possibly give us the kind of understanding of human knowledge in
general that is a goal of epistemology. And so we have found no good
reason to accept philosophical scepticism, the main target thesis of
this paper. As for any desperate retreat to relativism or ethnocen-
trism, finally, that now seems ill-conceived and imperceptive. I
mean the retreat into relativism that sees no way of adjudicating
through reason among clashing, equally coherent systems. The
recoil to ethnocentrism (or the like) betrays a rationalist malgré lui
with no objective way to adjudicate except reason. Who but a
philosopher could expect so much from reason? What privileges
our position, if anything does, cannot be that it is self-supportive, as
we have seen; but nor can it possibly be just that it is ours. Our
position would be privileged rather by deriving from cognitive
virtues, from the likes of perception and cogent thought, and not
from derangement or superstition or their ilk.

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35 And a similar objection can be lodged, based on similar reflections, on the analogous
retreat in moral and political philosophy.

36 About other views that are in some way ‘relativist’ I remain silent.

37 And, besides, the irrationalist cannot be answered nonquestionbeggingly anyhow, not if
our answer presupposes the validity of reason. When thought through, the requirement
of nonquestionbegging defensibility against all conceivable corners is ill-advised, and
indeed incoherent. But once we see why that is so, we should see also that reason cannot
plausibly be held above perception or memory as a proper source of epistemic status.

38 ‘But that bare assertion is so empty! Which are these virtues? What means this cogency?
What else is involved?’ To this reaction the response would have to be a very long story,
if told in full, one that turns no longer, now shorter, with every advance in our
understanding of ourselves and our thought and our environment and our origins, and the
relations among all these. One’s epistemic perspective is joined indispensably to one’s
broader worldview.
suddenly (or even gradually) wiped off the face of the earth no one would then know anything or have any reason to believe anything about the world, but that would not make scepticism about the external world true. A philosophical theorist wants to understand human knowledge as it is, as human beings and the world they live in actually are. But again not just any denial of human knowledge in a certain domain counts as philosophical scepticism. Human beings as they are right now do not know the causes of many kinds of cancer, or of AIDS, or the fundamental structure of matter. But universal ignorance in a particular domain does not make scepticism true of that domain. Scepticism holds that people as they actually are fail to know or have good reason to believe the sorts of things we all think we already know right now. Anti-scepticism, or a positive theory of knowledge, holds the opposite. It would explain how human beings, equipped as they are and living in the world they live in, do in fact know the sorts of things they think they do.

Theories of knowledge which conflict in this way nevertheless typically share many assumptions about human beings and their cognitive and perceptual resources. It is agreed on all sides, for example, that if human beings know things about the world around them, they know them somehow on the basis of what they perceive by means of the senses. The dispute then turns on whether and how what the senses provide can give us knowledge or good reason to believe things about the world. Knowledge of matters which go beyond perception to the independent world is seen, at least temporarily, as problematic. A successful positive theory of knowledge would explain how the problem is solved so that we know the things we think we know about the world after all.

It must be admitted, I think, that what many philosophers have said about perceptual knowledge is pretty clearly open to strong sceptical objections. That is, if the way we know things about the world is the way many philosophers have said it is, then a good case can be made for the negative sceptical conclusion that we do not really know such things after all. That is why scepticism remains such a constant threat. If you don’t get your description of the human condition right, if you describe human perception and cognition and reasoning in certain natural but subtly distorted ways, you will leave human beings as you describe them incapable of the very knowledge you are trying to account for. A sceptical conclusion will be derivable from the very description which serves to pose the epistemological problem. Thus did the ancient sceptics argue, conditionally, against the Stoics: ‘if human knowledge is arrived at in the way you say it is, there could be no such thing as human knowledge at all’. Even if true, that does not of course show that scepticism is correct. It shows at most that human knowledge or the human condition must be understood in some other way. The threat of scepticism is what keeps the theory of knowledge going.

The point is that scepticism and its competitors among more positive theories of knowledge are all part of the same enterprise. They offer conflicting answers to what is for all of them a common question or set of questions. The task is to understand all human knowledge of a particular kind, or all reasonable belief concerning a certain kind of matter of fact. Scepticism is one possible outcome of that task. In that sense, scepticism, like its rivals, is a general theory of human knowledge. But it is not a satisfactory theory or outcome. It is paradoxical. It represents us as having none of the knowledge or good reasons we ordinarily think we’ve got. No other theory or answer is satisfactory either if it does not meet and dispel the threat of scepticism. I think many philosophical theories of knowledge have failed to do that, despite what their defenders have claimed for them.

In fact, I find the force and resilience of scepticism in the theory of knowledge to be so great, once the epistemological project is accepted, and I find its consequences to be so paradoxical, that I think the best thing to do now is to look much more closely and critically at the very enterprise of which scepticism or one of its rivals is the outcome: the task of the philosophical theory of knowledge itself. Its goal is not just any understanding of human knowledge; it seeks to understand knowledge in a certain way. Both scepticism and its opposites claim to understand human knowledge in that special way, or from that special philosophical point of view. I would like to inquire what that way of understanding ourselves and our knowledge is, or is supposed to be. I wonder whether there is a coherent point of view from which we could get a satisfactory understanding of ourselves of the kind we apparently aspire to. Many would dismiss scepticism as absurd on the grounds that there is no such point of view, or that we could never get ourselves into the position of seeing that it is true if it were true. But to adopt a
more positive theory of knowledge instead is still to offer a description of the human condition from that same special position or point of view. If we cannot get into that position and see that scepticism is true, can we be sure that we can get into it and see that scepticism is false?

The coherence and achievability of what we aspire to in the epistemological enterprise tends to be taken for granted, or left unexplored. But that question is prior to the question whether scepticism or one or another of its positive competitors is the true theory of human knowledge. What does a true theory of knowledge do? What does a philosophical theorist of knowledge seek?

These are large and complicated questions to which we obviously cannot hope to get a definitive answer today. Distinguishing them from the question of the relative merits of scepticism and its competitors might nonetheless help to locate the target of Ernest Sosa's opposition to something he calls 'scepticism'. He gives that label to the view that 'there is no way to attain full philosophical understanding of our knowledge' or that 'a fully general theory of knowledge is impossible'.¹ That is obviously not what I have just called 'scepticism', which is itself a fully general theory of knowledge. Sosa considers a two-step argument for the view he has in mind which would show exhaustively that any general theory of knowledge possessing a certain feature would be what he calls 'impossible', and that any general theory lacking that feature would be 'impossible' too. So there couldn't be a fully general theory of knowledge. The conclusion certainly does follow from those two premisses, but Sosa doubts the second premiss. He thinks some theories which lack the feature in question have not been shown to be defective in the way the original argument was meant to show. The surviving theories are what he calls 'externalist'.

Theories of the first type hold that a belief acquires the status of knowledge only by 'being based on some justification, argument, or reason'.² That requirement is what makes them 'impossible', according to Sosa, because in order to succeed they would have to show that our acceptance of the things we think we know is justified in each case by good inferences or arguments which are not circular or infinitely regressive. That is what it would take to 'legitimate' those beliefs, and that cannot be done. Every inference has to start from something, so without circular or regressive reasoning there must always be something whose acceptance by us is left unsupported by inference, and so cannot be accounted for as knowledge by theories of this type. But a fully general theory of knowledge must account for everything we know. Sosa concludes that there could be no fully 'general, legitimating, philosophical understanding of all one's knowledge'.³ This is equivalent, I believe, to saying that no such theory avoids the conclusion that we know nothing. What he is saying of theories of this first type is that if, in order to know things, we had to satisfy what those theories say are conditions of knowledge, then we would not know anything, since we cannot satisfy those conditions. So theories of the first type depict us as knowing nothing. They cannot be distinguished, in their consequences, from the view that I (but not Sosa) have called 'scepticism'.

I take it to be the main point of Sosa's paper to show that certain 'externalist, reliabilist' theories escape that fate. They can be fully general and still succeed where theories of other kinds fail. He thinks there is 'a very wide and powerful current of thinking [which] would sweep away externalism root and branch',⁴ and he wants to resist that 'torrent of thought'.⁵ He concentrates here on the reasons he thinks William Alston and I have given for thinking that, as he puts it, 'externalism will leave us ultimately dissatisfied'.⁶ He appears to equate that charge with what he calls the 'unacceptability in principle'⁷ of 'externalism'.

What exactly are these objections? For my part, I do think there is a way in which 'externalism' would leave us 'ultimately dissatisfied' as an answer to the completely general philosophical question of how any knowledge of the world is possible. I tried to indicate what I have in mind in the paper that Sosa refers to and discusses.⁸

1 Sosa, 'Philosophical Scepticism and Epistemic Circularity', this volume p.263.
2 Sosa, p.273.
3 Sosa, p.267.
4 Sosa, p.266.
5 Sosa, p.266.
6 Sosa, p.266-7.
7 Sosa, p.267.
But I do not suggest that 'externalism' is unsatisfying because it cannot avoid depicting us as knowing nothing about the world and so is indistinguishable from the view that I call 'scepticism'. Nor would I argue that it is inconsistent or viciously circular or internally deficient in some other way which prevents it 'in principle' from being true or acceptable. Sosa says the objections are 'grounded in what seem to be demands inherent to the traditional epistemological project itself', and I think his efforts to meet the objections are intended to defend not only 'externalist' theories but also by implication that very epistemological project as well. My own doubts about 'externalism' could perhaps be said to be 'grounded in' or at least connected with demands inherent to that project, but that is because they are doubts not only about 'externalism' but about the coherence or feasibility of the general epistemological project itself. That question is what I think should be our primary target, not just one or another of the answers offered to it. We need to examine more critically what we want or hope for from the traditional epistemological project of understanding human knowledge in general.

Alston's objections might well have a different source. I suspect that in opposing 'externalism' as he does he is working towards what he sees as a more adequate theory of knowledge, perhaps one which would recognize some beliefs as 'evident' or 'prima facie justified' in a way that 'externalism' cannot explain. But to support a theory that competes with pure 'externalism' as the right answer to the philosophical question is not to bring that whole philosophical project itself into question. Although I think there are many points on which we would agree, I shall therefore leave Alston to one side. That leaves me with the question: does Sosa's defence of 'externalism' show that it does not have that feature which I think means it must always leave us dissatisfied, and so by implication that the goal of epistemology must always leave us dissatisfied as well, or does he really accept the point and not regard it as a deficiency in his 'externalist' theory?

The question is complicated because Sosa sees opposition to 'externalism' as coming from some competing philosophical con-

9 Sosa, p.267.

ception or theory of knowledge. His defence amounts to arguing that any theory from which the objections could come must be a theory of his first general type, and so can be discredited 'for simple, demonstrable logical reasons'. If it is a conflict between competing theories of knowledge, 'externalism' must win, since it does not have the fatal defect those other theories have. In order to bring out my doubts about the kind of satisfaction offered by 'externalism', I can grant that point. I would like to reveal something that I think remains unsatisfying about 'externalism' even if it is the best philosophical theory of knowledge there is or could be. I do not want to put a better theory in its place; I want to ask what a philosophical theory of knowledge is supposed to be, even at its best. Revealing the unsatisfactoriness of even the best 'answer' to the philosophical question can perhaps help draw attention to its unsatisfiable demands.

We aspire in philosophy to see ourselves as knowing all or most of the things we think we know and to understand how all that knowledge is possible. We want an explanation, not just of this or that item or piece of knowledge, but of knowledge, or knowledge of a certain kind, in general. Take all our knowledge of the world of physical objects around us, for example. A satisfactory 'theory' or explanation of that knowledge must have several features. To be satisfyingly positive it must depict us as knowing all or most of the things of that sort that we think we know. It must explain, given what it takes to be the facts of human perception, how we nonetheless know the sorts of things we think we know about that world. To say simply that we see, hear, and touch the things around us and in that way know what they are like, would leave nothing even initially problematic about that knowledge. Rather than explaining how, it would simply state that we know. There is nothing wrong with that; it is true, but it does not explain how we know even in those cases in which (as we would say) we are in fact seeing or hearing or touching an object. That is what we want in a philosophical explanation of our knowledge. How, given what perception provides us with even in such cases, do we thereby know what the objects in question are like? What needs explanation is the
connection between our perceiving what we do and our knowing the things we do about the physical objects around us. How does the one lead to, or amount to, the other?

Suppose there is an ‘externalist, reliabilist’ theory of the kind Sosa has in mind which accounts for this. I mean suppose there are truths about the world and the human condition which link human perceptual states and cognitive mechanisms with further states of knowledge and reasonable belief, and which imply that human beings acquire their beliefs about the physical world through the operation of belief-forming mechanisms which are on the whole reliable in the sense of giving them mostly true beliefs. Let us not pause over details of the formulation of such truths, although they are of course crucial and have not to this day been put right by anybody, as far as I know. If there are truths of this kind, although no one has discovered them yet, that fact alone obviously will do us no good as theorists who want to understand human knowledge in this philosophical way. At the very least we must believe some such truths; their merely being true would not be enough to give us any illumination or satisfaction. But our merely happening to believe them would not be enough either. We seek understanding of certain aspects of the human condition, so we seek more than just a set of beliefs about it; we want to know or have good reason for thinking that what we believe about it is true. This is why I say, as Sosa quotes me: ‘we need some reason to accept a theory of knowledge if we are going to rely on that theory to understand how our knowledge is possible’.11

Sosa does not dispute that as a condition of success for understanding human knowledge. He disputes my going on to say that ‘no form of ‘externalism’ can give a satisfactory account’12 of our having such a reason to accept it and so understanding our knowledge of the world in purely ‘externalist’ terms. He thinks my only support for that second claim comes from what he calls a ‘metaepistemic requirement’13 which does not follow from the conditions of success admitted so far. It comes, he thinks, from ‘a deeply held intuition that underlies a certain way of thinking about epistemology’.14 He thinks I have an ‘anti-externalist’ conception of knowledge according to which ‘what is important in epistemology is justification’, which in turn requires ‘appeal to other beliefs that constitute one’s reasons for holding the given belief’.15 That is what can only lead in a circle or down an infinite regress, and so in Sosa’s terms it is an ‘impossible’ theory of knowledge. Without that requirement, he thinks, the objection vanishes.

Now I want to say that I do not accept any of that. As far as I know, I do not hold an ‘anti-externalist’ theory of knowledge with which I seek to oppose ‘externalism’. I do not think that everything a person knows requires justification which involves appeal to other beliefs, and so on. I think that what I am drawing attention to about ‘externalism’ is something that can be recognized by anyone who has a good idea of what the general epistemological project is after. Of course, it could be that I am unwittingly imposing the ‘anti-externalist’ requirement that Sosa’s diagnosis says I am. He thinks I must be; I don’t think I am. But rather than searching my soul, which I am sure would be of limited general interest, let me again present for public assessment the way I think ‘externalism’ must leave us dissatisfied. I find in any case that Sosa has not really considered the reasons I actually gave.

We agree that an ‘externalist’ theorist of knowledge must know or have good reason to believe that his explanation of our knowledge of the physical world around us is correct in order to understand in that way how that knowledge is possible. How will he know or have good reason to believe that? Well, his theory is in part a theory of the conditions under which people in fact know or have good reasons to believe things about the world. If that theory is true in particular of the theorist’s own acceptance of that theory, then the theorist has what his own theory says is knowledge of or reasonable belief in the truth of that theory. I believe this is the situation Sosa is describing when he says: ‘We can legitimately and with rational justification arrive at a belief that a certain set of faculties or doxastic practices are those that we employ and are

11 Sosa, p.272, quoting from Clay & Lehrer (ed.), p.43.
12 Clay & Lehrer (ed.), p.43.
13 Sosa, p.272.
14 Sosa, p.273.
15 Sosa, p.273.
reliable'. He thinks there is 'no obstacle in principle' to our achieving such a state. I do not disagree with that.

That Sosa thinks the resistance to 'externalism' must be based on some such 'obstacle in principle' is suggested by his immediately going on to ask 'why could we not conceivably attain thereby a general understanding of how we know whatever we do know?'. It is clear that his question at that point is rhetorical. His idea is that if we can have what an 'externalist' theory calls good reason to believe our 'externalist' theory, it could thereby give us a satisfactory general understanding of our knowledge. For me his question is not rhetorical. I think we can see why, even with what counts for an 'externalist' as good reason to believe his theory, there would remain something ineliminably unsatisfactory about the position a theorist would then be in for gaining a philosophical understanding of his knowledge of the physical world in general.

The difficulty I have in mind does not show up in understanding the knowledge which other people, not myself, have about the world. I understand others' knowledge by connecting their beliefs in the right way with what I know to be true in the world they live in. I can discover that others get their beliefs through the operation of belief-forming mechanisms which I can see to be reliable in the sense of producing beliefs which are largely true. But each of us as theorists of knowledge is also a human being to whom our theory of knowledge is meant to apply, so we must understand ourselves as knowers, just as we understand others. All human knowledge of the world is what we want to understand.

If I ask of my own knowledge of the world around me how it is possible, I can explain it along 'externalist' lines by showing that it is a set of beliefs I have acquired through perception by means of belief-forming mechanisms which are reliable. Suppose that is what I believe about the connection between my perceptions and the beliefs I acquire about the world. As we saw, my merely happening to believe such a story would not be enough for me to be said to understand in that way how that knowledge is possible. I must know or have good reason to believe that that story is true of me. As a good 'externalist', I do of course believe that I do. I think that I acquired my belief in my 'externalist' explanation of human knowledge by means of perception and of the operation of the same reliable belief-forming mechanisms which give me and others all our other knowledge of the world around us. So I think I do know or have good reason to believe my theory; I believe that I fulfil the conditions which that very theory says are sufficient for knowing or having good reason to believe it. Do I now have a satisfactory understanding of my knowledge of the world? Have I answered to my own satisfaction the philosophical question of how my knowledge of the world is possible? I want to say No.

It is admittedly not easy to describe the deficiency in a few words. It is not that there is some internal defect or circularity in the 'externalist' theory that I believe. Nor is there any obstacle to my believing that theory or even to my having good reasons in the 'externalist' sense to believe it. If the theory is true, and if I did acquire my belief in it in the way I think I did, then I do know or have good reason to believe it to be true. To appreciate what I still see as a deficiency, or as less than what one aspires to as a philosophical theorist of knowledge, let us consider the merits of a different and conflicting, but still 'externalist', account of our knowledge of the world.

I have in mind a fictional 'externalist' whom I shall call 'Descartes'. The theory of our knowledge of the world which he accepts says that there is a beneficent, omnipotent, and omniscient God who guarantees that whatever human beings carefully and clearly and distinctly perceive to be true is true. The real René Descartes held a closely similar theory, but he tried to prove demonstratively that it is true. He was accused of arguing in a circle. My 'externalist' Descartes offers no proofs. He believes that when people carefully and clearly and distinctly perceive things to be true, they are true; God makes sure of that. That is how people come to know things. He also acknowledges that what he himself needs in order to know or have good reason to believe his own theory of knowledge is to fulfil the conditions it says are sufficient for knowing or having good reason to believe something: to acquire belief in it by carefully and clearly and distinctly perceiving it to be true while God guarantees that it is true. Suppose he examines the origins of his own theory and carefully and clearly and distinctly
perceives that he did acquire his belief in it in just that way. Does he now have a satisfactory understanding of his knowledge of the world? Has he got what he can see to be a satisfactory answer to the philosophical question of how his knowledge of the world is possible? I want to say No.

Your seeing and sharing my reservations about the adequacy of ‘externalism’ and so about the feasibility of the epistemological project depend on your finding the position of this ‘externalist’ Descartes unsatisfactory in a certain way as an understanding of his knowledge. The question is what is wrong with it. I think most of us will say first that what is wrong is that his theory is simply not true; there is no divine guarantor of the truth of even our most carefully arrived-at beliefs, and he is therefore wrong to think that he acquired his belief in his theory in that way. Even if that is so, is it the only deficiency in his position? I think it is not.

We cannot deny that he does believe his explanation of human knowledge, and does believe that he came to believe that theory by a procedure which his theory says is reliable, so we have to admit that if his theory and his account of how he came to believe it were true, then he would know or have good reason to believe his explanation of knowledge. But if we say that the falsity of his theory is the only deficiency in his position we would have to admit that if his theory and his belief about how he came to believe it were true, then he would have a satisfactory understanding of all of his knowledge of the world. That implies that whether he understands how his knowledge is possible or not depends only on whether the theory which he holds about how he came to believe it is true or not. If it is true, he does understand his knowledge; if it is not, he does not. An ‘externalist’ theorist of this fictional kind who reflects on his position could still always ask: ‘I wonder whether I understand how my knowledge of the world is possible? I have a lot of beliefs about it. If what I believe about it is true, I do; if it is not, I don’t. Of course, I believe all of it is true, so I believe that I do understand my knowledge. But I wonder whether I do’. I think anyone who can get into only that position with respect to his alleged knowledge of the world has not achieved the kind of satisfaction which the traditional epistemological project aspires to. He has not got into a position from which he can see all of his knowledge of the world all at once in a way that accounts for it as reliable or true.

Sosa’s ‘externalist, reliabilist’, I believe, can get himself into no better position for understanding himself. If what distinguishes his position from that of my ‘externalist’ Descartes is only that his theory is in fact true while that fictional character’s theory is false, then he too will be in a position to say no more about himself than ‘If what I believe about my knowledge is true, I do understand it; if it is not, I do not. I think I do, but I wonder whether I understand my knowledge or not?’. This is where the difficulty of describing the deficiency in his position comes in. It will not be true to say simply that although he believes his theory, he has no reason to believe it. If we imagine that his ‘externalist’ theory and his account of how he came to believe it are in fact true, as I have been conceding, then in that sense he does have good reason to believe his explanation of human knowledge. But still his own view of his position can look no better to him than the fictional ‘externalist’ Descartes’s position looks to him.

It would be to no avail at this point for him to try to improve his position by asking himself whether he knows or has good reason to believe that he does know or have good reason to believe his theory. Answering that question would be a matter of coming by what he believes is a procedure that his theory says is reliable to the belief that he knows or has good reason to believe his theory. Again, if he did come to believe that in that way, and his theory is in fact true, he will in fact know or have good reason to believe a second-order claim about the goodness of his reasons for believing his theory. But still he could then make only the same sort of conditional assertion about his position one level up, as it were, as he made earlier. The ‘externalist’ Descartes could do the same. He could carefully and clearly and distinctly perceive that he came to believe his theory to be true of himself by what that very theory says is a way of coming to know or have good reason to believe. He could then come to a similarly true conditional verdict about his position. Both he and Sosa’s ‘externalist’ could say at most: ‘If the theory I hold is true, I do know or have good reason to believe that I know or have good reason to believe it, and I do understand how I know the things I do’. I think that in each case we can see a way in which the satisfaction the theorist seeks in understanding his
knowledge still eludes him. Given that all of his knowledge of the world is in question, he will still find himself able to say only ‘I might understand my knowledge, I might not. Whether I do or not all depends on how things in fact are in the world I think I’ve got knowledge of’.

Those of us who are inclined to think that Sosa’s ‘externalist’s’ theory is in fact true and the fictional Descartes’s theory false will say that he does know and perhaps that he does understand his knowledge and that the fictional Descartes does not. But that does not show that that theorist’s position gives him a satisfactory understanding of his own knowledge. As I said, the difficulty does not show up in one’s understanding all of someone else’s knowledge of the world; it is only when each of us seeks to understand our own knowledge of the world in general that we reach this unsatisfactory position.

If we do recognize a certain ineliminable dissatisfaction in any such ‘externalist’ attempt at self-understanding I do not think it is because of hidden attachment to an opposing ‘internalist’ theory which requires that everything we know must be justified by reasonable inference from something else we believe. We can be ‘externalists’ and still reach at best what I think is an unsatisfactory position, even if we do in fact have what ‘externalism’ regards as knowledge of or reasonable belief in that ‘externalist’ theory. I think the dissatisfaction, if we recognize it, is felt to come from the demands of the epistemological project itself, or perhaps we could say from the complete generality of the project. Whatever we seek, and what the theorists I have imagined appear to lack, is something that ‘externalism’ alone seems unable to explain or to account for.

Sosa grants that the epistemological goal can never be reached if the successful theory is expected to provide what he calls a ‘legitimating’ account. He means by that an account which ‘specifies the reasons favouring one’s beliefs’, and he thinks no theory that is ‘internalist’ in his sense can do that without circularity or regress. But surely the goal of understanding how we know what we do does require that the successful account be ‘legitimating’ at least in the sense of enabling us to understand that what we have got

is knowledge of, or reasonable belief in, the world’s being a certain way. We should be able to see that the view that I call ‘scepticism’ is not true of us, and we want to understand how we get the knowledge we can see that we’ve got. ‘Externalism’ implies that if such-and-such is true in the world, then human beings do know things about what the world is like. Applying that conditional proposition to ourselves, to our own knowledge of the world, to our own knowledge of how that knowledge is acquired, and so on, even when the antecedent and so the consequent are in fact both true, still leaves us always in the disappointingly second-best position I have tried to illustrate, however far up we go to higher and higher levels of reiterated knowledge or reasonable belief. We want to be in a position knowingly to detach that consequent about ourselves, and at the same time to know and so to understand how any or all of that knowledge of the world comes to be. And that would require appealing to or relying on part of our knowledge of the world in the course of explaining to ourselves how we come to have any knowledge of the world at all.

There are indications that Sosa acknowledges and accepts the situation I have tried to describe. Believing that our belief-forming mechanisms are reliable when they are in fact reliable, and coming by what are in fact those very mechanisms to believe that they are reliable, he says, is ‘the very best conceivable outcome’ of the epistemological project. ‘How could we possibly improve our epistemic situation?’, he asks. The thought that someone else could find his own ‘epistemic situation’ equally good on the basis of a competing theory of knowledge, he admits, might cause some dissatisfaction or discomfort, but he thinks that is ‘discomfort we must learn to tolerate’. He concedes that in explaining, even to ourselves, how we know our ‘externalist’ theory of knowledge to be true, we must appeal to that very theory, and so cannot avoid, as he puts it, ‘begging the question’ or ‘arguing circularly’ in our attempts to account for our knowledge. But again, he asks, ‘once we understand this, what option is left to us except to go ahead and

19 Sosa, p.273.
20 Sosa, p.282.
21 Sosa, p.282.
22 Sosa, p.284.
23 Sosa, p.289.
'beg' that question?' 24 I think his thought is that without doing that, we would have no chance of answering the epistemological question at all. We have to 'tolerate' the 'discomfort' of relying on a 'self-supporting argument' 25 for our theory simply because we could not arrive at a 'successful and general theory of knowledge' 26 in any other way.

Here, perhaps, we approach something that Sosa and I can agree about. What I have tried to identify as a dissatisfaction that the epistemological project will always leave us with is for him something that simply has to be accepted if we are going to have a fully general theory of knowledge at all. He appears to think, as I do, that it is endemic to the epistemological project itself. We differ in what moral we draw from that thought.

I want to conclude that we should therefore re-examine the source of, and so perhaps find ourselves able to resist, the not-fully-satisfiable demand embodied in the epistemological question. I think its source lies somewhere within the familiar and powerful line of thinking by which all of our alleged knowledge of the world gets even temporarily split off all at once from what we get in perception, so we are presented with a completely general question of how perception so understood gives us knowledge of anything at all in the physical world. If that manoeuvre cannot really be carried off successfully, we have no completely general question about our knowledge of the world to answer. We could still ask how we know one sort of thing about the physical world, given that we know certain other things about it, but there would be no philosophical problem about all of our knowledge of the world in general. What then would 'externalism' or any other fully general theory of knowledge be trying to do?

Sosa wants his 'externalism', even with its admitted 'discomfort', to serve as a bulwark against the 'relativism', 'contextualism', and 'scepticism' which he sees as rampant in our culture. I share his dark view of our times, but if those widely-invoked 'isms' are thought of as competing answers to a fully general question about our 'epistemic situation' in the world, I think the resistance has to start farther back. It is what all such theories purport to be about, and what we expect or demand that any such theory should say about the human condition, that we should be examining, not just which one of them comes in first in the traditional epistemological sweepstakes. In that tough competition, it still seems to me, scepticism will always win going away.

24 Sosa, p.289.
25 Sosa, p.289.
26 Sosa, p.289.