Sosa’s Reflective Knowledge: How damaging is epistemic circularity?

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Abstract The problem of epistemic circularity maintains that we cannot know that our central belief-forming practices (faculties) are reliable without vicious circularity. Ernest Sosa’s Reflective Knowledge (2009) offers a solution to this problem. Sosa argues that epistemic circularity is virtuous rather than vicious: it is not damaging. Contra Sosa, I contend that epistemic circularity is damaging. Section 1 provides an overview of Sosa’s solution. Section 2 focuses on Sosa’s reply to the Crystal-ball-gazer Objection. Section 2 also contends that epistemic circularity does not prevent us from being justified in (e.g.) perceptual beliefs, or from being justified in believing that (e.g.) sense perception is reliable. But, Sect. 3 argues that it does prevent us from being able to satisfactorily show that our central belief-forming practices (faculties) are reliable. That is, epistemic circularity prevents us from distinguishing between reliable and unreliable practices, from guiding ourselves to use reliable practices and avoid unreliable ones, and from defending reliable practices against skepticism. Hence, epistemic circularity is still damaging. The concluding section suggests that this has repercussions for Sosa’s analysis of the value of reflective knowledge.

Keywords William Alston · Epistemic circularity · Epistemic justification · Externalism · Internalism · Knowledge · Problem of the criterion · Reflective knowledge · Ernest Sosa · Skepticism

Can we know that our central belief-forming practices or faculties—like sense perception, memory, induction, deduction, and introspection—are reliable?1 More importantly, can we know that these practices or faculties are reliable without vicious

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1 For the purposes of this paper, I assume that belief-forming ‘practices’ and belief-forming ‘faculties’ are synonymous.

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circularity? The problem of epistemic circularity maintains that we cannot know (or be justified in believing) that our central belief-forming practices or faculties are reliable without vicious circularity. It alleges that we will be caught in a vicious circle if: we must first know that (e.g.) sense perception is reliable in order to have individual bits of perceptual knowledge (e.g. that the wall is green), but we must already have individual bits of perceptual knowledge in order to know that sense perception is reliable.

The problem of epistemic circularity is a version of the problem of the criterion, the latter of which ultimately has its roots in ancient skepticism. Famously analyzed by Roderick Chisholm in his *The Foundations of Knowing*, the problem of the criterion maintains that epistemology must answer two sets of questions: (1) “What do we know? What is the extent of our knowledge?” and (2) “How are we to decide whether we know? What are the criteria of knowledge?” (1982, p. 65, his emphasis). It alleges that we cannot answer either set of questions without first answering the other. That is, we cannot determine (1) which of our beliefs count as bits of knowledge and which do not, unless we first decide (2) which methods are knowledge-producers and which are not. To explicate, we cannot “sort out the good beliefs from the bad ones,” unless we first decide which methods produced those beliefs and whether those methods are themselves good or bad—whether those methods produce knowledge or not (Chisholm 1982, p. 64). But, we simultaneously cannot decide (2) which methods are knowledge-producers and which are not, unless we first determine (1) which beliefs count as bits of knowledge and which do not. For, to decide whether a method is a knowledge-producer, we must be able to tell whether its outputs constitute knowledge; hence we must already be able to determine the difference between beliefs that constitute knowledge and beliefs that do not. The problem of epistemic circularity is a version of the problem of the criterion that is explicitly designed to engage reliabilist accounts of justification and knowledge. Hence, it claims that we must first know that a central belief-forming practice P is reliable in order to have individual bits of P-knowledge, but we must already have individual bits of P-knowledge in order to know that practice P is reliable. Its conclusion is that we cannot know that our central belief-forming practices are reliable without vicious circularity.

The problem of epistemic circularity is, prima facie, compelling. After all, if knowledge (or justification) requires giving reasons or arguments—if knowing requires showing—then (a) knowing (or being justified in believing) that the wall is green will likely require an inference from the prior knowledge that sense perception is reliable; and (b) knowing (or being justified in believing) that sense perception is reliable will likely require an inference from prior bits of perceptual knowledge. In prima facie defense of (b), it seems highly unlikely that we could know that sense perception (or any other central belief-forming practice) is reliable without providing an argument of some sort; after all, the reliability of sense perception does not seem to be the sort of thing that we could directly experience. ² The most obvious sort of argument we could provide for the reliability of sense perception would be an inductive inference from amassed bits of perceptual knowledge. Though (a) is perhaps less plausible (especially for externalists), it relies on the intuition that one does not know (or is not justified in