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# The Status of Reflection in Virtue Epistemology

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## Introduction

According to a view I will dub *classical internalism*, one knows that  $p$  only if one justifiably believes that  $p$ . And one's belief that  $p$  is justified only if one is able to access the facts on which one's justification that  $p$  supervenes by reflection alone.<sup>1</sup> In this way, classical internalism takes reflection to be essential to both justified belief and knowledge.

In contrast, a view I will dub *classical externalism* has that one justifiably believes that  $p$  if and only if one's belief that  $p$  is reliably produced.<sup>2</sup> Since reliability is independent of reflection, this means that, on classical externalism, reflection is not essential to justified belief. And since knowledge arguably features no other condition that essentially involves the reflection, the same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for knowledge.

Classical internalism has come under considerable pressure in recent literature. The reason for this is that the view threatens to over-intellectualise knowledge in the sense that it excludes cognitively un-

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<sup>1</sup> Roderick Chisholm [e.g. 1977] and Laurence Bonjour [e.g. 1985, 2003] are perhaps the most prominent champions of accessibilism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the view has a number of further supporters including Robert Audi [e.g. 2001], Carl Ginet [e.g. 1975], Matthias Steup [e.g. 1999] and Declan Smithies [e.g. 2012].

<sup>2</sup> The perhaps most prominent advocates of reliabilism are Alvin Goldman [e.g. 1979] and Ernest Sosa [e.g. 1980]. However, the view has a number of further noteworthy supporters, including Juan Comesaña [e.g. 2010], Sandy Goldberg [e.g. 2010], Peter Graham [e.g. 2012], John Greco [e.g. 1999], Hilary Kornblith [e.g. 2002] and Jack Lyons [e.g. 2009], to name but a few. I have also defended versions of the view elsewhere [e.g. Author 2016a,b].

sophisticated agents such as small children and animals from having knowledge. However, this appears rather implausible [e.g. Burge 2003: 503, see also Dretske e.g. 1981]. Partly in response to such difficulties, some internalists have moved away from the classical view according to which reflection is essential to knowledge and justified belief and have embraced alternative versions of the view that can steer clear of these difficulties. The most prominent alternative claims, roughly, that facts about justification supervene on facts about one's mental life.<sup>3</sup> Since even unsophisticated agents can have a mental life, the prospects of avoiding the overintellectualisation problem for classical internalism start to look up.

I believe that it is fair to say that the general trend in recent literature has been away from taking reflection to play essential role in the analysis of knowledge and justified belief. In view of this, it may come as some surprise that one of the most promising attempts at rehabilitating reflection in epistemology is due to Ernst Sosa, a card-carrying externalist if ever there has been one. More specifically, Sosa argues that reflection is essential to the kind of knowledge that is of central epistemological interest, to wit, human knowledge.

In this paper, I will take a closer look at Sosa's attempt at rehabilitating reflection in epistemology. My goal is twofold. First, I will argue that Sosa's view remains ultimately unsatisfactory as it succumbs to a version of the familiar overintellectualisation worry. Second, I will offer an alternative view on behalf of Sosa. While this alternative can not only avoid the costs but also secure the benefits of Sosa's view, I will argue that it fails to properly rehabilitate the role of reflection in epistemology. I thus remain critical on this front. First things first, however, I will briefly outline Sosa's account of human knowledge.

## 1 Sosa's View

Like many recent virtue epistemologists, Sosa takes his account of knowledge to drop out of an application of a general account of the normativity of performances to belief. Given that this is so, I will first look at his account of performance normativity.

In the first instance, performances—or, to be more precise, performances with an aim—can be evaluated along the following three

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<sup>3</sup> This view is most prominently defended by Earl Conee and Richard Feldman [e.g. 2001].

dimensions: success, competence and aptness. Roughly, a performance is successful if and only if it attains its aim, it is competent if and only if it is produced by the exercise of a competence to attain its aim, and it is apt if and only if it is successful because competent. For instance, an basketball player's shot is successful if and only if it goes in, it is competent if and only if it is produced by an exercise of a competence to make shots, and it is apt if and only if it goes in because of the exercise of the competence to make shots.

While this gives us the basic account for first order evaluations of performances, Sosa does not take this to be the whole story about the normativity of performances. Rather, he countenances two further types of aptness, alongside first order aptness, or 'animal' aptness as Sosa calls it. These additional types of aptness are 'reflective' and 'full' aptness. Attaining these further types of aptness requires successful and indeed apt performance at a higher order, in addition to animal aptness. In a nutshell, the thought is that performances will rise to these higher levels of aptness only if, alongside animal aptness, one has aptly ascertained that one's performance is free from any relevant risk one may be running: one must have arrived at an apt awareness that one's performance would be apt. While animal aptness in conjunction with apt risk assessment will be enough for reflective aptness, full aptness additionally requires that the first and the second order aptness are connected in the right way: one must be guided to animal aptness by one's reflectively apt risk assessment.

There are a number of normative properties that performances can enjoy. Crucially, according to Sosa, full aptness enjoys special status among these properties. Since Sosa's view on the special status of full aptness will be of considerable importance in what follows, I'd like to take a look at a few passages in which Sosa clarifies what he has in mind:

The *fully desirable status for performances in general* is full aptness: it is aptness on the first order guided by apt awareness on the second order that the first order performance would be apt (likely enough).

[Sosa 2015: 85, *my emphasis*]

[E]ven while succeeding in its basic aim, a performance *falls short* if it neglects attaining that aim aptly. This latter is an aim also required for *full credit* in the domain of that performance. What is yet more, full credit requires that

this aim too be attained aptly. [...] *That is so for all first-order performances, in whatever domain, whether cognitive or not.*

[Sosa 2015: 86, *my emphases*]

Note that Sosa is clear that full aptness is the fully desirable status for performances in a given domain and that performances fall short unless they attain full aptness. Moreover, he is also clear that this claim holds with full generality. In view of this, it seems fair to attribute the following thesis to Sosa:

*The Normative Thesis (NT).* Any performance in any domain attains fully desirable status qua performance in that domain if and only if it is fully apt; and it falls short qua performance in that domain if and only if it isn't.

Why think NT is true? To see how Sosa ventures to answer this question, let's return to the basketball case. In particular let's look at two versions of it. In both versions (i) your shot is animal apt and (ii) you are very close to the edge of the range of your competence to make shots. Now, in the first version of the case, you are blissfully ignorant of just how far your range extends. As a result, had you been a step further away, you would have taken the shot just the same. In contrast, in the second version of the case, you are well aware of how far your range extends. In particular, you are aware that while you are just within your range, any further away from the basket would already be too far for you. In view of this awareness of your range, you take the shot. In this case, had you been a step further away, you wouldn't have taken the shot.

Sosa's observation here is that, in the first version of the case, your performance falls short qua basketball performance. You may rightfully be scolded by your coach for ignoring the importance of shot selection. Only in the second version will you remain clear of such criticisms. Since your performance is animal apt in both versions of the case, fully satisfactory performance must require more than animal aptness. Sosa's proposal is that what is required in addition is apt performance at the second order and, in particular, full aptness.

With these points about Sosa's general account of the normativity of performances in play, let's move on to epistemology. In order to connect these two issues, Sosa embraces the following thesis:

*The Psychological Thesis (PT).* Belief is a type of performance with an

aim. More specifically, it is an epistemic type of performance that constitutively aims at truth.

While PT does not go uncontested [e.g. Chrisman 2012], for the purposes of this paper, I will simply grant Sosa that it is true. But, of course, if belief is a performance with an aim, the general account of the normativity of performances can be applied to belief. We can ask whether a given belief is successful, i.e. whether it is true, whether it is competent, and whether it rises to various levels of aptness.

Most importantly for present purposes, NT and PT jointly entail the following:

*Fully Desirable Belief (FDB).* A belief attains fully desirable status qua epistemic performance if and only if it is fully apt. It falls short qua epistemic performance if and only if it isn't fully apt.

Note that FDB is an epistemologically highly interesting claim. After all, if there is such a thing as fully desirable status for belief, then it also makes sense to specially care about beliefs that attain fully desirable status. FDB not only implies that there such a thing as fully desirable status for belief, it also tells us what exactly fully desirable status of belief amounts to, i.e. fully apt belief.

Finally, the last key thesis of Sosa's view is epistemological in nature. Here goes:

*The Epistemological Thesis (ET).* Human knowledge is fully apt belief.

ET is attractive because not in the least because it can offer a highly attractive account of the value of human knowledge. After all, ET and FDB jointly entail that a belief attains fully desirable status if and only if it qualifies as human knowledge. Given that it makes sense to specially care about belief that attains full desirable status, we get the result that it makes sense to specially care about human knowledge, which, in turn, goes a long way toward explaining the special value of knowledge.

While the account of the value of knowledge is certainly one attraction of Sosa's view, it is not the only one. Sosa argues that it enables us to solve a range of long-standing epistemological problems, including the Gettier problem and the problem of fake barn cases. For the purposes of this paper, I will set these issues aside.

## 2 The Status of Reflection

What I'd like to focus on instead is the status of reflection in Sosa's epistemology. Note first that, by Sosa's account of full aptness, fully apt belief requires the apt exercise of monitoring competences, i.e. a form of reflective competence. In this way, reflection features essentially in what, by FDB, is belief that attains fully desirable status. Already at this stage there is reason to think that if Sosa is right, reflection does play a central role in epistemology. After all, it is essential to the status of belief that we have special reason to care about. ET then ties this back to human knowledge. The result that we get is not only that human knowledge is something it makes sense for us to specially care about, it is also a kind of state that essentially involves reflection. In this way, Sosa's view promises to rehabilitate reflection in epistemology.

At the same time, note that reflection does not enter the picture at the specifically epistemological level. Rather, it already comes in with Sosa's general account of the normativity of performances. After all, reflective competences are essential not only for fully apt belief but for fully apt performance in general. Of course, there is no in principle problem with this. In fact, it might be thought that this only means that Sosa's rehabilitation of reflection in epistemology is particularly well motivated as it simply drops out of an independently plausible view and that, as a result, the overintellectualisation objections that have been raised against classical internalism will in any case have much less force against Sosa.

While this might appear to be an attractive move for fans of Sosa, on reflection, it is just a bit too quick. If it is indeed correct that reflective competences are essential for performances that attain fully desirable status in general, then the force of the overintellectualisation objections will have been mitigated. Not so if it turns out that there are cases in which reflective competences are not essential for performances that attain fully desirable status. After all, in that case, we will have reason to think that NT is false.

The trouble is, of course, that there is excellent reason to think that reflective competences are indeed not required for performances to attain fully desirable status. After all, it is overwhelmingly plausible that performances of unsophisticated agents, i.e. agents who are not endowed with reflective competences, can nonetheless attain fully desirable status. Take the waggle dance of honey bees, for instance. Surely, when a bee performs a waggle dance, her performance can

attain fully desirable status. At the same time, there is little doubt that honey bees are not endowed with reflective competences and so are not even in a position to rise to the level of fully apt performance. What comes to light is that Sosa does encounter an overintellectualisation objection after all. Interestingly enough, the worry arises in the first instance not for his epistemological claim but for his key normative claim, NT.<sup>4</sup>

The falsity of NT has important ramifications for Sosa. After all, since FDB was motivated by NT and PT, FDB loses its key source of support. Similarly, unless FDB is true, ET loses a great deal of its attraction also. After all, we will now have to answer the question of why we should identify human knowledge with fully apt belief rather than some other property such as apt belief or reflectively apt belief or, perhaps, whatever else may turn out to be required for belief that attains fully desirable status.

At this point, it might be objected that while PT and ET come close enough to Sosa's view for many purposes, they actually don't represent Sosa's view quite accurately, at least not his most recent view from *Judgment and Agency*. After all, there Sosa takes human knowledge to be a species of *judgement* or *judgemental belief*. And unlike belief, which aims at truth, judgement in addition aims at (alethic) aptness. Unsophisticated agents aren't in a position to make judgements in the first place. As a result, the overintellectualisation objection is misplaced.

Even if this works, it will not help Sosa to rescue NT (or epistemologically relevant instances of it, for that matter). To see why not, note that if NT holds (or epistemologically relevant instances of it), a judgement attains fully desirable status if and only if it is fully apt. If we wanted to identify human knowledge with any kind of judgement, it had better be fully apt judgement. After all, if we want to say that human knowledge is a species of judgement, we would surely not want to allow that it is a species of judgement that might still fall

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<sup>4</sup> Couldn't Sosa avoid this problem by restricting the claim that the fully desirable status for performances is full aptness to performances of (adult) humans and weakening the requirement for performances of unsophisticated agents, perhaps to animal aptness? Even if we can get rid of the air of ad hocness that might appear to trouble this proposal, note that in Section 3, I will develop an alternative to NT on behalf of Sosa that can offer a unified account of the performances of both unsophisticated and sophisticated agents, while also accommodating the motivations for NT. As a result, this move is bound to remain unsuccessful at any rate because a more choiceworthy alternative to resulting view is available.



short qua epistemic performance. But now note that Sosa himself acknowledges that apt judgement already requires one to affirm aptly in the endeavour to (alethically) affirm aptly [Sosa 2015: 77]. This means that fully apt judgement requires us in addition (at least) to arrive at *an apt awareness that we would indeed affirm aptly in the endeavour to (alethically) affirm aptly and for our apt affirmation in the endeavour to affirm aptly to be guided by this apt awareness*. And I take it that this would be a too demanding requirement on human knowledge even by Sosa's lights. After all, for many of us (adult humans), it is doubtful whether we ever arrive an apt awareness that we would affirm aptly in the endeavour to (alethically) affirm aptly as we might just not have the sophistication to even entertain so complex a thought. And even those of us who do attain this level of sophistication, it remains doubtful just how frequently we actually take the time to process so complex a thought. By the same token, there is reason to believe that if human knowledge does require fully apt judgement, we don't have a lot of it.

If Sosa wants to unpack human knowledge as a species of judgement, he will thus do well to analyse it as *apt* judgement rather than fully apt judgement. But that result does not sit well with NT, especially given that we attain fully apt judgement only rarely if ever. After all, if NT holds, then any judgement that is apt but not fully apt will fall short qua epistemic performance. Since we attain fully apt judgement only rarely if ever, this means that the vast majority of judgements that qualify as human knowledge simultaneously fall short qua epistemic performances. And that just appears to be ever so implausible.

### 3 Rescue Mission

I take these considerations to provide good reason for thinking that NT is false. That, of course, is bad news for Sosa, for reasons already indicated. If NT is false, why should we care specifically about fully apt performances? And why should we identify human knowledge with fully apt belief (or judgement for that matter)? That said, I do believe that a lot of Sosa project can be rescued. In what follows, I will outline how.

First, I'd like to propose the following simple alternative to NT:

*The Simple Normative Thesis (SNT).* The fully desirable status for performances in general is (simple first-order) aptness.

It is easy to see that SNT avoids the overintellectualisation worry that NT encounters. (Simple first-order) aptness does not require reflective competence. As a result, even the performances of agents who don't have the cognitive sophistication requisite for reflective competence may attain fully desirable status. SNT will also enable us to follow Sosa in analysing human knowledge as a species of judgement—to wit, apt judgement—without either succumbing to a sceptical threat or allowing that the vast majority of our judgements that qualify as human knowledge still fall short qua epistemic performances. After all, on SNT, apt judgement is judgment that is fully satisfactory qua epistemic performance is apt judgement. So, judgements that qualify as human knowledge do not fall short qua epistemic performance. And since apt judgement is something that we frequently attain, the sceptical threat can be avoided also.

While all of this is good news for SNT, the view comes under pressure from the kinds of cases that Sosa adduced to motivate NT. Recall that Sosa offered two basketball cases. In both of them (i) your shot is apt and (ii) you are very close to the edge of the range of your competence to make shots. In the second case you are aware of how far your range extends and, in view of this awareness, you take the shot. In the first case, in contrast, you take the shot despite the fact that you have no idea that you are still within your range. Sosa's key observation was that your performance attains fully satisfactory status only in the second case; in the first case it falls short qua basketball performance. But of course your performance is apt in both cases. If this is correct, SNT cannot be true.

Here, then, is my response to this worry. First, note that, as Sosa also acknowledges, performances can be nested [2015: 126]. For instance, your performance of turning on the light may be nested in the performance of alerting your lover that you are home. What's more, the nested performance may be apt whereas the nesting performance isn't. You may have aptly turned on the light, without aptly having alerted your lover, say because he wasn't anywhere near your house and so couldn't see the sign.

In the basketball case, we also find nesting. In particular, I'd like to distinguish between two performance types in basketball: *shot* and *play*. I take it to be clear what a shot is in basketball. A play in basketball is a performance type involving the implementation of a choice of a more specific way of playing: taking a shot, making a pass, continuing to dribble, etc. It is easy to see that, in basketball,

shots are nested in plays.

Crucially, each performance type can attain fully desirable status. There is such a thing as a fully desirable shot and such a thing as a fully desirable play. On SNT, a shot is fully desirable if and only if it is an apt shot, and a play is fully desirable if and only if it is an apt play. According to the present proposal, in both cases, you produce an apt shot. However, only in the second case do you produce an apt play. After all, the performance type play involves selection of a performance at the level of shot (e.g. shoot, pass, dribble). It makes sense that for the play to be apt, the performance nested in it must be apt, its selection must be apt and apt selection must lead the way to the aptness of the nested shot. Since in the first case, your shot is not aptly selected, the play is not going to be apt. On SNT, then, in both cases, your shot attains fully satisfactory status, but only in the second case does your play attain this status. And this latter fact explains the intuition that there is something amiss with your performance in the first case.

It may also be worth noting that this account of nested performances can make good sense of the relation between belief and judgement. More specifically, the idea here would be that belief corresponds to a performance at the level of shot in basketball and judgement to a performance at the level of play. In a way, then, we can think of belief as a doxastic shot and of judgement as one form of a doxastic play (i.e. in the case of a judgement that  $p$ , a doxastic play involving belief that  $p$ ). This view has a couple of appealing features: first, it predicts that judgement that  $p$  nests and so entails belief that  $p$ ; second, it predicts the aptness conditions for judgement that Sosa also countenances. Just like an apt play in basketball, an apt doxastic play (i) will of course require the nested doxastic performance at the level of shot (e.g. belief) to be apt and (ii) will in addition require that the selection of a doxastic performance at the level of shot (i.e. belief, suspension of judgement, disbelief) and (iii) the apt selection must lead the way to the aptness of the nested belief.

#### **4 Back to the Status of Reflection**

While NT got Sosa's view into trouble, it now transpires that there is an attractive fix available to Sosa. Most importantly for present purposes, while, on this proposal, reflection does not play a key role in the theory of the normativity of performances in general, we may

still be able to rehabilitate reflection in epistemology. After all, the present proposal does follow Sosa in identifying human knowledge with apt judgement. But, as we have just seen, apt judgement does require the exercise of reflective competence. Reflection thus turns out to be essential for human knowledge. Its role will be rehabilitated in epistemology.

Before closing, I'd like to briefly turn to the question as to whether this rehabilitation ultimately succeeds. As a first observation, note that, as epistemologists, our primary interest lies of course with the nature of knowledge and, more specifically, with the normative element involved in knowing that makes knowledge distinctively valuable. According to Sosa's original proposal, this normative element is full aptness. Since full aptness essentially involves reflection, it can reasonably be thought to rehabilitate the role of reflection in epistemology.

The trouble is that once we replace Sosa's original proposal by the one developed above, the distinctively normative element involved in knowing is simple first-order aptness. And simple first order aptness does not essentially involve reflection. But it would then seem as though the proposal I developed on behalf of Sosa is unfit to rehabilitate reflection in epistemology.

Here is another way of making this point. According to the standard overintellectualisation objection, cognitively unsophisticated agents can have knowledge. But since, due to lack of sophistication, they aren't even in the ballpark of reflection, reflection isn't essential to knowledge. Sosa's original proposal effectively deals with the overintellectualisation objection by relegating the cognitively unsophisticated. Even if we grant that their beliefs qualify as knowledge, what they can attain is a second-rate kind of knowledge at best. After all, since they lack reflective competences and so are not in the ballpark of full aptness, any beliefs they may form, i.e. even those that qualify as knowledge, are and will always be bound to fall short qua epistemic performances. First-rate knowledge, which involves belief that doesn't fall short qua epistemic performance, requires full aptness and so reflective competence. It is easy to see that this will work as a rehabilitation of reflection in epistemology. After all, first-rate knowledge clearly deserves a special place in epistemology. And if first-rate knowledge requires reflection, so does reflection.

Once we abandon Sosa's original proposal in favour of the one I sketched above, the beliefs of cognitively unsophisticated agents are

no longer bound to fall short qua epistemic performances. All that's required for belief that attains fully desirable status (and so doesn't fall short qua epistemic performance) is aptness. And even unsophisticated agents can achieve this. On this proposal, then, there is no such thing as second-rate knowledge. All knowledge, whether in unsophisticated or sophisticated agents, is first-rate knowledge. But, crucially, the lesson that the cognitively unsophisticated teach us is that knowledge does not require reflection. So, first-rate knowledge doesn't require reflection. And that does just not sound like a successful rehabilitation of reflection in epistemology.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have taken a closer look at Sosa's virtue epistemology with a specific eye towards whether the view serves to rehabilitate the role of reflection in epistemology. I argued that the key normative thesis in Sosa's framework—that the fully desirable status for performances in general is full aptness (NT)—falls prey to a version of the overintellectualisation objection that is familiar from the literature on classical internalism in epistemology. I then outlined one way of rescuing Sosa's view from this objection, which replaces NT by the thesis that the fully desirable status of performances in general is simple first-order aptness (SNT), and showed how the kinds of cases that Sosa adduces to motivate NT can be accommodated in terms of nested performances. Finally, I returned to the issue of the status of reflection and argued that while Sosa's original proposal does serve to rehabilitate reflection in epistemology, the better alternative I proposed on behalf of Sosa doesn't. As virtue epistemologists, then, we will do well to continue to think of reflection as having been dislodged from its throne in epistemology.

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