



Knowledge, normativity, and virtue

Himanshu Parcha

Department of Philosophy, University of Delhi, India

Abstract

The post-Gettier literature in epistemology tries to resolve the problem rose by Edmund Gettier (1963), and in doing so epistemologists are also trying to answer two pertinent questions: (1) what is the nature of knowledge? (2) why it is valuable? Ernest Sosa (2007, 2009, and 2009a) has developed an account of epistemology known as virtue epistemology; this account proposes to answer both the questions. In this paper, I will sketch an analysis of Sosa's virtue epistemology (VE), to see whether it provides an answer to these questions and in doing so I will also look at challenges faced by VE by focusing on two critiques Stewart Cohen (2004), and Alvin Goldman (2004). In short, this paper is a defence of Sosa's VE.

Keywords: Epistemic normativity, safety, animal knowledge, reflective knowledge, perspectivism

Introduction

Aristotle opens his *Metaphysics* by saying that "all men by nature desire to know" (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1.1). Human is naturally inclined to know, and knowledge is always a central concern for them. Inquiry into the nature and value of knowledge is an old enterprise. Plato in *Theaetetus* inquires into its nature, and in the *Meno*, he inquires about its value. The issue of knowledge poses serious questions to philosophers, and philosophers have taken questions about knowledge much seriously than anything else. Traditionally, epistemologists focus on the propositional aspect of knowledge, and the focus of analysis was beliefs and other constituents of knowledge. In a general sense, pre-Gettier literature in epistemology classified, explain, and analyse knowledge in terms of propositions and their truth-content. Epistemologists focused their attention on two central aspects of knowledge one is about the structure of knowledge and other is about the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge. The former question leads us to foundationalism etc. and the latter takes us to the justified true belief (JTB) model of knowledge. It was Gettier (1963) [4] who summarized and argued that all the previous epistemologists had thought about knowledge in terms of JTB or something similar to it. Furthermore, Gettier posed a challenge to the JTB model, and with his counterexamples [1], he showed that despite fulfilling all the necessary and sufficient condition (JTB) of knowledge an epistemic subject failed to know. Coming back to the former question, epistemologists have developed theories regarding the structure of knowledge like foundationalism and coherentism etc. Following Sosa's (1980) [6] analogy of the raft and the pyramid, we can make a difference between the two. According to foundationalism, knowledge has an analogous structure to pyramid, which has a basic belief (BB) as its foundation, which means all the other beliefs in that knowledge structure require BB for their justification, but BB doesn't require any other belief for its justification, this epistemic basicity of BB provides it with an epistemic privilege over other beliefs. Isn't it arbitrary? Yes, that is why foundationalism faces "the problem of arbitrariness". Coherentism, on the other hand, has a structure similar to the river raft which means there is no single belief that enjoys the epistemic basicity or privilege, but beliefs, in

this model, are like logs of the raft which support each other, so a justification of a belief B1 is provided by the surrounding beliefs B2, B3 etc. So, coherentism avoids the problems of arbitrariness. But coherentist theory fails to recognize the role of experience in justification [2]. Now, Ernest Sosa (1980) [6] argues that both these theories are failing on a larger picture but are partially true and can provide important inputs in the debate about knowledge. To resolve the issue regarding justification, Sosa proposes a theory of virtue reliabilism which is based on his notion of epistemic supervenience [3]. So, Sosa's VE tries to do three things 1) it tries to resolve the debate between foundationalism and coherentism, 2) it tries to provide an answer to the question what knowledge is, and 3) why it is valuable. In the coming section, I will sketch Sosa's account of epistemic normativity and safety, and in the following sections, I will deal with animal and reflective knowledge, and with the objections that are raised against Sosa's account.

Knowledge and Normativity

As we have seen, the traditional account of knowledge [4] does tell us about the propositional content of knowledge and it provides us with the necessary and sufficient conditions about knowledge. So, in the case like 'S knows that P' we got the required (but faulty) philosophical tools to know that P. But wait! What about the subject S, the believer or the knower, in the analysis of knowledge. It seems that the subject who claims to know that P or not-P is nowhere in the scene or, at least, we can say that the subject is passively present in the epistemological analysis. If it is the case, then we cannot answer questions like this how and why a believer's belief turns into knowledge. Why knowledge is more valuable than true belief for a subject S? It the epistemic agent who understand the value of knowledge, without placing the epistemic agent in the epistemological discourse we definitely can't answer the question regarding the value of knowledge. So, what we need is an account that provides a central place to the epistemic agent in the epistemic discourse. Basically, what was missing in the JTB kind of analysis of knowledge was a conception of normativity, to put it simply, we need normativity in epistemology.

In Sosa's epistemology, performance plays a significant role, so a belief, according to Sosa, is a kind of performance and what is achieved out of this performance is knowledge. Sosa (2007) ^[7] divides the success of a belief into three levels, and all these levels are necessary for any belief to be classified as apt belief. Sosa's three conditions for apt belief are this: 1) a belief must be true (i.e. accurate), 2) it must be competent (i.e., adroit), and 3) if the belief is accurate because of believer's adroitness or competence, then it is apt. This is what we call Sosa's AAA structure of knowledge, or to be precise, Sosa's AAA structure of apt belief, and this reading of beliefs as performances (via competence, accuracy etc.) opens up the room for normativity in epistemology. All things, animate or inanimate, perform, but what does Sosa mean by belief as performance? Is performance enjoying a special status in Sosa's epistemology? Yes, Sosa distinguishes human performances from other performances, he believes that human performances have an aim, so do other objects, but human performances are motivated by the reasons provided by the aim. So, an apt belief is attained purely by the competence or adroitness of the believer which excludes any involvement of luck factors. This AAA structure of knowledge is designed to exclude all of the luck-involving factors in epistemic cases and thereby distinguishes apt-beliefs from Gettierized cases of knowledge. Sosa's archer example illustrates this very well, here is the example: An archer shot an arrow to a target (i.e. bull's eye) her success can be analysed in terms of accuracy, and secondly, we have to see whether the shot manifests the skill of the archer (i.e. adroit). However, a shot can both be accurate and adroit but fail to be apt, imagine an archer shot the arrow but unbeknown to her a devil alters the path of the arrow, then again, an angel brings back the arrow to the right path which results into a bull's eye hit. In this case, the shot is both accurate and adroit, but not accurate because adroit, so it is not apt. It is clear that this AAA structure of apt beliefs excludes Gettierized cases. So, we can say that "the account of epistemic normativity as a sort of performance normativity has thus two virtues. It provides an explanation of the nature of knowledge, which amounts to a belief that is apt, belief that is an apt epistemic performance, one that manifests the relevant competence of the believer in attaining the truth. And, secondly, it also explains the extra value of knowledge beyond that of merely true belief" (Sosa, 2009 ^[8], p. 10).

It is important to note that the AAA structure is only about the apt belief which means it is, in some sense, not a sufficient condition for knowledge. Since knowledge is an achievement via. apt performance but even an apt performance can fail to be safe, here is an example: you are reading this article aptly using your intellectual faculties like perception etc. your skills are manifested in this task and so on, but you are dreaming that 'you are reading this article aptly', this possibility of dream make your apt belief about reading this article unsafe. So, Sosa believes knowledge requires a further condition, and according to Sosa, this condition is the safety condition: "a belief that p is safe provided it would have been held only if (most likely) p" (Sosa, 2007 ^[7], p. 25). But there can possibilities where a belief can be safe but inapt for example, an archer shot the arrow but unbeknown to her a devil alters the path of the arrow; then again, an angel brings back the arrow to the right path which results into a bull's eye hit, here the

performance is safe though inapt. Both these conditions, i.e., aptness and safety are required for knowledge but there is no entailment relation between the two; both these conditions are connected in a disjunctive manner, nonetheless, both these conditions face some problems which means we require something more. But what is that? Sosa makes a distinction between animal knowledge and reflective knowledge ^[5], the conditions like aptness and safety are meant for animal knowledge. The apt knowledge provided by the AAA structure of knowledge is regarded as animal knowledge, while in reflective knowledge the subject aptly notes an apt belief. But why do we need reflective knowledge? As we have seen that neither aptness entails safety nor safety entails aptness, and the dream scenario challenges the apt animal knowledge acquired through reliable faculties, to defend this and to make knowledge safe Sosa introduced the concept of reflective knowledge. Reflective knowledge is apt belief noted apply, but how can an epistemic agent aptly note a belief? An apt belief can be noted aptly only when an apt belief is safe, which means an outcome of the intermingling of safety condition and aptness lead to reflective knowledge, it means when we put an apt belief in a proper perspective what we gain is the reliability of our virtuous faculties and thereby knowledge ^[6]. For example, there is a hunter, unlike archer a hunter has to select shot by assessing the risk of failure (not-P), Hunter has two aim in mind hitting the target (e.g. aptness) and avoiding failure (safety) ^[7], when a hunter shot is both safe and apt we can call that shot fully apt. Similarly, a belief can be fully apt when it is both apt and safe (i.e. apt because safe), and fully safe belief can qualify as knowledge because it is better than a mere belief, because a belief can either be safe or apt, but it is only because of reliable faculties of an epistemic agent and his capacity of assessing risk of failure that we reach to a level when a belief can be both safe and apt, that is why knowledge is more valuable than true belief. So, knowledge is an achievement because of performance, and these performances of reliable faculties and assessment of risks (safety, reflective knowledge) provide knowledge with a value that wasn't available to mere beliefs.

Problems with Sosa's VE

Stewart Cohen (2004) ^[3] argues that Sosa's virtue perspectivism faces a problem of epistemic circularity because in this "One first acquires animal knowledge without the benefit of any knowledge of the reliability of one's faculties. After acquiring such knowledge, one uses it to gain a perspective from which one can learn of the reliability of the faculties in virtue of which one's initial animal knowledge was acquired" (Cohen, 2004 ^[5], p.18). He argues that such a model of knowledge endorses a kind of circularity because, for example, how can perception be used to establish the reliability of perception? In this model, for example, we start with perception etc. and after using it we gain a perspective which confers a kind of reliability on perception etc. But how can Sosa have overseen this problem of epistemic circularity? Sosa hasn't overseen this problem, but he accepts and endorses it intentionally, epistemic circularity is not a problem for Sosa but a virtue. But what was the intention and how can it be a virtue? Cohen believes that epistemic circularity is vicious, but Sosa argues that epistemic circularity is not vicious but virtuous, and this epistemic circularity can help us to resolve the

problem of criterion. Sosa traces back the virtuosity to Descartes and Moore. To understand the virtuosity of circularity, Sosa proposes a principle of exclusion (PE), this principle says, “if one is to know that p then one must exclude (rule out) every possibility that one knows to be incompatible with one’s knowing that p” (Sosa, 2009a ^[9], p.198). PE is a sensible principle, it is sensible to exclude not-P cases in order to know that P, and to know that P one must know that faculties yielding the knowledge that P are reliable. So, in order to properly know that P we need such kind of circularity; there is no other way to know the reliability of such faculties, it is only by the performance of these faculties we gain a perspective about their reliability. For example, an archer cannot know that his bow is reliable that it does not have any defects, it only by shooting from the bow that he came to know that it is reliable. So, in Sosa’s epistemology, we start with a belief, for e.g., you are reading this line (P), from this you derive that your perception faculty is reliable (this belief is true ad-hoc), but this belief about perception can be unsafe (you may be dreaming). It is only by using your perception faculty by excluding not-P cases (using safety) you come to know that your belief was true because your perception faculty is reliable. So, in this way this circularity yields knowledge and is not vicious.

Alvin Goldman (2004) ^[5] also raises some objections against Sosa’s VE; he categorically argues that Sosa’s VE does not have a space for the causal process involved in a target belief and rather it focuses on the epistemic subject and his faculties. Goldman favours causal reliabilism over VE. He says Sosa believes that a belief (B) falls within a field of propositions (F) and range of conditions (C) that provides justification for the belief, but Goldman argues that there can be a possibility where a different causal process (CP) which is not covering within F & C is providing a justification for the belief B. Let us again use archer’s example to argue against Goldman, for e.g., there is an archer who shoots the arrow to a target (TB), now following F&C model, the archer must fulfill the AAA condition in order to aptly hit TB. But if employ Goldman’s CP condition here, then we can talk of a possibility that the arrow hits TB not because of the manifestation of the skills of an archer but because an angel helps the arrow to hit TB. So, what Goldman is saying here is this: that even by fulfilling all the conditions like F & C (e.g. AAA) a belief can still be unsafe (other causal factors) and can’t amount to knowledge, but this possibility of unsafe belief(s) can be ruled out by Sosa’s safety condition. All the conditions like safety, aptness, meta-aptness and fully apt etc. rule out all the possibilities of irrelevant factors that do not occur within the range of F & C.

We can also argue that Goldman’s introduction of causal conditions in epistemology would not help much because a focus on causal conditions can rule out the epistemic subject out of the epistemic discourse, and if via. Epistemology we are aiming at certainty and truth then we can’t go by causal mechanisms because causal mechanisms are not stable units, and accepting causal mechanisms is similar to accepting luck factors in cases of knowledge which will again take us to Gettier like problem, which wouldn’t be good for epistemology. So, it is good to undermine the causal mechanisms.

Conclusion

Sosa’s VE provides a stable alternative to the previous theories of knowledge, and by introducing epistemic normativity or performativity theory of beliefs Sosa’s theory, in some sense, able to answer both the questions about knowledge. Sosa’s acceptance of epistemic circularity resolves the problem of the criterion. It is important to note that the safety condition plays a significant role in Sosa’s VE; safety condition is a development on the sensitivity condition of knowledge, while in the sensitivity condition the epistemic closure fails whereas the safety condition avoids the closure failure. It is the safety condition and aptness that provide a more stable structure to Sosa’s VE. It is with the help of safety conditions we are able to show that the objections raised by Cohen (2004) and Goldman (2004) ^[3, 5] are untenable. So, we can say that knowledge is an achievement via. performances of beliefs.

References

1. Ayer AJ. *The Problem of Knowledge*. London: Macmillan, 1956.
2. Chisholm R. *Perceiving: A Philosophical Study*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1957.
3. Cohen S. *Structure and Connection*. In: Greco J, Ed. *Ernest Sosa and His Critics*. Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2004. p. 17-21.
4. Gettier E. *Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?* *Analysis*, 1963;23(6):121-123. doi:10.1093/analys/23.6.121
5. Goldman A. *Reflective Knowledge and Virtue Perspectivism*. In: Greco J, Ed. *Ernest Sosa and His Critics*. Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2004. p. 86-95.
6. Sosa E. *The Raft and the Pyramid: Coherence versus Foundations in the Theory of Knowledge*. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 1980;5(1):3-26.
7. Sosa E. *A Virtue Epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
8. Sosa E. *Reflective Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
9. Sosa E. *Knowing Full Well: The Normativity of Beliefs as Performances*. *Philosophical Studies*, 2009;142(1):5-15.
10. For example, Swamiji has seen Tikaram driving a WagonR to the department, and after seeing this he forms the belief that ‘somebody in the department owns a WagonR’ (belief b), this belief of Swamiji is true and justified because he has seen Tikaram driving a WagonR to the department, but unbeknown to Swamiji it was Prem who own the WagonR (factor C) Tikaram was just driving it to the department. It is true that Swamiji has fulfilled all the conditions (JTB) but it is by sheer luck that he got the knowledge. Intuitively, we cannot ascribe knowledge to Swamiji because the deciding factor of knowledge, i.e., factor C was unknown to Swamiji. Hence, despite of fulfilling all the conditions (JTB) Swamiji fails to know, or he knows just by luck. A huge amount of counterexamples to the JTB model has been developed in the contemporary epistemology which follows the same Gettierized structure. These examples include the fake barn, the pyromaniac, the sheep in the field etc.
11. Since justification of one belief is provides by other beliefs and so on. So, it is beliefs that justify other beliefs without any external input of experience etc. For

example, there is a highly advance computer simulation called NaMo which has a belief (B1) that ‘whoever has appetitive feature is a human’, he has another belief (B2) that ‘he has an appetitive feature’ therefore, he coherently reach to a belief (B3) that ‘he is a human’, and B3 is coherently derived from and justify by B1 and B2. But since NaMo is not a human, but a computer simulation, therefore, coherentism fails. It shows that the absence of experiential inputs in coherentism makes it more vulnerable.

12. This notion of epistemic supervenience is based on a simple notion of supervenience of evaluative properties over non-evaluative.
13. By traditional account, I am referring to the JTB kind of analysis of knowledge. Philosophers like Ayer (1956), Chisholm (1957), and Gettier (1963) have reduced all the traditional analysis of knowledge (which also includes Plato’s account) to the JTB model or something similar to it.
14. Sosa does not mean that “know” is ambiguous, but he is talking about the gradation of knowledge.
15. It is the safety condition that provides the proper perspective for a belief. For example, a person aptly perceives a red ball (belief P) by using his faculty of perception, but if he is dreaming than his belief would be wrong and will not count as knowledge, and thereby his faculty of perception would be classified as unreliable. But when apt belief P is noted aptly by using the safety condition it avoids not-P cases (e.g., dreaming) and thereby the person gain a perspective because of safety condition, hence we come to know that perception was reliable.
16. Though Sosa also introduces a condition called meta-aptness, but meta-aptness is nothing but safety condition. Meta-aptness is the condition which avoids failure so does safety. According to Sosa, a shot can be apt but fail to be meta-apt, and can be meta-apt but fail to be apt. Similarly, a belief can be apt but not safe, and a belief can be safe but not apt. Safety is the condition which assess the risk of failures and avoid failures of belief (i.e. safety avoids not-P cases, hence make knowledge safe.).