

Virtuous intuitions: comments on Lecture 3 of Ernest Sosa's *A Virtue Epistemology*

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Abstract I agree with Sosa that intuitions are best thought of as attractions to believe a certain proposition merely on the basis of understanding it. However, I don't think it is constitutive of them that they supply strictly foundational justification for the propositions they justify, though I do believe that it is important that the intuition of a suitable subject be thought of as a *prima facie* justification for his intuitive judgment, independently of the reliability of his underlying capacities. I also think that we need to be able to explain how mere understanding of a proposition can confer upon us an ability to have reliable intuitions, that we cannot simply take that idea for granted. And that when try to explain that, our best avenue for doing so is to take the intuitions as *constituting* the understanding of which they are said to be a manifestation.

Keywords Intuitions · Foundational justification · Perception · Virtue epistemology · Meaning

I want to look at what Ernest Sosa has to say about the nature and status of intuitions, as they figure in a priori knowledge. This is an important topic in its own right and a good test of the virtue approach to epistemology that Sosa favors and has done so much to place at the center of philosophical discussions of knowledge.

My own view has tended to be that we should eschew talk of intuitions in the theory of a priori knowledge, especially as it concerns the epistemology of logical *inference*.¹ In this comment, though, I want to take a different tack: I want to use

¹ See my "Analyticity Reconsidered" and "Blind Reasoning," both reprinted in my *Content and Justification: Philosophical Papers*, (Oxford: OUP, 2008).

Sosa's illuminating discussion to explore in a sympathetic way what we should say about intuitions if we were to give them a substantive role in our epistemology of the non-inferential a priori.

If we are going to meaningfully debate the nature of intuitions, we must find some way of specifying what we are talking about while begging as few questions as possible about what intuitions are. Too often, philosophers show little sensitivity to this point, starting out with some tendentious way of characterizing intuitions.

It is characteristic of the subtle and sensitive way in which he treats all the topics that he discusses that Sosa does not proceed in this way but begins, rather, by asking what *role* intuitions are supposed to play in a priori knowledge. And he explains that role by saying that

intuitions are supposed to play a foundational role in philosophy and other a priori disciplines (to the extent that these are a priori). (p. 45)

What does Sosa mean by a foundational justification? An attitude has a foundational justification, Sosa explains, just in case it has a justification "that does not derive from its being based on a reason, on some other appropriate state of the subject's at the time, except insofar as the reason is not a state of the subject's that itself requires justification." (45 fn)

In other words, an attitude of a subject's has a foundational justification just in case either it is justified by some reason (state of the subject's) that is not itself in need of justification, or it is justified by something other than a reason. (This corresponds to his distinction between basis-dependent justification and competence-based justification: more on this further in the article.)

This characterization does raise an issue, as Sosa notes, about how the conscious judgment that *p* can provide a reason for my believing that I have consciously judged that *p*, irrespective of the epistemic status of the conscious judgment that *p*. But I will follow Sosa in ignoring this complication.²

Later on, I will come back to the question whether this characterization in terms of foundational justifiers is the right way to think about intuitions. For now, let me grant it. What, then, could intuitions be, if they are to fulfill this role of providing a foundational justification for a priori judgments?

Sosa suggests that perceptually justified beliefs provide a paradigm of foundational justification. How does this work?

Suppose I have a visual experience as of a cat in front of me and come to believe, on that basis, that there is a cat in front of me. Then, on the model Sosa has in mind, (1) my visual state justifies my belief all by itself and (2) since my visual state is itself beyond justification and unjustification, the justification it provides is foundational.

Now, as is well known, we could question whether the liberal assumption expressed in (1), that visual states are capable of justifying the beliefs that are based upon them all by themselves, without the help of a justified background belief to the

² The answer I favor is that it is not the conscious judgment that *p* that provides the reason for the second-order belief, but rather one's *awareness* of that conscious judgment—but this is best left for another occasion.

effect that one may rely on one's senses (or some such). But let me set aside this issue about liberalism and let me go along with the claim that visual states do justify the beliefs that are based upon them all by themselves and without any help from a background, justified, belief.³

Of course, if they are to provide foundational justification, they must themselves lie beyond justification and unjustification. Why is it clear that they do?

Sosa says:

Since they are only passively received, they cannot manifest obedience to anything, including rational norms, whether epistemic or otherwise. Since unmotivated by reasons, they can serve as foundational sources, as regress-stoppers. When they help explain rational standing of some other state or action, they do not thereby problematize their own rational standing. Being so passive, they have no rational standing. (p. 46)

Visual states, then, are said to be beyond justification because they are passive, not subject to rational control.

Satisfied that perceptual states provide us with a clear model of foundational justification, Sosa argues that we could not model intuitions along similar lines.

The theorist who would model intuitions on the perceptual case would construe them as quasi-perceptual states of "intellectual seeming," understood to be states of awareness with a mediating role analogous to that of visual experience in visual perception. Thus, according to this theorist, my belief that

$$1 + 1 = 2$$

would be justified by my having a quasi-perceptual state of its intellectually seeming to me that $1 + 1 = 2$ based merely on my understanding of the proposition in question and without reliance on inference, memory and so forth.

Sosa objects to this picture on the grounds that, when it is properly understood, it cannot supply the sought after foundational justification for simple a priori propositions. Why not?

Sosa's objection is not that there are no such things as intellectual seemings. He does not believe, as some philosophers are inclined to think, that we can make do with the mere notion of being disposed to believe an a priori proposition, and have no need for that proposition's intellectually seeming to be true.

He is, rightly in my view, influenced here by the phenomenon of our being *tempted* to believe certain a priori propositions that we *know* to be false. Thus, even as I know that there aren't more whole numbers than even ones, it still seems to me as though there must be. I am not disposed to believe that proposition; but it still tempts me, in some sense.⁴ And that phenomenon gives one a good basis for distinguishing between a proposition's intellectually seeming true to one and one's being disposed to believe it.

³ For the dispute between liberalism and conservatism about perceptual justification see Jim Pryor, "The Skeptic and the Dogmatist," *Noûs* 34 (2000), 517–49 and Crispin Wright, "The Perils of Dogmatism," in *Themes from G. E. Moore*, edited by Susanna Nuccetelli and Gary Seay, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁴ I heard this example from David B. Barnett.

Indeed, Sosa is such a fan of intellectual seemings that he thinks that they crop up even in ordinary *visual perception*—that is, he thinks we need to posit intellectual seemings as mediating between visual experience and perceptual belief!

In a Muller-Lyer illusion, says Sosa, an image tempts us to believe that two lines are incongruent, when they are not. How is it that we are so tempted? The lines in the drawing are not incongruent. Nor, says Sosa, are the lines in one's "visual field," as we can see by inserting vertical parallel lines until the end points at one end are connected to those at the other end, which removes the appearance of incongruence without altering the length of the lines in one's mental image. Hence, it must be that what explains our temptation to think that the lines are incongruent is an intellectual seeming that interposes itself between the visual experience and the belief.

I think this argument relies too heavily on a sense-datum conception of visual experience. If we worked with a conception of visual experiences according to which their contents are characterized propositionally—so that when we see the lines as incongruent, that is not because somewhere in one's experience there are lines that *are* incongruent—then we wouldn't be able to run this argument. Still, I am familiar with the temptation to think as Sosa does here.

Let's go back to the question, though, why Sosa thinks that the perceptual theorist cannot explain intuitions. As I say, his reason is not that there are no intellectual seemings; nor does he seem to be worried about calling them quasi-perceptual, although I would be. Rather his point is that, when we understand what intellectual seemings must be, we see that they cannot provide a foundational justification for our a priori beliefs along the lines promised by the perceptual theorist.

Recall, the perceptual theorist's view is that intuitions are (a) intellectual seemings, which (b) are certain kinds of states of awareness that (c) foundationally justify the a priori beliefs that are founded upon them.

Sosa agrees with both (a) and (b). What he denies is that the kinds of states of awareness that intellectual seemings are could satisfy (c).

The reason is that an intellectual seeming as of a proposition's being true cannot consist in anything other than one's being *attracted* towards believing that proposition, merely on the basis of entertaining it.

Unlike the visual case, in which there is a sensory manifold that has a certain character independently of the attractions towards belief to which it gives rise, in the case of its intellectually seeming that $1 + 1 = 2$ there is no such sensory experience, just the felt attraction towards believing that proposition on considering it, while relying on nothing more than one's understanding of it.

And then Sosa's point is that while a visual experience is incapable of being assessed for justification, and so is able to provide foundational justification, an intellectual seeming *is* capable of being assessed for justification and so is unable to provide such justification.

He says:

A consideration can be assigned the wrong weight, as it attracts one too strongly or too weakly. Why should intuitive attractions be any exception?

The sheer considering of a proposition can attract too much, if for example its attraction derives from enculturation into an unfortunate bias or superstition.

So intuitions are intellectual seemings based merely upon understanding and intellectual seemings are not beyond justification. Hence, they cannot provide a basis that foundationally justifies a belief that may be based on them.

No such state beyond justification and unjustification seems available to serve as foundation for intuitive justification or knowledge. No distinctive experiential state serves here as a basis, as a motivating reason for attraction to assent. We find nothing like the sensory experience that prompts a perceptual belief or the pain that prompts an introspective belief. When we are intuitively justified in believing that *p*, we are attracted to so believe through the mere grasp of the content that *p*, which we then entertain. So it is the mere entertaining of that very content that prompts attraction and perhaps assent. Only one conclusion seems in order: that intuitions, unlike visual experiences, are not states of awareness that lie beyond justification and unjustification, able thereby to provide foundational justification... (p. 54)

Now, given that we have said that providing foundational justification is supposed to be constitutive of intuitions, we seem perched on the brink of the conclusion that there are no intuitions and so no such thing as a justified intuitive judgment.

However, that is not the conclusion that Sosa draws. Rather, he sees here yet another opportunity for his signature virtue- or competence- based account of justification to rush to the rescue.

He distinguishes between Basis-Dependent Foundational Justification and Virtue Foundational Justification. The former is foundational justification that derives from the justified belief's being based on a psychological state's of the subject, one that is beyond issues of justification; the latter is foundational justification that derives essentially from the justified propositional attitude's manifesting an epistemic competence.

His claim, of course, is that although we can't have *basis-dependent* justification of the sort that the perceptual theorist was looking for, we can have *competence-based* foundational justification.

Sosa's considered account, then, is that an intellectual seeming is *intuitive* when it is an attraction to assent triggered simply by considering a proposition consciously with understanding. And such an attraction is *rational* if and only if S's intuitive attraction to assent to *p* is explained by a competence (an epistemic ability or virtue) on the part of S to discriminate, among contents he understands well enough, the true from the false, in some subfield of the modally strong (the necessarily true or necessarily false) with no reliance on perception, memory, testimony or inference. (pp. 61–62)

In a word, then, the idea is this: An intuition that (some modally strong proposition) *p* is rational if and only if it is explained by a competence to tell, on the basis of one's understanding of *p* alone, whether *p* is true.

Let me raise a few questions about this proposal.

If this is to be a general theory of the a priori, why does it restrict itself to invoking a capacity to tell the true from the false in the domain of the modally strong – the necessarily true or false?

Sosa says something puzzling about this. He seems to suggest (fn, p. 61) that he means only to be talking about the uses of intuition in philosophy, although initially he claimed to be talking about the use of intuition in any a priori discipline. So perhaps he could clarify this: what, exactly, is the scope of the phenomena he seeks to explain?

However, even if we restrict ourselves to the modally strong, we still seem to face a mystery. How could the mere understanding of a modally strong proposition confer upon us the reliable ability to tell whether it's true or false? This is not true for most propositions. It is certainly not true for contingent propositions—example, for the proposition that there have been dogs or that the earth is spherical? And it is also not true for most necessary propositions—for Goldbach's conjecture, for example. If we explain the rationality of our intuitions by invoking a capacity to have reliable intuitions about the modal merely on the basis of understanding modal propositions, it can look as though we have invoked a mystery to solve a mystery. Why does the explanation work in a certain range of cases and not in others?

What various theorists have tried to do at this point, of course, is to try to *explain* how we could have such capacities by seeing such capacities as *constituting* our understanding. How is it that we can have reliable intuitions about whether p is true based merely on our understanding of p? Well, it is because our having such intuitions *constitutes* our understanding of p.

Now, I myself am sympathetic to one version of such a program and have tried to work out its details.⁵ But there are many difficult issues. Making such a picture work requires overcoming many obstacles among which we should mention especially—Quine's critique of analyticity, revived and extended recently by Tim Williamson, and Putnam and Burge's critiques of individualist conceptions of concepts.⁶ I think we are far from understanding whether these obstacles can be satisfactorily overcome.

So here is a question for Sosa. Does he see his account as consistent with such a meaning- or concept-based account of the relevant intuitions as constitutive of concept possession or understanding, or does he see it as offering an *alternative* to such an account?

If the former, does he have an answer to the traditional puzzles that beset such accounts? If the latter, how does he explain how there could be reliable intuitions about the truth of propositions, especially the modal ones, merely on the basis of our *understanding* of those propositions?

Now, even if Sosa were to say that he intends his account to be consistent with meaning-based explanations, the vaguely reliabilist, competence-based, account of justification he gives is still distinctive.

⁵ See "Analyticity Reconsidered" and "Blind Reasoning," in my *Content and Justification: Philosophical Papers*, (Oxford: OUP, 2008). My own formulations tend to be in terms of our disposition to follow certain rules of assent or inference, but the proffered explanations are easily adaptable to talk of intuitions as here understood (temptations to assent).

⁶ See especially Timothy Williamson: *The Philosophy of Philosophy*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

In putting forward such understanding-based accounts, I have worried about the question why an intuitive judgment (or disposition to believe) that *p* should be considered rational just because it is understanding-constituting. Sosa has an answer to this: roughly (and I ignore his many refinements here as irrelevant for my purposes), because it is a manifestation of a competence to tell true from false propositions in that area.

But there is a standard worry about such accounts and that is that they make it hard to know whether someone's intuitive judgment that *p* is or is not rational without first knowing whether this particular judgment of his is a manifestation of his capacity to reliably tell the true from the false.

But don't we need our intuitive judgments about modality to play the role of *data*? Especially in philosophy, but elsewhere as well, what we find rationally intuitively compelling has to be our starting point, even if it's not the last word.

But that would look to require that I be able to determine whether an intuitive judgment is rational prior to being able to say what the modal facts are and so prior to being able to say whether or not someone's modal judgments are reliable.

I think we need to be able to say that, for a suitable subject, an intuitive judgment of his is at least *prima facie rational* provided that, on the basis of his understanding alone, it seems to him to be plausible—provided that he intuits it to be true.

So it looks as though we need a conception of intuitive judgment that will allow us to take an intuitive judgment to be *prima facie rational* just by virtue of its being the intuitively backed judgment of a suitably trained person *vis a vis* a proposition that he understands and independently of any determination about the reliability of his underlying capacities.

In other words, we need to be able to regard the relation between intuitions and intuitive judgments in the same way as the classical picture we looked at earlier regards the relation between visual experience and the perceptual beliefs that they justify.⁷

But Sosa has argued against such a construal. Can his arguments be answered?

Sosa's arguments turn on two claims: first, that intuitions must supply foundational justification. And, second, that intuitions, being no more than attractions to assent, cannot do that (in a basis-dependent way) because they are not beyond epistemic assessment. I think that we can question both claims.

To begin with the first claim, it is true of course that many philosophers have expected foundational justification out of intuitions.

But it is surely also true that philosophers who are not foundationalists about justification have had use for the notion of intuition, or of an intuitively supported judgment. For example, the method of *reflective equilibrium* is usually described as

⁷ This may seem to contradict various things I say in "Blind Reasoning" and "How Are Objective Reasons Possible?" (see *Content and Justification*), but that appearance is misleading. What I was opposed to in those papers was intuitions conceived of as quasi-perceptual glimpses into the nature of modal reality. That spooky picture need not be involved in the conception of intuitions as intellectual seemings, especially if these are thought of as playing a constitutive role in the account of concept-possession. What I am emphasizing in the text is that the relation between intellectual seemings and the judgments they justify should be thought of *on analogy* to the way the liberal conceives of the relation between perceptual states and the judgments they justify.

consisting in our working back and forth among our intuitive judgments about particular cases, the principles that we take to govern our judgments, and the theoretical considerations that we take to bear on our acceptance of those judgments and principles, with the aim of achieving some sort of coherence among them.

A philosopher who believes that a belief is justified just in case it is part of a belief system that is in reflective equilibrium precisely doesn't believe in foundational justification. But such a philosopher may still have use for the notion of an intuition or of a judgment that is intuitively supported.

So I think Sosa's fundamental claim that the notion of intuition has a home only within a foundational framework can be questioned.

But even if we were to overlook this fact, there is still scope for wondering about Sosa's arguments against basis-dependent accounts of intuitive justification.

What exactly is the reason why visual states are said to be apt for foundational justification and intuitions are said not to be. As we have seen, the fundamental idea is that visual states are beyond epistemic assessment and intuitions are not. But in what sense is this invidious comparison true?

Sosa says, as we have seen:

Since they are only passively received, they cannot manifest obedience to anything, including rational norms, whether epistemic or otherwise. Since unmotivated by reasons, they can serve as foundational sources, as regress-stoppers. When they help explain rational standing of some other state or action, they do not thereby problematize their own rational standing. Being so passive, they have no rational standing. (p. 46)

The idea seems to be that visual states are beyond epistemic assessment because they are *passive*, not subject to rational control.

In that sense, though, one could well argue that intellectual seemings are *also* passive, also beyond our rational control. I cannot control what intellectually seems true to me. Just like a Muller-Lyer illusion doesn't go away just because we know that the appearance is illusory, so the simultaneous plausibility of all the propositions in a paradoxical cluster doesn't go away just because we know that they can't all be true.

What, though, of Sosa's point that "the sheer considering of a proposition can attract too much, if for example its attraction derives from enculturation into an unfortunate bias or superstition."

But in the sense in which this is true, it seems to me, it is equally true of visual states. Notice that the focus here is not on rational control, but on the fact that we can assess the extent to which intellectual seemings lead us towards the truth as opposed to away from it.

But, of course, visual states can be assessed in that respect as well. Indeed, if the content of perceptual states can be belief- or theory-laden, as many philosophers have supposed, then it would seem that we could say about them exactly what Sosa says about intellectual seemings, that they can attract too much if their attraction derives from enculturation into an unfortunately biased theory or superstition.

Perhaps Sosa thinks that saying that a state is passive precisely rules out its being subject to influence by background theory. But I think those distinctions cut across one another.

Conclusion

There is much in Sosa's treatment of intuitions with which I agree. I think intuitions are best thought of as attractions to believe a certain proposition merely on the basis of understanding it.

I don't think it is constitutive of them that they supply strictly foundational justification for the propositions they justify, though I do believe that it is important that the intuition of a suitable subject be thought of as a *prima facie* justification for his intuitive judgment, independently of the reliability of his underlying capacities.

I also think that we need to be able to explain how mere understanding of a proposition can confer upon us an ability to have reliable intuitions, that we cannot simply take that idea for granted. And that when we try to explain that, our best avenue for doing so is to take the intuitions as *constituting* the understanding of which they are said to be a manifestation.

Finally, I think that Sosa's arguments don't really stand in the way of our construing the relation between intuitions and the judgments they support as modeled on the relation between perceptual states and perceptual judgments, on a liberal view of the latter.