PHILOSOPHICAL SCEPTICISM

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I—Ernest Sosa

PHILOSOPHICAL SCEPTICISM AND EPISTEMIC CIRCULARITY

Epistemic circularity has dogged epistemology from the time of the Greek sceptics, through Descartes’s circle and Hegel’s serpent biting its tail, to serve finally as a source of today’s relativism and scepticism—an important source, though of course only one of several. ‘Since there is no way to justify one’s overall practical or theoretical stance without circularity,’ we are told, ‘all justification must be ultimately relative to one’s basic commitments, conceived perhaps as arbitrary creatures of the will. In comparing overall systems, anyhow, especially when these are equally coherent and self-supportive, there is no way to privilege one’s own except arbitrarily, irrationally or arationally, perhaps by adopting a frank and honest ethnocentrism.’ That is today a wide-spread attitude. This paper aims to expose questionable assumptions on which it rests.

We shall consider the following thesis and its supporting argument.

Philosophical Scepticism. There is no way to attain full philosophical understanding of our knowledge. A fully general theory of knowledge is impossible.

The Radical Argument (RA)

A1. Any theory of knowledge must be internalist or externalist.
A2. A fully general internalist theory is impossible.
A3. A fully general externalist theory is impossible.
C. From A1–A3, philosophical scepticism follows.

In discussing these, first it will be convenient to define some terminology. ‘Formal internalism’—or ‘internalism’ for short—
shall stand for the doctrine that a belief can be justified and amount to knowledge only through the backing of reasons or arguments. This is of course a special sense of the word, but internalism in this sense today enjoys substantial support. Here are some representative passages, drawn from the writings of Donald Davidson, Richard Rorty, Laurence Bonjour, and Michael Williams.

[Nothing]...can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief...[And it]...will promote matters at this point to review very hastily some of the reasons for abandoning the search for a basis for knowledge outside the scope of our beliefs. By ‘basis’ I mean here specifically an epistemological basis, a source of justification.1

[It]...is absurd to look for...something outside [our beliefs]...which we can use to test or compare with our beliefs.2

[Nothing]...counts as justification unless by reference to what we already accept, and there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence.3

[We] can think of knowledge as a relation to propositions, and thus of justification as a relation between the propositions in question and other propositions from which the former may be inferred. Or we may think of both knowledge and justification as privileged relations to the objects those propositions are about. If we think in the first way, we will see no need to end the potentially infinite regress of propositions-brought-forward-in-defense-of-other-propositions. It would be foolish to keep conversation going on the subject once everyone, or the majority, or the wise, are satisfied, but of course we can. If we think of knowledge in the second way, we will want to get behind reasons to causes, beyond argument to compulsion from the object known, to a situation in which argument would be not just silly but impossible...To reach that point is to reach the foundations of knowledge.4

To accept the claim that there is no standpoint outside the particular historically conditioned and temporary vocabulary we are presently using from which to judge this vocabulary is to give up on the idea

2 Ibid., p.431.
4 Ibid., p.159.
that there can be reasons for using languages as well as reasons within languages for believing statements. This amounts to giving up the idea that intellectual or political progress is rational, in any sense of 'rational' which is neutral between vocabularies.\(^5\)

[The] notion of a [foundational] 'theory of knowledge' will not make sense unless we have confused causation and justification in the manner of Locke.\(^6\)

If we let \(\emptyset\) represent the feature or characteristic, whatever it may be, which distinguishes basic empirical beliefs from other empirical beliefs, then in an acceptable foundationalist account a particular empirical belief B could qualify as basic only if the premises of the following justificatory argument were adequately justified:

1. B has feature \(\emptyset\).
2. Beliefs with feature \(\emptyset\) are highly likely to be true.

Therefore, B is highly likely to be true.

...But if all this is correct, we get the disturbing result that B is not basic after all, since its justification depends on that of at least one other empirical belief.\(^7\)

Only a legitimating account of our beliefs about the world will give an understanding of our knowledge of the world. This means that an account of our knowledge of the world must trace it to something that is ours, and that is knowledge, but that is not knowledge of the world.\(^8\)

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5 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 48. Note the ambiguity between 'reasons for using languages' that one has and adduces, versus reasons that there are whether or not one has them or adduces them. And note also the assumption that only what is based on reasonings from adduced reasons can be assessed as 'rational.' (One might of course yield the vocabulary of the 'rational' in the face of such uninhibited assumptions, for the sake of the conversation, so long as one could still distinguish among beliefs, and even among 'choices of vocabulary,' those that are 'apt,' in some apt sense, from those that are not.)


8 Michael Williams, 'Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism,' *Mind* 97 (1988), p. 246. (This paper sketches a view developed and defended in his *Unnatural Doubts* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992.) Here Williams is attributing a view to Stroud. But in his paper (and in his book) he evidently agrees that if there were a way of attaining a general philosophical understanding of our knowledge of the world, it would have to be in terms of a legitimating account; and he does not take seriously the possibility of a substantially externalist account.
'Formal externalism’ shall stand for the denial of formal internalism. And, again, for short we shall drop the qualifier, and speak simply of ‘externalism’.

A very wide and powerful current of thinking would sweep away externalism root and branch. This torrent of thought in one way or another encompasses much of contemporary philosophy, both on the Continent and in the Anglophone sphere, as may be seen in the Continental rejection of presence to the mind as well as in the analytic rejection of the given. The Continentals have been led by Heidegger, Gadamer, Habermas, Foucault, and Derrida to a great variety of anti-foundationalisms, ranging from consensualism and hermeneutics to relativism and contextualism. The tide against the given on this side of the Channel is no less powerful and is illustrated by the passages already cited. Having also rejected the given and presence to the mind, others settle into an irresolvable frustration that recognizes the problems but denies the possibility of any satisfactory solution.9 Many who now object to externalism in such terms offer little by way of support. Barry Stroud and William Alston are exceptional in spelling out the deep reasons why, in their view, externalism will leave us ultimately dis-

9 Such overreaction against objective foundations may drive even someone brilliant to unfortunate excesses. Compare the writings of Paul Feyerabend. Moreover, the sort of internalism that enforces capitulation to ‘circularity’-wielding relativists is not confined to the avant-garde we have already consulted. For just one example, earlier in the century, in an otherwise most illuminating paper, Alan Gewirth had this to say: ‘Consequently, it is circular to say that the basic principles of science are themselves cognitive; for it is these principles or norms which determine whether anything else is to be called cognitive. Moreover, these principles are a selection from among other possible principles—possible, that is, in the sense that they are espoused by people who claim to have “science” or “knowledge” by methods which are in important respects different from those grounded in inductive and deductive logic. These other methods include those of Christian Science, astrology, phrenology, tribal medicine-men, and many others. Each of these other methods has its own way of defining what is to be meant by “fact,” “knowledge,” and so forth. Hence, if any of these latter is to be called “noncognitive,” it will be by reference not to its norms or principles but to those of some other way of viewing “science” or “knowledge.” To claim that any of those is “absolutely” non-cognitive is to ignore the relativity of all claims of cognitiveness to norms or principles which define what is to be meant by “cognitive.”…Hence, strictly speaking, the choice among different conceptions of “knowledge” or “science” cannot itself be said to be made by cognitive means.’ (F ➔ A. Gewirth, "Positive "Ethics" and Normative "Science"," The Philosophical Review LXIX (1960); the passage quoted comes from the thirteenth paragraph.) Here again, we might well yield the vocabulary of ‘choices made by cognitive means,’ so long as we could keep a distinction between choices or commitments that are ‘apt’ and those that are not, where this is not just something ‘relative’ to raw or brute or ‘arbitrary’ commitments.
satisfied. They have made as persuasive a case as can be made for the unacceptability in principle of any externalist circles in epistemology, and have done so on a very simple a priori basis grounded in what seem to be demands inherent in the traditional epistemological project itself. What follows will focus on their case against such externalism, but much of it applies mutatis mutandis to the reasoning, such as it is, offered by other thinkers as well. Though the issue before us is phrased in the terms of analytic epistemology, it is a wellspring of main currents of thought that reach beyond analysis and epistemology. Yet the issue and its options, rarely faced directly, are very ill-understood.

One thing is already clear. Given our definition of externalism as simply the denial of internalism, premise A1 is trivially true and amounts to $p$ or not-$p$.

Note further that an acceptable internalist epistemological account of all one’s knowledge in some domain D would be, in the following sense, a ‘legitimating’ account of such knowledge.

$A$ is a legitimating account of one’s knowledge in domain D IFF

D is a domain of one’s beliefs that constitute knowledge and are hence justified (and more), and A specifies the sorts of inferences that justify one’s beliefs in D, without circularity or endless regress.

But such an account cannot be attained for all one’s knowledge:

The impossibility of general, legitimating, philosophical understanding of all one’s knowledge: It is impossible to attain a legitimating account of absolutely all one’s own knowledge; such an account admits only justification provided by inference or argument and, since it rules out circular or endlessly regressive inferences, such an account must stop with premises that it supposes or ‘presupposes’ that one is justified in accepting,

10 Alston is among those who settle into irresolvable frustration, insofar as he accepts externalism at the cost of a freely avowed dissatisfaction, which, as we shall see, he takes to be inherent in the human theoretical condition. Insofar as he tries to struggle against this, it is by conceding the theoretical frustration, and turning to a kind of practical reasonability, in a way we shall consider.

11 The position on these issues of my Knowledge in Perspective (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), has repeatedly drawn an objection (as detailed in notes 19 and 33 below) that we shall consider in what follows.
without explaining how one is justified in accepting them in turn.

Accordingly, premise A2 of argument RA seems clearly right. And it all comes down to premise A3. If we are to resist philosophical scepticism we cannot accept that premise. What then are the prospects for a formal externalist epistemology?

The formal externalist has, it seems to me, three main choices today, concerning how a belief attains the status of knowledge, how it acquires the sort of epistemic justification (or aptness or warrant, or anyhow the positive epistemic status) required if it is to amount to knowledge. These three choices are:

E1. **Coherentism.** When a belief is epistemically justified, it is so in virtue of its being part of a coherent body of beliefs (or at least of one that is sufficiently coherent and appropriately comprehensive).

E2. **Foundationalism of the given.** When a belief is epistemically justified, it is so in virtue of being either the taking of the given, the mere recording of what is present to the mind of the believer, or else by being inferred appropriately from such foundations.

E3. **Reliabilism.** When a belief is epistemically justified, it is so in virtue of deriving from an epistemically, truth-conducively reliable process or faculty or intellectual virtue of belief acquisition.

E1. There is a lot to be said about coherentism, but I lack the space to say much of it here. Suffice it to say that the most comprehensive coherence accompanied by the truth of what one believes will not yet amount to knowledge. The New Evil Demon problem establishes this as follows. Consider the victim of Descartes’s evil demon. In fact, suppose we are now such victims. Could that affect whether or not we are epistemically justified in believing what we believe? If we are justified as we are, we would seem equally justified, in some appropriate sense, so long as nothing changed within our whole framework of experiences and beliefs. However, if by sheer luck one happened to be right in the belief that one faces a fire, one’s being both thus justified and right still would fall short of one’s knowing about the fire. So whatever is to be said for coherence, or even for comprehensive coherence, one thing
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seems clear: none of that will be enough just on its own to explain fully what a true belief needs in order to be knowledge. One’s beliefs can be comprehensively coherent without amounting to knowledge, and the same goes for one’s beliefs and experiences together. So the sense of ‘epistemic justification’ in play here is one that will not capture fully the epistemic status required in a true belief if it is to constitute knowledge.

E2. What of foundationalism of the given? *Cogito ergo sum* exclaimed Descartes, as he at last found a good apple off the tree of knowledge. By that time many other apples had already been judged defective, or at least not clearly enough undefective. Our perceptual beliefs had not qualified, since we could so easily be fooled into believing something false on the basis of sensory experience. For example, one could fall victim to illusion or hallucination, and, more dramatically, to an evil demon or a mad scientist who manipulated one’s soul or one’s brain directly, thus creating systematically the sorts of experiences that one would normally take to be indicative of a normal environment. None of this will affect the *cogito*, however, since even while hallucinating or while manipulated by evil demon or mad scientist, we must still exist and we must still be thinking, if we are to be fooled into thinking something incorrectly. One thought that could never be incorrect, is the thought that one exists, and another is the thought that one is thinking.

What is the feature of the *cogito* that explains its special assurance? Consider the proposition (a) that I am now standing. This proposition is true but only contingently so, since I might have been sitting now. In contrast, it is not only true but necessarily true (b) that either I am standing or I am not standing. Is it the necessity of (b) that accounts for its special certainty as compared with (a)? Not entirely. For much is necessary without being certain, and much is certain without being necessary. And, in any case, it cannot be the necessity of ‘I think’ or ‘I exist’ that gives such propositions their special epistemic status. For in itself the *cogito*, the proposition that I am thinking, is only true and not necessarily true: I might have been unconscious, or even dead, in which case I would not have been thinking. What is not just contingently true, what is necessarily true, is the fact that *if* I am thinking that I think, then I am right: no-one can think that they think without being right. Is it *this*, then,
that distinguishes the *cogito* and makes it a legitimately known contingent truth, of which we can properly be assured?

No, that one must be right in believing something does not entail that one is justified in doing so. Take the proposition that there is no largest prime. Since that proposition is necessarily true, we could not possibly go wrong in believing it. Nevertheless, we are not justifiably assured in believing it if we are just guessing right and have seen no proof. That a belief could not be wrong is hence not enough to make it apt, nor is a belief necessarily apt just because even the Cartesian demon could not fool one into holding it incorrectly. A groundless belief is one that we hold in the absence of supporting reasons or arguments. Some such beliefs seem far superior to others: some amount to knowledge of the obvious, while others are no better than superstition or dogma. We are now after distinguishing properties or features that will help explain which groundless beliefs might qualify as knowledge and which could never do so, and for some account of why these properties or features can make such a difference.

A second main source of apt, groundless beliefs, according to the epistemological tradition, is presence to the mind, or what is given in sensory and other experience. What is involved in one’s aptly believing something about the character of one’s present sensory experience? It is required by the tradition that one be reporting simply how it is in one’s experience itself. One must be reporting on the intrinsic, qualitative character of some experience.

But here again a similar problem arises. Suppose one eyes a well-lit surface with a medium-sized white triangle against a black background. In that case, assuming one is normally sighted, one would have visual experience of a certain distinctive sort, as if one saw a white triangle against a black background. Introspectively, then, one could easily come to know that one was then having experience of that sort: viz, that one was presented with a white triangular image, or the like. What now is the relevant feature of one’s introspective belief, what is the feature that makes one’s belief apt, makes it indeed a bit of knowledge? Is it simply that one is just reporting what is directly present to one’s mind, what is given in one’s experience?

No, that something is thus present to one’s mind or given in one’s experience is not enough to make it something of which one can be
legitimately assured. Take that same situation and change the white image projected on the black surface from a triangle to a dodecagon. And suppose you believe yourself to be presented with a white dodecagon on a black surface, all other conditions remaining as before. Are you then properly assured about the character of your experience so that your introspective belief can then count as apt belief, and indeed as knowledge? What of someone poor at reporting dodecagons in visual experience, who often confuses them with decagons, but who now happens by luck to be right? Such a belief could hardly count as knowledge or even as apt belief.

What Descartes needs in order to explain the special status of the cogito is not just that one cannot incorrectly believe that one thinks, but rather that one could not possibly answer incorrectly the question whether one thinks (at least not sincerely and in foro interno). And how can one explain this special status enjoyed by that proposition? Descartes’s explanation is of course that even a powerful evil demon could not fool one into thinking incorrectly that one thinks. For if the demon gets one to think that one thinks—and how else could he fool one into thinking incorrectly that one thinks?—then of course inevitably one does think and one is bound to be right.

However, that does only half the job. It explains only how one must be right if one thinks that one thinks. It does not explain why it is that one would never think that one does not think. Of course Descartes does claim that the proposition that one thinks is not only one with regard to which one is infallible, such that if one accepts it one must be right. He also thinks that it is an indubitable proposition. But whereas he explains incontestably why one must be right in thinking that one thinks, he does little or nothing to explain why it is that the cogito and other similarly simple, clear, distinct propositions are for us indubitable.

What of the doctrine of the given or of presence to the mind? Here the proposal would be that one aptly introspects P iff P describes a present state of one’s own consciousness and while considering attentively and with a clear mind the question whether P is the case, one believes P. It is held to be very unlikely that one would ever opt wrong on such a proposition when in such circumstances.
By reflecting on how the doctrine of the given must be formulated in order to meet certain objections, we have arrived at a reliabilist version of foundationalism. What matters is not that one attend to the contents of one’s mind, to one’s experiences or beliefs or other states of mind, nor is what matters that one attend to simple necessary truths. For simplicity is a relative matter: what is simple for an experienced mathematician is far from it to the schoolchild learning arithmetic. It is important rather that the subject be reliable on the object of knowledge, and unlikely to go wrong on such subject matter.

E3. So we are down to the third and last of the options open to the formal externalist. But I view generic reliabilism as a very broad category indeed, one capacious enough to include thinkers as diverse as Descartes and Alvin Goldman. If we are to resist philosophical scepticism it would appear that here we must make a stand. For, remember, if A3 cannot be defeated, then philosophical scepticism seems the inevitable consequence. So let us consider some objections to generic reliabilism. Here we turn to the promised arguments by Barry Stroud and William Alston.

According to Stroud, ‘we need some reason to accept a theory of knowledge if we are going to rely on that theory to understand how our knowledge is possible. That is what...no form of ‘externalism’ can give a satisfactory account of.’ Against Descartes, for example, and against the ‘externalist’ in general he objects on the basis of the following metaepistemic requirement:

MR In order to understand one’s knowledge satisfactorily one must see oneself as having some reason to accept a theory that one can recognize would explain one’s knowledge if it were true.

And how is MR to be defended? From the assumptions: (a) that understanding something is a matter of having good reason to accept something that would be an explanation if it were true, and (b) that, as generality-thirsty theorist of knowledge, one wants to understand how one knows the things one thinks one knows. But


13 Compare p.44, ibid.: ‘[Descartes is]... a theorist of knowledge. He wants to understand
MR does not follow from these assumptions. From these assumptions it follows only that in order to understand one’s knowledge one must in fact have good reason or at least justification to accept some appropriate explanation. Why must one also see oneself as having such reason?

Far from being just an isolated slip, MR represents rather a deeply held intuition that underlies a certain way of thinking about epistemology. We have seen already several passages that fit this intuition. According to such ‘anti-externalism,’ as Stroud might label it, what is important in epistemology is justification; and the justification of any given belief requires appeal to other beliefs that constitute one’s reasons for holding the given belief. Of course, when one combines this with rejection of circularity, the case for scepticism is very strong, assuming that for limited humans an infinite regress of reasons or justifications is out of the question.

The ‘externalist’ therefore wants to allow some other way for a belief to acquire the epistemic status required for it to be knowledge, some way other than the belief’s being based on some justification, argument, or reason. Note, moreover, how very broad this sense of ‘externalism’ is. Even arch-internalist Descartes is an ‘externalist’ in our present sense. We distinguish our present externalism as ‘formal externalism,’ it will be recalled, which induces a corresponding type of internalism, ‘formal internalism.’ Formal internalism holds that there is only one way a belief can have the positive epistemic status required for knowledge, namely by having the backing of reasons or arguments. Note the connection with the requirement that a philosophically satisfactory account of how one knows must be a legitimating account, one that specifies the reasons favouring one’s belief. Obviously, a formal internalist will believe that for every belief that amounts to knowledge there must be such a legitimating account, and that only once we have such an account can we understand what makes that belief knowledge.14

14 Compare here again the passages from Davidson and Rorty cited earlier, and the
Consider now the naturalist, externalist epistemologist. Will he be able to understand how people know the things they do? He will only if he knows or has some reason to believe his scientific account of the world around him. According to Stroud, this dooms our epistemologist:

If his goal was, among other things, to explain our scientific knowledge of the world around us, he will have an explanation of such knowledge only if he can see himself as possessing some knowledge in that domain. In studying other people, that presents no difficulty. It is precisely by knowing what he does about the world that he explains how others know what they do about the world. But if he had started out asking how anyone knows anything at all about the world, he would be no further along towards understanding how any of it is possible if he had not understood how he himself knows what he has to know about the world in order to have any explanation at all. He must understand himself as knowing or having some reason to believe that his theory is true.15

But it is again unclear why the epistemologist needs to see himself as having justification for his theory, or as knowing his theory, in order for it to give him understanding of how he and others know the things they know, either in general or in the domain in question. Why is it not enough that he in fact have good reason to accept his theory or perhaps even know his theory to be true? This is different from his knowing that he has good reason to believe his epistemologically explanatory theory, or even knowing that he knows his theory to be true. To this the response is as follows.

[The externalist epistemologist]...is at best in the position of someone who has good reason to believe his theory if that theory is in fact true, but has no such reason to believe it if some other theory is true instead. He can see what he would have good reason to believe if the theory he believes were true, but he cannot see or understand himself as knowing or having good reason to believe what his theory says.16

[Even]...if it is true that you can know something without knowing that you know it, the philosophical theorist of knowledge cannot

consequences drawn by Rorty not only for theory but also for praxis.

15 Ibid., p. 45.
16 Ibid., p. 46.
simply insist on the point and expect to find acceptance of an ‘externalist’ account of knowledge fully satisfactory. If he could, he would be in the position of someone who says: ‘I don’t know whether I understand human knowledge or not. If what I believe about it is true and my beliefs about it are produced in what my theory says is the right way, I do know how human knowledge comes to be, so in that sense I do understand. But if my beliefs are not true, or not arrived at in that way, I do not. I wonder which it is. I wonder whether I understand human knowledge or not.’ That is not a satisfactory position to arrive at in one’s study of human knowledge—or of anything else.\(^{17}\)

But again it is hard to see why the externalist theorist of knowledge must be in that position. Suppose that, as suggested earlier, he does not have to say or believe that he does know his theory of knowledge. Suppose he does not after all need to satisfy MR. Must he then say or believe that he does not know his theory of knowledge? Must he begin to wonder whether his theory of knowledge is true, or whether he does really understand human knowledge or not? Surely not.

Here the dialectic is given a further twist. It is replied that the sort of understanding of our knowledge of the external that we want in philosophy is not just understanding by dumb luck. What we want is rather knowledgeable understanding. And this we will never have until we are in a good position to accept our view of our own faculties (of perception or memory, for example), a view which properly underlies our trust in their reliability. But this view we will never be able to justify without relying in turn on already attained knowledge of the external. And this precludes our ever attaining a philosophically satisfactory understanding of all our knowledge in that domain.\(^{18}\)


\(^{18}\) Compare Stroud on this: ‘We want witting, not unwitting, understanding. That requires knowing or having some reason to accept the scientific story you believe about how people know the things they know. And in the case of knowledge of the world around us, that would involve already knowing or having some reason to believe something in the domain in question. Not all the knowledge in that domain would thereby be explained.’ *Ibid.*, p.48.) Also: ‘The demand for completely general understanding of knowledge in a certain domain requires that we see ourselves at the outset as not knowing anything in that domain and then coming to have such knowledge on the basis of some independent and in that sense prior knowledge or experience… [When] we try to explain how we know… things [in a domain we are interested in] we find we can understand it only by
The demands introduced by this drive for *knowledgeable* philosophical understanding are different from those deriving from the twofold assumption that (a) epistemic justification is required for knowledge, and (b) reasons and arguments are universally required for epistemic justification. This twofold assumption—formal internalism—leads, as we have seen, to the impossibility of any fully general, legitimating, philosophical understanding of one's knowledge (and indeed to the impossibility of one's knowledge altogether). The new demands do not derive simply from such formal internalism. They derive rather from a distinctively epistemic circularity that came to philosophical consciousness long ago.

The dialectic of the diallelus is about as ancient as philosophy itself. Nor is Stroud the only philosopher today who argues extensively on the basis of epistemic circularity. Recent books by William Alston, for example, contain extensive discussion of these issues, and feature the following main theme:

*if sense-perception is reliable*, a track-record argument will suffice to show that it is. Epistemic circularity does not in and of itself disqualify the argument. But even granting that point, the argument will not do its job unless we are justified in accepting its premises; and that is the case only if sense perception is in fact reliable. And this is to offer a stone instead of bread. We can say the same of any belief-forming practice whatever, no matter how disreputable. We can just as well say of crystal-ball gazing that if it is reliable, we can use a track record argument to show that it is reliable. But when we ask whether one or another source of belief is reliable, we are interested in *discriminating* those that can reasonably be trusted from those that cannot. Hence merely showing that *if* a given source is reliable it can be shown by its record to be reliable, does nothing to indicate that the source belongs with the sheep rather than with the goats. I have removed an allegedly crippling disability, but I have not given the argument a clean bill of health.19

assuming that we have got some knowledge in the domain in question. And that is not philosophically satisfying. We have lost the prospect of explaining and therefore understanding all of our knowledge with complete generality.' *(ibid.,* pp.48–9.)

19 W.P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 148. In a review of → *Knowledge in Perspective*, in *Mind* 102(1993): 199–203, Alston adds that 'it is plausible to suppose that we cannot give an impressive argument for the reliability of sense perception without making use of what we have learned from sense perception. This problem affects Sosa's view as much as it does any other form of externalism that requires for justification or knowledge that the
Both in that book, and in more recent work,\textsuperscript{20} Alston is forthright in his statement of the problem of circularity that he sees, and in his response to that perceived problem:

Hence I shall disqualify epistemically circular arguments on the grounds that they do not serve to discriminate between reliable and unreliable doxastic practices.\textsuperscript{21}

Hence, when we reflect on our epistemic situation, we can hardly turn our backs on our inability to give a satisfactory demonstration of SP and other doxastic practices...\textsuperscript{22}

In response to this, Alston argues instead that it is ‘practically rational’ for us to engage in our firmly rooted doxastic practices,\textsuperscript{23} such as our ‘sense perceptual practice,’ SP, ‘our customary ways of forming beliefs about the external environment on the basis of sense perception.’\textsuperscript{24} And he believes that ‘in showing it to be rational to engage in SP,’ he has thereby, ‘not shown SP to be reliable, but shown it to be rational to suppose SP to be reliable.’\textsuperscript{25} This is so in the sense that it would be irrational for one to judge that SP is rational and deny that SP is reliable, or even to abstain from judging that SP is reliable if the question arises. So in accepting that SP is rational one ‘pragmatically implies’ and thereby ‘commits oneself’ to its being the case that SP is reliable.

Just how is it shown that it is ‘rational’ (or ‘reasonable’) to engage in SP? Here the argument begins by drawing from Thomas Reid the following claim:

1. The ‘only (noncircular) basis we have for trusting rational intuition and introspection is that they are firmly established doxastic practices, so firmly established that we cannot help

source of a belief be truth-conducive. To apply Sosa’s view we would have to determine which belief forming habits are intellectual virtues, i.e., which can be depended on to yield mostly true beliefs. Doesn’t epistemic circularity attach to these enterprises, by his own showing? What does he have to say about that?’

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p. 17. The problem is supposed to arise from the fact that the data on the basis of which a track-record argument reaches the conclusion that a certain doxastic practice DP is reliable, are data that derive (at some remove, if not immediately) from the use of that very practice DP.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p.120. My emphasis.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 130.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p.7.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., p.131.
[doing so]...; and we have exactly the same basis for trusting sense perception, memory, nondeductive reasoning, and other sources of belief for which Descartes and Hume were demanding an external validation.  

And it continues as follows:

2. ‘[Even if] we could adopt some basic way of forming beliefs about the physical environment other than SP, or some basic way of forming beliefs about the past other than memory,... why should we?’

3. ‘The same factors that prevent us from establishing the reliability of SP, memory, and so on without epistemic circularity would operate with the same force in these other cases.’

4. ‘These considerations seem to me to indicate that it is eminently reasonable for us to form beliefs in the ways we standardly do,’ such as SP.

This is presented as an argument for the practical rationality (or reasonableness) of using SP, one which avoids the ‘epistemic circularity’ that cripples track-record and other arguments for the reliability of SP. Where exactly is the circularity, and just how does it do its damage? The answer considers the use of a track-record argument, an argument that appeals to our past cognitive success through using SP:

[If] I were to ask myself why I should accept the premises, I would, if I pushed the reflection far enough, have to make the claim that sense perception is reliable. For if I weren’t prepared to make that claim on reflection, why should I, as a rational subject, countenance perceptual beliefs? Since this kind of circularity involves a commitment to the conclusion as a presupposition of our supposing ourselves to be justified in holding the premises, we can properly term it ‘epistemic circularity’.  

However, consider again the earlier argument in favour of the conclusion that it is rational (or reasonable) to use SP, the argument

26 Ibid., p.127.
27 Ibid., p.125.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., p. 126.
30 Ibid., p.15.
presented above as 1–4. If we push reflection far enough with regard to why we should accept the premises of this argument, don’t we find ourselves appealing precisely to its conclusion? And, if so, then is not this argument just as circular, and in a similar way, as the track-record argument in favour of the reliability of SP?

Epistemological reflection therefore leads to a situation that does seem ‘fairly desperate’ after all. We wonder whether we really know what we take ourselves to know. We wonder how we know whatever it is that we know. We hope that our way of forming beliefs— with its characteristic elements of memory, introspection, perception, and reason—does give us knowledge and explains how we know. But how can we be sure?

Suppose W is our total way of forming beliefs. If we believe that W is reliable, R(W), our belief B:R(W) is itself formed by W. And if a belief is justified iff formed in a reliable way, then our B:R(W) is justified iff W is reliable (given that it is formed by W). B:R(W) is justified, therefore, iff W is reliable.

Yet we must sympathize with the critics of ‘externalism,’ who argue that this is to ‘give us a stone instead of bread,’ and that the externalist ‘is at best in the position of someone who...can see what he would have good reason to believe if the theory he believes were true.’ Let us consider carefully what they have to say.

Alston, in his recent books, argues as follows.

Consider our sense-perceptual doxastic practice SP, (our total way of forming beliefs based on sense perception). The reliability of SP can be inferred, let us suppose, by relying on the deliverances of SP itself. Hence, assuming our reasoning is otherwise unobjectionable, belief B:R(SP) is justified if SP is reliable. But using the deliverances of SP to argue for B:R(SP) would be unacceptably circular.

Here, again, is how he puts it.

[When] we ask whether one or another source of belief is reliable, we are interested in discriminating those that can reasonably be trusted from those that cannot. Hence merely showing that if a given source is reliable it can be shown by its record to be reliable, does nothing to indicate that the source belongs with the sheep rather than with the goats. I have removed an allegedly crippling disability, but I have not given the argument a clean bill of health. Hence I shall disqualify epistemically circular arguments on the
grounds that they do not serve to discriminate between reliable and unreliable doxastic practices.\(^3\)

But what exactly is the problem for the justification of B:R(SP)? And, even more generally, what exactly is the problem for the justification of B:R(W), where W is our total way of forming beliefs (of which SP would be only one among several components)?

Justification can be either a matter of one’s internal rationality and coherence, or it can go beyond that to encompass some broader (or just different) state pertinent to whether one knows. Thus the victim of Descartes’ s evil demon may have internal justification for believing that there is a fire before him, but would still lack knowledge even if by accident he is right. Similarly, the hopelessly myopic Mr. Magoo may have internal justification for believing that it is safe to step ahead, but would still lack knowledge even if the board over the precipice does by accident still lie ahead.

For now let us focus just on internal justification or rational coherence. Are we bound to fall short of rational coherence if we form our belief that W is reliable—B:R(W)—through W itself? Alston suggests that we do fall short, in some way, since in asking whether one or another source of belief is reliable, we wish to discriminate sources that we can trust with good reason. Therefore, to show that if a given source is reliable it can be shown by its own use to be reliable does nothing to discriminate it from the many other possible sources equally able to pass that test.

We are thus offered the following view of the matter. We have before us a menu of sources, of ways of forming beliefs: W1, ..., Wn. And we would like to discriminate the reliable from the unreliable. About Wi we discover that it has this much to be said for it: if one uses Wi to form beliefs, then by Wi one can form the belief B:R(Wi), the belief that Wi is reliable. And if Wi is reliable, then B:R(Wi) will itself of course be justified. When a way of forming beliefs, Wi, has this feature relative to a subject S in circumstances C, let us say that Wi is self-supportive for S in C: i.e., for S in C, Wi will deliver the belief on the part of S that Wi is itself reliable—B:R(Wi).

\(^3\) Ibid., p.17.
Here then is Alston's point about the feature of being self-supportive relative to oneself and one's circumstances: several (indefinitely many) ways of forming beliefs might well have this feature relative to oneself and one's circumstances, but many of these are palpably unacceptable. Indeed they might well be inconsistent in such a way that most by far are bound to be unreliable. Therefore, even once we reach the conclusion that Wi is self-supportive relative to us and our circumstances, that by itself does not enable us to conclude that it is acceptable, that it is a sheep, not a goat.

That much is surely right. But there is more. There is also the further proposal that if a way of forming beliefs W (a doxastic practice) is 'firmly established' for us, then we can conclude that it is practically acceptable, that we are practically rational in accepting it. Presumably this feature of a doxastic practice of its being FE (firmly established) is thought to have an advantage over the feature of a doxastic practice of its being R (reliable), with regard to the dialectic above. But it is hard to see how it can possibly enjoy any such advantage. For in order to reach the belief that our total way of forming beliefs W is firmly established—B:FE(W)—we could hardly avoid using W itself. And it is not hard to see that indefinitely many crazy ways W* of forming beliefs might (conceivably) be equally effective, if used by one in one's circumstances, in leading to the belief—B:FE(W*)—that W* is firmly established for us, even though W* is still clearly unacceptable. What is more, it is also conceivable that there be a way W* that might in fact become firmly established, even though W* remained unacceptable (by our present lights, of course). Conclusion: It is hard to see the advantage in moving from reliability to firm establishment and practical reasonableness. True, even if using W to settle whether W is reliable would yield a positive verdict, that is not enough to lift W above its many competitors with an analogous feature. But, similarly, even if using W to settle whether W is firmly established would yield a positive verdict, that is not enough to lift W above its similar competitors either. It might be answered that we needn't see W as firmly estab-

32 I will use 'firmly established' here as short for 'firmly established in the way described more fully by Alston and proposed by him as sufficient for practical reasonableness or rationality'.
lished in order for its firm establishment to lend us practical justification for using it. But then why need we see W as reliable in order for its reliability to lend us epistemic justification for using it?

Again, suppose we use way W, and that the use of W assures us that W itself is reliable. Indeed, consider our situation in the very best conceivable outcome. Suppose:

a) W is reliable (and suppose even that, given our circumstances and fundamental nature, it is the most reliable overall way we could have).

b) We are right in our description of W: it is exactly W that we use in forming beliefs, and it is of course (therefore) W that we use in forming the belief that W is our way of forming beliefs.

c) We believe that W is reliable (correctly so, given a above), and this belief, too, is formed by means of W.

Now what? Are we still in a ‘desperate situation’? What could possibly be missing? How could we possibly improve our epistemic situation?

It might be suggested that perhaps we could still search for some argument that would not be flawed by epistemic circularity. But is such circularity necessarily vicious? After all, what does an argument ever accomplish? Suppose you are given argument A with premises P and conclusion C and you correctly accept it as evidently valid. What this gives you in the first instance is the conviction that P entails C. And, unless you go back on this conviction, you are now restricted in the combinations of coherent attitudes that are open to you. But that is all that the argument by itself does: i.e., that is all you can derive from its validity. As far as the argument goes, its relevant deliverance is your belief that P entails C, and this justifies your believing C, given that you believe P, only by contrast with believing P and either disbelieving or consciously withholding on C. But it does not justify your believing C, given that you believe P, by contrast with many other optional attitudes: e.g., disbelieving C and disbelieving P. N.B.: it is a kind of intrinsic coherence that lifts the preferable attitudes over the lesser ones: once we have (a) B:[P entails C], we need to avoid (b) B:P and D:C, and (c) B:P and Wh:C —where D:P means B: ~P, and Wh:P means consciously or
deliberately withholding on whether P or ~P. Many other combinations of attitudes remain open options, of course, but so long as we retain (a), both (b) and (c) are to be avoided. Why so? Because they do not cohere well. There is some evident lack of fittingness or harmony in each of them. Here I won’t try to spell out the exact nature of the incoherence that attaches not only to (a) & (b) but also to (a) & (c). I’ll assume we can agree that it is there, whatever its nature. In fact, it is not really necessary to say anything that strong. A comparative judgment is enough. Consider: (d) B:P and B:C. All we need is the judgment that (a) & (d) is more coherent than either of (a) & (b) or (a) & (c). Given (a), which results from our supposed argument above, (d) is lifted over each of (b) and (c) in respect of coherence.

The upshot: all that (the validity of) an argument ever does is to raise some combinations of attitudes (to premises and conclusion respectively) above others in respect of coherence.

But now suppose that by using way W of forming beliefs (which may and probably will include the use of argument) we arrive at the conviction that W is our way of forming beliefs. Now, so long as we do not go back on that conviction, does that not restrict our coherent combinations of attitudes? Take: (e) B:[W is my overall way of forming beliefs]. And compare (f) B:[W is reliable], (g) D:[W is reliable] and (h) Wh:[W is reliable]. Is it not evident that (e) & (f) would be more satisfyingly coherent than either of (e) & (g) or (e) & (h)?

If so, the question arises: Just how would any further argument provide a fundamentally different and superior source of justification or rationality for our accepting the reliability of our overall way W of forming beliefs, as compared with what we are provided already by our conviction that W is indeed that overall way of ours?

The answer might come back: ‘But once we had an argument A for W being reliable from premises already accepted, we would embed our faith in W’s reliability within a more comprehensively coherent whole that would include the premises of our argument A.’ And it must be granted that such an argument would bring that benefit. However: we know that such an argument would have to be epistemically circular, since its premises can only qualify as beliefs of ours through the use of way W. That is to say, a correct
and full response to rational pressure for disclosure of what justifies one in upholding the premises must circle back down to the truth of the conclusion. *Necessarily* such an argument must be epistemically circular—that much seems clear enough. To rue that fact at this stage is hence like pining for a patron saint of modesty (who blesses all and only those who do not bless themselves), once we have seen that there could not possibly be such a saint.

Perhaps the dissatisfaction emphasized by Alston and Stroud, and many others, has a different source than any we have considered. Perhaps it arises from the following reasoning:

If we justify our belief in the reliability of our \( W \)—\( B:R(W) \)—by noting that \( W \) itself yields \( B:R(W) \), then anyone with a rival but self-supporting method \( W^* \) would be able to attain an equal measure of justification through parallel reasoning. They would justify their belief \( B:R(W^*) \) by noting that \( W^* \) itself yields \( B:R(W^*) \). So are we not forced to conclude that someone clever enough could attain a measure of rational justification equal to ours so long as their way of forming beliefs, \( W^* \), turned out to be, to the same extent, coherently and comprehensively self-supporting?

If *this* is the source of the discomfort, then it is discomfort we must learn to tolerate—though in time reason should be able to dispel it, just as it would dispel any desire to meet the saint who blesses all and only the nonselfblessed. After all, discursive, inferential reason is not our only faculty; and logical brilliance does not even ensure sanity. In light of this, I see no sufficient argument why we must settle, at the end of the day, for any irresolvable theoretical frustration.

We need to distinguish the internal justification that amounts to rational coherence, or even to rational coherence plus rational intuition, from the broader intellectual virtue required for knowledge. In order to know that \( p \), one’s belief must not fail the test of rational, internal coherence. But it must be tested in other ways as well: it must be true, for one thing. And, more than that, it must be *apt*: it must be a belief that manifests overall intellectual virtue, and is not flawed essentially by vice. (Mr. Magoo can infer brilliantly and a belief of his can manifest *that* virtue, while it is still flawed by epistemic vice and fails to manifest overall virtue.) Finally, if it
is to amount to knowledge a belief must be such that, in the circumstances, it would be held by that subject iff it were true, and this in virtue of its being apt in the way that it is apt, in virtue of deriving from the complex of virtues that form it and sustain it.

Suppose we are rationally justified in accepting the reliability of our way of forming beliefs $W$, and suppose our justification derives from the way that very belief coheres within our overall body of beliefs. Then we do of course commit ourselves to the consequence that anyone intelligent enough to secure an equal measure of coherence for their body of beliefs would attain thereby a comparable degree of rational justification for their belief in the reliability of their way of forming beliefs (a belief we may assume to be already part of their corpus). And this remains so even if their way amounts on the whole to madness! For in granting them logical coherence we need not grant thereby that there is no epistemically pertinent distinction between them and us. There are faculties other than reason, surely, and there is plenty of scope for madness and other vices beyond the ability to spin a coherent story.

To sum up: We can legitimately and with rational justification arrive at a belief that a certain set of faculties or doxastic practices are those that we employ and are reliable. That remains so, even though someone mad can weave a system of comparable internal coherence and can thereby attain a comparable degree of internal justification. But in granting this we must not grant that such coherently rational belief need only be true in order to be knowledge. A coherently rational belief can fail to be apt, surely, and can even be mad if formed by a mind that is brilliantly logical though deranged in its social and physical perception and perhaps also in its memory. (A rationally coherent belief can also be apt, of course, and can thereby amount to knowledge as well.) Anyhow, the point remains: there is no obstacle in principle to our conceivably attaining rationally coherent belief in some general account of our own epistemic faculties and their reliability. This would be bread, not a stone (or a sheep, not a goat). Why could we not conceivably attain thereby a general understanding of how we know whatever we do know?

We have also felt the attraction of Stroud’s reasoning, however: his brief for a very general and fundamental doubt against our ever conceivably attaining any such general understanding.
Stroud’s reasoning, and that of many others along the historical length and contemporary breadth of philosophy, may perhaps return us to an assumption that seems questionable: the questionable assumption that a satisfyingly general philosophical account of human knowledge would have to be a legitimating account that would reveal how all such knowledge can be traced back to some epistemically prior knowledge from which it can be shown to be derived (without logical or epistemic circularity). There is no good reason to make this assumption, especially when it is evident that no such general account of all our knowledge could conceivably be obtained.

The desire for a fully general, legitimating, philosophical understanding of all our knowledge is unfulfillable. It is unfulfillable for simple, demonstrable logical reasons. In this respect it is like the desire to find the saint who blesses all and only the nonselfblessed. A trek through the Himalayas may turn up likely prospects each of whom eventually is seen to fall short, until someone in the expedition reflects that there could not possibly be such a saint, and this for evident, logical reasons. How should they all respond to this result? They may of course be very unhappy to have been taken in by a project now clearly defective, and this may leave them frustrated and dissatisfied. But is it reasonable for them to insist that somehow the objective is still worthy, even if unfortunately it turns out to be incoherent? Is this a sensible response? How would we respond if we found ourselves in that situation? Would it not be a

33 See p. 6 above. And compare Paul Moser’s statement of the difficulty as he sees it (Paul Moser, Review of Knowledge in Perspective, in Canadian Philosophical Reviews XI (1991): 425–7): ‘What...can effectively justify one’s meta-belief in the virtue of memory? What can effectively justify the claim that “the products of such faculties are likely to be true”? These questions...ask what, if anything, can provide a cogent defense of the alleged reliability of memory against familiar sceptical queries...The...questions ask not for absolute proof, but for a non-questionbegging reason supporting the alleged reliability of memory, a reason that does not beg a key question against the sceptic. It is doubtful that we can deliver such a reason; coherence of mere beliefs will surely not do the job.’ T.E. Wilkerson also joins the broad consensus against the supposed ‘circularity’ in externalism: ‘How can I know that I am intellectually virtuous, that I have a settled ability or disposition to arrive at the truth? Indeed, how do I know that I have arrived at the truth? As Sosa points out, it is no good to answer that my beliefs are true in so far as they are justified by other beliefs: that way lies either old-fashioned foundationalism or coherentism. Nor presumably is it any good to say that they are justified because they have been acquired in an intellectually virtuous way: the circle seems swift and unbreakable.’ (Review of Knowledge in Perspective, in Philosophical Books 33(1992): 159–61.)
requirement of good sense or even of sanity to put that obviously incoherent project behind us, to just forget about it and to put our time to better use? And is that not what we must do with regard to the search for fully general, legitimating, philosophical accounts of our knowledge?

If it does not just return us to that questionable assumption, however, then what can be the basis for the objection to a general theory of knowledge, indeed to one so general that it encompasses not only all our knowledge of the external but all of our knowledge in general? Suppose one’s belief in one’s theory takes the following form:

T  A belief X amounts to knowledge if and only if it satisfies conditions C.

It would not be long before a philosopher would wonder in virtue of what T itself is a piece of knowledge, and if T is held as an explanatory theory for all of our knowledge, then the answer would not be far to seek: T is a piece of knowledge because T itself meets conditions C. And how do we know that T meets conditions C? Well, of course, that belief itself must meet conditions C in turn. And so on, without end. Is there any unacceptability in principle here, is there any unavoidable viciousness? Compare the following three things.

E  A belief B in a general epistemological account of when beliefs are justified (or apt) that applies to B itself and explains in virtue of what it, too, is justified (apt).

G  A statement S of a general account of when statements are grammatical (or a sentence S stating when sentences are grammatical) that applies to S itself and explains in virtue of what it, too, is grammatical.

P  A belief B in a general psychological account of how one acquires the beliefs one holds, an account that applies to B itself and explains why it, too, is held.

Why should E be any more problematic than G or P? Why should there be any more of a problem for a general epistemology than there would be for a general grammar the grammaticality of whose
statement is explained in turn by itself, or for a general psychology belief in which is explained by that very psychology?

It must be granted that what we want is a sort of explanation that would in principle enable us to understand how we have any knowledge at all. Question: ‘Why are there chickens?’ Answer: ‘They come from eggs.’ ‘And why are there eggs?’ ‘They come from chickens.’ This exchange could not provide a complete answer to a child’s question, if the question is, more fully, that of why there are chickens at all, ever. To answer this question we need appeal to divine creation, or evolution, or anyhow to something entirely other than chickens. Consider now the analogous question about knowledge, about the sources of the epistemic status of our knowledgeable beliefs (and not now about the causal sources of their existence). A complete answer for this question must appeal to something other than beliefs claimed already to enjoy the status of knowledge. For we want an explanation of how beliefs ever attain that status at all.

It is important to avert a confusion. We shall never be able really to have an explanation of anything without our having some knowledge, the knowledge that constitutes our having the explanation, knowledge like

\[ K \quad X \text{ is the case in virtue of such and such.} \]

Though we must have such knowledge if we are to understand why X is the case, however, there is no need to include any attribution of knowledge in the explanans of K, in the ‘such and such.’ The concept of knowledge need not be part of that explanans. Compare again our general theory of knowledge schema:

\[ T \quad \text{A belief X amounts to knowledge if and only if it satisfies conditions C.} \]

T is something we must know if it is to give us real understanding, and in offering it we are perhaps, in some sense, ‘presupposing’ that we know it. This does not mean that our theory must be less than fully general. Our theory T may still be fully general so long as no epistemic status—e.g., knowledge, or justification—plays any role in the ‘conditions C’ that constitute the explanans of T.

It is true that in epistemology we want knowledgeable understanding, and not just ‘understanding by dumb luck’ (which, in the
relevant sense, is incoherent anyhow, and hence not to be had). But there is no apparent reason why we cannot have it with a theory such as T, without compromising the full generality of our account. Of course in explaining how we know theory T, whether to the sceptic or to ourselves, we have to appeal to theory T itself, given the assumptions of correctness and full generality that we are making concerning T. Given those assumptions there seems no way of correctly answering such a sceptic except by ‘begging the question’ and ‘arguing circularly’ against him. But, once we understand this, what option is left to us except to go ahead and ‘beg’ that question against such a sceptic (though ‘begging the question’ and ‘arguing circularly’ may now be misnomers for what we do, since it is surely no fallacy, not if it constitutes correct and legitimate intellectual procedure). Nor are we, in proceeding thus, by means of a self-supporting argument, assuming that all self-supporting arguments are on a par. This would be a serious mistake. It is not just in virtue of being self-supporting that our belief in T would acquire its epistemic status required for knowledge. Rather it would be in virtue of meeting conditions C.\(^{34}\) And conditions C must not yield that a belief or a system of beliefs has the appropriate positive epistemic status provided simply that it is self-supporting. For this would obviously be inadequate. Therefore, our belief in T would be self-supporting, as had better be any successful and general theory of knowledge, but it would not amount to knowledge or even to a belief with the appropriate epistemic status, simply in virtue of being self-supporting.

In all our reflection and in all our discussion of objections to externalism we have found no good argument for the view that epistemically circular arguments must be disqualified globally as ineffecutal in making discriminations between reliable and unreliable doxastic practices. Nor have we been able to find any good reason to yield to the sceptic or to reject externalist theories of knowledge globally and antecedently as theories that could not

\(^{34}\) This seems the key to an answer for Alston’s charge that epistemically circular arguments ‘do not serve to discriminate between reliable and unreliable doxastic practices,’ cited earlier. One can make such discriminations with epistemically circular arguments (ones with premises that are in fact true and justified, etc.) even if it is not the circular character of the reasoning that by itself affects the discrimination.
possibly give us the kind of understanding of human knowledge in general that is a goal of epistemology. And so we have found no good reason to accept philosophical scepticism, the main target thesis of this paper. As for any desperate retreat to relativism or ethnocentrism, finally, that now seems ill-conceived and imperceptive.\textsuperscript{35} I mean the retreat into relativism that sees no way of adjudicating through reason among clashing, equally coherent systems. The recoil to ethnocentrism (or the like) betrays a rationalist \textit{malgré lui} with no objective way to adjudicate except reason.\textsuperscript{36} Who but a philosopher could expect so much from reason?\textsuperscript{37} What privileges our position, if anything does, cannot be that it is self-supportive, as we have seen; \textit{but nor can it possibly be just that it is ours}. Our position would be privileged rather by deriving from cognitive virtues, from the likes of perception and cogent thought, and not from derangement or superstition or their ilk.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{35} And a similar objection can be lodged, based on similar reflections, on the analogous retreat in moral and political philosophy.

\textsuperscript{36} About other views that are in some way ‘relativist’ I remain silent.

\textsuperscript{37} And, besides, the irrationalist cannot be answered nonquestionbeggingly \textit{anyhow}, not if our answer presupposes the validity of reason. When thought through, the requirement of nonquestionbegging defensibility against all conceivable comers is ill-advised, and indeed incoherent. But once we see why that is so, we should see also that reason cannot plausibly be held above perception or memory as a proper source of epistemic status.

\textsuperscript{38} ‘But that bare assertion is so empty! Which are these virtues? What means this cogency? What else is involved?’ To this reaction the response would have to be a very long story, if told in full, one that turns now longer, now shorter, with every advance in our understanding of ourselves and our thought and our environment and our origins, and the relations among all these. One’s epistemic perspective is joined indispensably to one’s broader worldview.
PHILOSOPHICAL SCEPTICISM

Ernest Sosa and Barry Stroud

II—Barry Stroud

SCEPTICISM, ‘EXTERNALISM’, AND THE GOAL OF EPISTEMOLOGY

Scepticism has been different things at different times in the history of philosophy, and has been put to different uses. In this century it has been understood primarily as a position—or threat—within the theory of knowledge. It says that nobody knows anything, or that nobody has good reason to believe anything. That view must be of central significance in epistemology, given that the goal of the enterprise is to explain how we know the things we think we do. It would seem that any satisfyingly positive theory of knowledge should imply the falsity of scepticism.

Scepticism need not always be taken as completely general. It has more typically been restricted to this or that particular kind of alleged knowledge or reasonable belief: we have no reason to believe anything about the future, for example, even if we know a great deal about the past and the present; we know nothing about the world around us, although we know what the course of our own experience is like; or I know what the physical world and my own thoughts and experiences are like, but I know nothing about the minds of other persons. Scepticism is most illuminating when restricted to particular areas of knowledge in this way because it then rests on distinctive and problematic features of the alleged knowledge in question, not simply on some completely general conundrum in the notion of knowledge itself, or in the very idea of reasonable belief. It is meant to be a theory about human beings as they actually are, and about the knowledge we think we actually have in the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Scepticism in the theory of knowledge involves much more than the bare assertion that no one knows anything or has any reason to believe anything of a particular kind. If all animate life were
suddenly (or even gradually) wiped off the face of the earth no one would then know anything or have any reason to believe anything about the world, but that would not make scepticism about the external world true. A philosophical theorist wants to understand human knowledge as it is, as human beings and the world they live in actually are. But again not just any denial of human knowledge in a certain domain counts as philosophical scepticism. Human beings as they are right now do not know the causes of many kinds of cancer, or of AIDS, or the fundamental structure of matter. But universal ignorance in a particular domain does not make scepticism true of that domain. Scepticism holds that people as they actually are fail to know or have good reason to believe the sorts of things we all think we already know right now. Anti-scepticism, or a positive theory of knowledge, holds the opposite. It would explain how human beings, equipped as they are and living in the world they live in, do in fact know the sorts of things they think they do.

Theories of knowledge which conflict in this way nevertheless typically share many assumptions about human beings and their cognitive and perceptual resources. It is agreed on all sides, for example, that if human beings know things about the world around them, they know them somehow on the basis of what they perceive by means of the senses. The dispute then turns on whether and how what the senses provide can give us knowledge or good reason to believe things about the world. Knowledge of matters which go beyond perception to the independent world is seen, at least temporarily, as problematic. A successful positive theory of knowledge would explain how the problem is solved so that we know the things we think we know about the world after all.

It must be admitted, I think, that what many philosophers have said about perceptual knowledge is pretty clearly open to strong sceptical objections. That is, if the way we know things about the world is the way many philosophers have said it is, then a good case can be made for the negative sceptical conclusion that we do not really know such things after all. That is why scepticism remains such a constant threat. If you don’t get your description of the human condition right, if you describe human perception and cognition and reasoning in certain natural but subtly distorted ways, you will leave human beings as you describe them incapable of the very knowledge you are trying to account for. A sceptical conclusion will be derivable
from the very description which serves to pose the epistemological problem. Thus did the ancient sceptics argue, conditionally, against the Stoics: ‘if human knowledge is arrived at in the way you say it is, there could be no such thing as human knowledge at all’. Even if true, that does not of course show that scepticism is correct. It shows at most that human knowledge or the human condition must be understood in some other way. The threat of scepticism is what keeps the theory of knowledge going.

The point is that scepticism and its competitors among more positive theories of knowledge are all part of the same enterprise. They offer conflicting answers to what is for all of them a common question or set of questions. The task is to understand all human knowledge of a particular kind, or all reasonable belief concerning a certain kind of matter of fact. Scepticism is one possible outcome of that task. In that sense, scepticism, like its rivals, is a general theory of human knowledge. But it is not a satisfactory theory or outcome. It is paradoxical. It represents us as having none of the knowledge or good reasons we ordinarily think we’ve got. No other theory or answer is satisfactory either if it does not meet and dispel the threat of scepticism. I think many philosophical theories of knowledge have failed to do that, despite what their defenders have claimed for them.

In fact, I find the force and resilience of scepticism in the theory of knowledge to be so great, once the epistemological project is accepted, and I find its consequences to be so paradoxical, that I think the best thing to do now is to look much more closely and critically at the very enterprise of which scepticism or one of its rivals is the outcome: the task of the philosophical theory of knowledge itself. Its goal is not just any understanding of human knowledge; it seeks to understand knowledge in a certain way. Both scepticism and its opposites claim to understand human knowledge in that special way, or from that special philosophical point of view. I would like to inquire what that way of understanding ourselves and our knowledge is, or is supposed to be. I wonder whether there is a coherent point of view from which we could get a satisfactory understanding of ourselves of the kind we apparently aspire to. Many would dismiss scepticism as absurd on the grounds that there is no such point of view, or that we could never get ourselves into the position of seeing that it is true if it were true. But to adopt a
more positive theory of knowledge instead is still to offer a description of the human condition from that same special position or point of view. If we cannot get into that position and see that scepticism is true, can we be sure that we can get into it and see that scepticism is false?

The coherence and achievability of what we aspire to in the epistemological enterprise tends to be taken for granted, or left unexplored. But that question is prior to the question whether scepticism or one or another of its positive competitors is the true theory of human knowledge. What does a true theory of knowledge do? What does a philosophical theorist of knowledge seek?

These are large and complicated questions to which we obviously cannot hope to get a definitive answer today. Distinguishing them from the question of the relative merits of scepticism and its competitors might nonetheless help to locate the target of Ernest Sosa’s opposition to something he calls ‘scepticism’. He gives that label to the view that ‘there is no way to attain full philosophical understanding of our knowledge’ or that ‘a fully general theory of knowledge is impossible’.¹ That is obviously not what I have just called ‘scepticism’, which is itself a fully general theory of knowledge. Sosa considers a two-step argument for the view he has in mind which would show exhaustively that any general theory of knowledge possessing a certain feature would be what he calls ‘impossible’, and that any general theory lacking that feature would be ‘impossible’ too. So there couldn’t be a fully general theory of knowledge. The conclusion certainly does follow from those two premisses, but Sosa doubts the second premiss. He thinks some theories which lack the feature in question have not been shown to be defective in the way the original argument was meant to show. The surviving theories are what he calls ‘externalist’.

Theories of the first type hold that a belief acquires the status of knowledge only by ‘being based on some justification, argument, or reason’.² That requirement is what makes them ‘impossible’, according to Sosa, because in order to succeed they would have to show that our acceptance of the things we think we know is justified

¹ Sosa, ‘Philosophical Scepticism and Epistemic Circularity’, this volume p.263.
² Sosa, p.273.
in each case by good inferences or arguments which are not circular or infinitely regressive. That is what it would take to ‘legitimate’ those beliefs, and that cannot be done. Every inference has to start from something, so without circular or regressive reasoning there must always be something whose acceptance by us is left unsupported by inference, and so cannot be accounted for as knowledge by theories of this type. But a fully general theory of knowledge must account for everything we know. Sosa concludes that there could be no fully ‘general, legitimating, philosophical understanding of all one’s knowledge’.3 This is equivalent, I believe, to saying that no such theory avoids the conclusion that we know nothing. What he is saying of theories of this first type is that if, in order to know things, we had to satisfy what those theories say are conditions of knowledge, then we would not know anything, since we cannot satisfy those conditions. So theories of the first type depict us as knowing nothing. They cannot be distinguished, in their consequences, from the view that I (but not Sosa) have called ‘scepticism’.

I take it to be the main point of Sosa’s paper to show that certain ‘externalist, reliabilist’ theories escape that fate. They can be fully general and still succeed where theories of other kinds fail. He thinks there is ‘a very wide and powerful current of thinking [which] would sweep away externalism root and branch’,4 and he wants to resist that ‘torrent of thought’.5 He concentrates here on the reasons he thinks William Alston and I have given for thinking that, as he puts it, ‘externalism will leave us ultimately dissatisfied’.6 He appears to equate that charge with what he calls the ‘unacceptability in principle’7 of ‘externalism’.

What exactly are these objections? For my part, I do think there is a way in which ‘externalism’ would leave us ‘ultimately dissatisfied’ as an answer to the completely general philosophical question of how any knowledge of the world is possible. I tried to indicate what I have in mind in the paper that Sosa refers to and discusses.8

3 Sosa, p.267.
4 Sosa, p.266.
5 Sosa, p.266.
6 Sosa, p.266–7.
7 Sosa, p.267.
But I do not suggest that ‘externalism’ is unsatisfying because it cannot avoid depicting us as knowing nothing about the world and so is indistinguishable from the view that I call ‘scepticism’. Nor would I argue that it is inconsistent or viciously circular or internally deficient in some other way which prevents it ‘in principle’ from being true or acceptable. Sosa says the objections are ‘grounded in what seem to be demands inherent to the traditional epistemological project itself’,9 and I think his efforts to meet the objections are intended to defend not only ‘externalist’ theories but also by implication that very epistemological project as well. My own doubts about ‘externalism’ could perhaps be said to be ‘grounded in’ or at least connected with demands inherent to that project, but that is because they are doubts not only about ‘externalism’ but about the coherence or feasibility of the general epistemological project itself. That question is what I think should be our primary target, not just one or another of the answers offered to it. We need to examine more critically what we want or hope for from the traditional epistemological project of understanding human knowledge in general.

Alston’s objections might well have a different source. I suspect that in opposing ‘externalism’ as he does he is working towards what he sees as a more adequate theory of knowledge, perhaps one which would recognize some beliefs as ‘evident’ or ‘prima facie justified’ in a way that ‘externalism’ cannot explain. But to support a theory that competes with pure ‘externalism’ as the right answer to the philosophical question is not to bring that whole philosophical project itself into question. Although I think there are many points on which we would agree, I shall therefore leave Alston to one side. That leaves me with the question: does Sosa’s defence of ‘externalism’ show that it does not have that feature which I think means it must always leave us dissatisfied, and so by implication that the goal of epistemology must always leave us dissatisfied as well, or does he really accept the point and not regard it as a deficiency in his ‘externalist’ theory?

The question is complicated because Sosa sees opposition to ‘externalism’ as coming from some competing philosophical con-

9 Sosa, p.267.
ception or theory of knowledge. His defence amounts to arguing that any theory from which the objections could come must be a theory of his first general type, and so can be discredited 'for simple, demonstrable logical reasons'. If it is a conflict between competing theories of knowledge, 'externalism' must win, since it does not have the fatal defect those other theories have. In order to bring out my doubts about the kind of satisfaction offered by 'externalism' I can grant that point. I would like to reveal something that I think remains unsatisfying about 'externalism' even if it is the best philosophical theory of knowledge there is or could be. I do not want to put a better theory in its place; I want to ask what a philosophical theory of knowledge is supposed to be, even at its best. Revealing the unsatisfactoriness of even the best 'answer' to the philosophical question can perhaps help draw attention to its unsatisfiable demands.

We aspire in philosophy to see ourselves as knowing all or most of the things we think we know and to understand how all that knowledge is possible. We want an explanation, not just of this or that item or piece of knowledge, but of knowledge, or knowledge of a certain kind, in general. Take all our knowledge of the world of physical objects around us, for example. A satisfactory 'theory' or explanation of that knowledge must have several features. To be satisfactorily positive it must depict us as knowing all or most of the things of that sort that we think we know. It must explain, given what it takes to be the facts of human perception, how we nonetheless know the sorts of things we think we know about that world. To say simply that we see, hear, and touch the things around us and in that way know what they are like, would leave nothing even initially problematic about that knowledge. Rather than explaining how, it would simply state that we know. There is nothing wrong with that; it is true, but it does not explain how we know even in those cases in which (as we would say) we are in fact seeing or hearing or touching an object. That is what we want in a philosophical explanation of our knowledge. How, given what perception provides us with even in such cases, do we thereby know what the objects in question are like? What needs explanation is the

10 Sosa, p.286.
connection between our perceiving what we do and our knowing the things we do about the physical objects around us. How does the one lead to, or amount to, the other?

Suppose there is an 'externalist, reliabilist' theory of the kind Sosa has in mind which accounts for this. I mean suppose there are truths about the world and the human condition which link human perceptual states and cognitive mechanisms with further states of knowledge and reasonable belief, and which imply that human beings acquire their beliefs about the physical world through the operation of belief-forming mechanisms which are on the whole reliable in the sense of giving them mostly true beliefs. Let us not pause over details of the formulation of such truths, although they are of course crucial and have not to this day been put right by anybody, as far as I know. If there are truths of this kind, although no one has discovered them yet, that fact alone obviously will do us no good as theorists who want to understand human knowledge in this philosophical way. At the very least we must believe some such truths; their merely being true would not be enough to give us any illumination or satisfaction. But our merely happening to believe them would not be enough either. We seek understanding of certain aspects of the human condition, so we seek more than just a set of beliefs about it; we want to know or have good reason for thinking that what we believe about it is true. This is why I say, as Sosa quotes me: 'we need some reason to accept a theory of knowledge if we are going to rely on that theory to understand how our knowledge is possible'.

Sosa does not dispute that as a condition of success for understanding human knowledge. He disputes my going on to say that 'no form of 'externalism' can give a satisfactory account' of our having such a reason to accept it and so understanding our knowledge of the world in purely 'externalist' terms. He thinks my only support for that second claim comes from what he calls a 'metaepistemic requirement' which does not follow from the conditions of success admitted so far. It comes, he thinks, from 'a deeply held intuition that underlies a certain way of thinking about

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11 Sosa, p.272, quoting from Clay & Lehrer (ed.), p.43.
12 Clay & Lehrer (ed.), p.43.
13 Sosa, p.272.
epistemology'. He thinks I have an 'anti-externalist' conception of knowledge according to which 'what is important in epistemology is justification', which in turn requires 'appeal to other beliefs that constitute one's reasons for holding the given belief'. That is what can only lead in a circle or down an infinite regress, and so in Sosa's terms it is an 'impossible' theory of knowledge. Without that requirement, he thinks, the objection vanishes.

Now I want to say that I do not accept any of that. As far as I know, I do not hold an 'anti-externalist' theory of knowledge with which I seek to oppose 'externalism'. I do not think that everything a person knows requires justification which involves appeal to other beliefs, and so on. I think that what I am drawing attention to about 'externalism' is something that can be recognized by anyone who has a good idea of what the general epistemological project is after. Of course, it could be that I am unwittingly imposing the 'anti-externalist' requirement that Sosa's diagnosis says I am. He thinks I must be; I don't think I am. But rather than searching my soul, which I am sure would be of limited general interest, let me again present for public assessment the way I think 'externalism' must leave us dissatisfied. I find in any case that Sosa has not really considered the reasons I actually gave.

We agree that an 'externalist' theorist of knowledge must know or have good reason to believe that his explanation of our knowledge of the physical world around us is correct in order to understand in that way how that knowledge is possible. How will he know or have good reason to believe that? Well, his theory is in part a theory of the conditions under which people in fact know or have good reasons to believe things about the world. If that theory is true in particular of the theorist's own acceptance of that theory, then the theorist has what his own theory says is knowledge of or reasonable belief in the truth of that theory. I believe this is the situation Sosa is describing when he says: 'We can legitimately and with rational justification arrive at a belief that a certain set of faculties or doxastic practices are those that we employ and are

14 Sosa, p.273.
15 Sosa, p.273.
reliable'.¹⁶ He thinks there is 'no obstacle in principle'¹⁷ to our achieving such a state. I do not disagree with that.

That Sosa thinks the resistance to 'externalism' must be based on some such 'obstacle in principle' is suggested by his immediately going on to ask 'why could we not conceivably attain thereby a general understanding of how we know whatever we do know?'¹⁸ It is clear that his question at that point is rhetorical. His idea is that if we can have what an 'externalist' theory calls good reason to believe our 'externalist' theory, it could thereby give us a satisfactory general understanding of our knowledge. For me his question is not rhetorical. I think we can see why, even with what counts for an 'externalist' as good reason to believe his theory, there would remain something ineliminably unsatisfactory about the position a theorist would then be in for gaining a philosophical understanding of his knowledge of the physical world in general.

The difficulty I have in mind does not show up in understanding the knowledge which other people, not myself, have about the world. I understand others' knowledge by connecting their beliefs in the right way with what I know to be true in the world they live in. I can discover that others get their beliefs through the operation of belief-forming mechanisms which I can see to be reliable in the sense of producing beliefs which are largely true. But each of us as theorists of knowledge is also a human being to whom our theory of knowledge is meant to apply, so we must understand ourselves as knowers, just as we understand others. All human knowledge of the world is what we want to understand.

If I ask of my own knowledge of the world around me how it is possible, I can explain it along 'externalist' lines by showing that it is a set of beliefs I have acquired through perception by means of belief-forming mechanisms which are reliable. Suppose that is what I believe about the connection between my perceptions and the beliefs I acquire about the world. As we saw, my merely happening to believe such a story would not be enough for me to be said to understand in that way how that knowledge is possible. I must know or have good reason to believe that that story is true

¹⁶ Sosa, p.285.
¹⁷ Sosa, p.285.
¹⁸ Sosa, p.285.
of me. As a good ‘externalist’, I do of course believe that I do. I think that I acquired my belief in my ‘externalist’ explanation of human knowledge by means of perception and of the operation of the same reliable belief-forming mechanisms which give me and others all our other knowledge of the world around us. So I think I do know or have good reason to believe my theory; I believe that I fulfil the conditions which that very theory says are sufficient for knowing or having good reason to believe it. Do I now have a satisfactory understanding of my knowledge of the world? Have I answered to my own satisfaction the philosophical question of how my knowledge of the world is possible? I want to say No.

It is admittedly not easy to describe the deficiency in a few words. It is not that there is some internal defect or circularity in the ‘externalist’ theory that I believe. Nor is there any obstacle to my believing that theory or even to my having good reasons in the ‘externalist’ sense to believe it. If the theory is true, and if I did acquire my belief in it in the way I think I did, then I do know or have good reason to believe it to be true. To appreciate what I still see as a deficiency, or as less than what one aspires to as a philosophical theorist of knowledge, let us consider the merits of a different and conflicting, but still ‘externalist’, account of our knowledge of the world.

I have in mind a fictional ‘externalist’ whom I shall call ‘Descartes’. The theory of our knowledge of the world which he accepts says that there is a beneficent, omnipotent, and omniscient God who guarantees that whatever human beings carefully and clearly and distinctly perceive to be true is true. The real René Descartes held a closely similar theory, but he tried to prove demonstratively that it is true. He was accused of arguing in a circle. My ‘externalist’ Descartes offers no proofs. He believes that when people carefully and clearly and distinctly perceive things to be true, they are true; God makes sure of that. That is how people come to know things. He also acknowledges that what he himself needs in order to know or have good reason to believe his own theory of knowledge is to fulfil the conditions it says are sufficient for knowing or having good reason to believe something: to acquire belief in it by carefully and clearly and distinctly perceiving it to be true while God guarantees that it is true. Suppose he examines the origins of his own theory and carefully and clearly and distinctly
perceives that he did acquire his belief in it in just that way. Does he now have a satisfactory understanding of his knowledge of the world? Has he got what he can see to be a satisfactory answer to the philosophical question of how his knowledge of the world is possible? I want to say No.

Your seeing and sharing my reservations about the adequacy of ‘externalism’ and so about the feasibility of the epistemological project depend on your finding the position of this ‘externalist’ Descartes unsatisfactory in a certain way as an understanding of his knowledge. The question is what is wrong with it. I think most of us will say first that what is wrong is that his theory is simply not true; there is no divine guarantor of the truth of even our most carefully arrived-at beliefs, and he is therefore wrong to think that he acquired his belief in his theory in that way. Even if that is so, is it the only deficiency in his position? I think it is not.

We cannot deny that he does believe his explanation of human knowledge, and does believe that he came to believe that theory by a procedure which his theory says is reliable, so we have to admit that if his theory and his account of how he came to believe it were true, then he would know or have good reason to believe his explanation of knowledge. But if we say that the falsity of his theory is the only deficiency in his position we would have to admit that if his theory and his belief about how he came to believe it were true, then he would have a satisfactory understanding of all of his knowledge of the world. That implies that whether he understands how his knowledge is possible or not depends only on whether the theory which he holds about how he came to believe it is true or not. If it is true, he does understand his knowledge; if it is not, he does not. An ‘externalist’ theorist of this fictional kind who reflects on his position could still always ask: ‘I wonder whether I understand how my knowledge of the world is possible? I have a lot of beliefs about it. If what I believe about it is true, I do; if it is not, I don’t. Of course, I believe all of it is true, so I believe that I do understand my knowledge. But I wonder whether I do’. I think anyone who can get into only that position with respect to his alleged knowledge of the world has not achieved the kind of satisfaction which the traditional epistemological project aspires to. He has not got into a position from which he can see all of his
knowledge of the world all at once in a way that accounts for it as reliable or true.

Sosa’s ‘externalist, reliabilist’, I believe, can get himself into no better position for understanding himself. If what distinguishes his position from that of my ‘externalist’ Descartes is only that his theory is in fact true while that fictional character’s theory is false, then he too will be in a position to say no more about himself than ‘If what I believe about my knowledge is true, I do understand it; if it is not, I do not. I think I do, but I wonder whether I understand my knowledge or not?’ . This is where the difficulty of describing the deficiency in his position comes in. It will not be true to say simply that although he believes his theory, he has no reason to believe it. If we imagine that his ‘externalist’ theory and his account of how he came to believe it are in fact true, as I have been conceding, then in that sense he does have good reason to believe his explanation of human knowledge. But still his own view of his position can look no better to him than the fictional ‘externalist’ Descartes’s position looks to him.

It would be to no avail at this point for him to try to improve his position by asking himself whether he knows or has good reason to believe that he does know or have good reason to believe his theory. Answering that question would be a matter of coming by what he believes is a procedure that his theory says is reliable to the belief that he knows or has good reason to believe his theory. Again, if he did come to believe that in that way, and his theory is in fact true, he will in fact know or have good reason to believe a second-order claim about the goodness of his reasons for believing his theory. But still he could then make only the same sort of conditional assertion about his position one level up, as it were, as he made earlier. The ‘externalist’ Descartes could do the same. He could carefully and clearly and distinctly perceive that he came to believe his theory to be true of himself by what that very theory says is a way of coming to know or have good reason to believe. He could then come to a similarly true conditional verdict about his position. Both he and Sosa’s ‘externalist’ could say at most: ‘If the theory I hold is true, I do know or have good reason to believe that I know or have good reason to believe it, and I do understand how I know the things I do’. I think that in each case we can see a way in which the satisfaction the theorist seeks in understanding his
knowledge still eludes him. Given that all of his knowledge of the world is in question, he will still find himself able to say only 'I might understand my knowledge, I might not. Whether I do or not all depends on how things in fact are in the world I think I've got knowledge of'.

Those of us who are inclined to think that Sosa's 'externalist's' theory is in fact true and the fictional Descartes's theory false will say that he does know and perhaps that he does understand his knowledge and that the fictional Descartes does not. But that does not show that that theorist's position gives him a satisfactory understanding of his own knowledge. As I said, the difficulty does not show up in one's understanding all of someone else's knowledge of the world; it is only when each of us seeks to understand our own knowledge of the world in general that we reach this unsatisfactory position.

If we do recognize a certain ineliminable dissatisfaction in any such 'externalist' attempt at self-understanding I do not think it is because of hidden attachment to an opposing 'internalist' theory which requires that everything we know must be justified by reasonable inference from something else we believe. We can be 'externalists' and still reach at best what I think is an unsatisfactory position, even if we do in fact have what 'externalism' regards as knowledge of or reasonable belief in that 'externalist' theory. I think the dissatisfaction, if we recognize it, is felt to come from the demands of the epistemological project itself, or perhaps we could say from the complete generality of the project. Whatever we seek, and what the theorists I have imagined appear to lack, is something that 'externalism' alone seems unable to explain or to account for.

Sosa grants that the epistemological goal can never be reached if the successful theory is expected to provide what he calls a 'legitimating' account. He means by that an account which 'specifies the reasons favouring one's beliefs',¹⁹ and he thinks no theory that is 'internalist' in his sense can do that without circularity or regress. But surely the goal of understanding how we know what we do does require that the successful account be 'legitimating' at least in the sense of enabling us to understand that what we have got

¹⁹ Sosa, p.273.
is knowledge of, or reasonable belief in, the world's being a certain way. We should be able to see that the view that I call 'scepticism' is not true of us, and we want to understand how we get the knowledge we can see that we've got. 'Externalism' implies that if such-and-such is true in the world, then human beings do know things about what the world is like. Applying that conditional proposition to ourselves, to our own knowledge of the world, to our own knowledge of how that knowledge is acquired, and so on, even when the antecedent and so the consequent are in fact both true, still leaves us always in the disappointingly second-best position I have tried to illustrate, however far up we go to higher and higher levels of reiterated knowledge or reasonable belief. We want to be in a position knowingly to detach that consequent about ourselves, and at the same time to know and so to understand how any or all of that knowledge of the world comes to be. And that would require appealing to or relying on part of our knowledge of the world in the course of explaining to ourselves how we come to have any knowledge of the world at all.

There are indications that Sosa acknowledges and accepts the situation I have tried to describe. Believing that our belief-forming mechanisms are reliable when they are in fact reliable, and coming by what are in fact those very mechanisms to believe that they are reliable, he says, is 'the very best conceivable outcome'\(^\text{20}\) of the epistemological project. 'How could we possibly improve our epistemic situation?', he asks.\(^\text{21}\) The thought that someone else could find his own 'epistemic situation' equally good on the basis of a competing theory of knowledge, he admits, might cause some dissatisfaction or discomfort, but he thinks that is 'discomfort we must learn to tolerate'.\(^\text{22}\) He concedes that in explaining, even to ourselves, how we know our 'externalist' theory of knowledge to be true, we must appeal to that very theory, and so cannot avoid, as he puts it, 'begging the question' or 'arguing circularly'\(^\text{23}\) in our attempts to account for our knowledge. But again, he asks, 'once we understand this, what option is left to us except to go ahead and

\(^{20}\) Sosa, p.282.  
^{21}\) Sosa, p.282.  
^{22}\) Sosa, p.284.  
^{23}\) Sosa, p.289.
‘beg’ that question?’.24 I think his thought is that without doing that, we would have no chance of answering the epistemological question at all. We have to ‘tolerate’ the ‘discomfort’ of relying on a ‘self-supporting argument’25 for our theory simply because we could not arrive at a ‘successful and general theory of knowledge’26 in any other way.

Here, perhaps, we approach something that Sosa and I can agree about. What I have tried to identify as a dissatisfaction that the epistemological project will always leave us with is for him something that simply has to be accepted if we are going to have a fully general theory of knowledge at all. He appears to think, as I do, that it is endemic to the epistemological project itself. We differ in what moral we draw from that thought.

I want to conclude that we should therefore re-examine the source of, and so perhaps find ourselves able to resist, the not-fully-satisfiable demand embodied in the epistemological question. I think its source lies somewhere within the familiar and powerful line of thinking by which all of our alleged knowledge of the world gets even temporarily split off all at once from what we get in perception, so we are presented with a completely general question of how perception so understood gives us knowledge of anything at all in the physical world. If that manoeuvre cannot really be carried off successfully, we have no completely general question about our knowledge of the world to answer. We could still ask how we know one sort of thing about the physical world, given that we know certain other things about it, but there would be no philosophical problem about all of our knowledge of the world in general. What then would ‘externalism’ or any other fully general theory of knowledge be trying to do?

Sosa wants his ‘externalism’, even with its admitted ‘discomfort’, to serve as a bulwark against the ‘relativism’, ‘contextualism’, and ‘scepticism’ which he sees as rampant in our culture. I share his dark view of our times, but if those widely-invoked ‘isms’ are thought of as competing answers to a fully general question about our ‘epistemic situation’ in the world, I think the resistance has to start

24 Sosa, p.289.
25 Sosa, p.289.
26 Sosa, p.289.
farther back. It is what all such theories purport to be about, and what we expect or demand that any such theory should say about the human condition, that we should be examining, not just which one of them comes in first in the traditional epistemological sweepstake. In that tough competition, it still seems to me, scepticism will always win going away.