

Handout: Ernest Sosa – Can There Be a Discipline of Philosophy? And Can It Be Founded on Intuitions?

I. The Problem

A Crisis in Method: Experimental Philosophy's Challenge to the Armchair

- **Armchair philosophy** relies heavily on *intuition*—our reflective judgments about thought experiments.
- **Experimental philosophers** challenge this by citing:
 - **Disagreement** across cultures and socio-economic backgrounds.
 - The possibility that these intuitions reflect *biases*, not access to objective philosophical truth.
- **Initial worry**: Intuitions are unreliable due to such variance.
- **Deeper worry**: Intuition is **insufficiently testable**; it lacks the rigorous methods of empirical science.

II. The Proposed Solution

Sosa attempts to **rescue armchair philosophy** by:

1. Distinguishing between types of intuition and levels of epistemic rigor.
 2. Arguing that philosophical practice can be *competent*, even if less testable.
 3. Reframing intuition as part of a broader **epistemic competence**, akin to perceptual and introspective justification.
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III. Mapping the Argument

1. Disagreement and the Dialectic So Far (pp. 453–454)

- Experimentalists claim: If intuitions **disagree**, they cannot all be accurate reflections of objective truth.
- Sosa responds:
 - Not all disagreement is **genuine**; different readings may underlie apparent disagreements.
 - Disagreements between **experts and novices** don't necessarily undermine expert intuitions.

Key claim: Survey results don't show that intuition is fundamentally flawed—they may just reveal semantic variation or miscommunication.

2. The Foundationalist Challenge (pp. 454–455)

- Philosophical **epistemology** seeks *justification*—how beliefs are warranted.
- Two major models:
 - **Foundationalism**: Some beliefs are *non-inferentially justified* (e.g., perception, introspection).
 - **Coherentism**: Beliefs are justified by mutual support within a system.

Problem: Justification chains either regress infinitely or must bottom out. What provides a non-inferential foundation?

Sosa insists on:

- The importance of **competence**—beliefs are justified when formed through *epistemic virtue*, not just coherence.
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3. Experience, the Given, and Competence (pp. 455–457)

- **Sensory experience** often provides the basis for perceptual belief.
- But some judgments—e.g., about large numbers of dots (the “speckled hen” case)—overstep our *competence*.
- Thus, **competence** must constrain even experiential beliefs.

Important shift: Justification stems not merely from experience but from the **competent use** of experience.

- This opens space for **intuitions** as *seemings*—non-inferential, conceptually-laden inclinations to assent.

4. Justified Intuition as Epistemic Competence (pp. 457–458)

- Not all intuitions are equal:
 - Cultural biases, superstitions ≠ justified intuitions.
- **Justified intuitions:**
 - Manifest a *rational ability* to discern truth from falsehood in abstract domains.
 - Are *competently formed*, even if not inferentially based.

Sosa’s **moderate rationalism**: a priori intuition can be legitimate when competently deployed.

5. The Challenge of Testability (pp. 458–460)

- Objection: Intuition is **untestable**, unlike scientific methods.
 - No external calibration (like instruments).
 - Risk of **circular endorsement**—justifying intuitions by using them.
- Sosa’s analogy: early **astronomy** used unaided perception—it was epistemically weak, but not worthless.

Lesson: A method can be **useful** and **epistemically respectable**, even if not fully testable.

6. The Deeper Problem: Expert Disagreement (pp. 460–462)

- Worse than amateur disagreement is the **persistent lack of consensus among philosophers**.
- Even after centuries of careful reasoning, **core questions remain disputed**.
- This raises doubts about philosophy's status as a *discipline*.

Key dilemma:

- If we **agree on questions**, but not answers → maybe our methods are flawed.
 - If we **disagree on the questions themselves** → maybe the field lacks shared targets, undermining testability.
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7. Is Philosophy Hopeless? (pp. 463–464)

- Even broader *philosophical methodology* (argument, dialectic, explanation) may fall short of scientific standards.
- But Sosa argues:
 - Many domains (morality, politics, art) share this low testability.
 - Yet we do not abandon *rational inquiry* in these areas.
 - Philosophy is perhaps like **early science**—undeveloped, not hopeless.

Conclusion: The **problem is not untestability per se**, but **persistent disagreement**.

8. A More Modest Experimentalist Critique (pp. 464–466)

- Recent critiques are more **measured**:
 - Concede that armchair philosophy has yielded insights (e.g., logical distinctions).
 - Call for *awareness of biases* and *refined intuition calibration*.
 - But such critiques face a **dilemma**:
 - If divergence isn't found → problem disappears.
 - If divergence is found → may result from *semantic or interpretive differences*, not epistemic failure.
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IV. Final Assessment

- Sosa concedes that **philosophy's epistemic status is fragile**, but not fatally so.
 - He urges a **measured optimism**: philosophy may grow toward greater reliability, just as early science once did.
 - The real threat is not intuition's untestability, but **disagreement without resolution**.
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