

# Ernest Sosa's "Philosophical Scepticism and Epistemic Circularity"

## I. PHILOSOPHICAL SKEPTICISM

There is no way to attain a full philosophical understanding of our knowledge. A fully general theory of knowledge is impossible.

## II. THE RADICAL ARGUMENT FOR PHILOSOPHICAL SKEPTICISM

- A1. Any theory of knowledge must be internalist or externalist.
- A2. A fully general internalist theory is impossible.
- A3. A fully general externalist theory is impossible.
- C. From A1-A3, *philosophical skepticism* follows.

- Given that externalism is simply the denial of internalism, it is clear that A1 is true.
- A2 is true as well.
  - i. If an internalist account of knowledge is to be *fully general*, it must account for all of our knowledge all at once.
  - ii. We can provide such an account of knowledge only from an extra-epistemic standpoint.
  - iii. Given only the resources available to internalists, it is impossible to adopt an extra-epistemic standpoint.
  - iv. Thus, it is impossible to provide a fully general internalist account of knowledge.
- Thus, if we are to avoid philosophical skepticism, we must find some way to deny A3.

## III. THREE CHOICES FOR THE EXTERNALIST

- 1) COHERENTISM: When a belief is epistemically justified, it is so in virtue of its being part of a coherent body of beliefs (or at least of one that is sufficiently coherent and appropriately comprehensive).
- 2) FOUNDATIONALISM OF THE GIVEN: When a belief is epistemically justified, it is so in virtue of being either the taking of the given, the mere recording of what is present to the mind of the believer, or else by being inferred appropriately from such foundations.
- 3) RELIABILISM: When a belief is epistemically justified, it is so in virtue of deriving from an epistemically, truth-conducively reliable process or faculty or intellectual virtue of belief acquisition.

#### IV. COHERENTISM

This isn't the best option, for "[o]ne's beliefs can be comprehensively coherent without amounting to knowledge" (p. 97).

That this is true is shown by the New Evil Demon problem: Suppose that we are victims of Descartes' evil demon. If the coherentist is right, then we're justified in holding the vast majority of our beliefs (just as we would be if it were to turn out that we are *not* victims of an evil demon). Suppose, too, that some of our beliefs turn out by sheer luck to be true. Even in this case, "one's being *both* thus justified [in virtue of the comprehensive coherence of one's beliefs] *and* right still would fall short of one's knowing" (p. 96).

#### V. FOUNDATIONALISM OF THE GIVEN

This isn't the best option, either, for it's difficult if not impossible to identify any characteristic in virtue of which takings of the given will count as knowledge. (Recall here the familiar arguments against foundationalism, i.e., those according to which none of the suggested features, which typically include infallibility, incorrigibility and self-justifiedness, allow us to account for the foundational nature of certain beliefs).

#### VI. RELIABILISM

- 1) It seems that we must here take a stand against philosophical skepticism.
- 2) There are, however, arguments against reliabilism that seem significant. In particular, some suggest that there is no fully general reliabilist account of knowledge.
  - i. If a reliabilist account of knowledge is to be fully general, it must account for all of our knowledge all at once.
  - ii. Reliabilists cannot explain how the following might amount to knowledge: my belief that SP, sense-perceptual practice, is reliable.
  - iii. Thus, it is impossible to provide a fully general reliabilist account of knowledge.
- 3) How are we to counter this argument?

#### VII. RESPONDING TO THE ARGUMENT

- 1) We can say that my belief that SP is reliable is justified *because it is produced by a reliable belief-forming process*.

- i. Yet this is to “give us a stone instead of bread,” for we are in this case “at best in the position of someone who ... can see what he *would* have good reason to believe if the theory he believes were true” (p. 104).
- ii. Moreover, this strategy is “unacceptably circular” (p. 104). For we are attempting to justify our belief in the reliability of SP by employing SP itself (or by appealing to the reliability of SP itself).

2) We can say that SP is *firmly established*.

- i. Yet why am I justified in believing that SP is firmly established? It still seems that we’re being given stones instead of bread. “For in order to reach the belief that our total way of forming beliefs W is firmly established—B:FE(W)—we could hardly avoid using W itself” (p. 105). Thus, if the above strategy is circular, then so is this one.

3) Sosa’s strategy

- i. Suppose that by using way W of forming beliefs, we arrive at the conviction that W is our way of forming beliefs (see p. 107).
- ii. This conviction restricts our coherent combinations of attitudes. Consider
  - 1. B:[W is my overall way of forming beliefs]
  - 2. B:[W is reliable]
  - 3. D:[W is reliable]
  - 4. Wh:[W is reliable]
- iii. 1+2 is more satisfyingly coherent than either 1+3 or 1+4.
- iv. No further argument would provide a fundamentally different and superior source of justification or rationality for our accepting the reliability of our overall way W of forming beliefs (see pp. 107, 108). Moreover, it is necessarily the case that any such argument will be epistemically circular, and so we should not lament the circularity here.

4) Another strategy

- i. There is no good reason to assume that a fully general account of knowledge must “reveal how all such knowledge can be traced back to some epistemically prior knowledge from which it can be shown to be derived (without logical or epistemic circularity)” (p. 109). For it is *impossible* to reveal any such thing.
  - 1. OK. But if we should reject this assumption here, shouldn’t we also reject it in the argument against A2? And if that’s the case, then haven’t we (re)opened the door for an *internalist* response to philosophical skepticism? If so, why think that we ought to prefer the reliabilist strategy?