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Skepticism and Virtue Epistemology: Wittgenstein and Sosa

Michael Willliams

Department of Philosophy, The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD 21218, USA; michaelwilliams47@icloud.com or mwilliams@jhu.edu

Abstract: Ernest Sosa has long been a leading advocate of a virtue-theoretic approach to the traditional problems of epistemology. However, in a recent book his thoughts take a striking new turn. Appealing to our epistemic competencies, he argues, will not suffice to meet the skeptical challenge to our claim to have knowledge of the world around us. We must recognize that our epistemic competencies are exercised against a background of "proper default assumptions": commitments concerning the world and our place in it that we cannot justify but can rely on without incurring epistemic fault. Sosa finds anticipations of this idea in Wittgenstein's appeal to propositions "hinge" propositions which, though not known, "stand fast". However, mere fast-standing beliefs, "unhinged from any broader virtue epistemology", cannot explain how we come to have knowledge of a world whose character is independent of what we happen to think about it. I argue that the claim that our everyday knowledge of the world rests on a body of assumptions is a serious concession to skepticism, which Wittgenstein shows we need not make. Hinge propositions are not mere "standfast" beliefs: they are known with certainty. Wittgenstein offers a way of thinking about knowledge that Sosa does not consider. He also poses a challenge to commonly held views about how epistemology, to the extent that there is such a subject, should be pursued.

Keywords: Wittgenstein; skepticism; hinge proposition; knowledge; doubt; circumstance-dependence

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1. Introduction

Ernest Sosa has long been a leading advocate of a virtue-theoretic approach to the traditional problems of epistemology. A distinctive feature of Sosa's epistemology is its appeal to grades of knowledge. The number of grades has grown over time. Sosa has always distinguished *animal* from *reflective* knowledge. *Animal* knowledge is *apt* belief: belief that owes its truth to our epistemic competence. Such belief need not be defensible: aptly believed to be apt. Defensibility requires knowledge of one's first-order competence and is therefore the hallmark of reflective knowledge [1]. Later, he introduces the idea of *full* aptness. A belief is fully apt when "appropriately *guided* by one's relevant meta-competence", which "governs whether one should form a belief at all or should rather withhold belief altogether" [2] (p. 12). However, in a recent book his thoughts take a striking new turn[1]. He now argues that appealing to our epistemic competencies will not suffice to meet the skeptical challenge to our claim to have knowledge of the world around us. We must recognize that our epistemic competencies are exercised against a background of "proper default assumptions" [EE 123]: commitments concerning the world and our place in it that we cannot justify but which we can rely on without incurring epistemic fault.

Sosa argues that recognizing the epistemic role played by proper default assumptions enables "a fresh treatment of philosophical skepticism". Although skeptical arguments have a certain intuitive plausibility, their proponents have "mistaken what's required for

the epistemic quality of ordinary judgments and beliefs" [EE 123]. To explain how this can be, Sosa introduces a grade of knowledge superior to knowing full well: *secure* knowledge. This is true belief gained when the background conditions for the successful exercise of our relevant competencies—principally, that we are not in the positions envisaged by various skeptical scenarios–could not have easily failed to obtain [EE 181f.]. In everyday life, we do not demand so much. We can know something full well if *in fact* our default assumptions hold. They do not need to hold securely. But by calling attention to the lack of security tolerated by our everyday thinking about knowledge, skeptical arguments can tempt us to conclude that we don't *really* know anything about the world around us. This is a conclusion we can and should resist.

Sosa finds anticipations of his idea of proper default assumptions in the writings of G. E. Moore and Wittgenstein though, in his view, neither philosopher stakes out a satisfactory position.

In "A Defence of Common Sense", Moore claims to know with certainty that various propositions of common sense, for example that the earth his existed for many years past, are wholly true. In "Proof of an External World", he claims to have proved the existence of external things by holding up his hands while announcing "Here is one hand and here is another"[2]. But while he is sure *that* he knows his premises to be true, he cannot explain *how*. On the one hand, Moore is a realist, resolutely opposed to idealism in all its forms, for which Sosa commends him. On the other hand, though he insists that the existence of external things is mind-independent, he takes our knowledge of them to be grounded, in some way he cannot explain, on our knowledge of our sense-data. Sosa rightly concludes that Moore's *indirect* realism invites a skeptical challenge to which he has no answer.

Sosa thinks that, in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein comes closer to getting things right[3]. But like Moore, though right in one way he is wrong in another. Wittgenstein suggests that our practices of inquiry and epistemic assessment are made possible by a rich background of propositions, particular and general, that "lie apart from the route travelled by inquiry" [OC 88]. They are the "riverbed" through which the epistemic waters flow, or "hinges" that must stay put for a door to turn [OC 96–98, 341]. This is an important insight. However, unlike proper default assumptions, Wittgenstein's hinge commitments are mere fast-standing beliefs, "unhinged from any broader virtue epistemology". As such, they cannot explain how we come to have knowledge of a world whose character is independent of what we happen to think about it. Since Wittgenstein cannot recover, and may even repudiate, Moore's realism, he fails to address the fundamental question that concerns Moore: how do we know anything at all about the world around us? [EE 210].

Sosa's discussion is subtle, inventive, and densely argued. However, I take his idea that our everyday knowledge of the world rests on a body of *assumptions* to be a serious concession to skepticism. Wittgenstein, as I read him, shows why no such concession need be made. Far from being mere "standfast" beliefs, his "hinge" propositions are *known with certainty* [OC 340]. Wittgenstein offers a way of thinking about knowledge that Sosa does not consider. More than that, he poses a challenge to commonly held views about how epistemology, to the extent that there is such a subject, should be pursued.

2. Knowledge as Achievement

Sosa's telic virtue epistemology is normative: knowledge is an *achievement* that is "creditable" in the sense of *attributable* to an agent[4]. In judgment, we aim at truth. We know when we attain it through the quality of our performance rather than by luck. So understood, knowledge, is "a phenomenon in the world", which means that the theory of knowledge, or "gnoseology", is "not primarily about words, semantics, or even concepts" but rather aims "to understand that phenomenon in human social reality"[5]. This being so,

we can examine knowledge from the standpoint of a general theory of "telic normativity": the conditions for agent's being credited with the success of an action. Since these are especially clear in sports, Sosa offers to exploit "an analogy between epistemic and athletic performance, and between episteme and praxis generally" [EE 123]. Call this "the Analogy".

The fundamental concept of Sosa's general theory is that of an *attempt* to achieve some goal. With respect to earning telic credit, attempts are evaluated by reference to a "triple A" structure. In a tournament, an archer's shot must be *accurate* and *adroit*: hit the target and manifest her competence. But her success will be creditable to her only her shot is *apt*: accurate *because* adroit. If it were blown off course, then blown back on course by a compensating gust of wind, its success would owe too much to luck.

Competence answers to a "triple S" structure. A competent agent must possess the *skill* required for succeeding at the level of reliability appropriate to the given performance domain, which need not be all that high[6]. She must be in good *shape*. However, since even a skilled and sober driver could find himself skidding if there is ice on the road, a successful performance also depends on an agent's being in a favorable *situation*. That said, we often exercise some control over the situation in which we act. Diana the huntress leaves less to chance by being adept at choosing when and where to shoot. A successful attempt guided by this second order competence is *fully* apt. It rises to the level of achievement *full well* [EE 21].

Achievement full well does not require that favorable conditions be *modally safe* [EE 20]. That is to say, an achievement can be fully creditable to an agent even though, in the circumstances, the attempt could easily have failed. Being favorably situated is a matter of how things *are*, not how they might be or have been. Suppose that in a baseball game under the lights an outfielder makes a fine catch. However, the ill-maintained lighting system could have cut out at any moment, in which case he would not have caught the ball. But although his attempt to catch the ball could easily have failed, this "merely modal fact" in no way detracts from the excellence of the fielder's performance. If he gets lucky, he does so in a way that is normatively irrelevant[7].

Sosa takes epistemic performances to be governed by similar triple A and triple S structures. To "affirm alethically" is to "attempt to get it right by affirming that p" [EE 24]. This need not involve competence. The quiz show contestant who hazards a guess affirms alethically, but *merely* so. The expert oncologist aims to obtain a correct diagnosis through competence: *apt* alethic affirmation or "judgment". A "Gettiered" agent–one who reasons competently to a fortuitously true conclusion–falls short of full aptness or even aptness altogether [EE 22]. Distinguishing between alethic affirmation and judgment allows Sosa to restate his grades of knowledge. Animal knowledge is apt alethic affirmation, whereas knowing full well is apt judgment guided by an understanding of one's first order competences. Since reflective knowledge requires second-order competence, Sosa now speaks of knowledge full well as "reflective knowledge full well" [EE 142–143].

To illustrate epistemic competence's triple S structure, consider perceptual knowledge. To know what is going on, I need to possess the relevant *skills* (sharp enough vision and appropriate recognitional capacities), to be in good *shape* (e.g., paying attention), and in a *situation* that allows me to get a good look. Again, modal safety is not required. I may get a clear view of an accident when an approaching bus might easily have blocked my view. But it slowed for a pedestrian, so I saw what happened.

All three S-factors are subject to "background conditions". Returning to the Analogy, athletes need to pay attention to what is going on in the game, but other aspects of their situation be ignored.

> In a night game. . ., they can ignore the lighting system, even when the lights are in fact poised to fail without warning. As an athlete, one is not negligent for ignoring such factors, with a default assumption that they are of no concern,

> absent an indication to the contrary. What would be negligent is to reduce one's attention to the ball and the field, so as to ponder such imponderables. As for the relevant "background conditions", one need only assume that they are in place, which one can do if no defeater intervenes, such as flickering lights, or an alert on the PA system [EE 124].

Conditions "belong to the background" when an agent "can perform fully aptly without *knowing* that they hold. Nor need they hold safely" [EE 125]. To make the catch, the fielder needs the lights to *be* on. He does not need to know that they will *stay* on.

Turning to epistemology, this account of background conditions enables "a response to the skeptic independent of the modal remoteness shared by many radical skeptical scenarios" [EE 126]. Consider the "brain in a vat":

> On the standard conception of that scenario, its actuality would of course affect one's epistemic performances, just as the lights going out would affect the performances of players in a night game. However, the merely modal fact that the scenario might easily occur may be harmless to the quality of the epistemic performance, just as the merely modal fact that the lights might easily fail is harmless to the quality of athletic performance. Nor need one *knowledgeably* rule out that sceptical scenario if one's performance is to be *fully* apt, any more than nighttime athletes need knowledgeably rule out the malfunction of the lights on pain of forsaking full aptness [EE 126, emphasis in original].

Sosa concludes:

> An initial response to our skeptics is that they have mistaken what's required for the epistemic quality of our ordinary judgments and beliefs. *Their mistake is like disparaging a superb baseball catch because, unbeknownst to the fielder, the lights could easily have failed* [ibid.].

Our everyday knowledge is "based on a proper assumption *that no abnormal spoilers will intervene*" [EE 130, 135, emphasis in original]. In everyday life, assuming that no such error-possibilities are in play is our default position. Proceeding this way is entirely proper in that here is nothing negligent about our so doing. There is more to life than philosophy. Worrying about abnormal spoilers would only distract from the business of living. It would be like the fielder's worrying about the lights instead of paying attention to the game. In refusing to grant us telic credit for our otherwise competent epistemic performances, the skeptic demands more from us than is required even for knowing full well[8].

It is immediately clear why Sosa introduces background *assumptions*. Initially, he argues that coming to know requires only that background conditions *be* in place. Given that we do not need to *know* that they are in place, why must we even *assume* that they are? John Greco has argued—rightly, in my view—that Sosa seems to be in two minds about as to whether his style of virtue epistemology *allows* background assumptions or *requires* them [6]. In some ways, the latter seems implausible. To assume that no abnormal spoilers are in play, you must at least have heard of them and, for all I know, most people in the world haven't. But allowing them may be enough. I think that Sosa brings them in because resting content with background conditions would amount to ignoring the traditional skeptical problem. Of course, many externalists are happy to do this. But Sosa wants a normative theory that explains why we are *entitled* to ignore radically skeptical concerns, whether we have heard of them or not. As philosophers, to refuse to consider them at all would be tantamount to giving up on epistemology as a worthwhile philosophical undertaking. We shall return to this issue when we come to Wittgenstein's. approach to skepticism.

Although Sosa calls skeptical scenarios "abnormal" spoilers, he means his response to skepticism, based on the idea of proper default assumptions, to be independent of the modal remoteness of the situations they invite us to envisage. To this end, he invites us to consider a scenario in which our being trapped in some technologically manipulated virtual reality is more than a bare possibility, far distant from anything we would normally consider. Suppose NASA scientists, whom we have good reason to trust, warn us that aliens from a faraway galaxy could have placed us all in a "Matrix" situation. Fortunately, they didn't do so. Rather than immediately follow through on their threat, they set up a lottery that gave us a slight chance of escaping imprisonment in the virtual reality they had designed for us, which against all odds we won[9]. In this situation, would we abandon our stored beliefs just because they could all so easily have turned out to be false? Sosa's intuition is that we would rightly refuse to do any such thing. Our default assumption that our epistemic situation was and remains auspicious is entirely *proper*, even though it might easily not have been. That we were fortunate to win the lottery no more detracts from our epistemic credit than the fielder's being lucky with the lights impugns the excellence of his catch.

The Analogy is doing a lot of work here. Too much, in my view: Sosa's argument stretches it to breaking point. It is true that baseball players needn't worry about the state of the lighting system. But this is because, as everyone knows, games wouldn't be played at night, if stadium lights weren't generally reliable. The players don't *assume* that the lights won't fail. Rather, without some special reason for concern, they reasonably *presume* they won't. If there were reason for concern, officials could investigate. None of this applies to skeptical scenarios. The danger to a catch posed by the possibility of a lighting failure is nothing like the danger to knowledge posed by the possibility of being trapped in a Cartesian simulation. In the case of Sosa's "Matrix" scenario, how are we supposed to know that the story of the lottery isn't part of the simulation?

Up to a point, Sosa agrees. The extreme skeptical problems we inherit from Descartes cannot be answered. Descartes challenges us to explain how we know that we are not in some radically skeptical situation. Since we *don't* know such things, there is no answer to this question. But this is *not* a capitulation to skepticism.

> We humans can know things through our global epistemic good judgment. . . [It] cannot be required that we would be able to tell that we were globally disabled, *supposing* that we were. Instead, it may suffice that we simply avoid such disability, even if we do so through epistemic luck [EE 151].

If we *were* in one of Descartes's skeptical scenarios, we wouldn't be able to tell. But it can be no part of our ordinary practice of attributing knowledge that we be able to answer questions that are designed to be unanswerable.

Sosa is well aware that not all philosophers will be happy with this outcome. He adds a new element to his diagnosis of skepticism. Though knowing full well is all we aim for or need in everyday life, there is a higher grade of knowledge that we may sometimes lack. He introduces this idea by way of a further science-fiction example.

> Simone is an ace fighter pilot with many years of experience. What she does not know is that she is now routinely subject to testing under simulation. While in the dark about that, she now takes to sit in her genuine cockpit up aloft, and she is entirely right. But most often now she is only in a simulation cockpit that she cannot distinguish from its genuine twin. Can Simone really know to be true what she correctly and justifiably takes to be true? [EE 168–169].

Sosa takes it that many philosophers see cases like this as exemplifying justified true beliefs that fall short of knowledge and will answer "emphatically in the negative"

[EE 169]. But there will be considerable dissent. Sosa notes that he used to account for these different reactions by arguing that Simone has animal knowledge but not reflective knowledge. However, if reflective knowledge full well can be based on default assumptions, this strategy is much less appealing. A better response is that Simone enjoys reflective knowledge full well but not *secure* knowledge. Sosa explains:

> A given judgment of yours constitutes secure knowledge only if your you are safe from the following fate: losing your pertinent SSS competence to so judge while at the same time *retaining* a disposition to make or suspend judgments when you "inquire" into that question *even absent any such competence* (on a broad notion of inquiry requiring only that you take up that question, at least implicitly and representationally, if not through intentional conscious questioning or affirmation [EE 170–171].

Secure knowledge is knowledge full well that is modally safe: that is, when the conditions that enable the successful exercise of our cognitive competencies do not merely hold in fact but could not easily have failed to obtain[10]. Here, the Analogy shows its limitations. If the lights had gone out during the baseball game, the players would have been unable to carry on playing. By contrast, Simone, though under simulation, is still making genuine judgments. To "fly" the simulator, she must handle the controls every bit as adeptly as if she were up in the air. Nevertheless, "Intuitively she does not know as well as when she is safe from simulation" [EE 175]. By virtue of her SSS competence, Simone knows full well, when airborne, that she is climbing, turning and so on. But since she could easily have been in the simulator, her knowledge is not secure. This lack of security inclines us to say that she doesn't *really* know what she is up to.

Sosa argues that adding secure knowledge to his "metaphysical/epistemic hierarchy" [EE 181] explains how we can feel the intuitive appeal of skepticism. Although security is required for the highest grade of knowledge, its absence does not detract from the quality of our epistemic performance according to the standards appropriate to everyday life[11]. Imagine that Simone, though *mostly* subject to simulation, is on an important mission with others in her squadron. If we focus on the "topmost knowledge that requires security", we will say that "she no longer really knows what goes on in her surroundings, so as to respond properly" and will have to conclude that "her fellow pilots then can then no longer properly predict what she will do". This seems wrong. But we can explain this intuition by focusing on the "metaphysically less demanding level of 'knowledge full well'" which "permits them all to rely on proper default assumptions" [EE 183]. Sosa takes his metaphysics of knowledge to account for the intuitions that tempt us to accede to skepticism, while leaving unscathed knowledge as we understand it in everyday life.

Or does it? I agree with Sosa that, ideally, we want to do more than show that skeptical arguments go wrong. It would be good to explain why, to many philosophers, they can seem compelling. But this is a delicate matter. The danger is that in explaining why the skeptic can *seem* right, we end up conceding that he *is* right. Of course not about right *everything* but right about *something*. Unfortunately, the something may turn out to be more significant than we want to admit. I think that Sosa falls into this trap[12].

An early sign of trouble is that his theory entails denying deductive closure. If we win the aliens' lottery, we will keep full epistemic credit for our epistemic performances, so we must also "keep our pertinent knowledge as the drama unfolds". If so,

> I then know that by pressing its starter button, I will start my car. And I could then deduce that I will not be Matrixed so as to preclude that anticipated outcome. So, could I come to know after all that I will not be Matrixed, and also that we will not lose our fateful lottery? [EE 133].

Sosa says not. "Transmission" is ruled out. I could *make the deduction*, but it would not give me knowledge of the conclusion.

> The vice would come from assuming (by default) that p and then arriving at the conclusion on that (circular) basis (ibid).

So, what about non-transmissive closure: the principle that If I know that p and that p entails q, then I know that q. Here, Sosa invites us to consider the following reasoning: *Must I not know that p if my basis for coming to know that q is essentially dependent on my thought that it is true that p?* No: this reasoning just "begs the question against [his] telic epistemology of default assumptions", the whole point of which is that "we do not need to know the whole of the propositional basis on which we aptly come to know that q by aptly so believing" [EE 134]. This fails to engage the problem. The non-transmissive closure principle implies only that my knowing that I have hands and my knowing that I'm not a handless brain in a vat stand or fall together. It says nothing about *why* this is so. It does not imply that one of these items of knowledge is the basis for the other. Sosa is committed to what Keith de Rose [8] calls "abominable conjunctions". I know that I'm sitting at my computer, but I don't know that I haven't been "matrixed" and placed in a pod [7] (p. 27). This is a serious concession to skepticism.

It is not the only one. Given Sosa's epistemic/metaphysical hierarchy, what we call "knowledge" in everyday life is second rate. Sosa recognizes this concern, but he thinks that secure knowledge is a grade of knowledge that "we rarely recognize and require. . .in ordinary epistemic assessments". Accordingly, it is not something we would or should feel the lack of [EE 171]. Is this so?

Sosa means his hierarchy to explain intuitions commonly appealed to in philosophical discussions of knowledge and skepticism. However, he does not take account of philosophers who have "infallibilist" intuitions *with respect to everyday knowledge*. Such intuitions are not easily dismissed. As David Lewis remarks, "To speak of fallible knowledge, of knowledge despite uneliminated possibilities of error, just *sounds* contradictory" [9] (p. 549). A possibility worth exploring is that security is not something we hanker after only when reflecting philosophically. Rather, it is something that with respect to everyday knowledge we both require and possess.

This brings us to Wittgenstein.

3. Sosa *Contra* Wittgenstein

Although a good number of Wittgenstein's remarks in *On Certainty* concern issues of language–for example, the use of "I know"—Sosa finds little value in them. Setting them aside, he summarizes Wittgenstein's specifically epistemological ideas under four headings.

> W1. We do not learn the core components of common sense through ratiocination or evidence. Rather we "acquire" them as part of a coherent system: "light dawns gradually on the whole".
>
> W2. We do not strictly *know* these components. Rather they "stand fast" for us, and it is upon such a riverbed that our retail beliefs flow; it is by turning on such hinges that doors open to our retail knowledge.
>
> W3. Core beliefs of common sense generally require no conscious assent. Many are manifest rather in how we act.
>
> W4. We can grasp the core propositions that give content to such beliefs only through believing enough of them (along with other related propositions with which they form one's individual system of beliefs). We might doubt any one of them, but we could not possibly doubt them all (and retain our grasp) [208].

Sosa allows that there are some insights here. But regarding the philosophical question of how we have knowledge of a mind-independent world,

> Wittgenstein *seems* to adopt a wildly implausible stance. Does everything that "stands fast" for us does so justifiably, with proper epistemic standing, so that. . . it can serve as a proper basis for the knowledge that, according to Wittgenstein himself does gain proper support from such fast standing beliefs?. . . Wittgenstein seems to reject Moore's realism, the view that of fact independent there is and "external" world independent of human minds, including facts accepted at the core of common sense [210].

Sosa speculates that Wittgenstein rejects realism because "he adopts the anti-modal animus that long infected broad swaths of analytic philosophy" [210]. This would be seriously misguided since, without modality, it is unclear what the mind-independence of the world would even amount to.

To the questions "How do we know the core components of common sense?" and "Why are such beliefs so much as rationally, epistemically justified?", Sosa thinks that "the best answer that might be extractable from *On Certainty*, with some strain, is relativistic". But relativism won't do. Cultural consensus is "insufficient for knowledge, since. . . it is compatible with falsity. If our consensual beliefs happened to be true, it would be due to epistemic luck incompatible with knowledge" [EE 211].

Sosa argues that explaining knowledge as the product of world-engaging competences, exercised against a background of proper default assumptions offers a way beyond both Moore and Wittgenstein. Our competences include "subitizing abilities": abilities to *just* see how things are, that a sum is correct, or that certain premises entail a particular conclusion [219][13]. For the purposes of epistemology, understanding how such competences relate to the sub-personal processes on which they depend is not required. All we need is an account of worldly knowledge that detaches Moore's metaphysical realism from the indirect realism entailed by his sense-datum theory of perception. That said, while Wittgenstein is right to reject Moore's "traditional foundationalist stance", he "does not so much as address the sort of philosophical question" that drives Moore to it [213]. Detached from the competences that put us in touch with the world, mere fast-standing beliefs cannot explain our knowledge of it. Not that such competences alone are sufficient. For them to yield even true beliefs, much less knowledge, we need to be in good shape, which will not be the case if abnormal spoilers are in the offing. We must have also proper default assumptions to rule them out.

Thus Sosa. But why is an appeal to assumptions better than one to beliefs that "stand fast"? More to the point, how are these options different? In everyday life, or scientific and scholarly inquiry, we do not concern ourselves with skeptical scenarios. This being so, how are we supposed to tell whether someone properly *assumes* that no abnormal spoilers will intervene or implicitly *believes* that they won't?[14] Given Sosa's declared aim of understanding knowledge "in human social reality", a distinction that makes no practical difference should have no theoretical significance either[15].

To address this issue, Sosa recurs to his example of "the Matrixing intergalactic interlopers. . . and their lottery to determine whether Earthians are all to be Matrixed". Suppose we win the lottery, and the aliens depart, never to return. Sosa finds it plausible that "their visit is epistemically inconsequential for humanity at large", even though "post-lottery we would be getting it right just by luck" and despite the fact that, just prior to the lottery, all of our predictions and even our specious-present beliefs and judgments would run monumental risk". Indeed, "they would be nearly certain to be false" [ibid.]. Wittgenstein, he supposes, cannot allow for this. He cannot explain how it is that we can "predict knowledgeably at the moment of the lottery" and "retain our background

knowledge" [ibid.]. Beliefs "do not acquire their epistemic status just by standing fast, if their likelihood of being true drops precipitously to approach zero" [ibid]. Sosa concludes that we need something more robust: "fast-standing assumptions that incur no relevant epistemic negligence or recklessness" [221]. But why is it negligent or reckless to hold on to framework *beliefs* that are essential for getting on with life and to which we have no good alternative? It is not as if calling them "assumptions" makes them more likely to be true. The question remains: is there more than a verbal difference Sosa's own view and Wittgenstein's, *as* Sosa *understands* Wittgenstein's view? How would we distinguish in practice–that is, in human social reality–between default assumptions and fast-standing beliefs? Both would be manifested in our ignoring "inappropriate skeptical concerns" [EE 221]. Perhaps some of us make proper assumptions (good!), while others hang on to their beliefs (bad!). So, some know, others don't? This would be an implausible verdict.

These are good questions, but they don't go to the heart of the matter. Wittgenstein does not fail to rise to the challenge of skepticism, as Sosa understands it. He sees no reason to try. Or better, every reason not to.

4. Knowing and Claiming to Know

Sosa shares the generally held view that, for Wittgenstein, the certainties belonging to our frame of reference are not things we know to be true. What hinge commitments *are* is a matter of dispute[16]. For the most part, I shall ignore this issue. Those who take it seriously, agree that such commitments are *not* knowledge. This is what I shall contest: knowledge is exactly what they are.

I suspect that many, perhaps most, readers of *On Certainty* will be inclined to dismiss my suggestion out of hand. Doesn't Wittgenstein say in so many words that Moore's propositions of common sense are *not* things we know? No, he doesn't. What he *does* do is take a dim view of Moore's *claims to know*, whether in connection with "Here is one hand" or "The earth has existed for many years past". For example:

> 151. I should like to say: Moore does not know what he asserts he knows, but it stands fast for him, as for me; regarding it as absolutely solid is part of our *method* of doubt and enquiry.

Wittgenstein *doesn't* say that Moore does *not* know what he asserts, only that he *should like* to say this. He is expressing a reaction to Moore's "I know". In the philosophical context in which Moore enters his claims to know, they strike the wrong note. This is a recurrent theme.

> 407. For *when* Moore says "I know that that's a. . ." I want to reply "you don't *know* anything!"—and yet I would not say that to anyone who was speaking without philosophical intention.

Moore's says "I know that. . ." in connection with assertions that, in everyday life, we never make. Moore's claims to know have a place only in his philosophical projects: proving that there is an external world or defending common sense. But if the existence of the external world requires a proof, or common sense needs defending, Moore's insisting that *he knows* such and such achieves less than nothing.

> 481. *When* one hears Moore say "I know that that's a tree", one suddenly understands those who think that this has by no means been settled.
>
> The *matter* strikes one all at once as being unclear and blurred. It is as if Moore had put it in the wrong light.

By their very ineffectiveness, Moore's *philosophical* knowledge-claims make it seem that there is a problem he can't solve, thereby encouraging the idealism or skepticism he means

to rebut. This is a fair comment as far as it goes. But it tells us nothing about *Wittgenstein's* own views concerning what we do and don't know in everyday life or science.

There are everyday cases where "I know…" seems wrong. An early example:

> 10. I know that a sick man is lying here? Nonsense! I am sitting at his bedside, I am looking attentively into his face—So I don't know, then, that there is a sick man lying here? Neither the question nor the assertion (*Aussage*) makes any sense. Any more than the assertion "I am here", which I yet might use at any moment, if a suitable occasion presented itself…

But again, Wittgenstein is making a point about the inappropriateness of my saying "I know", not a point about what I know. This should be obvious from his comparing my nonsensical "I know there is a sick man lying here" to an out-of-the-blue "I am here". For Wittgenstein, to *say* something with these words, I need to be *doing* something: announcing my arrival or complaining about being ignored. Otherwise, my words are *just noise*. Similar considerations apply to "I know". Not everything I know is something I can always assure people of by telling them that I know it: not because I *don't* know but because there is no point to my saying that I do. This would be the case with things that we all know already. But even when I'm conveying information—say, I'm a paramedic alerting my colleagues to the presence of a sick man–I tell them *what* I know, not *that* I know it. Where there is no doubt, there is no occasion for assurance or parading my epistemic credentials. My inappropriate "I know" seems not to be nonsense because it is easy to imagine cases where those words would be appropriate. I might report to my supervisor that, though we thought the building had been cleared, I knew straightaway that a sick man was lying there. If I didn't know this at the time that, my report would be false.

Wittgenstein suggests that "One says "I know" when one is ready to give compelling grounds (OC 245). Typically, this will be when there are questions about what one has said[17]. So, if someone reacted to my "There is a sick man lying here" with "Are you sure", I could reply "I know so: he's gasping for breath". Wittgenstein cautions us: "We just do not see how very specialized the use of "I know" is [OC 11]. His views about what I know should not be confused with his thoughts about what I can meaningfully claim to know. Sosa dismissal of Wittgenstein's remarks about "language" as irrelevant to epistemology blinds him to what is for Wittgenstein a vital distinction.

If Wittgenstein's remarks about "I know" do not tell us everything about what he takes us to know, his remarks on 'hinge' propositions tell us even less. OC 341, where the hinge metaphor is introduced, is often quoted with its first three words elided. They matter. They are "That is to say…". OC 341 clarifies its predecessor.

> 340. We know with the same certainty with which we believe *any* mathematical proposition, how the letters A and B are pronounced, what the colour of human blood is called, that other human beings have blood and call it "blood".
>
> 341. That is to say, the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.

Since hinge propositions are introduced as known with certainty, they cannot be his answer to general skepticism. The hinge metaphor calls attention to the vital role played by such knowledge.

> 342. That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific (*wissenshaftliche*) investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted.

> 343. But it isn't that the situation is like this We just *can't* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put.

Our "scientific" inquiries—natural-scientific or humanistic—require a background of common knowledge that we cannot doubt. The problem regarding hinge commitments is not, as Sosa supposes, to understand how mere beliefs could serve as a foundation for knowledge. The problem is how we can have basic, non-inferential knowledge. In traditional foundationalist epistemology, basic propositions—prototypically sense-datum propositions–are taken to be *intrinsically* credible. As reports on how things appear, they cannot be false, if properly made. But hinge propositions have no special subject matter. They look like straightforward empirical propositions. How can they be things we know with anything like mathematical certainty?

5. Limits to Doubt

Wittgenstein's notes begin with a comment on Moore's peculiar performance in *Proof of an External World*. As noted, in giving his proof Moore makes certain hand-gestures while announcing "Here is one hand and here is another". In this way, he claims, he has proved that at least two external things exist. His conclusion differs from his premises, his premises entail his conclusion, and he knows them to be true. Granted, he has not proved his premises to be true. As Descartes points out, to prove that he is holding up his hands, he (Moore) would have to prove that he is not dreaming; and although no doubt he has "conclusive reasons" for believing he is awake, he cannot say exactly what they are. However, spelling them out is a task for philosophers. Insisting that we can only know what we can prove would mean that at most some philosophers know things that in fact we all know.

Wittgenstein is more puzzled than persuaded.

> 1. If you do know that that *here is one hand*, we'll grant you all the rest.

When one says that such and such a proposition can't be proved, of course that does not mean that it can't be derived from other propositions; any proposition can be derived from other propositions. But they may be no more certain than it is itself.

We might think that Wittgenstein is suggesting that, while Moore is certain that he has hands, he doesn't *know* this. But as we have seen, Wittgenstein's objection is to Moore's attempt to solve a philosophical problem by insisting that *he* knows what other philosophers call in question. "[I]f what he believes is of such a kind that the grounds that he can give are no surer than his assertion, then he cannot say that he knows what he believes" [OC 243].

Moore's conditions on proof are incomplete. His premises must not just be known to be true. They must be more certain than his conclusion, which they aren't. Nothing is more certain than what we learn from having familiar objects in plain view. Of course, Moore thinks that there is something more certain than this: our "direct" knowledge of sense-data or perceptual seemings. This is why, though he sees no need to prove his premises, he does not doubt that they are *provable*. He has conclusive reasons for believing that he is holding up his hands: difficult to describe, but undeniably present, features of his sense-data. Wittgenstein rejects this out of hand.

> 2. From its seeming to me—or to everyone–to be so, it doesn't follow that it *is* so.

What we can ask is whether it makes sense to doubt it.

If knowledge requires conclusive reasons, knowing how things seem will not provide them. But since there *is* nothing more certain than Moore's premises, there is no possibility of demonstrating them from any premises. However, this is a problem only if doubting them makes sense. When and where doubting *doesn't* make sense, there is no possibility

of our having gone wrong, in which case we have non-evidential certainty amounting to knowledge.

Pursuing this line of thought, Wittgenstein reminds us of our everyday way of thinking about such things.

> 3. If someone says "I don't know if there's a hand here" he might be told "Look closer"—This possibility of satisfying oneself is part of the language-game. Is one of its essential features.

Non-evidential certainty is not just a matter of *what* we say (or think), as with Moore's sense-datum propositions. It is a matter of what we say (or think) together with *the circumstances in which we say or think it*. If at Moore's lecture I had failed to realize that he had just held up his hands, it would have been because I didn't get a good look: my view was blocked, or I was distracted. If I had been looking attentively in his direction and normally sighted, I *couldn't* have failed to know. In such circumstances, doubts don't make sense. I can explain to someone else how I came to know—"I saw it with my own eyes"—but such an explanation is not *for me* a justification. That I saw what was going on is no more certain than what I took to be so. Knowing and doubting are deeply circumstance dependent.

Doubts make sense when there is a possibility of error. In such cases, sustaining a claim to know takes "compelling grounds" for the proposition in question (OC 243). These thoughts point to Wittgenstein's having an "infallibilist" conception of knowledge: we know when we can't be going wrong. More precisely, when we can't be *mistaken*. This is not just saying (or seeming to believe) something false.

> 71. If my friend were to imagine one day that he had been living for a long time past in such and such a place, etc., I should not call this a mistake, but rather a mental disturbance, perhaps a transient one.

There are lots of things that people are expected to know without having anything that would normally count as evidence for them. I can give the policeman evidence that the car I am driving is my own. Only in exceptional circumstances, such as amnesia resulting from a blow to the head, could I even *try* to prove this to myself. If this were not so, we would live very differently.

Wittgenstein does not harbor the across-the-board hostility to modality that Sosa suspects him of. What he has is a different account of when we can and can't have gone wrong. We can't have gone wrong when doubts fail to make sense: so far, so traditional. But the limits to doubt are not set by a class of special propositions. Whether doubts make sense depends on who is claiming (or thinking) what, when and where. Or what in simple cases comes to the same thing, there are things to think such that, in normal circumstances, the fact that I think those things *is* conclusive evidence for their truth.

Wittgenstein's suggestion has something in common with Sosa's view that coming to know things through the exercise of basic epistemic competencies is subject to the triple-S structure of skill, shape, and situation. The significant difference is that, for Wittgenstein, both knowing *and* doubting are sensitive to the circumstances in which claims are made or beliefs are held. Still, Sosa is closer to the real Wittgenstein than he realizes.

Early on, we find Wittgenstein calling attention to the fact, previously noted, that not everything we take to be true—or even know—is something we would or even could ordinarily say we know. If we made such a claim, what we meant would be far from clear.

> 4. "I know that I am a human being." In order to see how unclear the sense of this proposition is, consider its negation. At most, it might be taken to mean "I know I have the organs of a human". (E.g. a brain, which after all no one has ever seen.) But what about such a proposition as "I know that I have a brain"?

> Can I doubt it? Grounds for *doubt* are lacking. Everything speaks in its favour, nothing against it. Nevertheless it is imaginable that my skull should turn out empty when it was operated upon.

Doubts need grounds as much as, or even more than, claims to know. But grounds for doubt are not as easy to come by as many philosophers think. A cartoon could depict astonished neurosurgeons finding Wittgenstein's skull to be empty. But that it is imaginable doesn't make it possible. I could be given an MRI scan to check for injury to the brain. Giving me one to make sure I had a brain to injure would make no sense at all. The thought that I might lack one flies in the face of everything we know about human beings. What we know shapes our sense of what might be. "We use judgments as principles of judgment" [OC 124].

Sosa will be unmoved. He will grant that, with our default assumptions in place, we don't need an examination to know full well that someone has a brain. But he will argue that general skepticism has not been addressed, much less answered. Wittgenstein anticipates this reaction. Suppose some doubt arose concerning a knowledge claim like Moore's:

> 19. The statement "I know that here is a hand" may. . . be continued: "for its my hand that I'm looking at. Then a reasonable man will not doubt that I know. Nor will the idealist; rather he will say that he was not dealing with the practical doubt which is being dismissed, but there is a further doubt behind that one—That this is an *illusion* has to be shown in a different way.

How does this philosophical doubt arise? Wittgenstein offers a suggestion.

> 24. The idealist's question would be something like: "What right have I got not to doubt the existence of my hands? (And to that the answer can't be: I <u>*know*</u> that they exist.) But someone who asks such a question is overlooking the fact that a doubt about existence only works in a language-game. Hence, that we should first have to ask: what would such a doubt be like?, and don't understand this straight off[18].

This could be better stated. Idealists don't deny that hands *exist*: they deny that they are external things. According to Moore, such things are "things to be met with in space" [*Proof* 154]. Unlike after images, which are merely "presented in space" [*Proof* 151], external things can be viewed from different angles, and seen by other people. They are there to be met with, whether or not anyone meets them[19]. Moore's gestures are essential to his proof: they *show* his audience that his hands are external things, as defined. The cost is taking for granted the conception of a public world that idealists call in question.

The skeptical challenge presupposes that it is possible that there are no external things or, as Wittgenstein prefers, physical objects. Can we imagine this? Maybe, maybe not. It doesn't matter: "There are physical objects" is nonsense [OC 35]. Moore and his opponents think that "physical object" is like "wooden object", only more general. Wrong.

> 36. "A is a physical object" is a piece of instruction which we give only to someone who doesn't yet understand either what "A" means or what "physical object" means. Thus it is instruction about the use of words, and "physical object" is a logical concept. (Like colour, quantity. . .) And that is why no such proposition as: "There are physical objects" can be formulated".

"Physical object" is a logical concept, having to do with identity and individuation. Moore thinks he is giving an existence proof. He is merely teaching his audience some philosophical terminology.

Though worth making, by itself this point will not dispel the illusion of a doubt behind the everyday doubt.

> 37. But is it an adequate answer to the skepticism of the idealist, or the assurances of the realist, to say that "There are physical objects" is nonsense? For them after all it is not nonsense. It would, however, be an answer to say: this assertion, or its opposite is a misfiring attempt to express what can't be expressed like that. And that it does misfire can be shown; but that isn't the end of the matter. We need to realize that what presents itself to us as the first expression of a difficulty, or of its solution, may as yet not be correctly expressed at all. Just as one who has a just censure of a picture to make will often at first offer the censure where it does not belong, and an *investigation* is needed to find the right point of attack for the critic[20].

Anticipating the hinge passages, Wittgenstein begins with a remark on mathematics. Knowledge of mathematical propositions, seen as vouchsafed by rational insight, will seem to set a standard for certainty that no proposition concerning the world around us can ever meet be, so that no knowledge of the world is *really* certain. Wittgenstein advises us to ignore the 'inner process': "What is interesting is how we use mathematical propositions" [OC 38]. Shifting our focus, we see that there is nothing mysterious about the evident necessity of simple mathematical truths.

> 43. What sort of proposition is this: "We cannot have miscalculated in 12 × 12 = 144"? It must surely be a proposition of logic.—But now, is it not the same, or doesn't it come to the same, as the statement 12 × 12 = 144?
>
> 44. If you demand a rule from which it follows that there can't have been a miscalculation here, the answer is that we did not learn this through a rule, but through learning to calculate.

What goes for elementary mathematical propositions also applies to simple propositions about things around us. Getting things right, in propitious circumstances, goes with having learned to speak—thus to think—about such things at all.

> 80. The truth of my statements is the test of my understanding of these statements.
>
> 81. That is to say: if I make certain false statements, it becomes uncertain whether I understand them[21].

In particular:

> 629. It is simply the normal case, to be incapable of mistake about the designation of certain things in one's mother tongue.

Such primitive knowledge could be said to be 'logically' grounded[22]. But this doesn't make them analytic or logically true. Facts about the world can be contingent without being "empirical" in the sense of needing or even being open to verification. Again, circumstance dependence comes into the picture. Other people can verify that I am who I say I am. I can show my passport. But only in very unusual circumstances could *I* try to verify that I'm who I say I am.

With more ambitious claims, doubts can arise.

> 52. The situation is. . . not the same for a proposition like "At this distance from the sun there is a planet" and "Here is a hand" (namely my own hand). The second can't be called a hypothesis. But there isn't a sharp boundary between them.
>
> 53. So one might grant that Moore was right, if he is interpreted like this: a proposition saying that here is a physical object may have the same logical status as one saying that here is a red patch.

Of course, this is what Moore denies: in his view, *only* propositions about sense-data are "directly" known. If you think *that*, you will think that our thoughts about "external things" are beset by problems, epistemological *and* metaphysical. If you don't, you won't.

6. Common Sense, Science and Modality

Since Sosa rejects Moore's traditional foundationalism, it may seem that Wittgenstein's strictures do not apply to him. On the other hand, though Sosa tries to put some distance between Descartes [20] and himself, his skeptical scenarios are all science-fiction variants on Descartes's examples of dreaming and demonic deception.

> Suppose that we could too easily have been globally disabled (insane or totally dreaming, as Descartes imagines). Such disability would have prevented us from properly forming any judgment on whether we were thus disabled... Would we fall short, however, merely because we would be unable to discern such a disability? Note well: No one could tell that he was thus, globally, disabled (EE 150).

This is a curious passage. Insanity to the point of global cognitive disability would not just prevent us from "telling", in the sense of properly forming a judgment on our debilitated state: it would take away our power of judgment altogether. In that case, we don't need a default assumption to the effect that we are not so disabled. If we can so much as discuss the matter, we know we aren't. Surely, I can't be just assuming that I'm making judgments. That's one lesson Descartes taught us: I can't think that I'm incapable of thinking.

Strangely, this seems to be the view that Sosa comes to take of radical skeptical scenarios generally, including those he himself uses to prompt epistemic intuitions. He notes that "familiar skeptical scenarios like the evil demon, the brain in a vat and the Matrix... are radical by comparison with Simone's simulation", which "raises the question of whether the victims retain the capacity to make genuine judgments" [EE 176]. His preference, he says, is to answer in the negative", which "seems plausibly connected to the metaphysical detachment from society that comes along with detachment from their surrounding world" [ibid.]. This sounds like Wittgenstein [21], not to say Heidegger[23]. It points to a profound asymmetry between the so-called "good case" (our being normally situated in the world with others) and the "bad case" (our being stuck in some skeptical scenario). In the good case, we know that we aren't in the bad case. In the bad case, we don't know what case we are in, because we're incapable of thought. But while this accords well with Sosa's aim of understanding knowledge as a phenomenon in human, social reality, it cuts the ground from under his idea that our everyday knowledge depends on a body of proper default assumptions.

Descartes is aware of this problem, which is why he picks his skeptical scenarios carefully. *Pace* Sosa, he *dismisses* citing the possibility of madness as a ground for rational doubt: it is something he would be mad even to consider. By contrast, he takes dreaming to be compatible with retaining full rationality: we can do sums in a dream. However, the 'dream' argument is exclusively concerned with the "the evidence of the senses". Finding no "marks and traces" by which he could distinguish a sufficiently vivid dream from waking perception, he provisionally concludes he can't know for sure that he is sitting by the fire with a book in his lap, or at least can't do so by perception alone [20] (p. 14f).

For Descartes the 'dream argument' applies only to his knowledge of particular things around him, leaving untouched his beliefs about the general character of external reality. Even so, it is the pivot on which his general skepticism turns, for it insinuates the conception of perceptual experience that animates all radical sceptical scenarios. Wittgenstein calls it in question.

> 90. "I know" has a primitive meaning similar to and related to "I see" ("wissen", "videre"). And "I knew he was in the room, but he wasn't in the room" is like "I saw him in the room but he wasn't there". "I know" is supposed to express a relation, not between me and the sense of a proposition (like "I believe") but between me and a fact. So that the *fact* is taken into my consciousness. (Here is the reason why one wants to say that nothing that goes on in the outer world is really known, but only what happens in the domain of what are called sense-data.) This would give a picture of knowing as the perception of an outer event through visual rays which project it as it is into the eye and the consciousness. Only then the question arises whether one can be *certain* of this projection.

Sosa takes this Cartesian picture for granted. If we were "Matrixed", we wouldn't be able to tell since our "experience" would be just as it would have been if we were living in our familiar world. Accepting this, and eschewing Descartes's theology, abnormal spoilers can *only* be ruled out by assumption. Sosa rejects the traditional appeal to sense-data as the foundations of knowledge, but they live on as "subjective experience" or "the presentational given" [EE 206, 217][24].

The intuitions prompted by Sosa's thought experiments are not theory-neutral data: they reflect a particular and contestable view of perception and its relation to knowledge. But this is not the only problem and perhaps not the deepest. Sosa takes it to be evident that his skeptical scenarios represent possibilities. As we saw, Wittgenstein suggests our being able to imagine something, for example his lacking a brain, does not mean that it is possible. No doubt, he would say the same about skeptical scenarios generally.

As with "Here is one hand", Wittgenstein is struck by the peculiarity of Moore's assuring *us* that *he* knows his propositions of common sense to be true.

> 93. The propositions presenting what Moore '*knows*' are all of a kind such that it is difficult to imagine *why* anyone should believe the contrary. E.g. the proposition that Moore has spent his whole life in close proximity to the earth. . . Everything I have seen or heard gives me the conviction that no man has ever been far from the earth. Nothing in my picture of the world speaks in favour of the opposite.
>
> 94. But I did not get this world-picture by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between the true and the false.

Virtually everything we know about science or history starts from what we learned in school, were told, or read about. If Moore knows these things, we all do, at least with a layman's understanding. Even if we don't, they are known. If there's a problem—maybe we don't know these things—then he's in the same boat.

In this passage, Wittgenstein doesn't characterize his (and our) inheritance as knowledge. In later remarks, he does.

> 288. I know, not just that the earth existed long before my birth, but also that it is a large body, that this has been established, that I and the rest of mankind have forebears, that there are books about all this, that such books don't lie, etc. etc. etc. And I know all this? I believe it. This body of knowledge has been handed on to me and I have no grounds for doubting it, but, on the contrary all sorts of confirmation.
>
> And why shouldn't I say that I know all this? Isn't that what one does say?

The question is rhetorical: of course this is what we say. According to Sosa, Wittgenstein holds that we "do not strictly *know*" such things [EE 208], as if there were standards for knowing that our everyday and scientific attributions of knowledge all fail to meet. Such an idea is wholly foreign to Wittgenstein's approach to philosophy.

Wittgenstein's stresses the social and historical dimensions of knowledge that are occluded in the Cartesian tradition. The settled knowledge that provides the background for further inquiry is a cultural inheritance. Things that were once discoveries, justified through evidence and inquiry, get added to our store of knowledge, becoming the background for further inquiry. Sometimes we take ourselves to know when we don't, so we must not forget the expression "I thought I knew" [OC 12]. Even so, there are many things that are not subject to revision. We can refine our knowledge of various diseases. But unless civilization collapses, we are not going back to the Galenic miasma theory or explanation in terms of planetary influence. What it makes sense to doubt changes with the advance of science. If we hope to understand knowledge as a phenomenon in human social reality, this vital difference between human knowledge and the knowledge we attribute to animals must be accepted as a ground level fact.

As noted, Sosa suspects that Wittgenstein flirts with cultural relativism, and there are passages that might be taken to point in this direction. He imagines a tribe whose members think they visit the moon. This may be how they interpret their dreams. But suppose they believe they really go there. Could we argue them out of it? Wittgenstein thinks not.

> 108. "But is there then no objective truth? Isn't it true, or false, that someone has been on the moon?" If we are thinking with our system, then it is certain that no one has ever been on the moon. Not merely is nothing of the sort ever seriously reported to us by reasonable people, but our whole system of physics forbids us to believe it. For this demands answers to the questions "How did he overcome the force of gravity?" "How could he live without an atmosphere?" and a thousand others which could not be answered. But suppose instead of that we met the reply: "We don't know *how* one gets to the moon, but those who get there know at once that they are there; and even you can't explain everything." We should feel ourselves intellectually very distant from someone who said this.

Wittgenstein's reference to "thinking with our system" can sound relativistic. And as Sosa says, cultural consensus does not guarantee truth. However, it is important to remember that Wittgenstein's view of truth is deflationary: more or less, a redundancy theory [21] (§136). "It is true that the tribesmen don't travel to the moon" says neither more nor less than that they don't travel to the moon. So, the question is whether we know more about such matters than they do, and his is answer is that we do. Or at least we say we do.

> 286. What we believe depends on what we learn. We all believe that it isn't possible to get to the moon; but there might be people who believe that it is possible and it sometimes happens. We say: these people do not know a lot that we know. And, let them be never so sure of their belief—they are wrong and we know it. . .

If we compare our system of knowledge with theirs then theirs is evidently the poorer by far.

Are right? Here it matters that the *soi-disant* moon-visitors are tribesmen, not physicists or philosophers. Also important is the thought that not all false claims are mistakes.

> 155. In certain circumstances, a man cannot make a mistake. ('Can' is here used logically, and the proposition does not mean that he cannot say anything false in those circumstances.) If Moore were to pronounce the opposite of those propositions he declares certain, we should not just not share his opinion: we should regard him as demented.

Moore knows that he has never been very far from the surface of the earth. Just as well: if he were to tell us that he had often been to the moon, he would be delusional. The

tribesmen are merely pre-scientific. For this reason, the distance between us cannot be bridged by straightforward argument, any more than it could be with delusional Moore. To explain our skepticism regarding their lunar escapades, we would have to *teach* them physics and, if they were willing to learn, they would no longer think they go to the moon. Previously impossible, argument would be unnecessary. Such epistemic asymmetries are a fact of life: they have nothing to do with relativism. The tribe's "system of knowledge" is what they *take themselves* to know. We do not have to concede that they *do* know. Our current scientific knowledge may not be the last word, but much of it is future-proof[25]. That flying to the moon requires accelerating to escape velocity is an example.

Wittgenstein's treatment of the moon visitors further confirms the point that he doesn't harbor any general hostility to modality. His objection is to the cavalier view of possibility that drives the "thought experiments" that some philosophers continue to invoke to motivate the supposed problem of our knowledge of the external world. By the standards of common sense and science, my being a brain in a vat is no more possible than the tribesmen's travel to the moon: the technology doesn't exist.

By Wittgenstein's standards, skeptical scenarios are fairy tales. The witch's potion puts the princess to sleep for a hundred years until the prince awakens her with a kiss. Is such a thing possible? Of course not, no potion could work that way. Might I be the victim of an Evil Demon? No, there are no demons, evil or beneficent. Could a dream fully replicate waking life? No again: forgetting sensory modalities absent from dreams, seeing and dreaming have different neurological bases. Brain-in-a-vat tales only *sound* more scientific than Evil Demons. Sosa's "Matrix" example makes the point. In the movie, the hero is plugged in to the super-computer, like the connections in an old-fashioned telephone exchange. How is that supposed to work? Philosophers sometimes mention implanting microelectrodes. But synapses aren't plugs or electrodes: they are alive and in motion. Still, aren't the simulations envisaged in skeptical scenarios possible "in principle"[26]? Only if "in principle" means "forgetting everything we have learned about the mind and brain since the time of Descartes". Like fairy tales, they "make sense" in that we can play along with them by bracketing all relevant knowledge of what is possible. This is fine in films and fiction, but not in a project of understanding knowledge as a phenomenon in human social reality.

If Sosa's abnormal spoilers aren't possibilities, we don't need to assume that they won't intervene. We know they can't[27]. With skeptical scenarios off the table, there is no problem with non-transmissive closure.

7. Doing Epistemology

The differences between Sosa and Wittgenstein and Sosa regarding knowledge and skepticism reflect their disparate approaches to philosophy. Sosa's way of doing epistemology remains deeply embedded in the Cartesian tradition. Wittgenstein is one of its most radical critics.

Sosa intends his gnoseology to be normative, though not about concepts. How can this be, given that the use of epistemic concepts in epistemic assessment distinguishes human knowledge from the knowledge we attribute to animals. Unlike animals, we ask epistemic questions: "How do you know?" or "Why do you believe?", questions we can also ask ourselves. Depending on how they are answered, we count others or ourselves as knowledgeable or not. For Wittgenstein, to suppose that we can understand such evaluative practices without investigating our epistemic concepts is a non-starter. How can we investigate the norms governing epistemic assessment without investigating the concepts that set the standards of evaluation? For Wittgenstein, we can't: language is the *sine qua non* of conceptual thought. It never occurs to him that questions about knowledge,

belief, certainty, and doubt can be treated in isolation from issues of language, meaning and mind.

Because for Wittgenstein language is about the world in which it is used, his methodological stance is consistently third-personal. This keeps him focused on knowledge as a phenomenon in human social reality. Sosa oscillates. The Analogy gives his theory of knowledge an externalist character so, when it is driving the discussion, he discusses matters from a third-person point of view. When skeptical scenarios come to the fore, there is a shift of perspective. The question becomes "How can I know things about the world through my perceptual capacities?". The answer, unsurprisingly, is that I can't, unless I help myself to a body of default assumptions. Sosa's epistemic/metaphysical hierarchy of kinds of knowledge depends entirely on intuitions prompted by skeptical scenarios. Wittgenstein has no use for them.

Sosa sees the use of skeptical "thought experiments" as a way of gaining first-person understanding, which he takes to be especially important in the humanities [3f.] But this methodological argument fails to justify his way of doing epistemology. His treatment of competent epistemic performance in terms of skill, shape and situation has clear affinities with Wittgenstein's view of knowledge as circumstance dependent. But his reliance on intuitions prompted by skeptical scenarios undoes the good work. Skeptical scenarios are devices for radical decontextualization. Strangely enough, as we noticed, Sosa himself recognizes this, at least up to a point: skeptical scenarios detach us from the human world, thus from the possibility of thought. Wittgenstein couldn't agree more. But for him, they also detach us from the inherited knowledge that make further inquiry possible. Some of this may need rethinking: we can take ourselves to know when we don't. But not all of it, or even that much, is open to revision, though it could be lost. Examining our practices of inquiry and epistemic assessment from a third-person point of view, Wittgenstein pays attention to the way they are conditioned by our current knowledge. There is a lot to learn from Sosa: I have scarcely begun to cover the range of topics he discusses. But doing epistemology by treating fairy tales as "metaphysical" possibilities, consideration of which serves to uncover the nature of human knowledge, only keeps alive skeptical problems we should have put behind us long ago.

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Notes

1 [3] (p. 123). Subsequent citations given in the text by EE and page number.

2 G. E. Moore, "A Defence of Common Sense" (first published 1921) and "Proof of an External World" (first published 1939) in Baldwin (1993) [4]. Further citations given in the text by *Defence* and *Proof*.

3 [5] Further citations given in the text by OC and paragraph. The notes that comprise this volume were prompted by Wittgenstein's discussions with Norman Malcolm of Moore's *Defence* and *Proof*.

4 Sosa's terminology risks misunderstanding. "Creditable" and "attributable" mean different things. "Creditable" is an honorific. A creditable action is praiseworthy: it *does* a person credit. Praise requires attributability, but so does blame. Perhaps Sosa is drawn to "creditable" because "knowledge" is a success term: if, I know, I get things right. So is "achievement, but I can achieve things that are anything but creditable.

5 Sosa introduces "gnoseology" to distinguish inquiry into the nature of knowledge from broader concerns of intellectual ethics: for example, what things we ought or ought not to investigate.

6 As Sosa notes, in sports the success rate can be quite low. In my favorite sport, professional soccer, analysts define a big chance as a situation in which the player is expected to score 30% of the time, a success rate similar to that of an excellent batting average in baseball.

7 This calls in question Sosa's treatment of the archer whose shot is blown off target and then, fortuitously, back on target. Since she would have missed if her shot hadn't been originally on target, why not say she succeeds because of her skill? Although she is exceptionally lucky to have been in such a favorable situation–she could very easily have missed–modal safety is not required. The lesson here is that intuitions involving far-fetched examples are less clear-cut than Sosa thinks. Although he insists that questions about knowledge have nothing to do with language or even concepts, his gnoseology is based on linguistic intuitions. Given that everyday language is adapted to everyday reality, why should there be a correct answer to the question of what we would (or should) say in cases that never (or almost never) come up?

8 As Sosa acknowledges, this may sound familiar. Other philosophers have been attracted to the thought that knowing things about the world doesn't require being able to rule out all ways going wrong but only just certain "relevant" alternatives. However, he takes telic virtue epistemology to put the otherwise obscure notion of relevance on a firm theoretical footing [EE 127]. On "relevant alternatives" he cites section 5.3 of the article on the analysis of knowledge in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://plato.stanford.edu (assessed on 31 May 2024) [EE 127, n.6].

9 For those who haven't seen it, in "The Matrix" our brains stay where they are, but we are kept in pods for the purpose of harvesting our bioenergy, which is used to power the machines that run the world. We have no idea that this is going on, the computer-controlled input to our brains and nervous system imprisoning us in a virtual reality. When the lead character, Neo, takes (or seems to take) a red pill, he falls out of his pod into a large vat of water. Unsurprisingly, the question of how he knows this is another episode in the simulation is not even raised.

10 This is what I take from Sosa's calling secure knowledge the "topmost" kind of knowledge in his metaphysical/epistemic hierarchy. Certainly, this is what is on show in the case of Simone. However, there is no obvious reason why animal knowledge couldn't be secure. But as far as I can see, modal safety doesn't make any kind knowledge more creditable. Might it make knowledge full well less so? Maybe if the conditions for the successful exercise of our competencies couldn't easily have failed to obtain, it is harder to go wrong.

11 Here I am ignoring some twists and turns in Sosa's discussion.

12 Barry Stroud calls attention to "a familiar pattern in the theory of knowledge", in which "We find ourselves with questions about knowledge that lead either to an unsatisfactory sceptical conclusion or to this or that 'theory' of knowledge which on reflection turns out to offer no more genuine satisfaction than the original sceptical conclusion it was meant to avoid". See [7].

13 In psychology, "subitize" (from latin *subitus* for "sudden") was introduced by Kaufmann et. Al. (1949) to refer to our ability to see at a glance (up to some small number) how many objects are presented in a visual array. Sosa seems to intend a somewhat wider meaning.

14 Sosa himself suggests a more sympathetic interpretation of Wittgenstein's notion of hinges.

15 I take this to be related to Greco's point that Sosa does not distinguish between allowing default assumptions and requiring them. If default assumptions are allowed, which I think is all that Sosa needs, it is hard to see how they are to be distinguished from beliefs.

16 Strawson (1985) [10] likens them to Hume's natural beliefs. Wright (2004) [11] treats them as "rational entitlements" Moyal-Sharrock (2016) [12] argues that they are not propositions at all but rather commitments that are shown in how we act. Pritchard says that they are not beliefs, or at least not beliefs that are "knowledge apt" [13], Coliva (2022) [14] sees them as rule-like, so not empirical propositions. Borrowing a concept from cognitive psychology, Greco (2021) [15] identifies them with "procedural knowledge": knowledge exercised in the performance of some task" (p. 3596). Despite his willingness to call hinge commitments "knowledge, Greco's view has a lot in common with the views of Moyal-Sharrock and Pritchard. A view closer to my own can be found in Schönbaumsfeld (2016) [16]. See below, fn. 24. [14], Ch. 1 offers an excellent overview of the different forms taken by hinge epistemology.

17 Lawlor (2013) [17], passim.

18 Like Moore in *Proof* and *Defence*, Wittgenstein is thinking as much about idealism as about skepticism, if not more about the former than the latter. But his rejection of idealism does not amount to a defense of Moore's realism, about which he remarks, "It is as if 'I know' did not tolerate a metaphysical emphasis" [OC 482]. Clearly, the dispute between idealism and realism is another philosophical conundrum that Wittgenstein wants to dissolve, though exploring this issue in detail here would take me too far afield.

19 In *Proof*, Moore's stalking horse is Kant's argument in "The Refutation of Idealism" [18] He takes Kant to treat external things indifferently as things presented in space and as things to be met with in space: a fatal mistake. [*Proof* 151f.]

20 This passage contains the only occurrence of "scepticism" in *On Certainty*. There is a mention of sceptical philosophers at OC 524. And that's it. But of course, doubt is a recurrent topic.

[21] A referee noted that this anticipates Davidson, something I have long thought myself. However, there is one big difference between them. Wittgenstein has a deflationary view truth: more or less a redundancy theory. Wrongly in my view, Davidson categorically repudiates all such approaches. His views about meaning are compatible with a deflationary understanding of truth. See [19].

[22] Following up Wittgenstein's remarks that "I know" can express "a *logical* insight" [OC 59, italics in original]. Genia Schönbaumsfeld suggests that Wittgenstein recognizes a 'logical' or 'grammatical 'sense of "to know". I see no reason to suppose that Wittgenstein proliferates senses of "to know". Knowledge is logically grounded when doubts make no sense. In such a case, "I do not know" and "I know" are also nonsense. In her otherwise insightful discussion, Schönbaumsfeld fails to pay sufficient attention to the distinction between what we know and what we can meaningfully claim to know. See [16] p. 117f.

[23] For Heidegger, human being, *Dasein* (being there) is being-in-the-world with others. This them is developed at length in Heidegger [22], Division 1.

[24] There is reason to think that Descartes was inspired by the Academic skeptics, who make skeptical use of dreams and madness. But they do so in a very different way. In the first place, they take dreaming and madness to belong with inebriation: all states of diminished cognitive competence, though not total disability. Secondly, they recognize an important epistemic asymmetry between the 'bad' and 'good' states. Mad, drunk, or dreaming, we may not recognize our condition for what it is. Sane, sober, or awake, we can and typically do. There is no answer to the question "How do we know that we are?", if the question is meant as a demand for proof. Nothing is more certain than that I am awake and typing at my computer because I *am* awake, sober, and *compos mentis*. The Academic skeptics' position is far more commonsensical than that of Descartes.

[25] Vickers (2022) [23], passim.

[26] As Crispin Wright puts it, Descartes is "surely right" that "normal perceptual experience allows in principle of perfect phenomenological counterfeit" [24] (p. 390).

[27] With skeptical scenarios off the table, there is no problem with non-transmissive closure.

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