

*Beyond Virtue Epistemology*¹

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1. The works of Ernest Sosa claims to provide original and thought-provoking contributions to contemporary epistemology in setting a new direction for old dilemmas about the nature and value of knowledge. *Judgment and Agency* (2015) presents some new developments in his ideas. This book, described by Ram Neta (2015) as “both monumentally important and largely successful”, brings together eleven essays, mostly based on articles previously published in journals and collected works. These texts address the principal themes of Sosa’s philosophy, such as the nature and value of epistemic achievements, the different degrees of belief, the interaction between animal justification and reflective justification, the point of ancient and modern skepticism, and the moral, social and pragmatic aspects of knowledge.

As we know, virtue epistemology (SOSA, 1991, 2007, 2009) provides a solution to the disputes that monopolized the epistemological debates of the 1960s and 1980s, between, on the one hand, *foundational* and *coherentist* theories about epistemic justification and, on the other hand, *externalist* and *internalist* conceptions about the nature of knowledge. These foundational and coherentist, externalist and internalist positions address aspects relevant to our cognitive

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lives, however, their defenders are inclined to refute other positions, even when they contain intuitively relevant ideas: can we set aside the idea that we are natural beings and that the way in which we are embedded in the natural world plays a constitutive role in our mental lives? Can we also reject the idea that reflection and a broad understanding of our cognitive achievements play a central role in our lives?

Sosa argues that knowledge requires true belief produced by something that is related to the, natural or learnt, skills and competence that allow someone to pursue and reach the truth. The idea of *apt performance* is crucial for both knowledge and action because it involves the idea of an achievement based on the deliberate endeavor of the person in the capacity of agent. In this sense, Sosa (2007, pp. 22-43) uses the example of an archer shooting an arrow at a target in order to illustrate the fact that one of the demands which may be required for knowledge is the fact that the cognitive agent must undertake a specific type of performance based on certain skills. Once this archer is truly competent, we expect that he will hit the target *because* of his skill and not *because* of some other factor:

Performance whose success manifests the relevant competence of the performer avoids thereby a kind of luck. According to competence virtue epistemology, knowledge is a special case of that. Knowledge of a sort is belief whose correctness is attained *sufficiently* through the believer's epistemic competence, belief that is thus "apt". (SOSA, 2015, p. 9)

The cognitive agent is someone who forms a true belief in virtue of their competence to form true beliefs.

2. Sosa makes a distinction between "animal knowledge" and "reflective knowledge" (SOSA, 2007; 2009): when a belief is correctly attributed to a competence exercised under the appropriate conditions, this counts as apt and as knowledge of a certain type, i.e. animal knowledge (SOSA, 2007a, p. 93). The adjective animal does not have negative connotations, but merely serves to emphasize the natural sense of the process of acquiring beliefs; its paradigm is perceptual knowledge. Animal knowledge requires *apt belief without*, however, requiring *defensible apt belief*, in other words an apt belief that the subject aptly believes is apt, and the subject can defend its aptness against skeptical doubts (SOSA, 2007, p. 24).

Reliabilism (GOLDMAN, 2012) as a form of epistemic externalism declares that the fact that the cognitive agent does not know how he forms true beliefs and does not have any idea that the procedure is reliable does not prevent him from having knowledge, because knowledge does not require *reasons*. Virtue epistemology inclines towards externalism and reliabilism and accepts that an agent has animal knowledge only if his belief is apt, in other words: a) the belief is true, b) it is produced by intellectual virtue, c) the subject obtains the truth from his intellectual virtues. On the other hand, virtue epistemology also accepts the relevance of something as an intentional awareness, an epistemic perspective: the agent who is conscious of the ways and means in which he forms beliefs (in other words, he is careful to avoid mistakes and takes account of the available evidence) will be more virtuous and, as such, more reliable than someone who does not have this attitude. We can therefore admit that the epistemically virtuous person exercises both externalist excellence (is involved in reliable processes proved by nature, by their perceptual virtues, by society) and internalist excellence (an agent is virtuous if he has good motives for supporting what he believes).

For Sosa, *reflective knowledge* requires not only apt belief but apt belief that is defensible as apt (SOSA, 2007, p. 24; 2009, pp. 135-153; 2011, pp. 67-95). Reflective knowledge is actively acquired as the result of an intentional investigation; it requires the agent to undertake voluntary intellectual activities: thinking about evidence, formulating hypotheses, evaluating objections, considering alternatives, and formulating conjectures, as is the case with science and philosophy.

3. *Judgment and Agency* goes one step further, since Sosa intends to develop his theory of human knowledge (as seen in Sosa, 2007 and 2009) “further than before, by taking up issues of metaphysics and ethics (broadly conceived) that arise for it” (SOSA, 2015, p.1).

We would like to highlight two points here. A large number of commentators and philosophers divide virtue epistemology into two branches, “reliabilist virtue epistemology” (associated with Sosa and John Greco) and “responsibilist virtue epistemology” (associated with Linda Zagzebski, Jonathan Kvanvig and Jason Baehr) (AXTELL, 2000). The latter is based on a direct criticism of reliabilism and is specifically located in the axiological, evaluative and moral aspects of knowledge. Intellectual virtues are strictly the agent’s characteristic traits related to their personal qualities. For this reason, when we assign a virtue to a person, we are, in fact, saying

that they have a motive or inspiration to act in a certain way in order to carry out an intellectual good, principally to attain truth. In a frank debate with Jason Baehr (2011) – and in the light of an interesting reinterpretation of the skeptical tradition in Descartes and Sextus Empiricus – Sosa (2015, pp. 2-3; 34-61; 215-254) considers that a “true epistemology will indeed assign to such responsibilist-cum-reliabilist intellectual virtue the *main* role in addressing concerns at the center of the tradition”.

The second point refers to the two notions that figure in the book title, *agency* and *judgment*. For Sosa, someone is an agent if they have the capacity to perform actions *freely* and deliberately endeavor to perform them. *Epistemic agency* is present if this person has the capacity to undertake an epistemic performance by choice. Judgment, for its part, is the exercise of epistemic agency, when the person establishes a goal to reach higher levels of epistemic performance (“full aptness”, “knowing full well”), as found in the philosophical traditions started by Pyrrhonism and in Descartes’ concept of “*scientia*”.

As the first part of the book suggests, *Judgment and Agency* proposes an *extended and unified virtue epistemology*, which goes beyond *virtue epistemology*, deepening and extending its previous positions, principally that of “reflective aptness”. Judgment is identified as a fully alethic assertion which aims for both aptness and accuracy. From this point of view, an apt judgment is a fully apt assertion because, as well as seeking truth, it surpasses that which is only reflectively apt (for “reflective aptness” the condition of aptness and the condition of aptly representing it as apt are autonomous). Judgment as an exercise of epistemic agency is a fully apt performance because it is the kind of performance which necessarily expresses the competence that an agent exercises when he freely decides to undertake an investigation. From the point of view of tradition, crucial epistemic competence and agential performance are originally at the center of any philosophical investigation about knowledge, while, in the meantime, many current epistemologists, be these associated with reliabilism or responsibilist virtue epistemology, have neglected this aspect...

4. In June 2015, under the auspices of the Postgraduate Program in Philosophy at the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA) and the Teaching, Philosophy and History of Science Program at UFBA/State University of Feira de Santana (UEFS), with financial support from the Coordi-

nation for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES – PAEP 2012, process number 342229) and coordinated by both the *Grupo de Investigações Filosóficas* (CNPq) and the Skepticism Working Group (GT-Ceticismo) of the National Association of Postgraduate Studies in Philosophy (ANPOF), a group of Brazilian philosophers met in the city of Salvador, Bahia, Brazil in order to converse with Professor Ernest Sosa about his book *Judgment and Agency*. This book symposium brings together contributions from the participants at this meeting. Only Professor João Carlos Salles, as a result of his pressing commitments as Rector of Universidade Federal da Bahia was unable to contribute his text to this publication. We would, however, like to extend our sincere thanks to him for his valuable participation.

The meeting that took place in Bahia was a truly unique opportunity for the participants. As well as being one of the most important philosophers of our time, Professor Ernest Sosa is also highly educated and polite, open to dialogue, attentive to criticisms, and respectful of his interlocutors. We were able not only to discuss and clarify points in Sosa's arguments, but also to establish a frank dialogue. For the postgraduate programs involved in promoting the event, this signified an important step in terms of their international involvement, since they then began to address the agenda of current, significant debates in the philosophical community.

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