

Review of Ernest Sosa, Epistemology

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P U B L I S H E D A S

Review of Ernest Sosa, Epistemology (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017). The European Legacy 23, no. 5 (2018): 583–85.

doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2018.1437989>

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in The European Legacy on 16 February 2018, available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2018.1437989>. This is an Accepted Manuscript version of the following article, accepted for publication in The European Legacy: Hill, Benjamin D. 2018. Review of Epistemology, by Ernest Sosa. The European Legacy 23 (5): 583–85. It is deposited under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. This is the author's manuscript, before copyediting and typesetting; it is not the published version. Please cite the published version.

V E R S I O N I N F O R M A T I O N

Version date: October 2017 (author's manuscript)

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Epistemology, by Ernst Sosa, Princeton Foundations of Contemporary Philosophy, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2017 xiii + 235 pp., £24.95 (cloth)

I expected to like this book, but not quite as much as I do. I did not expect, however, to respect this book as much as I do. And I certainly did not anticipate the bases on which my respect for the book rests. This book surprised me.

Ernest Sosa's *Epistemology* is the latest installment of the Princeton Foundations of Contemporary Philosophy Series, which is advertised as fresh, high-level introductions. As such I expected Sosa's book to be somewhat backwards-looking, somewhat fair-minded, and somewhat comprehensive. Other titles in the series are — they consider the ideas and debates of the past 50-100 years, explain how and why they emerged and evolved, and analyze their conceptual underpinnings. Readers are generally prepared to enter deeper study of the areas. So, I expected Sosa's contribution to examine the past 50 years of debates over the types and sources of epistemic justification, the debate between foundationalists and coherentists, discussions of the natures of the potential sources of knowledge, and the various responses and reactions to contemporary external world skepticism.

Sosa's book is not like that, however. It is polemical rather than fair-minded; its scope is limited by its philosophical agenda; and it is forward-looking rather than backward-looking. If it is an introduction to anything, it is an introduction to "Performative Epistemology," which is Sosa's own brand of virtue epistemology. It reaches back maybe 12-15 years, through the series of books he has published since his John Locke Lectures at Oxford (2005), as he brings his epistemological thoughts together into a systematic and mature whole. Most traditional epistemological topics and themes do appear in the work, but not the ideas driving contemporary discussions about them. They appear instead as problems for Sosa's performative epistemology to resolve and push past as it moves the discussion forward. Sosa (and the press) are aware of

this and present the book as a “revisionary” introduction, but really it should be approached not as an introduction to a contemporary area of philosophical discussion but to Sosa’s peculiar strand within that discussion.

Seen in that light, the book is excellent, brilliant even. The power of Sosa’s view to reshape the questions and terms of debate as well as its capacity for resolving many issues of traditional worry and concern (especially external world skepticism) comes clearly into focus in this text. Here is where the value of Sosa’s book shines through, not in introducing the field as it was but introducing it as it could be. I did not expect this.

Sosa begins the book with a revisionist account of Descartes as a pyrrhonian virtue epistemologist (chs. 1-3). I doubt that historians of early modern philosophy will approve of Sosa’s implausible reading of the *Meditations*. Descartes, the 17th Century’s great mechanist and dualist, could never accept subconscious, apt animal beliefs as the lower-level epistemic foundations for rationally endorsed, conscious and reflective judgments, as Sosa’s interpretation maintains. But Sosa, *malgré lui*, does not need the authority of Descartes as a fellow performative epistemologist, and once I got past his attributions to Descartes, I could see more clearly value in Sosa’s misreading in how it highlights the presuppositions of his own vision. Sosa extracts from Descartes a set of constraints on responses to skepticism: required are second order responses resting on a fundamental distinction between credence and judgement and based on fundamentally indubitable propositions and that avoid bootstrapping or circular reasoning or justification. He also extracts from Descartes an understanding of a more interesting form of philosophical skepticism as a performance itself that threatens the safety (rather than the sensitivity) of our beliefs, which is best exemplified by dream skepticism. But Sosa’s main skeptical challenge is regress skepticism, a form of circularity that pressures a reflective knower

to accept that she is a reliable judge of the aptness of her reliable subconscious beliefs. He sets up the challenge for epistemologists (like him) as not one of breaking the circularity but establishing that the circularity involved in knowledge is virtuous rather than vicious. He sees his project reflected in the Cartesian endeavor to ground belief in an external world.

The heart of the book is chs. 4-8, where Sosa lays out his program of performative epistemology that answers the skeptic. The crux of Sosa's account is that the aim of believers are safe beliefs (beliefs that would not be held were the beliefs not true). And the norms governing such attempts are accuracy (believing truly), adroitness (exercising epistemic competence in believing truly), and aptness (believing truly because of one's adroitness). Knowledge, then, is an act of believing that satisfies these norms, whether animal belief or reflective belief. The highest form of knowledge, reflective judgment resulting in an affirmation of a proposition, is "*aptly* attaining aptness of affirmation," says Sosa (90). He uses this bi-level analysis of epistemic capacities not only to close off the circularity threatened by the regress skeptic, but also to defuse the intuitions that underlie virtually all of the defeaters of knowledge puzzling traditional epistemologists. Much of the text is devoted to these explanations. After describing his epistemological vision, Sosa considers the value of knowledge as opposed to simply true belief (ch. 7). He sees it as largely heuristic: knowledge is valuable because we'll be more successful believers if we strive for it. He also considers the problem of epistemic luck (ch. 8). According to Sosa, epistemic success must be achieved in the right way to avoid the luck problem, and he postulates a primitive notion of the manifestation of a capacity as a replacement for the concept of "in the right way." I found this to be the most disappointing chapter of the book — Sosa offers no real criteria for determining when an epistemic performance is a

manifestation of an agent's epistemic capacities and, in the end, relies on simple, case-by-case judgments that performances manifest aptness.

The remaining chapters (chs. 9-13) will probably be of most interest to working epistemologists invested in the conventional debates. Here he presents technical criticisms of opponents, such as Zagzebski's "responsibilist virtue epistemology" (ch. 9), contextualism (ch. 10), and situationalism (chs 11-12). The final chapter is summative. It walks through the ideas of knowledge, justification, and skepticism and explains how Sosa's performative epistemology reconceptualizes these ideas that are central to contemporary epistemology. It is rather forward-looking in that it pulls together the conceptual conditions that, for Sosa, will demarcate the terms for further developments and further discourse about epistemology with critics and followers.

I was surprised by the book, as mentioned earlier. I expected it to be introductory to the field of epistemology, which it really isn't. I wouldn't recommend it for graduate or advanced undergraduate students with a weak grounding in epistemology readying themselves for an epistemology seminar. Nor would I use it as a text in a third-year epistemology topics course. But for undergraduate students with a good background in contemporary epistemology, especially with some background in virtue epistemology, it would be an excellent text in a seminar on performative epistemology. I was also unexpectedly disappointed by the use of the historical material in the book. Sosa's selective and acontextualist readings said very little of interest about Descartes, or the pyrrhonians, or Aristotle and Plato. But, seen as ways of reading historical texts informed by a host of one's own theoretical commitments, Sosa's use of historical material was illuminating and contributed considerably to illustrating the power and scope of his vision. Even though Descartes could not have been a bi-level performative epistemologist concerned with the aptness of belief, seeing how his concerns could morph into

those illuminates the significance of aptness, safety, and higher-order reflection within the phenomena of human knowledge and helped (me at least) to more fully appreciate the power of Sosa's vision. As a work of contemporary epistemology, I think this little book is brilliant and I highly recommend that you read it even if you are not a student or practitioner of contemporary epistemology.