

## BOOK REVIEW

Sosa, Ernest, *Judgment and Agency*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. vi + 269, £25 (hardback).

Some of the very best philosophy attempts to combine things that we feel are true, but that can't necessarily be true all at once. Just think of Mill: is his hedonistic and utilitarian framework really compatible with a genuine commitment to the idea that lives are ultimately valuable in so far as they involve the free development of our individuality, or will the former aspect of his theory unavoidably override the latter? It's difficult to tell—and extremely rewarding to attempt to find out.

Ernest Sosa's theory of knowledge is rewarding for much the same reason. His thinking has shaped large parts of contemporary epistemology, and been instrumental in carving out the field of virtue epistemology in particular. Moreover—like some of the very best philosophy of the past—Sosa's epistemology is a sophisticated attempt to reconcile two notions that seem both independently true and mutually incompatible, in this case regarding what it is to come to know something.

On the first notion, to know something is simply to have arrived at a true belief through a *reliable* process, that is, a process that tends to issue in true beliefs. In its most straightforward (its opponents would say 'crude') form, that's the end of the story. Sometimes, the believer is *conscious* of the relevant operations, *reflects* on her beliefs, and so forth. But, on this reliabilist notion, these are nothing but bells and whistles on a set of operations that, fundamentally, differ only in their complexity from a thermometer responding to its environment.

The second notion finds this austere picture wanting, regardless of whether or not it is attractive by being so simple. Knowers are nothing like thermometers—not even very complex ones. When knowers reflect on their beliefs and evidence, or consciously endorse this or that belief, they are working within a domain of *freedom* that's fundamentally different from the automatic information processing that the reliabilist takes as its paradigm case. To borrow a term from this most recent book of Sosa's, knowers don't only form beliefs; they also make *judgments*, which involve a 'free, volitional endorsement' [3].

It's this notion of a judgment and its relation to the idea of knowers as *agents*—subjects consciously acting in their pursuit of knowledge, and not merely responding to external stimuli—that's at the heart of Sosa's book. He's not denying that much of the things that we know are the result of more or less automatic processing. He refers to such knowledge as *animal* knowledge, which involves subjects coming to believe true things *aptly*, that is, through an exercise of a truth-conducive disposition, or *competency*. The paradigm case here would be the perceptual knowledge attained when simply turning one's head in the direction of some stimuli and coming to know something about it as a result.

By contrast, someone possessing *reflective* knowledge is not merely forming a belief through a competency, but must also have 'an epistemic perspective on his belief, a perspective from which he endorses the source of that belief, from which he can see that source as reliably truth conducive' [Sosa 2009: 35]. In some cases, the subject is able to

ascend to an even higher level of reflectivity and to ‘know full well’, as Sosa [2011] calls it. Someone who knows full well isn’t merely putting her beliefs in an appropriate perspective, and as such possessing reflective knowledge; he is also able to competently assess the risk of believing in the first place, and to judge whether suspending judgment might be the appropriate response.

Sosa’s notion of judgment, as we find it in this book, is an elaboration on this concept of knowing full well. More specifically, he suggests that ‘the knowledge that gains conscious, agential, judgmental endorsement’ is ‘knowledge properly so-called’ and, moreover, ‘the knowledge at the center of the epistemological tradition from the Pyrrhonists to Descartes and beyond’ [52]. If Sosa is right, he has provided us with a picture integrating the two aforementioned notions: his concept of animal knowledge is in line with the reliabilist picture, while the variety of levels of reflective knowledge accounts for the idea that epistemic agents are in a substantive sense free. There is no doubt that it’s an impressive and sophisticated picture. But I’m not convinced it’s successful.

To see why, let’s have a closer look at what is supposed to motivate the ascension from (mere) animal knowledge to the epistemic heights of reflective judgments. It helps here to clarify the levels involved, by way of Sosa’s own basketball analogy:

1. **Mere true belief.** A basketball player who shoots and makes the basket—but through luck rather than skill.
2. **Animal knowledge.** A basketball player who shoots and makes the basket *through a competent exercise of skill* (that is, aptly).
3. **Reflective knowledge.** A basketball player who shoots and makes the basket through an exercise of skill, *from a perspective from which she aptly believes that her skill enables her to reliably make baskets.*
4. **Knowing full well.** A basketball player who shoots and makes the basket through an exercise of skill, from a perspective from which she aptly believes that her skill enables her to reliably make baskets, *and is guided by that belief—by a competent risk-assessment—in her decision to shoot.*

We may start by asking why one would ascend all the way from 2 to 4. According to Sosa, the reason is that it ensures that the agent’s belief-formation isn’t merely *accompanied* by a competent risk-assessment (which is guaranteed by level 3), but is also *guided* by it (level 4). That seems a good thing in cases where the relevant assessment is indeed competent. But it’s not clear what this necessarily has to do with *judgment*, since it would seem that someone can be guided by the relevant type of assessment without being guided in a way that involves ‘conscious, agential, judgmental endorsement’ [52]. The relevant risk-assessment might be no less effective in guiding the person for being non-conscious and more or less automatic, and as such simply constituting another layer of animal knowledge. In other words, it’s not clear that level 4 adds anything different in kind from what’s already present on level 2.

It might be said that this ignores level 3, the level of reflective knowledge. If level 3 adds something that’s different in kind from level 2, and if level 4 presupposes a type of risk-assessment that’s introduced at level 3, then there are things on level 4 that are different in kind from what’s on level 2. But it’s not clear that level 3 adds anything to level 2, either. To see why, consider Sosa’s case for talking about reflective in addition to (mere) animal knowledge. In an early paper, Sosa [1991: 240] suggests that reflective

knowledge is more *reliable* than animal knowledge. That, however, seems questionable—whether or not reflecting on one’s beliefs will make one more reliable is a function of the reliability of the relevant reflective processes, and we cannot simply assume that all such processes are reliable enough to improve the person’s epistemic position.

In more recent writings, Sosa motivates the distinction between animal and reflective knowledge with reference to how the latter, unlike the former, makes for success that can be *credited* to the believer, on account of not involving mere luck: ‘What favors reflective over unreflective knowledge? Reflective acquisition of knowledge is ... like attaining a prized objective guided by one’s own intelligence, information, and deliberation; unreflective acquisition of knowledge is like lucking into some benefit in the dark’ [2009: 142]. But that, too, seems questionable, since succeeding without reflecting doesn’t entail having been lucky. As the list of levels above makes clear, luck is presumably removed in ascending from level 1 to 2, not from 2 to 3. Return to Sosa’s own basketball analogy: a player can make a basket through an exercise of skill rather than luck, without having at any point reflected on the reliability of her skill. Indeed, reflecting thus might even have *decreased* her chances of making the basket, as in the case of someone who gets in the way of her own skill by overthinking it.

It might be objected that I am reading too much into the notion of ‘reflection’ here. Often, when we talk of ‘reflection’, we have in mind a conscious and concerted effort to self-monitor. By contrast, in making his case in *Judgment and Agency* for postulating reflective in addition to animal knowledge, Sosa makes clear that ‘reflective’ in the relevant sense simply means ‘second-order’ [82–4]. In particular, it involves a second-order sensitivity to defeaters that might take the form of nothing but ‘a default trust absent specific reasons for concern’ [117]. But if this is correct, then what Sosa refers to as ‘reflective knowledge’ is at best animal knowledge twice over, in the form of second-order competencies sensitive to considerations likely to render first-order competencies unreliable—none of which necessarily requires any conscious intervention, reflection (in the sense of conscious and concerted self-monitoring), endorsement, or judgment on the part of the subject.

If that’s so, it’s not clear that levels 3 and 4 add anything that’s different in kind from what’s already on level 2—several layers of animal knowledge will do the job. It also suggests that Sosa’s attempt to truly reconcile the two notions with which we started is unsuccessful, and that his view might just collapse into a version of reliabilism, albeit one acknowledging the interaction of different processes at different levels. In the opinion of the present reviewer, who happens to think that reliabilism is true, theories can suffer far worse fates than this. Moreover, it in no way takes away from the significance of Sosa’s theory, as presented in this book or elsewhere. *Judgment and Agency* has all the virtues that we’ve come to expect from Sosa’s work: it’s insightful, undogmatic, sensitive to detail, and will inevitably leave the reader more informed than she was before. Yet again, he has written a book that no serious epistemologist can ignore, and in so doing has provided further evidence—as if that were needed—that current discussions in virtue epistemology would not be at the high level of sophistication they currently are if not for his contributions.

## References

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