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Manifesting One's Competences Successfully and Aptly: Enough to Beat the Skeptic?

Abstract: Ernest Sosa's account of competences and their manifestation is central for his brand of competence virtue epistemology. In this paper we scrutinize this account as detailed in his book *Judgment and Agency*. Regarding Sosa's general theory of apt agency, we start with discussing the temporal relation between performances and the second-order risk evaluations that are necessary to make them fully apt. This leads us to the observation that evaluations of aptness are highly description-relative. Regarding Sosa's specific theory of epistemic agency, i.e. of judgment and knowledge, we identify three problems: First, using Davidson's Swampman scenario, we argue that Sosa is in trouble explaining how Swampman (or anyone else) can acquire first items of knowledge. Second, Sosa's account of fully apt knowledge is threatened by an infinite regress. Third, Sosa lacks an account of internal mechanisms providing us with (subjective) confidence in our competences to accompany their (objective) reliability. As a solution for these three problems we suggest to acknowledge that the manifestation of reflective competences (especially for coherence checking) is a constitutive part of the second-order competence manifestation. This move would also make his account more agreeable to adherents of internalist positions. Even with this amendment, however, Sosa's theory will fail to silence the skeptic.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to scrutinize Sosa's account of competences and their apt manifestation. We want to show that his account of "knowing full well" (or of "fully apt epistemic performances") as developed in his book *Judgment and Agency* (Sosa 2015) falls short to convince skeptics and even adherents of certain kinds of internalist positions.[1] We think that Sosa's theory has many merits as an account of human knowledge. One of these merits is that Sosa also covers weaker forms of epistemic accomplishments that show how we

[1] We have to thank Ernest Sosa for providing us with the manuscript of his work before publication. We are also indebted to Sosa and other participants of the *Münstersche Vorlesung* 2014 for valuable criticism of earlier versions of this paper.

are connected to the remainder of the biological world. Sosa's talk about "animal knowledge" is tailored in such a way that we can attribute it to non-human animals as well (cf. Sosa 2015, index, *s.v.*). Somewhat paradoxically, animal knowledge in humans can be based on propositional attitudes, but it need not be. In Sosa's terms, that is, animal knowledge may be credal or subcredal, i.e. based on a propositionally-structured doxastic attitude or not. Explicitly, not only conscious cognitive processes are taken into account by Sosa, but also unconscious ones.

In many ways, that is, Sosa provides room for a continuous field between cognitive capacities of humans and non-human animals. We may call this the 'continuity strand' in Sosa's thought. Next to this, however, we can identify another strand, which we might call the 'enlightenment strand': While stressing the continuity between human and non-human animals, Sosa also looks at what distinguishes human cognitive processes from those of non-humans. As Sosa says: "[…] it is the human, rational animal that can most deeply and extensively guide his performances based on the risk involved, in the light of the competence at his disposal." (Sosa 2015, 87) In concurrence with epistemological tradition, this strand of thought leads to a focus on rational, propositional and conscious cognitive acts. The reason for this is, to quote Sosa, that "our rational nature is most fully manifest in consciously reasoned choice and judgment" (Sosa 2015, 51).

In the course of this paper, we will focus on this latter strand in Sosa's thought, for it is this very character of human cognition that we hope to be most powerful. If there is hope for reliable cognitive processes, it is because of the reflective possibilities of the human mind. Moreover, it is this strand that is the very battlefield of skeptical debates and the home of internalists and skeptics. Can Sosa's conceptual repertoire of competences and their apt manifestation help reach a hand to the internalist or even beat the skeptic on this ground?

To answer this question, we will confront Sosa's account with a series of four problems. We will make several suggestions how these problems can be dealt with. In the end, however, we will argue that Sosa's account of full aptness has a structural problem even when viewed from a weak skeptic perspective.

We start with a sketch of Sosa's account of competences and their use in defining aptness of belief. We will then argue that full aptness can only be achieved by manifesting the second-order competence temporally prior to the performance itself (section 3.1). This will lead us to discuss in our second argument a kind of description relativity of judgments about aptness. Based on this feature, we will argue that Sosa's introduction of a new grade of aptness is not only confusing, but also unnecessary (section 3.2).

In the remainder of the paper we will limit our examination to cases of epistemic performances, including cases of reflective knowledge. Our main concern will be how Sosa can live up to his ambition to meet the internalist intuition – i.e. the intuition that it is features internal to the epistemic subject that distinguish knowledge from mere true belief.[2] In the third argument we use the Swampman scenario to investigate the acquisition of first beliefs and the possibility of 'knowing full well' in such limiting cases. This investigation will lead to holistic consequences (section 4.1) and a possible skeptical threat in the form of an infinite regress (section 4.2). We suggest fixing both problems by taking a closer look at the kinds of competences that must be involved in second-order risk assessments (section 4.3). In the end, this will enable Sosa to convince internalists, but will, alas, not be enough to beat the skeptic.

2. Sosa on Knowledge as a Manifestation of Competences

Let us begin with giving a short survey of Sosa's account of competences and their manifestations. This survey will prepare the way for our objections.

2.1 What is a Competence?

For Sosa, knowledge is a matter of aptly manifesting one's competences. Sosa characterizes "a competence in general" as "a disposition to succeed with a certain aim, and a competence to believe correctly is a special case of that" (Sosa 2015, 43). Most generally, then, a competence is a dispositional property. Archer may have the competence to hit the bull's-eye every second time when aiming at the target. Barney may have the competence to visually recognize a barn in daylight. As dispositional properties, every competence has a specific way to manifest itself, and the possession of a competence is linked to its manifestation by typical probabilized conditional sentences. The following sentences can, approximately, serve as examples for such conditionals:

– If Archer aims at the target, the arrow will hit the bull's-eye with a probability of 0.5.
– If Barney looks at an object in daylight, he will be able to tell whether the object is a barn or not.

[2] It seems that Sosa himself aims at meeting many different intuitions according to epistemic justification, including both internalist and externalist views; cf. Sosa 2015, 81.

As with dispositions in general, the manifestation of a competence is not a necessary condition for its possession. Also, it is advisable to distinguish conditions for the possession of a competence from conditions for its manifestation. Sosa does this by distinguishing three aspects of a competence: skill, shape and situation. Because of the initials of these three terms, he talks about the 'triple-S', or 'SSS', structure of competences (e.g., Sosa 2015 26 and 95). The skill is the 'innermost S competence'. It is 'determined' by modal criteria. For all of us who possess a competence, it should hold that if we tried, we would reliably enough succeed, given that we are in appropriate shape and situation (Sosa 2015, 26-27; 96 n.3; 99-100). The heading 'situation' comprises all external aspects that are necessary for the manifestation of the competence. The shape falls in between skill and situation. Presumably, it is meant to comprise all necessary manifestation conditions that are internal, but are not counted by us as necessary conditions for the possession of a certain competence.

Archer, for example, may have exercised many years to acquire the skill to hit the bull's-eye reliably. However, he cannot successfully manifest his skill in just any situation. If there are heavy winds, e.g., it might be too difficult for him to hit the target despite his skill, and, similarly, he may always miss the target when drunk. In the latter case, we might also have the option to say that Archer lost his skill due to intoxication. But in this case it is very easy for Archer to regain his archery skills: He just has to sober up. As this is quite in contrast with the long years of training that are necessary for first acquiring archery skills, it is very much justified to distinguish this third aspect between skill and situation.[3] One could also say that the relevant structures in Archer's "brain, nervous system, and body" (Sosa 2015, 95) remain stable while drunk, but cannot be put to work.

Every competence is a disposition to succeed, but not the other way round (Sosa 2015, 99). There are at least two reasons which make competences special. First, the relevant combinations of skills, shapes and situations have to be selected on the background of the norms connected to a certain domain (Sosa 2015, 104). The second reason is the probabilistic character of the dispositions in question. Like probabilistic dispositions, competences "come in degree" (of reliability, that is), but unlike dispositions, they come "along with a threshold" (Sosa 2015, 96). Very low degrees of reliability do not qualify as competences at all, and interesting competences typically have a high reliability in a certain range of situations; they "require a broader field of accomplishment" (Sosa 2015, 144). In sum, all this conceptual apparatus is meant to build up competence as a device that somehow guarantees or at least

[3] For a discussion of the methodological problems connected to the triple-S structure cf. Sosa 2015, 27-28 and footnote 29 on p. 28, discussing the analogy to politeness and etiquette.

promises success – a success that is then based on "competence as opposed to luck" (Sosa 2015, 142).

As a virtue epistemologist, Sosa is particularly interested in epistemic competences. As Sosa puts it, the main tenant of competence virtue epistemology is the following:

> Knowledge is analyzed as belief whose correctness manifests the believer's competence. So, the pertinent competence (the pertinent reliabilist intellectual virtue) must be one whose exercise can constitute knowledge. (Sosa 2015, 40)

This way, Sosa is able to bring together the two main factions of virtue epistemology, the responsibilists and the reliabilists: For a full account of epistemology, epistemic competences that are modelled after Aristotle's account of character virtues (following the responsibilists) are as important as competences that match Aristotle's intellectual virtues (following the reliabilists). As Sosa treats judgments as a special kind of performances, namely, as he calls them, alethic performances, he can develop a unified account of competent actions comprising both epistemic and non-epistemic actions. An epistemic performance qualifies as knowledge only if it is based on appropriate competences: "In my view, a competence can constitute (credal) knowledge only if it is a disposition to believe correctly, one that can then be manifest in the correctness of a belief." (Sosa 2015, 43)

2.2 Aptness: The Successful Manifestation of Competences

Competences can lead to knowledge when they are manifested in the right way. Sosa describes this 'right way' with what he calls the "triple-A", or "AAA", criteria: "accuracy, adroitness, and aptness of judgment or belief" (Sosa 2015, 1). Sosa's aim is to analyze these criteria in terms of "success, competence and success through competence" (Sosa 2015, 19). Hence, to meet the triple-A criteria, an act must be accurate or successful: Arrow shots need to hit their target and judgments need to hit the truths. Secondly, agents must have had a matching competence that, thirdly, was causally relevant for the success.

So far, apt acts can also be performed by animals. In particular, there is, in general, no need for a rational, enlightened and self-reflective mind. This is why Sosa calls what we can have by apt manifestation of epistemic competences (through our visual or auditory senses, say) 'animal knowledge' (Sosa 2015, 36, quoting Sosa 1991, 240). One could say: We have animal knowledge, if all *external* conditions are fulfilled, i.e., if we have a successful

epistemic act that is based on a reliable enough epistemic competence[4] – and for externalists this would be all that is required for a decent epistemic justification (Pappas 2014). For internalists, however, this would fall short of a full-blown justification, because in these cases we would not know that we are epistemically successful. There is more to be achieved: We could act on the basis that we know that we have the competence in question, i.e., that we have the respective skill and are in the appropriate shape and situation. If we meet these *internal* conditions, we act fully apt. In the epistemic case, Sosa speaks of 'knowing full well' or 'reflective knowledge'.

Aptness, then, is "success that manifests competence" (Sosa 2015, 18). Recurring to a competence, aptness blocks a certain kind of luck. In fact, it aims to block the very luck that is exploited in Gettier examples (Sosa 2015, 12-13). A performance is fully apt if it leads to aptness by a guiding second-order competence of the agent. This second-order competence manifests itself in an assessment of the risk involved with acting in a given situation. That is, it is based on the agent's reflection on his skill, shape and situation and on the odds of his acting successfully given these parameters. Again, a certain kind of luck is excluded by this reflective act: The agent does not just happen to act with an appropriate triple-S structure, but he has chosen to do so because of his knowledge of that structure (Sosa 2015, ch. 3, esp. 72).

3. Manifestations and Their Descriptions

3.1 Can Temporally Posterior Second-Order Competence Manifestation Make Prior Acts Apt?

In sum, a performance is apt if its success is based on a reliable competence; it is fully apt if the actor knows it to be reliable. As we have seen in section 2, it is the manifestation of second-order cognitive competences that makes a performance fully apt. In a footnote, and in passing, Sosa says about the second-order judgment regarding one's own potential performance that "this awareness need be neither conscious nor temporally prior" to the act in question (Sosa 2015, 79 n. 20). This suggests that there are three options for a second-order competence manifestation: it can either be temporally prior to the act, simultaneously with it

[4] Cf. Sosa 2015, 19: "It is not enough that the success *derive[s] causally* from competence, for it may so derive deviantly, by luck. Rather, the success must be *apt*. It must *manifest* some degree of competence on the part of the performer." Cf. also p. 24.

or it can be temporally posterior. There is, however, tension with another claim by Sosa, as he also states:

> […] a performance is *fully* apt, if and only if it is guided to aptness through the agent's reflectively apt risk assessment. The agent must perform not only *in the light of* her apt belief that she would perform aptly, but also *guided* by that belief. (Sosa 2015, 69)

It seems plausible that in this case guidance means that the second-order competence needs to have a causal or deliberational impact on a temporally subsequent performance.[5] For this reason it is not possible that the second-order competence is manifested temporally posterior to the performance in question.

One might go for the option that the second-order judgment can be manifested simultaneously with the performance itself. But then one needs an account of how an act can be guided by another act that takes place simultaneously to it. However, this might go beyond the possibilities of philosophical analysis and is a potential field of investigation for modern psychology.

Let us pause for a moment to take a closer look at what happens in the case of temporally posterior risk assessments. A completed apt performance cannot be made fully apt by a post-hoc manifested second-order competence. The putative performance, which could only be improved (i.e. made fully apt) by a post-hoc second-order manifestation, is already a *completed* act. A posterior second-order manifestation could only influence (or guide) a new performance. Therefore, an already completed act cannot be made fully apt by post-hoc second-order competence manifestation. We will explain this by way of two examples.

First, consider a case of alethic performance. Barney sees a barn and accordingly forms a belief that there is a barn in front of him. The following day he reflects on his former situation and manifests his second-order competence. He realizes that the conditions that affected his observations were convenient. It seems implausible that this posterior judgment can affect his prior performance and, hence, make it fully apt.

Secondly, consider a case of athletic performance. A basketball player scores a goal without reflecting with a risky shot. The following day he reflects and manifests his second-order competence. He realizes that in the moment of his performance he did not have a better

[5] See Sosa 2015, 69 with Sosa's explanation of Diana's coin toss, where she fails to be guided by her second-order competence. If *guidance* implies something else, then there needs to be a plausible example, which we were not able to think of.

option than to aim at scoring this goal. Again, it is implausible that this posterior judgment affected his prior performance and made it fully apt.

In both cases there is no post-hoc full aptness for the previous judgment (or acts in general). Rather, in the Barney case the judgment he makes the following day is a *new* epistemic act that involves memory traces of the previous one. Thus, the old judgment cannot be influenced by post-hoc second-order competence manifestation. We have to treat the basketball player performance in a similar fashion; it seems to be implausible to grant him post-hoc full aptness, because his performance is completed and cannot be influenced by post-hoc second-order competence manifestation as well.

We conclude that Sosa's emphatic statement, quoted at the beginning of this section, should be rejected. In order to perform fully apt, the second-order competence must have been manifested temporally prior to the actual performance in many interesting cases. Barney's re-thinking of his barn perception cannot make his barn perception *post hoc* fully apt since it is a new act of a different kind. The general lesson to be learned from this discussion is that we have to be careful how we describe the situation in question because this determines which action of which kind is evaluated in an aptness judgment. In the next argument, we will again make use of this strategy to discuss Sosa's swimmer example.

3.2 Are Judgments Concerning Aptness Description-Relative?

In Chapter 7 of *Judgment & Agency* Sosa introduces a weaker version of aptness because he thinks that his own previous account turns out to be too restrictive (Sosa 2015, 154). To illustrate this, Sosa discusses an example of a swimmer in the open sea who has to try to reach dry land to survive:

> Take a case in which we need to choose arbitrarily by just supposing that a certain means-end proposition is true. We may need to act on that assumption just as an arbitrary choice among 360 equal options, one of which must be chosen. We might just barely guess by opting for straight swimming in one of 360 directions, and we might reach land that way, and our doing so may be apt to some extent. Our guess is minimally competent. At least we do not swim in circles! So that seems a way to get it right on the direction of reachable land, in a way that manifests some degree of aptness. (Sosa 2015, 155)

We see here that Sosa introduces a further degree of aptness that must be even below animal aptness. For this degree of aptness not even credal animal knowledge is required; it is

sufficient to hope or suppose that the chosen direction will lead towards the coastline. Though the swimmer performs successfully by chance only, Sosa judges his performance as *apt to some degree*. This seems puzzling, because Sosa introduced aptness (i.e. successful manifestation of competence) as a means to block certain kinds of luck that may causally contribute to the success of a performance. Remember that Sosa himself explicitly opposes competence to luck (see section 2.2 above).

We suppose that one motivation for the introduction of this new degree of aptness is rooted in the Aristotelian view that even performances with luck, to some extent, are in accordance with virtue because of a kind of good will (Sosa 2015, 156). But this seems implausible, even from a lesser skeptical point of view. Why should we accept these performances as apt enough only because of a certain volition on the part of the agent?

Moreover, it seems to us that introducing a further degree is not necessary. Another of Sosa's examples may show why, namely the case of Simone, the pilot (Sosa 2015, 146-153). Simone is pilot of a jet fighter, regular shooting at targets. As Sosa puts up the story, Simone has regular trainings in a flight and combat simulator, but she is left agnostic about whether she is in a real plane shooting real targets or only in the simulator, shooting simulated targets. In evaluating these situations, Sosa refers to the different intentions that could underlie Simone's performance. She could either intend to shoot targets or 'real' enemy targets. The evaluation of her performance may vary with Simone's agential intention (Sosa 2015, 135-136).

We can apply this move to the case of the swimmer. Sosa does not need to label the swimmer's performance as "apt to some extent" because he could just state that his swimming performance was apt while his epistemic performance, the lucky guess, falls short of being apt. Reaching the shore is still creditable to the swimmer insofar as he successfully manifests his swimming-competence, even though there is no apt manifestation of an orientating competence. Sosa has to distinguish the different layers of intentions that underlie the swimmer's performance in order to avoid confusion. The swimmer's aim is both to reach the shore and swim properly. In fact, he intends to reach the shore *by* swimming properly. This swimming performance can be evaluated as apt, as well as the decision to try to reach the shore. Not so, however, the decision to choose the specific direction: It was sheer luck that the swimmer swam in the right direction. Regarding the performance as a composition of both swimming and orientating, the act cannot be judged as apt since the swimmer lacks the skill for the latter. Depending on which intention is used to describe the swimmer's action, the evaluation as apt varies. Hence, the weakening of the aptness conditions and the introduction

of a further degree of aptness can be avoided if one takes into account that aptness is description-relative.

4. The Internalist and Skeptical Perspective

Next we will look at Sosa's account from the internalist and the skeptic perspective. Therefore, we will from now on focus on epistemic performances. We begin with investigating the acquisition of very first beliefs and will show that the implications of Sosa's theory regarding these cases are convincing for internalists. We will, however, suggest an amendment to Sosa's theory that allows meeting the intuitions of internalists.

4.1 Knowledge for Davidson's Swampman?

Sosa states that, in first approximation, propositional knowledge is

> […] belief that attains its aim (truth) and does so not merely by luck, but through competence. Such knowledge is then a special case of performance that is not just lucky, but apt: i.e., performance whose success is sufficiently owed to the performer's relevant competence. The aptness of a performance is thus supposed to block an important sort of luck, the sort that precludes Gettiered subjects from knowing what they believe both correctly and competently. (Sosa 2015, 12-13)

The central ideas is that a judgment constitutes knowledge only if it "is not just lucky but apt"; that is, the competence should be a causally relevant factor for success. As we have seen in section 2.2, the judgment needs indeed to be fully apt to count as reflective knowledge, and this implies that the agent also needs a second-order competence manifestation. This can be understood as a risk assessment in which the agent reflects on the triple-S structure of her performance. In practice, that means that the agent considers whether her skill is sufficient for the supposed performance, whether she is in a good shape and if the situation is well suited for the performance. That means that she has beliefs concerning the triple-S structure. In this section, we will focus on limiting cases where human competences might possibly not suffice for acquiring knowledge fully apt. Sosa himself refers to human limits in order to avoid a potential problem of his account:

> Although the emphasis on full aptness seems to institute a potential regress, I can't see that it is vicious. True, as we ascend to the second order we get a boost of epistemic standing […].

> Arguably, you might then get a further boost if your competence-assessment is *itself* not just apt but fully apt. But this need not keep going forever. Returns may in fact diminish quickly to the effect of asymptotic approach to a limit near where you reach already with ascent to the second order. And this is plausibly because we soon hit a limit where human competence gives out as we ascend through the higher orders. Beyond that limit, creatures better endowed might attain incremental enhancement not attainable by limited humans. Because *ought implies can*, however, failure to surpass that limit is no human flaw. (Sosa 2015, 86 n. 25)

In section 4.2 we will consider the potential regress that Sosa himself describes in this quote. But first we want to discuss his reference to human limits. For this we will consider a variation of Davidson's famous Swampman thought experiment: Swampman comes into existence with no beliefs at all, but possesses full-blown basic human competences (Davidson 1987). This example will enable us to investigate the generation of very first beliefs. Both of the arguments will show that Sosa can strengthen his position with a few modifications and does not need to refer to human limits of competence to solve these problems.

We will discuss the Swampman example in two variants. In the first variant, Swampman comes into existence and starts to interact with his environment on the basis of his inborn competences. Let us suppose that his beliefs of the properties of the object, which he acquires by perception, are true as an outcome of his performance. How can Swampman acquire these beliefs according to Sosa? Sosa could say that Swampman can gain animal knowledge immediately through his basic human competences, in particular by perception, since these competences are reliably manifested. But would Sosa's account convince an internalist or even a skeptic? In the situation described, Swampman is not able to manifest his second-order competence because this would require him to have beliefs (or maybe even knowledge?) about his triple-S structure. However, according to the assumptions of the Swampman scenario, Swampman starts with no beliefs at all. In particular, Swampman does not have any beliefs about his skills. Moreover, any justification for such beliefs would require memories about past manifestations of these skills in order to judge about their possession and reliability. Therefore, Swampman is not in the position to perform fully apt. Sosa seems to have an advantage here, though, because from his point of view Swampman can at least be said to have animal knowledge. This is attractive from a reliabilist position because, being based on reliable competences, Swampman's newly acquired beliefs are in fact (mostly) true.

In contrast, an internalist will not be satisfied with this evaluation. From an internalist position, something important is missing. In general, (at least some) internalists demand the

execution of an internal mechanism, which is internally assessable to the subject (Pappas 2014). A standard candidate for such an internal mechanism as demanded by internalists is the inspection of the coherence of one's own beliefs by introspection. But even an internalist could grant that Swampman's simultaneously generated beliefs can be justified – in a holistic kind of way – due to internal coherence checking of his beliefs by Swampman's conscious introspection.

Can such a mechanism be among our basic competences? In his own examples, Sosa typically draws on perceptional competences like visual observations. If basic competences were in fact restricted to this field, Sosa is not able to meet internalist standards and, therefore, would not be able to satisfy internalist intuitions (Sosa 2015, 81). However, nothing seems to prevent us to treat those rational abilities that allow consistency checks as basic human competences.

In another variant of the Swampman example, however, Sosa is at a disadvantage compared to the internalist. Imagine that Swampman comes into existence completely intoxicated leading to double vision. Let's suppose that this intoxication affects the manifestation of his visual perceptional competences, but not his tactile sense, his sense of hearing and his ability to draw sound inferences. Swampman, that is, is not in the shape to exercise his visual perceptional skills properly. Swampman sees all objects twice due to his double vision, but by touching he experiences only one object where visual perception has pairs. Furthermore the object in front of him makes noises, but Swampman only hears noises coming from one of the objects he visually recognizes. Since the output of his perceptional competences is inconsistent, we cannot grant him animal knowledge about his environment coming only from his visual competence in this scenario. Still we can suppose again that the beliefs he acquires about his environment are, in fact, true: Since the intoxication is not affecting Swampman's ability to draw inferences, he can properly consider the coherence of his beliefs. By conscious introspection, he can come to the belief that where he sees pairs are in fact only single objects, because he can only hear and feel one of the visually perceived objects. This move would increase the coherence of Swampman's entire web of belief. For this reason, these true beliefs would be epistemically justified and, hence, knowledge.

In contrast to the first scenario, Sosa is not even able to grant Swampman animal knowledge in this second variant, since he does not consider reflective competences in his own examples. Again, we suggest acknowledging that coherence checking is a basic human competence. Doing so would fit smoothly into Sosa's account of knowledge acquisition, and it would allow ascribing knowledge to Swampman on both counts. Without this modification,

however, the implications of Sosa's theory for the Swampman cases would not be agreeable for internalists. It would seem that Sosa's conception is basically externalist – i.e. relying on features external to the epistemic subject – with only slight internalist influences. Counting coherence checking among the basic competences, however, seems to be beneficial for Sosa's account because in the second case Swampman can only acquire knowledge through such a process. Such an improved model would still be reliabilist at its core, but would grant the advantage that internalists would have to argue against coherentism, whereas internalists rely on coherentism to a huge extent themselves.

4.2 An Infinite Regress?

We now return to the passage quoted in section 4.1 and focus on the potential regress that may follow from Sosa's requirements for a fully apt second-order competence manifestation (Sosa 2015, 86 n. 25). In the passage in question, Sosa admits that the manifestation of a second-order competence could be boosted epistemically if it is fully apt itself, i.e. based on a proper risk assessment. Sosa suggests that the regress is blocked by the fact that human epistemic competences are limited: The infinite level of reflection that is required for a perpetuated epistemic boost through iterated risk assessments is far beyond our finite human cognitive capacities.

In order to develop the current objection, we want to reconstruct the regress more detailed than Sosa did, and afterwards we want to offer a solution which does not need to refer to the limits of human competence.

As quoted in section 4.1, Sosa holds that the second-order competence is a risk assessment that leads to fully apt performances. Again, knowledge is itself a performance. Hence, it needs to be performed fully apt. The second-order competence then ensures reliability of performances. As Sosa puts it for the case of knowledge: "Aptness of judgment *entails* safety of affirmation." (Sosa 2015, 79) It is plausible to assume that it is this kind of reliability that would be the skeptic's requirement for knowledge. All this entails that a fully reliable performance needs to be guided by a fully apt manifestation of a second-order competence. But in order to manifest the second-order competence fully apt, another risk assessment is needed. Thus we have entered an infinite regress.

Let us reconstruct the regress in more detail. Consider a single epistemic performance of an average person seeing an object in front of her. What is needed for the person to know something about this object full well, i.e., to perform fully apt? To begin with, her first-order

competence manifestation must be apt. This means that she has the required skills, is in a good shape and in the right situation. Furthermore, she needs to manifest the second-order competence in order to make her performance in question fully apt. What does that mean? She needs to consider her triple-S structure, i.e., to reflect upon her skill, shape and situation. By this she gains confidence in her own competences. She needs to know that her performance will be reliable. At this point the potential regress arises. How can she reliably know that she reliably knows that her first-order competence manifestation will be reliable? Plausibly, a skeptic would demand the level of reliability just stated. So what is needed? The last level of reliability can be reached by another manifestation of the reflective competences that ensures the reliability of the risk assessment during its first manifestation. Only in this way the manifestation could be fully apt in itself. But what ensures the reliability of this additional manifestation of the reflective competence? A further manifestation of our reflective competence is needed, and so on. We have, thus, entered an infinite regress.

Faced with this regress, it can, of course, be argued that such an infinite sequence of thoughts is both impossible and implausible for two reasons: Firstly, it is just irrational to reflect for an infinite duration upon a performance before its execution, delaying it, thus, for an infinite time span. Secondly, it would simply, as Sosa states, exceed the limits of human cognitive capacities. Since Sosa wants to establish aptness as *the* norm of *all* performances, he takes a step towards the skeptic's intuition in this respect. But as shown, this entails the unfolding of an infinite regress. However, is it necessary to retreat to human limits to uphold Sosa's account? What does a limitation of the human mind entail?

Sosa tries to block the regress by being content with animal knowledge at some level. This would, of course, not convince the skeptic or even the internalist since he would only meet the externalist's requirements. The performance would only be reliable, but not reliably reliable with a matching belief about the reliability of one's own performance. Even though there are cases where only animal knowledge is required to act successfully, the claim of the skeptic would remain. The skeptic wants full aptness for epistemic performances. Surely there are cases where animal knowledge suffices for a reasonable action, e.g., a dog that evades hitting an object in front of him since he acquired animal knowledge about the objects surrounding him. But unlike Gettier cases, these cases seem to be quite uninteresting from a theoretic point of view, as any 'assumption' the dog may have about the world is only instrumental for its moving forward. We need to focus on epistemic performances where knowledge is not only instrumental, but the end. In such cases, animal knowledge is not a convincing source for "real" knowledge from a non-reliabilist position. In particular, the

reliability of a performance based on animal knowledge alone will not convince those who are not externalists.

What is full aptness after all? Sosa himself says that fully apt knowledge performances are more than "just animal knowledge on top of animal knowledge" (Sosa 2015, 84). So *something more* is required than a simple manifestation of another competence. From Sosa's perspective, one possible attempt to identify the missing part is to say that the second-order competence is itself a basic human competence. Then the regress would stop there. This is because, according to Sosa, many of our beliefs have no rational basis at all, e.g., simplest arithmetic, geometric and logical beliefs: "What matters for the epistemic propriety of these various beliefs is in good part simply that they derive from proper epistemic competence, which in these cases need not be reason-based." (Sosa 2015, 202) Furthermore, Sosa states that there is "much basic competence that comes with our brains, or is soon acquired through early child development." (Sosa 2015, 145) The execution of these basic competences does not require propositional knowledge about the possession of the skill; Sosa conceives of such basic competences "as a certain sort of disposition to succeed, which need not in turn be understood as knowledge-how constituted by knowledge-that, so that it lies beyond sheer ability." (Sosa 2015, 146) Hence, it is possible to manifest such a basic competence aptly by just doing so. Could the second-order competence be such a basic competence? If we consider Sosa's examples for these basic competences, like ear-wiggling and forefinger-bending, we find that they are much less complex than second-order risk assessments. For example, the second-order judgment about one's own skill would require accessing one's own memories of past performances of the skill. Only by doing so one would be able to evaluate one's own skill, which is only *one* component of the triple-S structure. Taking everything into account, this attempt to explain why fully-apt knowledge is more than animal knowledge on top of animal knowledge has failed.

Let us have another try to identify the missing part. Instead of talking in a rather generic way about second-order competences, we can ask which competences these specifically are. Which competences are actually manifested during the second-order risk assessment? Simple perception cannot be relevant here since the skeptic and the internalist want *specific* epistemic competences to be manifested, namely reflective competences that generate beliefs about one's own beliefs. Since manifestations of these competences would inspire confidence, Sosa would be able to meet the non-externalist intuitions much better. Once again, the competences in questions (like the competence to check the coherence of one's own web of beliefs) belong to the internalist's luggage anyway; hence, this strategy

should be acceptable from the internalist point of view. With this modification, the regress would be blocked because the needs of non-reliabilists would be met. If these reflective competences would be manifested as part of the second-order judgment assessment in a fully apt knowledge acquisition, internalists should be satisfied. From their point of view, the consideration of coherence of one's own beliefs can lead to justified beliefs and, thus, knowledge. For the internalist, such an internal mechanism could block the regress. In the next section we will argue that the manifestations of reflective competences inspire confidence in our epistemic competences; and we will examine whether our amendment to Sosa's theory is in fact sufficient to convince internalists and skeptics.

4.3 Certainty and Confidence

Have we solved the problem of the second-order competence manifestation being not animal knowledge on top of animal knowledge? We stated before that there must be something more to the second-order competence manifestation. Let us reconsider what Sosa says about epistemic competences: "A competence is epistemic only if it is an ability, a disposition, to discern the true from the false in a certain domain. But infallibility is too much to require […]." (Sosa 2015, 172) We believe this to be true. A skeptic would in fact require too much, namely all-embracing reliability or certainty. In contrast, internalists do not require objective certainty, but only subjective confidence of some degree. It is indeed difficult to see how we could make use of our cognitive abilities without a subjective feeling of confidence in them, be it in everyday life or in science (Zagzebski 2013). We need a feeling of confidence that comes together with the reliability of our performances and affirmations. Sosa discusses confidence mainly with regard to one's memory (Sosa 2015, 89-92): To some degree we need to rely on our mnemonic beliefs even if we cannot remember how these beliefs have been generated. However, Sosa does not think highly of this kind of subjective confidence, as its level may be "artificially induced through mere therapy" without any correlation to objective reliability. For this reason, Sosa's account is primarily an account of the reliability of performances. By means of risk assessment we can indeed gain some confidence in our performances. The general structure of this account is the one that has been discussed in this paper before: Confidence is acquired by means of the manifestation of a second-order competence that assesses the possible risk or the probability of success of a first-order competence manifestation (cf., e.g., Sosa 2015, 94-95)

The confidence thus attained is connected with a mental representation (a belief), that is controlled by the agent, i.e. held consciously. This confidence, however, is generated externally by a belief about the reliability of first-order competences (for, say, a mnemonic performance) that has been empirically acquired, first by experience and then through memory. Again it becomes clear that Sosa's account, as stated earlier, is reliabilist at its core, for the level of confidence arises from a consideration of the reliability of one's own first-order competences. As we argued in section 4.2 above, this account is endangered to run into a regress. To be absolutely sure about the reliability of the risk assessment (the manifestation of the second-order competence, i.e. the conscious evaluation of the reliability of the first-order competence manifestation), another second-order competence manifestation would be required. Hence the regress unfolds.

For this reason we think that there is need for another source of confidence, namely manifestation of reflective competences like the competence to check the coherence of a set of beliefs. From our point of view reflective competences are able to generate confidence by their very manifestation, without requiring the manifestation of any further higher-order competence. The reason for this is that, in this way, confidence is acquired internally and can hence be considered to be agentially controllable. Let us justify this claim in detail.

The confidence just described can arise from manifesting one's own reflective competences, e.g. by considerations of coherence by conscious introspection. Since such abilities are within our innermost grasp, those competences are a fundamental part of our mental capacities. Even though our perception can be fallible, our reflective second-order competences seem to be more *controllable* by the agent (even though this can be fallible as well). This is important because the impression that these competences are controllable to a higher extent can inspire confidence. Nevertheless, one must recognize that having confidence, i.e. a feeling of certainty, is not the same as judging with certainty. In section 4.1 we have shown that Sosa's conception is deeply externalist because it is meant to secure reliability of performance. But Sosa also recognizes that for full aptness we need to supplement factual safety with a belief about our own competences as well to gain some confidence in them. Sosa himself restricts his account to a threshold of *enough* reliability to block such a potential regress (Sosa 2015, ch. 8). Human competences are limited, or so he argues, and thus there have to be domain-dependent norms that account for when a competence manifestation is sufficient (Sosa 2015, ch. 4). This idea seems to be counterintuitive for internalists, because they seek some factor internal to the epistemic subject, i.e. they seek rather confidence than reliability itself. Why should they be satisfied

with the notion that there are such thresholds of reliability determined by convention? In section 4.1 we suggested to include reflective competences among the competences that are manifested in second-order risk assessments, not only the regress is blocked, but also an intuitive confidence can occur. Such a feeling is, of course, fallible, for it does not guarantee the truth of one's believes. The reference to success being "reliable enough" is not a bad way to handle these problems, since it states when a performance is epistemologically satisfying from an externalist point of view, i.e. when it is based on a corresponding competence. Our approach, however, can also explain why it is epistemologically satisfying for internalists, namely because of the confidence connected with reliability of our competences (again, cf. Sosa 2015, ch. 8).[6]

The bottom line of our point is that reflective competences seem to be more controllable by the agent due to the fact that they are a part of the innermost competences. They are part of our mental inner life since they are a process of introspection. Therefore, they can inspire confidence in our own competences by the very manifestation of these competences alone. Nothing more is needed. They are able to generate confidence themselves, and thus are sources of confidence. Moreover, such competences are those that internalists demand. In contrast, due to the regress problem, mere risk assessment may fail to generate confidence. Hence, a stronger focus on reflective competences can make Sosa's theory more agreeable to adherents of internalist positions. Even with this modification, however, it does not seem that Sosa's account is able to convince the skeptics since a feeling of confidence and the impression of more controllability induced by introspection are not the same as certainty.

5. Conclusion

As rational beings we pride ourselves on our very special cognitive capacities: Among our fellow creatures, we stand out having propositionally structured epistemic attitudes, derived, in part, from conscious reflective processes. It is in this field that the skeptical attack hurts the most. Our aim in this paper was to test whether Sosa's general theory of aptness can beat the skeptic.

In section 3.1 we started with the observation that the assessment of epistemic risks can guide a judgmental act only if it is performed no later than the judgment itself. Later risk

[6] This approach may also explain why there are domain dependent norms, because manifestations of reflective competences do not only generate confidence but do also contribute to the determination of such norms. We are, however, not able to expand on this here.

assessments do not convey a post-hoc aptness on the prior act, but at most constitute a new epistemic act involving remembrance of the prior act. This led us to pay close attention to the way we describe actions in general or epistemic acts in particular in order to evaluate their aptness. Starting from the swimmer example, we argued in section 3.2 that Sosa's account of aptness is description-relative. His attempt to weaken the conditions of aptness seems to be unnecessary and even undermines his own position since the conception of aptness is meant to block relevant sorts of luck, which would be allowed according to Sosa's own analysis of the swimmer example.

In the remainder of our investigation, we paid particular attention to the question whether Sosa's account of epistemic performances can be enabled to persuade internalists and skeptics. In three waves we argued that Sosa would fare much better in this respect when he focuses more strongly on reflective competences and counts them as basic epistemic human competences. We started in section 4.1 by showing that Sosa needs to either rely on animal knowledge as a basis for further performances or accept holistic consequences. In the former case, he would not be able to satisfy his own ambition to convince internalists and skeptics. Since both groups would deny animal knowledge being "real" knowledge, Sosa's conception would not allow the acquisition of knowledge from their point of view. In the latter case, he can evade these consequences by accepting that the very first beliefs of a person can be acquired as a cluster of beliefs in a holistic way, being justified by manifesting reflective competences in checking their coherence. This would not only explain the very beginning of reflective knowledge in a person, but might also be agreeable to the internalist.

In section 4.2, we considered the threat of an infinite regress emerging out of Sosa's requirements for aptness. Once again, the internalist and skeptical intuitions are not met. Sosa attempts to block the regress by stating that human cognitive capacities are limited, and that we have to stay content with animal knowledge at some level. Again, taking reflective competences like coherence considerations into account would both help with the regress and be attractive to internalists. Finally, the manifestation of reflective competences can lead to enhanced confidence, which the internalist requires for full-blown epistemic performances (section 4.3).

Hence, despite we identified several problems in Sosa's account, we think that all of these can be solved within his theory, using his own resources. In section 4 we argued that, on the one hand, Sosa can meet internalist intuitions, but, on the other hand, that he falls short of meeting the demands of the skeptic. Confidence is not the same as infallibility: The manifestation of reflective competences and the confidence gained from it do not guarantee

knowledge in every case of performance. Since the skeptic requires all-embracing reliability, the given account does not suffice to persuade the skeptic and since such all-embracing reliability is hardly available to us humans, this might just be a result we have to learn to cope with.

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