ABSTRACT. This paper offers an analysis of Ernest Sosa’s Virtue Perspectivism. Although Sosa has been credited with fathering the influential contemporary movement known as Virtue Epistemology, I argue that Sosa imprudently abandons the reliabilist-based insights of Virtue Epistemology in favor of a reflection-based, “perspectival” view. Sosa’s mixed allegiance to reliabilist-based and reflection-based views of knowledge, in fact, leads to an unwelcome tension in his thought which can be relieved by recognizing that his reflection-based view is in fact an account of the cognitive state of understanding, rather than an account of knowledge. Sosa makes matters difficult for himself because he expects too much, as it were, from the concept of knowledge, and in the process burdens his view with elements of reflection it does not require. To solve the problem, I suggest that Sosa needs to develop a two-tiered epistemology which recognizes that knowledge, on the one hand, and understanding, on the other, both have necessary and sufficient conditions unique to themselves.

INTRODUCTION

In the midst of one of his essays on the nature of knowledge, Ernest Sosa pauses to confess a certain “meta-epistemic angst” (CV, 209). The source of Sosa’s angst is his struggle to account for the value of human reflection. Human beings, of course, have the capacity not simply to know a given fact, but to reflect on the fact that they know. Whereas animals and young children simply use their cognitive faculties to acquire facts, mature adults are able to reflect upon the cognitive faculties themselves, perhaps in order to verify their reliability or to consider how they complement one another. Intuitively, we sense that this capacity for reflection, this ability to give an account of our knowledge, is deeply valuable. But why? Does it suggest a sort of dignity which should be prized in itself? Or, more interestingly, does it somehow make our knowledge more certain, or more coherent, than unreflective belief?
Such questions are angst-inducing for Sosa because, although he insists that reflection has a privileged role in human cognition, he is also attracted to reliabilist accounts of knowledge which appear to have little interest in reflective justification. In this paper I will suggest that his mixed allegiance to reflection-based and reliabilist views of knowledge leads to an unwelcome tension in his thought. Further, and perhaps more controversially, I will propose that this tension can be relieved by recognizing that the reflection-based view is in fact an account of the cognitive state of understanding, rather than an account of knowledge. Sosa makes matters difficult for himself because he expects too much, as it were, from the concept of knowledge, and in the process burdens his view with elements of reflection it does not require. To solve the problem, I will suggest, Sosa needs to develop a two-tiered epistemology which recognizes that knowledge, on the one hand, and understanding, on the other, both have necessary and sufficient conditions unique to themselves.

I. KNOWLEDGE VS. UNDERSTANDING

Since the contrast between knowledge and understanding will be central to this paper, it will help to make some preliminary distinctions between the two terms. At first glance it may appear that the proposition “S knows that P” is more or less equivalent to the proposition “S understands that P,” but in fact there are important differences between them.

Although knowledge cannot be easily characterized in few sentences, for the sake of this comparison it is enough to point out that, in principle at least, knowledge might pertain only to a narrow range of facts. For instance, I might be said to know a single word in Dutch, while being oblivious about the rest of the language, or know by hearsay that my friends are getting a divorce, while knowing nothing else about their troubles.

It is not possible, however, to speak of understanding something in such a piecemeal way. In contrast to knowledge, understanding entails a grasp not only of a given fact P, but also of the broader network within which P has meaning. Hence understanding the Dutch language implies much more than knowing a given word here and there. Rather, it involves seeing connections between words,