

Reflective Knowledge and Epistemic Circularity*

C.S.I. Jenkins

Draft only: please do not quote or cite without checking with the author

1. Introduction

Sosa 2009 is the second part of Sosa's extensive presentation and discussion of a two-level view of human knowledge. Sosa believes that there exist both 'animal knowledge' and 'reflective knowledge'. Animal knowledge is said to consist in apt belief. Sosa characterizes apt belief as successful (i.e. true) belief where the success 'derives from faculties reliable in the context of the belief'¹ (p. 37). Apt belief is further characterized as belief which is 'true because competent' on p. 138. Another (albeit 'rough and partial') characterization of animal knowledge is given on p. 135: a belief is there said to count as animal knowledge 'only if it is true and its correctness derives from its manifesting certain cognitive virtues of the subject, where nothing is a cognitive virtue unless it is a truth-conductive disposition'. Sosa thinks that externalism is appropriate regarding animal knowledge, given the set of virtues that are relevant to understanding it. Externalism is defined on p. 157 as the denial of internalism, which is defined on p. 154 as 'the doctrine that a belief can amount to knowledge only through the backing of reasons adduced as premises'. For animal knowledge, truth deriving from reliable faculties is enough; such reasons aren't an additional requirement. Another claim in the vicinity of externalism made for animal knowledge is that 'perspectival endorsement of the reliability of one's sources' (p. 136) is not a requirement.

By contrast, reflective knowledge *does* require such endorsement, as 'a specific *further* condition' (p. 136). Reflective knowledge is characterized as 'apt belief aptly noted' in the first part of the two-volume discussion of which Sosa's 2009 is the second part (Sosa 2007, p. 32), and in Sosa 2009 it is described as 'requir[ing] the belief to be placed ... in a perspective within which it may be seen as apt' (p. 75). Sosa thinks reflective knowledge is *better* than mere animal knowledge (p. 147, p. 193) and that a different set (presumably a proper superset) of virtues is relevant for understanding it. One key difference is that Sosa seems to think that internalism (in the sense just described) is appropriate concerning reflective knowledge. Coherence is also crucial for reflective knowledge, but not for animal; reflective knowledge is conceived as 'web-like' and 'not transmissively linear', although it is also said that the web 'attaches to the world', presumably meaning that coherence alone does not suffice for reflective knowledge (p. 22). Aptness is also required, assuming that reflective

* Many thanks to my audience at the Northern Institute of Philosophy for feedback on this material. Particular thanks to Jonathan Ichikawa, Ernie Sosa and Crispin Wright for comments and discussion that significantly improved the final version. The remaining errors, interpretative and otherwise, are of course my own.

¹ As it isn't my main interest here, I set aside the question of how this avoids counterexamples in which success 'derives from' such faculties but in a deviant way.

knowledge is 'apt belief aptly noted', and this cannot be guaranteed by coherence alone.

It is important to note that certain other connotations of the word 'reflective' are not – as far as I can tell – intended by Sosa to apply to that which he calls reflective knowledge. In particular, reflective knowledge need not be a priori knowledge (or knowledge otherwise obtainable by means of armchair reflection).

In this paper I shall examine the kind of epistemic circularity which Sosa himself thinks is unavoidably entailed by reflective knowledge. In the next two sections, I shall describe the relevant kind of circularity and its role in Sosa's epistemology, *en route* presenting and resisting Sosa's arguments that this circularity is not vicious. Finally, in section four, I shall consider the somewhat complex relationship between Sosa's views concerning epistemic circularity and his response to the Problem of Easy Knowledge.

2. Epistemic Circularity

Sosa's conception of reflective knowledge leads to a worry about regress and/or circularity, of a kind commonly faced by internalist epistemologies. According to Sosa, one can secure *animal* knowledge of a proposition *p* using a source *K* without having any beliefs of any kind (justified or not, knowledgeable or not) concerning *K*'s reliability. However, Sosa thinks that *reflective* knowledge of *p*, with its internalist and coherentist baggage, does require 'relevant knowledge' of one's own 'high level of reliability' with respect to *p* (p. 199).² The worry is that knowing one's own reliability requires reliance on either another source, or the same source, as that used to acquire knowledge that *p*. And this raises the question how one knows that the source in question is reliable. Again, acquiring knowledge of that source's reliability requires reliance on either another source, or the same source. And so on. We seem to be faced with either an infinite regress or a circle.

Depending on what sort of knowledge of reliability is required in cases of reflective knowledge, there could be a fairly easy response to this worry. Suppose one has reflective knowledge that *p* via source *K*. Then one must know that *K* is reliable. But maybe animal knowledge will do here? It's not immediately obvious that he thinks this needs to be reflective knowledge. So say one uses source *H* to secure animal knowledge that source *K* is reliable. Perhaps one can stop there; knowledge of *H*'s reliability would be required for reflective knowledge of *K*'s reliability, but on the current hypothesis that's not what we need in order to have reflective knowledge of *p*.³

However, Sosa does not consider this response, which suggests that he is thinking that *reflective* knowledge of *K*'s reliability is required in order for one to

² That's not quite to require knowledge of *K*'s reliability. I might not know which source I'm using but know that *all* my sources are reliable.

³ Thanks to my audience at the Northern Institute of Philosophy for helping me think about this.

have reflective knowledge that p via K, which more clearly raises the circularity/regress worry. Sosa proposes to defend the circular option (chapter 9, §VI). He thinks that one can garner epistemic support for the proposition that source K is reliable by relying, at least in large part, on K itself. He regards such reliance on K in order to learn about K's reliability as epistemically circular, but not viciously so, because it does not put us 'in a situation that is somehow intellectually unsatisfactory' (p. 196), as a vicious epistemic circularity would.

Exactly how should we understand this conception of viciousness as a matter of being put 'in a situation that is somehow intellectually unsatisfactory'? Does Sosa mean that if circularity is in *any* respect intellectually unsatisfactory it is vicious? Or does he mean that there is some particular respect such that if circularity is intellectually unsatisfactory in *that* respect then it is vicious? I am not quite sure. In any case, I shall try to suggest here that there is something unsatisfactory about the kind of epistemic circularity Sosa describes which can plausibly be considered sufficient for viciousness, regardless of what exactly Sosa's own conception of viciousness is like.

I have to confess that I find exegesis of Sosa's argumentation in the relevant passages of his 2009 difficult. However, I think that two main arguments for the non-viciousness of this kind of circularity can be extracted. One is an argument from inevitability, and the other appeals to the fact that reliable sources are reliable even when delivering information on their own reliability.

Sosa's first argument that it not unsatisfactory to rely on source K to appreciate K's own reliability is premised on the thought that it is in some relevant sense *unavoidable* that sufficiently reflective people should engage in some such circular reasoning (p. 200):

So far we have been told that we must avoid epistemic circularity because it entails arriving at a generally positive view of one's faculties only by use of those very faculties. But why should that be frustrating when it is the inevitable consequence of its generality. [sic]

My main sticking point with this argument can be summed up quickly: I don't see why Sosa thinks that the envisaged inevitability *relieves* rather than *exacerbates* frustration in this arena. If one is inclined to feel frustrated at some obstacle, and then learns that the obstacle in question is immovable, one might give up on one's project, but that is a way of succumbing to, rather than overcoming, frustration. In fact, Sosa's own discussion on p. 173 seems to acknowledge this.

In the discussion on p. 173, Sosa talks about the project of finding 'a general, legitimating, philosophical understanding of all our knowledge' (meaning, presumably, a non-circular one), and some of his rhetorical questions in this passage suggest that he thinks it is 'a requirement of good sense or even of sanity' to stop pursuing such 'obviously incoherent' projects, and move on to other things. The discussion *begins* however, by pointing out that the project in question is 'unfulfillable', not 'incoherent'. The transition to 'incoherent' is then made via an intermediate description of it as 'inherently defective'.

This two-step move from ‘unfulfillable’ to ‘inherently defective’ to ‘incoherent’ is made without comment, but I am not sure that it is fair. The mere unfulfillability of a project doesn’t render it incoherent in any interesting sense, as far as I can see. Perhaps it could be said to render it ‘defective’ in some sense or other, and maybe even ‘inherently’ so (though I’m not sure what that means), and having labeled a project ‘inherently defective’ one might then slip into thinking that the inherent defect in question is incoherence. But that slip needs examination and defence.

I’m not quibbling over the move from unfulfillability to incoherence for the sake of it; I am concerned that the switch may be making Sosa’s task look easier than it should be by making out that the project of finding a non-circular is in worse shape than it is. ‘Unfulfillable’ sounds unfortunate, but ‘incoherent’ sounds *really* bad: in fact, it suggests that there is really no well-described project here at all (whereas ‘unfulfillable’ presumably requires the opposite). Of course, if there’s no well-described project here at all, there’s nothing for us to pursue. But that can’t be Sosa’s line, because in order to say that the project is unfulfillable Sosa must have a grip on what it is.

Admittedly, even though I think frustration may be merely exacerbated by a project’s turning out to be unfulfillable, it is a further question whether frustration *should* be so exacerbated.⁴ It might be that Sosa intends to persuade us that, instead of being frustrated when we realize we can’t have a non-circular but fully general account of the reliability of one’s faculties, what we *should* do is cease hankering after the unobtainable. But if this is the line, Sosa needs to engage with the issues surrounding the normative appropriateness of conative states, and this is fraught. What *should* I desire? Maybe there are pragmatic ‘should’s for which this question makes sense and is relatively feasibly answerable. But I don’t imagine the relevant normativity here is supposed to be purely pragmatic. I’m not at all sure what other sorts of normativity govern desire-like states, and in any case, assuming that desires don’t have mind-to-world direction of fit, it’s far from clear why the impossibility of a state of affairs would mean that one *ought* not to desire that it obtain in any but a purely pragmatic sense of ‘ought’.

To explore the inevitability argument in a little more detail, it may be helpful to note that Sosa’s argumentation here is somewhat similar to that of Wright (2004, p. 190):⁵

If there is no such thing as a process of warrant acquisition for each of whose specific presuppositions warrant has already been earned, it should not be reckoned to be part of the proper concept of an acquired warrant that it somehow aspire to this—incoherent—ideal. Rather, we should view each and every cognitive project as irreducibly involving elements of adventure—I have, as it were, to take a risk on the reliability of my senses, the conduciveness of the circumstances, etc. ...

⁴ Thanks to Sosa himself for suggesting that I consider the normative question here.

⁵ The following is presented as a ‘possible line of reply’ in Wright’s paper, but seems to be something to which he is sympathetic.

The idea, in both Sosa and Wright, seems to be that if in the relevant epistemic arena one *has no choice* but to Φ , then it is a mistake to regard Φ -ing negatively. Of course, the thing Sosa thinks is inevitable is circularity, and the thing Wright thinks is inevitable is taking presuppositions on trust. But they each seem to be arguing from inevitability to acceptability. (It's interesting that Wright also uses the word 'incoherent' in this passage, but I won't explore that here.)

Just what kind of mistake it would be to regard the inevitable thing in a negative light isn't entirely clear in either case. I discuss this point in Jenkins 2007 (pp. 30-1) as it relates to Wright; I was (and remain) unsure whether by 'a proper concept of warrant' Wright means our *actual* concept of warrant, or some improved *replacement* concept. The former claim risks begging the question against someone who thinks trust in presuppositions is unwarranted, but the latter risks changing the subject.

Regarding Sosa, my corresponding uncertainty is as to whether the mistake is in thinking that Φ -ing gets a negative evaluation by the lights of our *actual* epistemic standards/concepts/practices, or in thinking that it gets a negative evaluation by the lights of some *other* epistemic standards/concepts/practices that would be better for certain purposes. The former claim risks begging the question against someone who thinks epistemic circularity is vicious, but the latter risks changing the subject.

And either way, there are serious questions in the vicinity (which neither Wright nor Sosa considers) concerning the acceptability of the kind of epistemic ought-implies-can principle that would support the claim that whatever one *has* to do cannot be an epistemic mistake.

On pp. 106-7, Sosa discusses concerns about the sort of entitlement strategy that Wright 2004 pursues, though he does not discuss Wright's own version of that strategy. Sosa makes three brief points which indicate problems for the strategy (to all of which I am sympathetic; see below and Jenkins 2007):

- (1) Presuppositions may be necessary for rationality but we are not entitled to take it as read that we are rational.
- (2) It's unclear in what sense rationality is inevitable.
- (3) That making *some presuppositions or other* is necessary for rationality does not give us any entitlement to any *specific* presupposition.

What is interesting, though, is that these criticisms are also problems for Sosa's rather similar defence of circularity by appeal to its inevitability:

- (1*) Circularity may be necessary for telling a general story about how we know our sources are reliable, but we are not entitled to take it as read that there is any such story to be told.
- (2*) It's unclear in what sense circularity is inevitable.
- (3*) That *some circularity or other* is necessary for telling a general story about how we know our sources are reliable does not give us any reason to think any *specific instance* of epistemic circularity is acceptable.

Both (1*) and (2*) can be understood as driving at the fact that, whereas the premise of the inevitability-implies-acceptability argument seems to be that circularity is inevitable, all we actually have is a kind of *conditional* inevitability: circularity is inevitable *if* there is a fully general story to be told about how our sources are reliable. Perhaps there is no such story. Again echoing a concern about Wright's position (Jenkins 2007, pp. 28-31), let's grant that circularity is inevitable if we want to pursue the project of trying to give reasons for trusting our epistemic sources in full generality. But a sceptic might say: *that is precisely what is wrong with that sort of project, and why it's doomed to fail*. I don't see how one could then proceed to use this conditional inevitability fact as the basis for a *rejection* of such skepticism.

The problem highlighted by (3*) is that even if it is inevitable that circularity be involved in the general story somewhere, no specific kind of circularity is inevitable. For instance, one could adopt a circular story involving visual knowledge of the reliability of vision (and everything else), or a different one involving a priori knowledge of the reliability of the a priori faculties (and everything else), and so on. The risk, then, is that it could turn out that *each specific kind of circularity* is vicious (and none is defensible on grounds of inevitability), even though the general property of being *circular-in-some-respect-or-other* is non-vicious (because inevitable). Because every circular story we might tell will have to instantiate a specific circularity property as well as the general one of being circular-in-some-respect-or-other, there are grounds for concern that, for all Sosa's inevitability argument shows, whatever circular story we tell will involve *some* sort of vicious circularity.

It is also interesting to note that if circular warrant is an option as Sosa believes, taking presuppositions on trust is not inevitable as Wright claims, whereas if taking presuppositions on trust is an option as Wright believes, circular warrant is not inevitable as Sosa claims. So in order for either Sosa's or Wright's inevitability-implies-acceptability argument to get off the ground, the thing the other takes as *inevitable* must actually not be a real option.

3. *Pushing The Question Back*

If I understand him correctly, Sosa's second main argument for the non-viciousness of epistemic circularity is that there is nothing problematic about using a source *that is in fact reliable* to learn about K's reliability, even if that source is K itself. Reliable sources yield epistemically trustworthy information, the thought goes, and this is no less true when the subject upon which they are yielding information is their own reliability. (This is what makes trusting the senses better than trusting a crystal ball, even where both methods deliver positive verdicts on themselves: see p. 200.)

This sort of move is familiar from other areas of epistemology, especially inductive defences of induction (see e.g. Black 1958). While I don't intend to press an argument to the effect that any kind of circularity is immediately and

unavoidably vicious, I do think there is a reasonable worry about this kind of defense when used as Sosa uses it. My worry is that if Sosa responds to the question 'How can we learn about source K's reliability?' with the answer 'By using source K (perhaps together with others)', he will be *pushing the question back*. This worry arises regardless of whether source K is in fact reliable.

When we feel that an answer to a question has just 'pushed the question back', we find the answer to be in that respect unsatisfactory. But this phenomenon of pushing the question back deserves some reflection. We know it when we see it, or at least many of us think we do. But it's not immediately straightforward to spell out what it comes to. (For one thing, as I'll suggest, it's actually something of a misnomer.)

Here are some examples of question-and-answer pairs in which I think the answer can plausibly, at least in some contexts, reasonably be regarded as merely pushing the question back. In italics after each pair is a problematic new question that would be raised to salience by that answer in the relevant contexts.

Q1: How did this rabbit get into my living room?

A1: It followed another rabbit.

NQ1: *How did that other rabbit get into my living room?*

Q2: What do you want for your birthday this year?

A2: The same thing I wanted last year.

NQ2: *What did you want last year?*

Q3: Why is there a universe?

A2: Because there was a Big Bang.

NQ3: *Why was there a Big Bang?*

A symptom of an answer's pushing the question back is that one wants to say 'Well, OK, but ...' when one hears it. This suggests two things: (1) in some sense the answer is 'OK', and yet (2) when we hear it we're not satisfied.

In what sense is the answer OK? Well, the three examples illustrate that it is compatible with an answer's 'pushing the question back' that the answer in question be in *many* respects perfectly good. For example, the answer can still be true, informative, and interesting. The unsatisfactoriness of receiving such an answer comes from somewhere else, and I think it has something to do with the NQ members of the above triads.

The examples also bring to light the respect in which 'pushing the question back' is a misnomer; there is no *single* question that is posed at the beginning of one these triads and then posed again at the end, having been 'pushed back' by the intervening answer. The real problem is that a *new* question is raised to salience, which bears some important resemblance to the original one, and that in the absence of an answer to that new question, the original answer to the original question is in some respects wanting. (Be that as it may, I'll stick with the slightly misleading terminology because I'm not yet sure how to improve on it.)

Based on these reflections, I propose the following as a rough first pass at a necessary and sufficient condition on pushing the question back:

PTQB: An answer to a question pushes the question back iff it raises to salience at least one further question, without an answer to which some important part of the desire that prompted the original question will not be satisfied, and that because new question is (in some important sense) *in the same boat* as the original question.

If something like PTQB is right, a good deal of background information will presumably be needed to assess whether or not an answer pushes the question back. And it seems likely that it will often be a judgment call.

Returning to Sosa-style epistemic circularity, let's grant that a reliable source K is can indeed be a source (of a kind) of information about K's reliability, and let's consider the following question and answer pair:

Q4: How can we learn about source K's reliability as a source of information as to whether p?

A4: By using source K (perhaps together with others).

Given what we are granting, A4 may well be a true answer to Q4. It may well also be informative and interesting, and have various other virtues. But for all that, I think there is room to complain that A4 pushes the question back by raising to salience the following new question:

NQ4: *How can we learn about source K's reliability as a source of information as to whether K is a reliable source of information concerning p?*

And of course, giving the answer 'By using source K (perhaps together with others)' will raise to salience a further question of a similar kind, and so on.⁶

This new question NQ4 is, for the relevant purposes, *in the same boat* as the original question Q4. Lacking an answer to NQ4, we're not satisfied with our answer to Q4. And it is for that reason that A4 pushes the question back and counts as 'intellectually unsatisfactory' in a sense that seems (to me at least) relevant to whether or not Sosa's epistemic circularity is vicious.

Admittedly, A4 isn't the whole of what Sosa would say in response to NQ4.⁷ If PTQB is right, pushing the question back can (in a certain light) be construed as a matter of *not having said enough*, but the fact that A4 is incomplete certainly wouldn't by itself be a fair criticism of A4. However, the respect in which A4 is unsatisfactory isn't simply that it is lacking in detail; supplying more information

⁶ Notice that the possibility of repeatedly reiterating the original answer and thus repeatedly pushing back the question is also a feature of the Q1/A1/NQ1 example above, and many other instances of pushing the question back.

⁷ Thanks to Jonathan Ichikawa for pushing me on this point.

about how K functions to tell us about itself wouldn't solve the problem. It's the fact that it's K itself that's being appealed in A4 to that is problematic, raising to salience as it does the new question NQ4. This problem can't be solved by giving more details about the workings of K that are summarized in A4.

'In the same boat' is a vague and woolly expression, and I'm not sure how to cash it out, or even whether it's desirable to attempt more specificity here. (The notion of pushing the question back may be comparable vague and woolly.) But one might suspect that the reason NQ4 is 'in the same boat' is that the original Q4 was really intended as – or at least, getting at – a more general question along these lines:

Q4*: How can we learn that source K is a *generally* reliable source of information?

In fact, though, I suspect this is a red herring. Sosa would presumably want to give same sort of answer to Q4* as to Q4:

A4*: By using source K (perhaps together with others).

And this answer would generate the same sort of dissatisfaction as A4 did, raising this new question to salience:

NQ4*: *How can we learn about source K's reliability as a source of information as to whether K is a generally reliable source of information?*

If the same answer is given again, a further question is raised:

NNQ4*: *How can we learn about source K's reliability as a source of information as to whether K is a reliable source of information as to whether K is a generally reliable source of information?*

And so on.

I think a more promising line of enquiry concerning this notion of being 'in the same boat' might be opened up by drawing further on Wright's work on entitlement. Wright (2004, p. 192) considers situations in which one might want justification for some proposition P, and yet:

[t]he attempt to justify P would involve further presuppositions in turn of no more secure a prior standing [than P] . . . and so on without limit; so that someone pursuing the relevant enquiry who accepted that there is nevertheless an onus to justify P would implicitly undertake a commitment to an infinite regress of justificatory projects, each concerned to vindicate the presuppositions of its predecessor.

In Wright's terminology, the 'presuppositions' of the project leading to the giving of answer A4 are 'of no more secure a prior standing' than the claim that K is a reliable source of information concerning p. That, plausibly, is the sense in which NQ4 is 'in the same boat' as Q4. In giving an answer like A4 to Q4, one 'implicitly undertakes a commitment' to do more than one has done; that,

plausibly, is what makes us want to say ‘Well, OK, but ...’ when we hear A4. This is what makes A4 in some respects intellectually unsatisfactory as an answer to Q4.

4. *Circles and Lines*

I am inclined to regard Sosa’s epistemic circularity as vicious. Neither argument for non-viciousness seems to me compelling, and the way that the question is pushed back by Sosa’s story suggests ‘a situation that is somehow intellectually unsatisfactory’ in a way that, as far as I can tell, makes for viciousness given the nature of Sosa’s project. If he were trying merely to defend a certain kind of epistemic circularity in connection with *animal* knowledge, about which externalism is appropriate, the foregoing considerations would not carry across. They are specific to Sosa’s attempted vindication of *reflective* knowledge. What I’m worried about is the way in which questions get pushed back when we start asking how the kind of self-awareness required for Sosa-style reflective knowledge could come about.

To be clear, I am *not* here seeking to *identify* the phenomenon of vicious circularity with that of pushing the question back, or anything like that.⁸ All I say is that the question gets pushed back when we ask Sosa how he thinks we know that source K is reliable and he gives a circular answer. That’s what I think makes that answer unsatisfactory, and that in turn is what makes Sosa-style circularity count as vicious. Because the pushing back of the question is not to be identified with the vicious circularity, the former might perhaps be construed as being more regress-like than circle-like. I’m not saying it necessarily should be so construed, just noting that it’s no problem for the current project if it is. Similarly, it’s no problem for the current project if pushing the question back is a matter of *not having said enough* for certain purposes, and circularity *isn’t* that sort of phenomenon.

But even if I’m right about the circularity being vicious, it is a substantial further question how much of an impact that has on other parts of Sosa’s view. Here I shall look at a putative solution to the Problem of Easy Knowledge (PEK) which can be extracted from, or at least developed based upon, what Sosa says in chapters 9 and 10.

I am not at all sure what Sosa’s own view about the PEK comes to; I share the puzzlement expressed by Wright in his 2011. So instead of attempting accurate Sosa exegesis, I propose to expound a putative solution to the PEK which seems to me to fit with what Sosa says, and has a chance of avoiding some of the issues Wright raises for another position that also might be Sosa’s line on the PEK. I shall attribute this putative solution to Sosa*, without making any assumptions as to whether or not Sosa* is identical with Sosa. I shall aim to explore the

⁸ I’m grateful to my audience at the Northern Institute of Philosophy for helping me to clarify this.

question of whether the viciousness described above means that Sosa*'s putative solution to the PEK fails.

Here is the PEK as Sosa understands it (p. 211):

Consider the following proposition

KR: a potential knowledge source K can yield knowledge for S only if S knows that K is reliable.

If we affirm KR, we face the problem of vicious circularity. How can we attain the required knowledge that our epistemic sources are reliable? Must we not have that knowledge already before the sources can deliver it to us? How can we know perception to be reliable, for example, without basing our belief on our empirical knowledge derived ultimately from perception? And the same goes for memory and other sources.

If we deny KR, that apparently enables us to bootstrap our way from the deliverances of a source on some occasion (or upon a series of them) to conclusions about the safety of its operation on that occasion (or about its general reliability). But this is clearly unacceptable.

For current purposes, I shall follow Sosa in adopting this understanding of the nature of the PEK. The problem is pretty clearly stated and easy to grasp. But Sosa's response is difficult to extract. Sosa is at pains to defend a certain kind of epistemic circularity throughout much of his 2009, so one might think of him as attempting to defuse the 'affirm KR' horn of the dilemma. But in chapter 10, when the PEK is explicitly addressed, he in fact appears to be attempting to defuse the 'deny KR' horn. This matters, because *if* Sosa is not trying to defuse the 'affirm KR' horn to solve the PEK, then his solution to the PEK may survive regardless of whether the kind of epistemic circularity Sosa tries to defend in earlier chapters is in fact vicious. For only solutions which embrace the 'affirm KR' horn take on a responsibility to explain how epistemic circularity can be non-vicious.

In order to understand Sosa*'s response to PEK, a few pieces of background need to be in place. Sosa believes that reflective knowledge of p requires – and possesses some of its epistemic status in virtue of – p's fitting coherently into the subject's web of belief. (That is why he thinks one needs to know something about the source of one's belief that p, and something about the reliability of that source, in order to count as having reflective knowledge that p.)

For this reason, Sosa says that reflective knowledge is not to be construed on a 'linear' foundationalist model, whereby foundational beliefs enjoy some privileged epistemic status, and on account of are able to lend their support to beliefs at the next layer in a hierarchy, which in turn can then lend their support to beliefs in the next layer, and so on (pp. 239-40):

The right model for understanding reflective justification is not the linear model whereby justification is a sort of liquid that flows through some pipe or channel of reasoning, from premises to conclusion. (Such flow is linear, unidirectional; the pipe or channel "transmits" the justification – or warrant, or epistemic status.) A better model is rather that of the web of belief, whereby the web is properly attached to the environment, whilst its nodes can also gain status through mutual support.

However, I think this may be a somewhat misleading statement. It would be a mistake assume that just because the *coherence requirement* on reflective knowledge doesn't lend itself to being thought of on a linear model, reflective knowledge itself doesn't have any linear structure. Reflective knowledge of p requires more than *mere* coherence; it requires apt belief that p. Sosa is no pure coherentist, even about reflective knowledge; the web of belief is to be 'properly attached to the environment'.

Wright (2011, p. 35) is uncertain as to whether Sosa is a pure coherentist about reflective knowledge, noting that Sosa nowhere commits to such a position. I, by contrast, think Sosa is committed to *rejecting* pure coherentism about reflective knowledge by his view that reflective knowledge requires apt belief. Some sets of beliefs could be fully coherent but not at all apt, because formed using unreliable methods. A pure coherentist about reflective knowledge would have to count these beliefs as reflective knowledge, whereas Sosa has to say that they are not reflective knowledge (or indeed any kind of knowledge).

When considering what makes a belief apt, we might well want to think about what (if anything) we *base* those beliefs upon. For example, it's pretty plausible that a belief that is *inappropriately* based fails to exhibit the kind of skill or virtue required for aptness, even it is good in other ways. Indeed, Sosa himself talks about basing relations in some key passages about reflective knowledge and the PEK, such as the following (p. 239):

Consider ... one's justification for a give commitment ... say a commitment that lies behind one's belief that one sees as red wall. Might one's *reflective* rational justification for that commitment gain a boost through one's now basing it in part (perhaps in some very small part) on the belief that one does see a red wall. [sic]

But care is required concerning the nature of this linear basing relationship. Sosa could be read as suggesting that *some part of the positive epistemic status* of reflective knowledge that (say) one isn't looking at a white wall under red lighting can derive in a hierarchical – i.e. not purely coherence-based – way from the belief that one sees a red wall.

But this suggestion raises a serious concern, which is clearly articulated by Wright (2011, p. 36):

Even the suggestion of transmission of a very small degree of rational warrant offends the original intuitions about the case. A claims to be rationally confident about the colour of the wall on the basis of how it looks to her. We ask her, "What reason do you have for thinking that the circumstances are such that the appearance of the wall displays its actual colour?" She replies, "Well, nothing very strong; but there is the appearance of the wall."

What I think can be said on behalf of Sosa*, in reply to Wright, is that on the view under consideration the 'boost' which the commitment (lets call it C) gets by being based on the belief that one sees a red wall involves no linear transmission of warrant at all. Even if the *basing relation* is linear in structure, we needn't assume that *warrant* is being transmitted along that line. Suggestively, on p. 22

Sosa describes reflective knowledge as ‘not *transmissively* linear’ (emphasis added) rather than just ‘not linear’. Basing as intended here, then, might be more of a psychological matter than an epistemic one. It could then be said that the additional positive epistemic status that C gets in virtue of being based in this way is entirely due to new-found additional coherence in the subject’s overall doxastic state, where this state is determined both by which beliefs the subject has *and* what psychological basing relations hold between them. If that’s what’s going on, then the fact of being based on the belief that one sees a red wall contributes to (‘boosts’) C’s positive status, but that isn’t because warrant is being transmitted linearly from that belief to C.

Note that this still does not imply that Sosa* is treating reflective knowledge that C in a pure-coherentist manner. Any belief in C still needs to be *apt* if it is to count as an item of reflective knowledge. This, I’m assuming here, means it needs to be appropriately based, and one might think that means it’s not *mere* coherence with other beliefs that renders it knowledgeable. But admittedly, *that* doesn’t rule out a pure-but-sophisticated coherentism, because we are now allowing that the fact that a certain basis is appropriate may be partly or wholly due to the coherence of the overall doxastic state within which it is so based. However, aptness also requires that the subject has acquired the belief that C via a reliable source. And that’s the requirement for which no amount of coherence (however sophisticated in kind) can be substituted.

The small boost that C can get by being based in part upon the belief that one sees a red wall is presumably not the *only* boost of this kind that C will get to bolster the positive epistemic status it has in virtue of being apt. C will also get a number of other small boosts, together adding up to one that is large enough for C to count as an item of reflective knowledge. It may get a small coherence-related boost, for example, by being based in part upon one’s belief that in general, when one seems to see a red wall one really does see a red wall. And it may get another from being based in part upon the belief that things are usually the way they seem.

With a more thorough outline of Sosa*’s position in place, I can explain how it makes available a certain kind of answer to the PEK. First, given with Sosa’s two-level understanding of knowledge, we need to split KR into KRA (for animal knowledge) and KRR (for reflective knowledge):

KRA: a potential knowledge source K can yield *animal* knowledge for S only if S knows that K is reliable.

KRR: a potential knowledge source K can yield *reflective* knowledge for S only if S knows that K is reliable.

Sosa*’s proposal then has two parts. Firstly, Sosa* denies KRA, and argues that any bootstrapping generated at the level of *reflective* knowledge as a result of KRA is unproblematic, once properly understood as consisting in a coherence-generated ‘boost’ of the kind described above. So for example, S’s belief in commitment C can get a small bootstrapping ‘boost’ at the reflective level by

being based on *S*'s prior *animal* knowledge that *S* sees a red wall (which doesn't need to be based on *C* – or indeed on anything – because coherence isn't an issue for animal knowledge). *C* gets a boost by being so based because so basing it increases the coherence of *S*'s overall doxastic state.

Secondly, Sosa* affirms KRR. Sosa*'s response to the PEK cannot end with the defence of animal knowledge alone, but denying KRR sits very ill with the rest of Sosa 2009. So when it's KRR that's under discussion, the horn of the dilemma to be embraced is the circularity horn.

The discussion of the bootstrapping horn is very interesting and potentially important in its own right; Sosa* offers an intriguing approach to defending animal knowledge from the PEK which deserves further exploration and discussion. But this should not distract us from the fact that a defence of epistemic circularity as non-vicious does seem to be required for Sosa* to give a *full* answer to the PEK, if both animal and reflective knowledge are to be defended.

Given that I don't think Sosa has successfully argued that epistemic circularity is non-vicious, I don't ultimately think a full and satisfying answer to the PEK can be extracted from Sosa 2009 along the lines discussed here. I should stress, however, that (like Wright 2011) I am very unsure as to how to read Sosa's proposal, and certainly am not claiming that reading Sosa as Sosa* is the only possible interpretation.

References

- Black, M. 1958. 'Self-Supporting Inductive Arguments', in *The Journal of Philosophy* 55, pp. 718-25.
- Jenkins, C. 2007. 'Entitlement and Rationality', in *Synthese* 157, pp. 25-45.
- Sosa, E. 2007. *A Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge Volume I*. Oxford University Press.
- 2009. *Reflective Knowledge: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge Volume II*. Oxford University Press.
- Wright, C. 2004. 'Warrant For Nothing (And Foundations For Free)', in *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 78, pp. 167-212.
- 2011. 'Frictional Coherentism? A comment on chapter 10 of Ernest Sosa's Reflective Knowledge', in *Philosophical Studies* 153, pp. 29-41.