why would such coherence combined in this way with truth not suffice for knowledge as the coherentist avers? Note that coherence theorists have not been reluctant to add the requirement of truth to that of the internal attitudes, though they have differed concerning its nature. If truth be something external, then something external is part of the coherence theory of knowledge. The crucial question is whether our system of beliefs, when sufficiently coherent with each other to defend a target belief, suffices for knowledge when those beliefs required for the defense are true. Moreover, do not such beliefs constitute our perspective? And is it not those beliefs, which include the belief that they will lead us to truth and not error, whose virtue from our perspective yields knowledge? In short, then, why isn't the virtuous perspective required for knowledge a view that is part of the system of belief that coheres with other beliefs to yield knowledge when undefeated by error? Why isn't virtue perspectivism contained within coherence constrained by defensibility and supplemented by truth?

We conclude by expressing our appreciation for the remarkable clarification that Sosa has provided of the conditions of knowledge by advocating his position of virtue perspectivism. No one has done more to clarify issues pertaining to the relationship between knowledge and skepticism than Sosa. He has clarified beyond all others the way in which evidence that fails to be adequate for knowledge in a demon world may nevertheless be adequate for knowledge in the actual world. Moreover, his clarification of the role of reliability and what it can and cannot

accomplish is a remarkable contribution. He has sorted through the details in a way that leaves him in our debt. In asking for further clarification of the relationship between the coherence theory of knowledge and his virtue perspectivism, we hope to obtain one final step in the process of clarification he has effected.

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