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A PRIORI KNOWLEDGE: REPLIES TO WILLIAM LYCAN AND ERNEST SOSA*

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I wish to thank William Lycan and Ernest Sosa for their penetrating comments. I think I should be able to answer them.

1. REPLY TO WILLIAM LYCAN

Professor Lycan believes that intuition is extremely unreliable and that intuition-based philosophy differs from science and common sense in that the latter lead to consensus whereas philosophy does not. I completely disagree. The on-balance reliability of our elementary concrete-case intuitions is without question one of the most impressive facts about human cognition. And on the matter of consensus, there is significant agreement on a great many points in philosophical logic, philosophy of language, metaphysics, and epistemology. (E.g., the 'is' of existence vs. the 'is' of prediction; knowledge vs. justified true belief; and on and on.) Remember the darkness and confusion form which we started in early Greek thought. Regarding consensus in science, this is much exaggerated. Disagreement is rife on a great many questions – especially foundational questions. More to the point, seldom does science achieve consensus on central questions of *philosophy*. To the extent that science does, it is usually for the wrong reason: more often than not, it is linked to the nonscientific opinions of influential scientists (such as B. F. Skinner) or the radical views of philosophers (such as A. J. Ayer or Thomas Kuhn) who are fashionable with scientists.

In any case, Lycan's opinions about these factual matters have no bearing on my position.The Authority of Philosophy is a *modal* thesis, which follows from the argued-for modal conclusion that it is *possible* for there to be subjects with sufficiently good cognitive conditions that their intuitions, when processed, must yield largely

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true theories. The *de facto* reliability of *our* intuitions and the degree of consensus achieved so far by *our* philosophers is irrelevant to this modal question.

There seems, moreover, to be an unacceptable tension in Lycan's views.[1] He holds a plausible explanationist theory of justification: "[M]any of our beliefs are justified by their plausibly explaining other things we believe. Then, because explanation is asymmetric and on pain of regress, one must ultimately have some 'explained unexplainers' as Keith Lehrer has called them: There must be some data propositions that are not themselves justified by explaining more primitive data in their turn, and so must be justified in some other way." Lycan rightly recognizes that intuitions are data (evidence) – "explained unexplainers." As such, they function in our justificatory practices as "regress stoppers." The tension in Lycan's view is that it is hard to see how anything that is "laughably unreliable" (as Lycan deems intuitions to be) could rationally play the role of data – of regress stoppers – in genuine justification. Yet Lycan recognizes that they do play that role.

In an important note Lycan expresses uncertainty about the notion of a basic source of evidence (n. 5). In discussing this matter, one must be careful not to commit what Peter Geach calls a "Socratic fallacy" by thinking that one cannot possess a concept without first possessing its definition. The notion of a basic source of evidence is an intuitive notion picked out in the same way we pick out other intuitive notions, namely, with the aid of examples and rough-and-ready general principles. For this purpose the following remarks should suffice. Some examples: Depending on one's epistemic situation, calculators can serve as a source of evidence for arithmetic questions; tree-rings, as evidence for the age of trees; buying patterns, as evidence for consumer confidence; etc. It is natural to say that these sources are not as basic as phenomenal experience, intuition, observation, and testimony. By the same token, it is natural to say that testimony is not as basic as observation, and likewise that observation is not as basic as phenomenal experience. Phenomenal experience, however, is as basic as evidence can get. Next, some rough-and-ready principles: First, a source is basic iff it has its status as a source of evidence intrinsically, not by virtue of its relation to other sources of evidence. Second, a source is basic iff no other

source has more authority. Third, a source is basic iff its deliverances, as a group, play the role of "regress stoppers" or "explained unexplainers" in the above sense. Fourth, a source is basic only if it is a natural propositional attitude.[2] (This principle will be developed in my remarks on Ernest Sosa's paper.) These examples and principles suffice to fix our attention on a salient intuitive notion of basicness.

To account for the evidential status of intuitions, Lycan proposes an alternative to modal reliabilism that turns on his "Principle of Credulity." His proposal cannot be that a proposition is justified iff it belongs to the best explanation of the data, and a proposition is among the data iff it is a nonexplainer which is a little bit justified. That would be circular. The proposal must be that a proposition is among the data iff it *seems* to be true. But this proposal does not answer the main question: why do reliable guesses, hunches, desires, etc. not count as basic sources of evidence whereas seemings do? The answer cannot be the tautological observation that the latter are seemings whereas the former are not. What do the latter have that the former lack? The Principle of Credulity provides no answer. By contrast, modal reliabilism provides a very plausible answer: what the basic sources have an the others lack is an appropriate modal tie to the truth.

Professor Lycan tells us that he finds modal reliabilism a "strange and eerie" view. I could give a *tu quoque* reply. Or I might reply in the way David Lewis replied to Hilary Putnam: "Sticks and stones will break my bones, ..." Or I could respond by pointing to the theory of concept possession, which provides my second main argument for the Autonomy and Authority of Philosophy and which explains the modal tie which intuitions have to the truth.[3] Very roughly, you just would not have the concept unless your intuitions involving it were mostly reliable (modulo good cognitive conditions).

Finally, in connection with my views on scientific essentialism, Lycan states that he has "no serious disagreement." These views have implications for the Autonomy of Philosophy, and Lycan agrees that there is at least some autonomy: first, in connection with logical, syntactic, and semantic theories; second, in connection with some conditionals authorized by those theories (or perhaps by conceptual analysis). He believes, however, that many central philosophical

terms (e.g., 'conscious') are not semantically stable in the sense defined and so would be correctly classed with natural-kind terms like 'water', outside the scope of philosophical investigation. He supports this with an alleged counterexample: a twin earth on which the Doppelgängers of North Carolinian philosophers are conscious but the Doppelgängers of everyone else on earth are robots, zombies, or puppets.[4] Would the twin earthlings who are conscious mean the same thing by 'conscious' as we do? Lycan thinks not because he thinks that their term 'conscious', unlike ours, *would* apply to the indicated nonconscious things (robots, zombies, puppets): "Twin philosophers and scientists would apply the term ['conscious'] on the basis of animated behavior even when they know what the feeble innards are like." Certainly this is wrong. Suppose that you and I were North Carolinian philosopher-scientists and that we discovered that the innards of all non-North-Carolinians were straw and that their behavior was controlled by strings or some other external devices. We would certainly say, "My God, they're not conscious; they're just puppets!" But, since there would be no relevant difference between you and I and the twin-earthling philosopher-scientists, it would be completely mysterious if they did not say the same thing, contrary to Lycan's claim.

Professor Lycan tries to draw an analogy between his example and Burge's arthritis example. The analogy fails, and this helps to bring out what has gone wrong. Consider the two speech communities envisaged by Burge – the community of English speakers and the hypothetical community of speakers otherwise just like them except that they have different conventions for the use of 'arthritis'. The epistemic situations of these two speech communities are not qualitatively identical; in particular, the speaker intentions of respective experts differ over the conventions governing the use of 'arthritis'. I define semantic stability in terms of whole speech communities, rather than in terms of single individuals, precisely to rule out this kind of divergence in conventions. My motive might not have been clear; that may explain why Lycan thinks he has a counterexample: the twin earthlings' term 'conscious' could apply as Lycan suggests only if they had specific conventions to that effect, conventions with no counterparts here on earth. But this would be impossible if

their epistemic situation were qualitatively identical to ours in the intended sense.

Given Professor Lycan's evident agreement that questions expressible with semantically stable terms are subject to philosophical investigation, I hope that in the end he will be open to the possibility of a substantive philosophical theory of consciousness.

2. REPLY TO ERNEST SOSA

I come now to Ernest Sosa's comments, which I will consider in a slightly different order than he does.

Standard Justificatory Procedure. I appealed to this notion in my argument against radical empiricism. Professor Sosa asks in what way I am relying on the fact that this procedure is *standard.* This is a good question. Note that we can easily construct a *direct* argument against radical empiricism, one which is logically valid and which has true and evident premises. The premises would be provided by our intuitions about concrete cases in which intuitions are evidence (reasons). In a way, this is the end of the matter – radical empiricism is refuted. But this sort of direct argument, albeit sound and evident, does not persuade radical empiricists. The argument sketched in my paper, by contrast, was designed to have a persuasive force for radical empiricists, which these direct arguments lack. The argument falls into a class of arguments which is not well-understood today (although it was by Aristotle in, e.g., the *Topics*). Its purpose is to persuade people who are in the grips of an extreme view which interferes with the effectiveness of ordinary, direct arguments. Question: for whom is the standard justificatory procedure *standard*? Answer: radical empiricists *themselves*. It thus provides the *common ground* from which we are able to get them to see that they are in an epistemically self-defeating position.

This is not to say that this common ground is more than contingent. At this early stage, I have given no reason to think that this style of argument will have a *general* power to persuade. This brings up the question of whether the standard justificatory procedure is necessary or contingent. My view – which is a corollary of the theory of concept possession – is that the *core* of the procedure is

necessary for any subjects whose cognitive conditions are of appropriately high quality. Subjects capable of difficult theoretical work at least approximate those cognitive conditions in relevant respects; to that extent the core of their justificatory procedure must approximate that necessary core procedure. We may therefore expect the argument to work for almost any subjects who, like ourselves, are capable of difficult theoretical work. Consequently, the argument has a *general* effectiveness, after all. But this claim is something that can be made persuasive only late in the dialectic.

Phenomenology of Intuitions. Intuition is distinct from belief: one can believe something and not intuit it, and one can intuit something and not believe it. The latter fact also shows that intuition is not even a *species* of belief. (E.g., one can intuit the naive comprehension axiom and not believe it.) This is also shown by the point about plasticity: for nearly any proposition about which you have intuitions, authority and cajoling could fairly readily insinuate at least some doubt and thereby diminish to some extent, perhaps only briefly, the strength your belief; but seldom, if ever, do authority and cajoling so readily diminish the strength of your intuitions. Professor Sosa accepts the first argument that intuition is not a species of belief (the argument involving intuitions about comprehension), but he questions the second argument (regarding plasticity). I hope this restatement, which is more explicit about matters of scope, makes the argument persuasive.

I hold that intuitions are a kind of seeming, namely, intellectual seeming. Sosa proposes a *counterfactual* analysis of seemings generally, but to this there are clear-cut counterexamples. As I am talking to you, I believe on the basis of proofs that the naive comprehension does not hold. I also have the inclination – absent proofs, etc. – to believe that the axiom does hold. But at this very moment I assure you that I am having *no* intuition about the naive comprehension axiom one way or the other. I am addressing you, and this is about all I can do at once; my mind is full. If I am to have the intuition, then above and beyond a mere inclination, something else must happen – a *sui generis* cognitive episode must occur. Inclinations to believe are simply not episodic in this way.

For another sort of counterexample, consider *a posteriori* necessities which (on the received theory) lie beyond the reach of *a priori* intuition: for example, that gold has atomic number 79, that heat involves microscopic motion, etc. Presumably, by suitably modifying the brain we could cause a subject to acquire the sort of inclination featured in Sosa's analysis. We could, for example, cause a subject to have an inclination to believe (absent coaching) that gold has atomic number 79. (Such "brute" inclinations would be akin to the sort of irrational inclinations posited by some social theorists, e.g., "hard-wired" inclinations to believe that other races are inferior.) Likewise for other *a posteriori* necessities. But the subject cannot intuit these necessities, for in that case they would be *a priori*, not *a posteriori*, as everyone takes them to be.[5]

A final point about the phenomenology of intuitions. Sosa suggests that, if I reject the view that intuitions are inclinations, I might hold that they are inclinations plus a "glow" or other kind of "positive" element. Not so. My view is simply that intuition is a *sui generis*, irreducible, natural propositional attitude which occurs episodically. That is all; no "glow" or other "positive" element.

Modal Reliabilism. This doctrine provides an objectivist theory of evidence which avoids the well-known pitfalls besetting the standard positions – coherentism, contingent reliabilism, etc. Sosa worries that the objections to contingent reliabilism might carry over to modal reliabilism. For example, there might be instances of the "generality problem." Consider a subject who, through telepathy, believes that there is no largest prime. This belief, since it is necessarily true, has a modal tie to the truth. Is this belief, then, a basic source of evidence? Not according to modal reliabilism. The reason is that it is not even a candidate for a basic source of evidence. Something can be a candidate basic source only if it is a natural (i.e., non-Cambridge-like) psychological attitude. Intuition, appearance, belief, desire, guessing, wondering, etc. – these all qualify. Consider now Sosa's example, the relation holding between x and p such that x believes p and p is the proposition that there is no largest prime. The range of this relation is artificially restricted, in this case to a single necessary proposition. So the relation is Cambridge-like, not a natural propositional attitude or even a real species of belief. The

advantage of a theory like modal reliabilism, which offers a free-standing analysis of what it is to be a basic source of evidence, is that it can avail itself of this plausible solution to the generality problem in terms of natural propositional attitudes. This is possible only if intuition is a natural propositional attitude. That is why the earlier phenomenological points are so important.

Turning to a second problem, Sosa asks, "what explanation is offered by modal reliabilism of how ... [intuition] ... could serve as a basic source of evidence?" He tries to draw an unwelcome parallel between intuition and "rain-indicating" pain: necessarily, given suitable auxiliary *external* conditions, these too cannot go wrong. His discussion convinces me that more clarification is needed.

To avoid the problems besetting contingent reliabilism, I proposed a *general scheme* for analyzing what it takes for a candidate source of evidence to be basic: a candidate source is basic iff its deliverances have an appropriate strong modal tie to the truth. This biconditional is not itself an analysis: it is not intended that *just any* strong modal tie be sufficient for something's being a basic source of evidence. Rather, this scheme provides us with an *invitation* to find a modal tie that does the job – i.e., a strong modal tie which lets in the right sources and excludes the wrong ones. The explanation of why intuition is a basic source of evidence then goes as follows. By definition, a candidate source of evidence is basic iff it has *that* sort of strong modal tie; intuition does have that sort of tie; therefore, intuition is a basic source of evidence. My specific proposal was that the modal tie we are seeking is one which is relativized to *internal* conditions – specifically, cognitive conditions of suitably high quality. The resulting analysis excludes all unwanted candidate sources, such as non-basic *external* sources like those worrying Professor Sosa. The upshot is that modal reliabilism does offer an explanation of why intuition is a basic source of evidence.

Perhaps, however, Sosa is looking for another kind of explanation – one in terms of final causes, an explanation which gives us a philosophical understanding of why basic sources of evidence are suited to play the role they are supposed to. There might, however, not be such an explanation in this case; we might already be at rock bottom. Since Sosa's criticism provides no reason to think that we

are not at rock bottom, it provides no reason to think that what has been offered so far is not satisfactory as it stands.

Nonetheless, I do think there is still something to say. I am afraid that I will be able to give only a vague sketch here; I hope that the general strategy will make sense.

Consider an idealized analysis which posits a very strong modal tie: a candidate source is basic iff, necessarily, for anyone in ideal cognitive conditions, the deliverances of that source would be true. On this analysis, for anyone in ideal cognitive conditions, basic sources provide a guaranteed pathway to the truth regarding the deliverances of the source. Now *we* are not in ideal cognitive conditions, so this would provide no guarantee that the deliverances of *our* basic sources are true. Indeed, we even have reason to think that some deliverances of our basic sources are mistaken. But, if we limit ourselves to suitably elementary propositions, then relative to them we *approximate* ideal cognitive conditions. For suitably elementary propositions, therefore, deliverances of our basic sources would provide in an approximate way the kind of pathway to the truth they would have generally in ideal conditions. For those of us capable of real theorizing – that is, anyone whose cognitive conditions (intelligence, memory, attentiveness, constancy, etc.) are good enough to enable them to process theoretically the deliverances of their basic sources – the size of the class of relevantly elementary propositions would not be inconsiderable.[6]

As indicated, the above analysis posits a very strong modal tie. Our larger analytical strategy invited us only to seek the weakest modal tie that does the job. This would be done by something like the following: a candidate source is basic iff for cognitive conditions of some suitably high quality, necessarily, if someone in those cognitive conditions were to process theoretically the deliverances of the candidate source, the resulting theory would provide a correct assessment as to the truth of most of those deliverances. Whereas the previous analysis required that the deliverances of a basic source themselves be true, this weaker analysis requires only that most of the theoretical assessments as to the truth of those deliverances be true. The previous remarks about approximations then carry over *mutatis mutandis*. For subjects (like ourselves) capable of theoretically processing their basic sources, the result of that processing

would, for elementary deliverances, provide in an approximate way the kind of pathway to the truth it would provide generally in the indicated high quality cognitive conditions, a pathway whose reliability increases the more elementary those deliverances are. It would not *follow* that any deliverances, even maximally elementary, are utterly demon-proof for such subjects. But the more and more elementary the deliverances are, the fewer the potential sources of error. At the limit, the only surviving potential source of error would be a Cartesian evil demon or something on a par with one. Skeptical possibilities like this would, if realized, undermine one's quest for the truth regarding even the most elementary deliverances. Faced with this threat, one could simply give up. But if one gives up, one is bound not to succeed. The way to keep open the possibility of success is to proceed as if this sort of skeptical possibility is not realized. In this case, one would succeed as long as the skeptical possibility is not realized. And if it is realized, one would be no worse off for having tried.

Relying on maximally elementary deliverances of basic sources is thus the best possible *general* strategy theorizers could have for obtaining a class of reliable beliefs regardless of the context they find themselves in: these deliverances are reliable in every possible context which is demon-free. The situation is analogous when theorizers seek to enlarge this class at the risk of corresponding reductions in reliability: basic sources provide theorizers with the best possible general strategy for getting to such substantial classes of truths. This strategy is context-free in that it works for any subject capable of real theorizing no matter how the rest of the world is. One's basic sources may in turn be used as a yardstick for assessing whether candidate (nonbasic) sources qualify as genuine sources of evidence. Basic sources are thus by nature ideally suited to be "regress stoppers": they have their authority intrinsically, and it is an authority exceeded by no other. And these are precisely the features basic sources were supposed to have according to the general principles invoked (in response to Lycan's query) to single out the intuitive concept of a basic source of evidence.[7]

I am all too aware that the above sketch is wanting in various ways. But I hope it provides in broad outline the sort of philosophical explanation Professor Sosa has asked for. And from the modal tie

posited in this sketch it is a short step to the modal tie used to establish the Autonomy and Authority of Philosophy, for it would be incredible if the former were possible and the latter not.

Summing up, I have tried to answer the main points raised by Professors Sosa and Lycan. I hope I have succeeded in showing that those points do not undermine the account of *a priori* knowledge and the Autonomy and Authority of Philosophy defended in my paper.

NOTES

* The following is a slightly enhanced version of the replies I gave to William Lycan and Ernest Sosa at the APA Symposium on *A Priori* Knowledge. My warmest thanks to Mark Hinchliff.

[1] This point is due to James Tomberlin.

[2] In his note Lycan argues that on my own account intuition might not be a basic source of evidence. He asks us to consider someone with unreliable intuitions regarding the syntax and semantics of an imperfectly learned second language. The example does not succeed, for it is not addressed against the deliverances of a natural propositional attitude (i.e., intuition); rather it is addressed against a small *proper subclass* of the deliverances of a natural propositional attitude (i.e., a certain proper subclass of someone's intuitions). Of course, specific intuitions and specific subclasses of intuitions can lose their evidential authority; what I deny is that intuition generally could cease to be evidential. Another fault in Lycan's argument is that he does not distinguish between possessing concepts determinately and possessing them but only indeterminately. If one determinately possesses the concepts relevant to the syntax and semantics of a second language, one's intuitions involving those concepts would be by and large reliable. The same thing holds for phenomenal experience. If one determinately possesses concepts relevant to it, one's reports of it would be by and large reliable. But if one does not possess those concepts determinately, one's reports of one's phenomenal experience may always be challenged in the manner of J. L. Austin: "Are you sure it was magenta, not vermilion? Perhaps you are unsure of the difference." This phenomenon does not show that phenomenal experience is not basic; so also for intuition.

[3] Early in his paper, Lycan mentions (but does not endorse) Harman's view that genuine factual beliefs be *causally* explainable by the putative fact that would make the belief true. This requirement is far too strong. Nonetheless, a weaker version of this requirement is validated by this theory of concept possession: very roughly (even this is too strong), the putative fact that P plays a role in the explanation of the intuition that P. This point is addressed in note 8 of my paper.

[4] Note that this case does not meet the conditions for a candidate counterexample, for the qualitative epistemic situation of our language group – i.e., our *whole* language group – is not replicated on the twin earth; only that of a tiny fraction is replicated.

[5] In response to this counterexample it would do no good to adjoin to the analysis

the requirement that the subject be introspectively aware of the inclination, for in our counterexample the subject could well be introspectively aware of his inclinations to believe that gold has atomic number 79, etc. But as before the subject could not have *a priori* intuitions of these things.

[6] For the sort of theorizers who are able to engage in end-game self-approving theorizing, these cognitive conditions would perhaps need to be even higher, and so in turn the class of relevantly elementary propositions would be larger. Of course, what counts as "elementary" and "approximate" is vague. Although the lines are fuzzy, the larger point is clear enough.

[7] Notice that the above account is itself context-free in the sense just isolated: regardless of context anyone capable of real theorizing would feel its intuitive pull. Incidentally, I provisionally defined one's nonbasic sources of evidence to be those deemed reliable by one's best theory based on one's basic sources. There is an alternative approach. Just now in the text, when I tried to explain the role basic sources play, I reasoned thus: if there were an evil demon, I could have no success in my quest for the truth, so I might as well suppose that there is no such demon; that way I maximize my chances for succeeding in my quest. Perhaps this style of reasoning could be applied a series of times, once for each kind of relative basicness. First, for completely basic sources, where the only sort of threat would be an evil demon (or something on a par with one). Second, for observation, where besides evil demons there is a threat from bad observation conditions. Third, for testimony, where besides demons and bad observation conditions, there is a threat from liars. And so forth.

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