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## The Problem of the Criterion & Sosa's Virtue Epistemology

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### Abstract

The Problem of the Criterion arises from two plausible intuitions: first, belief sources (such as testimony and perception) should be reliable. Second, a person should be justified in believing that the source is reliable before it can produce justified beliefs. The problem is that these intuitions create a vicious circularity and lead to skepticism. The circularity arises from the priority relation between justified beliefs about a source and justified beliefs produced by a source. Oftentimes, the only way to have justified beliefs about the reliability of a source is to use that very source. For instance, the only way to acquire justified beliefs about the reliability of testimony may be to use other instances of testimony. But that is circular. In this paper, I apply The Problem of Criterion to testimony and argue that Ernest Sosa's virtue epistemology offers a solution. Editor's Note: Honorable Mention Paper, 17th Annual Pacific University Undergraduate Philosophy Conference (2013)

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**Cover Page Footnote**

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# The Problem of the Criterion & Sosa's Virtue Epistemology

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## Abstract

The Problem of the Criterion arises from two plausible intuitions: first, belief sources (such as testimony and perception) should be reliable. Second, a person should be justified in believing that the source is reliable *before* it can produce justified beliefs. The problem is that these intuitions create a vicious circularity and lead to skepticism. The circularity arises from the priority relation between justified beliefs about a source and justified beliefs produced by a source. Oftentimes, the only way to have justified beliefs about the reliability of a source is to use that very source. For instance, the only way to acquire justified beliefs about the reliability of testimony may be to use other instances of testimony. But that is circular. In this paper, I apply The Problem of Criterion to testimony and argue that Ernest Sosa's virtue epistemology offers a solution.

## Introduction

Knowledge should arise from reliable sources. Knowledge without reliability would be lucky and lucky knowledge is not knowledge at all. This intuition leads some philosophers to accept KR: "A belief source K can produce justified beliefs for S only if S is justified in believing that K is reliable" (Evans & Smith, 86). KR seems plausible--I should be justified in believing that a belief source (such as sense perception or testimony) is reliable before it can produce justified beliefs. The issue is that KR leads to the problem of the criterion. The problem of the criterion is a vicious circularity that makes justification (and therefore knowledge) impossible. If there is no way out of this circularity, then accepting KR leads to skepticism.

In this paper, I will show how the problem of the criterion applies to testimony and argue that Sosa's virtue epistemology offers a solution. First, I explain KR and how it leads to the problem of the criterion. Next, I apply the problem of the criterion to testimony and explain why rejecting KR leads to the problem of easy justification. I then introduce Sosa's virtue epistemology and show how it resolves the problem of the criterion. Lastly, I touch on several objections to Sosa's view.

## Problem of the Criterion

KR is a principle about belief sources. A belief source is anything that produces or sustains a belief. More importantly, KR is a principle about the *reliability* of belief sources. A belief source is reliable if it usually gets things right (it often produces accurate beliefs). But under KR, mere reliability is not enough; one also has to be justified in believing that the source is reliable. This additional premise leads to the problem of the criterion (Cohen, "Basic Knowledge", 310).

The problem of the criterion is a vicious circularity that arises from KR. According to KR, a person must be justified in believing that a source is reliable before they can acquire justified beliefs from that source. But it seems like the only way to acquire justified beliefs about a source is to use beliefs *from that very source*. The circularity becomes more perspicuous if we apply the problem of the criterion to testimony. Testimony is anything that a person writes, speaks, or gesticulates in order to convey information. Newspapers and classroom lectures are paradigm examples of testimony. The problem of the criterion arises by accepting KR with respect to testimony:

TR: "Testimony can produce justified beliefs for S only if S is justified in believing that testimony is reliable" (Evans & Smith, 104).

Accepting TR produces a vicious circle--I have to be justified in believing that testimony is reliable before testimony can produce justified beliefs, but KR makes this impossible. When I try to acquire justified beliefs about testimony, I end up using instances of testimony. For instance, if I want to determine whether my beliefs about Christopher Columbus are justified, I have to use history books and professors. This is a case of justifying one belief from testimony using other instances of testimony. The problem is that KR prevents a person from using a belief source to justify beliefs about that source; a person needs justified beliefs about a source before that source can produce justified beliefs, but this is an impossible task under KR. This leads to skepticism because if testimony cannot produce justified beliefs, then it cannot be a source of knowledge (Evans & Smith, 86).

To avoid the problem of the criterion, some philosophers dismiss KR. But rejecting KR leads to the problem of easy justification--a person can acquire justified beliefs even when there seems to be insufficient evidence for justification (Evans & Smith, 93). Consider the following scenario--while visiting a city for the first time, I ask someone for directions to State Street. If KR is false, then their directions immediately provide me with a justified belief about the location of State Street. This is counterintuitive because I was completely ignorant about this person's reliability; I had little to no evidence that this person was a reliable source of testimony, yet I acquired a justified belief.<sup>1</sup>

What started as an intuitive principle (KR) has led to a two-horned dilemma: accepting KR leads to the problem of the criterion, but rejecting KR leads to the problem of easy justification. Fortunately, Sosa's virtue epistemology shows how to accept KR without vicious circularity.

### Sosa's Virtue Epistemology

Sosa's virtue epistemology provides a framework for evaluating beliefs. Sosa treats beliefs as performances with aims (Sosa, "Knowing", 3). Sosa does this for two reasons. First, virtue epistemology is a normative enquiry--treating beliefs as performances allows one to *evaluate* beliefs because performances can be better or worse. Second, many things qualify as performances with aims, which shows that Sosa's framework uses a common method of evaluating things in the world. For instance, a beating heart carries out performances with aims--the performance is the heartbeat and the aim is to beat steadily. Hearts can have aims even if they do not have intentions (Sosa, "Knowing", 3).

Sosa's virtue epistemology rests on the AAA structure. Each A refers to a necessary condition for knowledge:

- **Accurate:** this is the truth condition; the belief is accurate.
- **Adroit:** a belief manifests skill or competence on behalf of the subject.
- **Apt:** a belief is accurate *because* of a skill or competence manifested by the subject.

Sosa often explains this AAA structure using the archer analogy: an archer's performance is accurate if it hits the target; the performance is adroit if the shot manifests the archer's skill or competence at archery; the performance is apt if the arrow hits the target *because* of the archer's skill. An archer's performance can be accurate without being adroit or apt--imagine an archer that shoots an arrow at the target, but a gust of wind blows the arrow off track. Fortunately, another gust of wind blows the arrow back and the arrow hits the target. In this case, the performance is accurate, but it is not adroit or apt. The arrow hit the target as a result of luck rather than skill. The archer analogy is supposed to show that people can form accurate or inaccurate beliefs and these beliefs can arise through skill or luck (Sosa, "Knowing", 4). All of these A's can come in degrees--a belief can be more or less accurate, as well as more or less adroit--or they can be treated as threshold concepts.

Sosa characterizes competences and skills as epistemic virtues. For Sosa, epistemic virtues are dispositions that reliably aim at truth and avoid error (Sosa, "Knowing", 81). If epistemic virtues are just dispositions, then body parts and non-human animals can have epistemic virtues. The human eye can be epistemically virtuous by reliably

producing visual experiences that lead one to form accurate beliefs. A cat can be epistemically virtuous by reliably finding its litter box.

Any epistemic virtue should be both specifically and generically reliable: reliable in particular instances (specifically reliable) and reliable overall (generic reliability) (Sosa, "Reflective", 238). However, epistemic virtues are only specifically and generically reliable in their normal environments, "our faculties or virtues give us knowledge only if they work properly in an appropriate environment" (Sosa, "Knowledge", 276). How one determines what these "normal" circumstances are is a problem that I will address in the objections to Sosa's view.

Sosa's virtue epistemology is a two-level view. There are two different kinds of knowledge: there is animal knowledge and reflective knowledge. Animal knowledge is apt belief--a belief that is accurate because of a skill or competence manifested by the subject. Humans, as well as non-human animals, can have animal knowledge. Reflective knowledge is only available to humans and it is a higher epistemic accomplishment than animal knowledge. Reflective knowledge is apt belief aptly noted--a belief that is accurate because of a skill manifested by the subject, and the subject is cognitively aware of their skill (Sosa, "Reflective", 135).

### **Virtue Epistemology & Holistic Coherentism**

Sosa's virtue epistemology resolves the problem of the criterion by incorporating holistic coherentism. Holistic coherentists think beliefs are like a web--beliefs cohere with one another and overtime, one acquires more and more beliefs; revising them along the way. For Sosa, beliefs cohere with one another by maximizing how well they explain other beliefs and features of the world (Sosa, "Knowledge", 214). The degree of coherence depends on whether the beliefs offer conflicting explanations of the same subject matter. For instance, my belief about a mathematical formula can cohere well or poorly with beliefs about other mathematical formulas.

Sosa invokes holistic coherentism because he thinks coherence always has some value, even if the coherent beliefs are false (Sosa, "Reflective", 242). However, this is not entirely clear. In his earlier work, Sosa argued that coherence is a reliable way of attaining true beliefs (Sosa, "Knowledge", 214). But in recent work, Sosa presents a weaker thesis, "I leave open the question of whether the nature of coherence, and of understanding/explanation, requires explanation in terms of reliability in the actual world" (Sosa, "Reflective", 137).

Holistic coherentism offers a plausible model for how beliefs relate to one another and the world. Some beliefs have little relation to one another (such as my belief that I have hands and my belief that Christopher Columbus sailed in 1492), but a person's beliefs

are all based in part on other beliefs in their web, “By basing beliefs on other beliefs, the rational weaver weaves a web, each member of which is held in place *in part* (perhaps a miniscule part) through its being based on certain others, directly or indirectly” (Sosa, “Reflective”, 240). For instance, my belief that I have hands will be based on my perceptual experience as of having hands, as well as my belief that humans have hands, that hands look a certain way, and so on. Sosa seems to hold a causal theory of basing, but he leaves this issue to the side (Sosa, “Reflective”, 213; “Knowing”, 150).

There can be coherence among animal, as well as reflective, knowledge. The only difference between coherence in the former and latter is that reflective knowledge requires beliefs about the reliability of coherence; meta-beliefs about coherence. There can also be coherence *between* animal knowledge and reflective knowledge (Sosa, “Reflective”, 243). Although holistic coherentism is usually portrayed as a single web of beliefs, it is possible for there to be multiple webs of belief; webs of animal knowledge that cohere well or poorly with webs of reflective knowledge. Although most coherentists talk of a single web, Sosa thinks that, “a plurality is more realistic” (Sosa, “Knowing”, Footnote 9, 150). Sosa also claims that reflective knowledge can cohere with animal knowledge by being based on animal knowledge (Sosa, “Reflective”, 243). For instance, reflective knowledge about one topic could be based on animal knowledge about another topic.

Holistic coherentists offer a unique account of justification: one’s beliefs are not justified until they form a sufficiently large and coherent set of beliefs. Once one has such a set, one’s beliefs become justified all at once. Justification is conferred on one’s beliefs by one’s sufficiently large and coherent set of beliefs (Cohen, “Basic”, 322) Sosa modifies this coherentist account of justification by adding an internalist caveat--a person must be cognitively aware of the coherence between their beliefs and the reliability of coherence. Sosa refers to coherence plus cognitive awareness as “full coherence”. Full coherence is coherence between one’s first-order beliefs and one’s meta-beliefs about the reliability of coherence (Sosa, “Knowing”, 157).

## The Solution

Holistic coherentism allows Sosa to accept KR without the ensuing vicious circularity. Invoking holistic coherentism removes any kind of priority relation between beliefs about a source and beliefs produced by the source. Sosa would agree that a belief source can only produce justified beliefs for someone if they are justified in believing that the source is reliable; the trick is that beliefs about a source and beliefs produced by that source become justified at the same time (Sosa, “Reflective”, 240).



Sosa mainly discusses this solution in relation to perceptual knowledge, but it works just as well for testimony: accepting KR does not lead to a vicious circularity because one's beliefs *based on* testimony and one's beliefs *about* testimony become justified at the same time. Once one acquires a sufficiently large and coherent set of beliefs, one will have justified beliefs about testimony and justified beliefs produced by testimony; justification is conferred all at once. This solution banishes any skepticism associated with KR and allows testimony to be a source of knowledge.

### **Virtue Epistemology: Objection #1**

Sosa's virtue epistemology and his solution to the problem of the criterion face a number of objections. One is that holistic coherentism seems to be doing all the work in resolving the problem of the criterion. If holistic coherentism provides the solution, then why talk about virtue epistemology?

Here is one reason: Sosa's virtue epistemology accommodates intuitions about the way a person should acquire true beliefs. One should not form true beliefs by any possible means. Rather, they should acquire true beliefs by manifesting epistemic virtue. Relying on holistic coherentism without a virtue epistemology would allow agents to acquire true beliefs through bad processes. For instance, I could acquire a true belief by copying my friend's exam, but cheating seems like a bad way to form true beliefs. Cheating violates moral norms (such as the norm that cheating is wrong), but it also violates epistemic norms (such as the norm that one's work should exhibit intellectual integrity). A virtue epistemology should accommodate such cases and explain why certain processes are not a good way to form true beliefs.

However, Sosa's virtue epistemology fails this intuitive test. In fact, Sosa's model treats cheating as an epistemic virtue! Again, Sosa thinks epistemic virtues are truth conducive dispositions; dispositions that reliably aim at truth and avoid error. To see why Sosa's model treats cheating as an epistemic virtue, imagine a case in which my friend almost always gets the right answer on exams. I am aware of this fact, so I develop a habit of cheating off my friend's exam. By cheating off my friend, I almost always form true beliefs about the subject matter. For me, cheating is a truth-conducive disposition--I am disposed to acquire true beliefs by cheating off my friend's exam! But this seems to be the opposite result of an adequate virtue epistemology--a case of intellectual dishonesty is now an instance of epistemic virtue.

### **Virtue Epistemology: Objection #3**

Another objection is that knowledge from testimony does not fit Sosa's AAA model. The worry is that knowledge from testimony does not involve any skill or competence on behalf of the subject. For instance, if I pick up a newspaper and form a true belief

from something I read, it does not seem like I deserve credit for my true belief; I acquired a true belief without manifesting any skill or competence. This violates Sosa's model because animal and reflective knowledge both require that the subject acquire a true belief *because* they manifested skill or competence (Greco, 80).

Fortunately, Sosa has a response. Sosa argues that even if a person does not deserve full credit for their true belief, they can still deserve *partial* credit and partial credit suffices for manifesting competence (Sosa, "Knowing", 88). Sosa does not specify how much credit is "partial" credit, but the distinction between full and partial credit should be intuitive enough.

### Easy Justification

If Sosa's virtue epistemology faces so many objections, then maybe it is best to reject KR and face the problem of easy justification. This is an attractive option for philosophers who think the problem of easy justification is not really a problem. For instance, evidentialists embrace easy justification. They argue that, "one can know P on the basis of E without knowing that E is a reliable indication of P. For example, one can know that X is red, on the basis of its looking red, without knowing that X's looking red is a reliable indication of X's being red" (Cohen, "Basic Knowledge", 310). Evidence provides defeasible justification even if a person does not know the evidence is reliable. (Cohen, "Bootstrapping", 142). Reliabilists also accept easy justification. Reliabilism holds that in order for a belief to be justified, it must arise from a reliable source. Reliabilism accepts easy justification because belief sources can produce justified beliefs even if one is completely ignorant about the reliability of that source.

One problem with evidentialism and reliabilism is that they allow for bootstrapping. Bootstrapping is when one uses a belief source to justify that very source. For instance, one can amass evidence of the form:

'On occasion one the wall looked red, and it was red; on occasion two the wall looked red, and it was red, etc.; moreover, there were no occasions on which the wall looked red and wasn't red.' From this impeccable track record, one infers by induction that one's color vision is reliable. The resultant knowledge looks too easy, since one's endorsement of the accuracy of the appearances was based on nothing but the appearances themselves (Van Cleve, 21).

Bootstrapping is problematic because it relies on circular reasoning--instances of a belief source can justify that very source. This would be akin to evaluating the reliability of a newspaper by using other copies of that newspaper (Sosa, "Knowledge", 221).

Another problem is that one can use easy justification to acquire easy knowledge. This problem arises from justification closure and closure through known logical implication. Justification closer is the view that if S is justified in believing P and S deduces Q from P, then S is justified in believing Q (Evans & Smith, 91). Knowledge closure simply replaces “justification” with “knowledge” in this formulation.

The problem is that a person can use an easily justified belief to acquire knowledge and then deduce another piece of knowledge, even when the deduced piece of knowledge does not seem like it should be knowledge. For instance, if KR is false, then I can be justified in believing that a table is red by its merely looking red. If the table actually is red, then I *know* the table is red. I can then run this knowledge through closure: if I know that the table is red, and I know that if the table is red then it is not white with red lights shining on it, then I know the table is not white with red lights shining on it. But this seems too easy: I should not *know* the table is not white with red lights shining on it from the mere fact that the table looked red (Cohen, “Why Basic”, 420).<sup>2</sup>

These problems show why accepting easy justification is not a tenable option. Instead, we should return to Sosa's solution: accepting KR by invoking holistic coherentism and virtue epistemology. However, Sosa's solution is also guilty of bootstrapping! On Sosa's account, one is using the coherence of one's beliefs to justify the reliability of coherence, but this is circular. Here, Sosa bites the bullet, “It must be recognized that, by parity of reasoning, the mutual support even in these latter cases might add *something* of epistemic value. Coherence through mutual support seems a matter of degree, and even the minimal degree involved in simple bootstrapping is not worthless (Sosa, “Reflective”, 242).

## Conclusion

The problem of the criterion no longer seems like a problem. Holistic coherentism and Sosa's virtue epistemology eliminated the need for any kind of priority relation between beliefs about a source and beliefs produced by a source. But this solution comes at a cost. Relying on holistic coherentism has its own forms of circularity and some philosophers balk at the notion that a set of beliefs becomes justified “all at once”. However, given the available solutions, holistic coherentism in conjunction with a virtue epistemology is the best way out.

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<sup>1</sup> This example came out of a class discussion in Philosophy 311.

<sup>2</sup> Other solutions to the problem of easy knowledge focus on truth tracking (Nozick, 1981), a priorism (Cohen, 2002), contextualism (Cohen, 2002), and revising or rejecting closure (Black, 2008).