

The Nature and Value of Firsthand Insight¹

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Abstract: You can be convinced that something is true but still desire to see it for yourself. A trusted critic makes some observations about a movie, now you want to watch it with them in mind. A proof demonstrates the validity of a formula, but you are not satisfied until you see how the formula works. In these cases, we place special value on knowing by what Sosa (2021) calls “firsthand insight” a truth that we might already know in some other way such as by testimony, the balance of evidence, or proof. This phenomenon raises two questions. First, what is the nature of firsthand insight? Second, what value motivates us to pursue firsthand insight when other kinds of knowledge are readily available? In the two central parts of this paper, I develop answers to these questions. I argue that firsthand insight that a proposition is true is knowledge based on experience of what makes that proposition true, and I argue that desires for firsthand insight are motivated by concerns with alienation. In a concluding section, I briefly illustrate how the resulting view of the nature and value of firsthand insight might bear on broader topics in the theory of value.

Keywords: value of knowledge; value of experience; firsthand knowledge; alienation; acquaintance; acquaintance principle; Sosa

Introduction

You can be convinced that something is true but still desire to see it for yourself. Contrast the following cases:

Earache

Arby has an earache. He goes to the doctor to find out why. She inspects Arby’s ear, figures out why it aches, tells Arby some of the details, and prescribes eardrops. Arby is perfectly happy to end his inquiry there. Indeed, Arby would recoil from any opportunity to see inside his own ear. He does want to know why it aches, but he is perfectly satisfied to learn why by deferring to the doctor.

Season Finale

¹ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at a conference in honor of Ernie Sosa organized at the University of Miami by Otávio Bueno and John Greco, and a workshop on Mind and Value organized at Cornell University by Emad Atiq and Matt Duncan. I thank the organizers of these events for the chance to present this work and the participants in them for helpful discussion. Thanks to two anonymous referees for the journal for critical engagement with an earlier draft. Finally, I am most pleased for this opportunity to express my gratitude, appreciation, and respect for Ernie Sosa. Ernie, your generosity as a person, benevolent influence on the profession, and excellence as a philosopher are inspiring.

Beatrice regularly meets with friends to watch a television series. She is out of town for the series finale. Her friends tell Beatrice that it cleverly connects different plotlines resulting in a surprising but well-motivated cliffhanger. Overcome by fan enthusiasm, one blurts out key spoilers, and Beatrice thereby learns why the episode counts as cleverly connecting different plotlines, etc. Still, Beatrice would like to see for herself, and watches the show when she has a chance.

Both Arby and Beatrice desire to know why something is the case. Arby desires to know why his ear aches, and he is satisfied by the testimony of his doctor. Beatrice desires to know why the season finale counts as cleverly connecting different plotlines, etc., and she is not satisfied by the testimony of her friends.

When Beatrice watches the season finale, she will learn facts about the episode that haven't already been communicated to her, and she will have some new experiences. Granted all that might be desirable on its own. But I take it that Beatrice also desires to get into a position to agree with the exact aesthetic judgment her friends made. She wants to see just what they saw but for herself. That is why I say Beatrice desires to know why the season finale counts as cleverly connecting different plotlines, etc. It is not her only desire, but it is one of them, and it remains unsatisfied by the testimony of her friends.

So, in some cases the pursuit of knowledge is only satisfiable by some kind of firsthand, immediate, or face to face confrontation with the facts. In addition to knowing, you want to know in one of these more direct ways. This idea recurs in a number of recent works of epistemology. For example, in "Seeing It For Oneself: Perceptual Knowledge, Understanding, and Intellectual Autonomy," Duncan Pritchard (2016) explores why, supposing you can perfectly well know something secondhand, you might prefer to see it for yourself. In "The Special Value of Experience," Chris Ranalli (2021) considers what we find distinctively valuable in conscious perception as opposed to other potential sources of knowledge. In "Why Think for Yourself?," Jon Matheson (2021) asks what could motivate a novice to deliberate autonomously about a question when an expert answer is readily available. And in the first chapter of *Epistemic Explanations*, Ernie Sosa (2021) addresses the following question: "Just when is a desire for outright understanding satisfiable only through firsthand insight?" (pg. 6).

The family resemblance is evident, but we shouldn't assume all these authors are always tracking exactly the same phenomenon. For example, Pritchard is primarily concerned with an achievement, Ranalli with an experience, Matheson with an activity, and Sosa with a motive. Sosa's formulation nicely ropes in a cluster of interrelated issues that I will be concerned with in this paper, and I'll take his discussion as my point of departure.

Here is the plan. Answering a question like Sosa's requires answering two related questions. First, there is a question about the nature of what I'll also call firsthand insight. What are some reasonable constraints on how to think about it, and given those constraints what exactly is the nature of firsthand insight? In Section 1, I argue that firsthand insight is knowledge that something is true that is based on experience of what makes it true.² Second, there is a

² I will understand experience in the following way: for S to experience O is for S to be in a relational state of consciousness in which O's appearing some way to S enables S to make original reference to O. Object-seeing is a paradigm example. This notion of experience is similar to Russell's at the time of his 1913 manuscript *Theory of*

question about the value of firsthand insight. Since we might desire to know something for many reasons, what value motivates desires for knowledge when satisfaction of those desires calls for firsthand insight? In section 2, I argue that such desires to know derive from concerns with alienation. In a concluding section, I briefly consider how the resulting view of the nature and value of firsthand insight might bear on a related and familiar topic in the theory of value, namely the Acquaintance Principle many take to govern aesthetic judgment.

1. The Nature of Firsthand Insight

Minimally, firsthand insight into P is a kind of knowledge that P. An account of firsthand insight should specify exactly what kind of knowledge.

The most obvious account characterizes firsthand insight into P negatively as knowledge that P that is not based on testimony. Sosa makes a key observation that shows this account to be inadequate. The observation is that *while firsthand insight is never knowledge based on another’s testimony, it is sometimes knowledge gained by following another’s guidance*. We need some positive account of firsthand insight that explains the difference between testimony and guidance (i.e., relying on “sheer say-so” vs. relying on “a script”; Sosa 2021, pg. 12).

The account I will defend is that firsthand insight into some truth P consists of knowledge that P that is based on experience of what makes P true. I’ll call this the experiential account. The experiential account naturally explains the difference between testimony and guidance. To see how, consider the following sentence:

The horse raced past the barn fell.

This is called a garden-path sentence, and it often trips people up. Typically, it seems ungrammatical, though in fact it is grammatical and has a determinate meaning.

Suppose you are tripped up by the sentence, and you do not see how it is grammatical. If I tell you that it is grammatical and you take my word about this without hearing the sentence or reading it in the way you normally hear or read sentences you understand, then you do not have firsthand insight into the claim that the sentence is grammatical. This is testimony. I might also offer an explanation along the following lines: “Fell” is the main verb, and “raced past the barn” tells you which horse fell; you are parsing the sentence according to left diagram, but the correct parse is shown in right diagram.



Knowledge where he equates experience with acquaintance: “we shall employ synonymously the two words “acquaintance” and “awareness,” generally the former. Thus when A experiences an object O, we shall say that A is acquainted with O” (Russell 1992, pg. 35).

Now you also understand why the sentence is grammatical, but if you continue to hear and read the sentence in the same way as before, then this is still a case of testimony. You know why the sentence is grammatical by testimony.³

Suppose, however, that in addition to the explanation, I intone the sentence in a helpful way. With guidance from the explanation and the intonation, you come to hear and read the sentence as being grammatical and as having a determinate meaning. Now you gain firsthand insight into the claim that the sentence is grammatical. According to the experiential account, this is because you are guided to experience what makes it true that the sentence is grammatical: you now hear or read the sentence as having a structure that wasn't initially presented in your experience.

In my view, firsthand insight can be attained even if guidance remains necessary. I am not sure whether Sosa would agree with this. But here is why I think it is a natural extension of his observation. Consider more complicated garden-path sentences such that only a dedicated few learn to parse them without guidance. These people are the garden-path experts. Suppose you are a garden-path novice and never gain the ability to correctly parse these super garden-path sentences on your own. Suppose in addition, that you can correctly parse some of them when guided by an expert. When you correctly parse a super garden-path sentence with expert guidance, then I'd say you thereby gain firsthand insight into its grammaticality.⁴ So, the firsthand aspect of firsthand insight is compatible with both actual and necessary dependence on others. In any case, however, the dependence must take the form of guidance rather than testimony. In slogan form: seeing for yourself doesn't require the ability to see by yourself.

There is a second observation about firsthand insight that an account of its nature should explain. This observation comes from Spinoza's discussion of different grades of knowledge. Spinoza discusses this issue in subtly different ways in the *Emendation of the Intellect*, the *Short Treatise*, and the *Ethics* (all in Spinoza 1985).

In all three works, Spinoza illustrates the different grades of knowledge by contrasting different ways one might solve for x in a problem such as $1/2 = 3/x$. The first grade of knowledge includes applying the general rule that if $a/b = c/x$, then $x = bc/a$, which is either based on testimony or on generalizing from a few simple cases. The second grade of knowledge consists in applying the same general rule, where this time the rule is based on "true reason," (*Short Treatise*) such as occurs when you are moved by "the force of the demonstration of proposition 19 in Book VII of Euclid" (*Emendation of the Intellect*, *Ethics*). Someone who attains the third grade of knowledge, however, skips the rule and immediately sees that 6 stands to 3 as does 2 to 1. Spinoza says that this person "has no need either of report, or of experience, or of the art of reasoning, because through his penetration he immediately sees the proportionality in all the

³ Sosa formulates his question about understanding, but the surrounding discussion makes clear that he construes understanding P as knowing why P where this consists in knowing that P because Q , for some appropriate Q . I'm sympathetic, but mostly focus on propositional knowledge, including propositional knowledge of answers to why questions, so that nothing in the present paper hinges on commitment to specific views about how understanding, knowing why, and knowing that interrelate.

⁴ For a more realistic example, consider a student in a music appreciation class. The student might hear aspects of a piece only when the professor points them out. Even if the instruction doesn't stick, the student really does have the relevant auditory experience, but it is one they can only have while guided.

calculations” and that he “sees the thing itself, not through something else, but in itself” (*Short Treatise*).

I think firsthand insight is a form of this third grade of knowledge. The point I take from Spinoza is that *while thinking through an argument can enable firsthand insight, it does not do so if you are thereby only moved to belief by the force of demonstration*. Spinoza’s example of firsthand insight involves knowing without any reasoning, but the absence of reasoning is not essential. I’ll illustrate this point with a different mathematical example.

Consider the claim that the bigger of two numbers is the average of their sum and difference:

$$\max(a, b) = \frac{a + b + |a - b|}{2}$$

I doubt you can see this without any reasoning, so here are two different arguments each establishing in its own way that the formula is true.

Argument by Cases	Argument by Redescription
<p>Case 1: $a \geq b$. Then $\max(a, b) = a$, and:</p> $\frac{a + b + a - b }{2} = \frac{a + b + a - b}{2} = a$ <p>Case 2: $a < b$. Then $\max(a, b) = b$, and:</p> $\frac{a + b + a - b }{2} = \frac{a + b + b - a}{2} = b$	<p>$a + b$ is the bigger number + the smaller number. $a - b$ is the difference by which the smaller number falls short of the bigger number. That means $a + b + a - b$ is twice the bigger number. So, halving that gives you $\max(a, b)$.</p>

Both arguments require reasoning. But there is an important difference. The argument by cases convinces you that the formula is true by showing you how it follows from your other commitments, such as your commitment to certain rules for manipulating absolute values. I’ll call arguments like this brute force arguments. The argument by redescription, on the other hand, seems to me to make the formula’s truth clear in itself. I’ll call arguments like this insightful arguments.⁵

The point I take from Spinoza is that brute force arguments do not enable firsthand insight, but insightful arguments do enable firsthand insight. The explanatory question that this point raises is what grounds this difference between the two sorts of argument.

The experiential account of firsthand insight provides a natural answer. Brute force arguments compel by the force of demonstration because they do not change how you experience their conclusions. The argument by cases doesn’t make the formula seem to be true

⁵ Browsing the website Math Stack Exchange for posts with titles like “the intuition behind the result” will turn up abundant evidence that this is a real distinction and that insightful arguments are often thought to be desirable.

in itself. Insightful arguments, on the other hand, enable insight because they do change your experience of their conclusions. The argument by redescription changes your representation of the operation that the formula uses to calculate the bigger of two numbers. For example, $a + b$ becomes adding the bigger number to the smaller number and $|a - b|$ becomes the difference by which the smaller number falls short of the bigger number. Changing the way in which you represent an operation is a common way to reveal otherwise hidden features of that operation, and I think this is an example of that phenomenon. The result in this case is an experience that displays what makes the formula true. Having the experience depends on going through the reasoning. But it is nonetheless an experience of an aspect of the operation in virtue of which that operation correctly calculates the bigger of two numbers. So, if you know that the formula is true based on this experience, you thereby know that the formula is true based on an experience of what makes the formula true. This is how the insightful argument by redescription enables firsthand insight.

Sosa's observation and Spinoza's observation are importantly similar. If you are persuaded by one, then it seems to me that you should be persuaded by the other. Sosa's observation tells us that firsthand insight is compatible with dependence on another person so long as that dependence takes the form of guidance, rather than testimony. Spinoza's observation tells us that firsthand insight is compatible with dependence on reasoning so long as reasoning plays an insight enabling role, rather than the role of compelling belief by the force of demonstration. Arguably, reasoning plays an insight enabling role just when going through it guides you to firsthand insight. So, with respect to both persons and arguments there is a species of dependence that is compatible with firsthand insight, namely that species which consists in guidance. It is less obvious how to generalize over deference and compulsion by demonstration. One merit of the experiential account is that it suggests the following natural idea. Deference and compulsion by demonstration are similar in that neither produces the right kind of experience.

Most people would agree that knowing that P by experiencing what makes P true is a way to gain firsthand insight into P. I take Sosa to agree, for example, when he describes firsthand insight into the success of an artwork in the following way:

One experiences the work in the relevant way—be it a piece of music, a painting, or a novel—and one discerns the reasons for the work's success through firsthand experience. (Sosa 2021, pg. 8)

What's more debatable is whether the experiential account captures the nature of firsthand insight. One worry is that experience is not essential. For example, maybe zombies can have firsthand insight.⁶ Another worry is that there is some deeper and more general account that explains what it is about experience that enables it to provide firsthand insight when it does so, leaving open whether something other than experience could do the same.

⁶ I bracket this worry here. I think it can be met by drawing on views about the interrelations among firsthand insight, epistemic justification, and consciousness, but pursuing these here would take the discussion too far of course. I am sympathetic with Declan Smithies' treatment of zombies in (2019).

A natural thought along these lines is to build an account of firsthand insight around the idea of epistemic agency. Sosa suggests such an account from two avenues. One approaches epistemic agency via the notion of competence:

Firsthand knowledge in pursuit of understanding requires that you reach your answer through competence seated in yourself, not through sheer deference to others. (Sosa 2021, pg. 11)

The other avenue approaches epistemic agency via the notion of reason. For example, Sosa describes being guided to firsthand insight in the following way:

Having been made aware of good available reasoning, you can then make it your own, so that the success of your judgment is then a firsthand success. (Sosa 2021, pg. 12)

The common thread is that firsthand insight into P consists of knowledge that P that appropriately manifests epistemic agency. If a belief based on experience amounts to firsthand insight, then it does so because it thereby appropriately manifests epistemic agency.

The main challenge to accounts of firsthand insight built around the idea of epistemic agency is to explain what an appropriate manifestation of epistemic agency is such that it is compatible with guidance and insightful argument, but incompatible with testimony and brute force argument. I'm skeptical that this is possible without introducing experiences of the sort that I've been discussing.

One problem is ruling out beliefs based on brute force argument. Suppose you are a mathematician and are fully competent with arguments that rely on manipulating inequalities and absolute values and the like. We can suppose you've worked out their validity from basic principles for yourself. When you go through the argument by cases for the formula calculating the bigger of two numbers, then you might thereby convince yourself that the formula is true. But this is different from gaining firsthand insight into its truth. The formula itself might remain opaque to you. This is especially likely in other examples where there are many more than two cases to consider. Then I'd say you lack firsthand insight into the truth of the formula even though you are manifesting a high grade of epistemic agency, however one chooses to rank such grades.

The difference between guidance and testimony also poses a challenge. Cases of "sheer deference" are easy to distinguish from guidance. There is a spectrum of cases, however, that runs from believing that P because someone tells you that P to believing that P because someone tells you where to look to find out whether P. Consider Plato's *Meno*. Does Socrates guide the slave boy to firsthand insight into the fact that doubling the side of a square quadruples its area? The text of the dialogue permits imagining two fictions. In both fictions, the slave boy makes a series of judgments in response to Socrates' questioning. In one fiction, making that series of judgments provides the slave boy with firsthand insight, but in the other fiction, there is a series of judgments culminating in knowledge that doubling the side of a square quadruples its area, but no firsthand insight. I find it difficult to see what it is about the slave boy's epistemic agency that I might imagine differently that could explain the difference in whether he gains firsthand insight. It seems to me that the difference must reside in whether

the slave boy's judgments fall into place for him in a way that results in an appropriate experience.

For these reasons I'm inclined to think the experiential account expresses the nature of firsthand insight. This claim is compatible with there being derivative relations to epistemic agency. For example, if you know that P is true by experiencing what makes P true, then you thereby manifest some epistemic agency. You at least need to have the relevant capacity for experience. So, I'm not suggesting that you can have firsthand insight without manifesting epistemic agency. Nor am I suggesting that it is impossible to circumscribe a form of epistemic agency whose manifestation is coextensive with attaining firsthand insight. Rather, I'm suggesting that what constitutes something as an instance of firsthand insight is its basis in a kind of experience. That is its nature, and any relation to epistemic agency derives from it.

2. The Value of Firsthand Insight

Let's return to the example of Beatrice and the season finale:

Season Finale

Beatrice regularly meets with friends to watch a television series. She is out of town for the series finale. Her friends tell Beatrice that it cleverly connects different plotlines resulting in a surprising but well-motivated cliffhanger. Overcome by fan enthusiasm, one blurts out key spoilers, and Beatrice thereby learns why the episode counts as cleverly connecting different plotlines, etc. Still, Beatrice would like to see for herself, and watches the show when she has a chance.

Beatrice already knows why the season finale counts as cleverly connecting different plotlines, etc., but desires to learn the same thing again through firsthand insight. An account of the value of firsthand insight should say what value motivates Beatrice's desire, and desires like hers. This should be a real value that firsthand insight is especially suitable to realize.⁷

We can set aside anything like the values of reliability or certainty. These are real values, but they are not values that firsthand insight is especially suitable to realize. If one is motivated by reliability or certainty, then it might be best to defer to an expert rather than pursue firsthand insight.

Two other values discussed in the epistemological literature are intellectual autonomy and intellectual achievement (cf. Zagzebski 2013, Pritchard 2016). I'm skeptical that either one of these values is the value of firsthand insight. Here I will only briefly indicate why, since there isn't space to fully consider these values and also develop a positive proposal.

The basic idea of intellectual autonomy is self-governance in judgment. One way to develop the basic idea is in the direction of self-reliance: intellectual autonomy requires judging independently of input from others. Firsthand insight does not have this value because it is

⁷ My use of the idea of real value depends on minimal commitments with respect to the metaphysics of value. Any reasonable account of the nature of value should recognize a distinction between desires motivated by arbitrary fetishes and desires motivated by something that really speaks in favor of their object.

compatible with guidance. Another way to develop the idea of intellectual autonomy is in the direction of self-legislation: intellectual autonomy requires judging based on reasons you recognize as such. Firsthand insight is not especially suitable to realize this value because firsthand insight is incompatible with testimony and testimony often constitutes recognizably good reason for belief.

The basic idea of intellectual achievement is the manifestation of ability in judgment. It is doubtful that the basic idea captures a real value. This is because every judgment manifests some ability, but only some judgments are valuable. Duncan Pritchard solves this issue by introducing the notion of strong achievement: “a strong achievement in addition demands either the manifestation of a high level of skill or else the overcoming of a significant obstacle to success” (2016, pg. 37). The problem now is that there is a mismatch between this value and the value of firsthand insight: working through a brute force argument is often more difficult than working through an insightful argument, but only the latter realizes the value of firsthand insight.

A more plausible candidate than any of the values discussed so far is the value of contact with reality. According to Mark Johnston, judgments based on experiences of what makes them true are “better than mere knowledge” because in such cases “a sliver of reality has been adequately *digested* in judgment” (2006, 289; see also Ranalli 2021). Perhaps firsthand insight is valuable because it is a form of contact with reality. I think something along these lines is part of the correct account, but only part.⁸

One limitation is that the value of contact with reality is too undemanding. It is not accidental to Beatrice’s desire that it can only be satisfied by a state of knowing why something is the case. If she watches the season finale, and finds it unintelligible, then she will thereby be in contact with the season finale, but she will not have satisfied the desire that motivated her to watch it. Her desire demands more than mere contact. It demands contact of a sort that provides knowledge of why the season finale counts as cleverly connecting different plotlines resulting in a surprising but well-motivated cliffhanger. Perhaps there is such a sort. Contact with reality is gradable.⁹ Maybe a contact-theoretic account of the value of firsthand insight can be developed according to which Beatrice’s desire requires a grade of contact sufficiently high to rule out finding the season finale unintelligible. Whether such a view is workable depends on what ways there are of grading contact with reality. There would have to be some grade of contact with reality whose value fully accounts for Beatrice’s desire. I think it is an open question whether there is such a grade. Setting that question aside for now, I note that whatever the answer, in order to explain the value of firsthand insight, we’ll need to invoke some idea other than contact with reality, if only to specify an appropriate grade of contact with reality.

Another limitation is that the value of contact with reality is too unspecific. One might want to be in contact with reality without wanting of each bit of reality to be in contact with that particular bit of reality. Some things are best kept at a distance, other things are aptly met

⁸ Nothing in what follows should be construed as challenging claims to the effect that the value of contact with reality fully accounts for the value of things other than firsthand insight, e.g., the value of experience as such rather than the value of experience as a source of firsthand insight.

⁹ I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me to take this point into account.

with indifference.¹⁰ Beatrice's desire, however, requires that she watch the season finale in particular. So, whatever value motivates her desire should combine with Beatrice's circumstances to generate a desire that requires watching the season finale in particular. It isn't clear how the value of contact with reality can do that. The challenge here is not that advocates of contact with reality are saddled with the implausible view that every bit of reality merits contact. Rather, it is an explanatory challenge: given that it is not the case that every bit of reality merits contact, what is it about this particular season finale that motivates Beatrice's desire to see it for herself? Here, again, we'll need to invoke some idea other than contact with reality, in this case to specify which bits of reality merit contact for which subjects.

Instead of contact with reality, I suggest that the value of non-alienation motivates desires like Beatrice's. Since non-alienation requires contact with reality, satisfying desires motivated by concerns with alienation will include being in contact with reality.

David Leopold neatly expresses the basic idea of alienation as follows: alienation consists in "the problematic separation of a subject and object that properly belong together" (Leopold 2018). For present purposes, we need only add a few additional observations to Leopold's formulation.

First, potential subjects of alienation are persons or relevantly like persons, and not whatever has psychological states of any kind, such as lower animals. Individual persons similar to Beatrice are paradigm examples, and our topic only requires considering such cases.

Second, the kinds of separation and non-separation that bear on alienation are a function of the distinctive subjectivity of persons, specifically their abilities to find and make meaning in their world. If Beatrice starves because she is physically separated from food, then that is a problematic separation, but it is not alienation. If Beatrice cannot properly participate in a cocktail party because she is vegan and the host only provided non-vegan snacks, then that is a scenario involving alienation. She is prevented from fully exercising her ability to enjoy the party.

Third, potential objects of alienation range across diverse categories. These include parts of the world that are not subjects, other subjects, and oneself. Beatrice might be alienated from the food at the party, the other attendees of the party, and herself if, say, she finds herself snacking on the non-vegan options after a night of drinking too much on an empty stomach. Some writers on alienation such as Hegel, Marx, and the critical theorists who follow them focus on alienation from whole domains, such as nature, society, work, or your real self (cf. Jaeggi 2014). But relations of alienation and non-alienation can involve less comprehensive ruptures and reconciliations. Here I'm concerned with these more limited forms of alienation.

Fourth, a subject's alienation from one object is systematically connected to that subject's alienation from other objects. For example, Beatrice's alienation from the food is likely

¹⁰ (Pritchard 2024) makes a similar observation and uses it to motivate refining our conception of the value of contact with reality. The refinement is that we want our system of beliefs to be grounded in contact with reality at "critical junctures." This idea is then recruited in defense of the view that truth is the one fundamental epistemic value. A harder line on the observation, suggested by an anonymous referee, is that it is always *prima facie* epistemically preferable to be in contact with the bits of reality one's true beliefs are about, but that this might not always be *ultima facie* preferable. I think either response to the observation faces the explanatory question pressed in the main text.

to result in her alienation from the other party attendees, since she will be unable to share in various experiences that would otherwise bring them together.

A fifth and final observation about alienation is that what makes a subject and object properly belong together typically depends on contingent and individual circumstances. The reason Beatrice ought to have options compatible with her food preferences at this specific cocktail party is that she was invited to it. It does not matter what is going on at other cocktail parties.

My suggestion with respect to Beatrice's desire to know about the season finale by watching it for herself is that this desire is motivated by the value of non-alienation.

One point in favor of this view is that the value of non-alienation does not have the same limitations as the value of contact with reality. The first limitation was that contact with reality is too undemanding. Contact with a bit of reality is compatible with finding that bit of reality to be unintelligible. But unintelligibility is a paradigm source of alienation. If Beatrice watches the season finale and finds it to be unintelligible, then she will be alienated from the show and likely also from her friends who did find it to be intelligible.¹¹

The second limitation of contact with reality was that it is too unspecific. It isn't clear how valuing contact with reality combines with Beatrice's circumstances to generate a desire that can only be satisfied by watching the season finale in particular. If we consider the value of non-alienation, however, then this is quite clear. Beatrice's membership in the group of friends who regularly meet to watch the show grounds the fact that missing that particular show's season finale is a problematic separation.

A second point in favor of thinking that Beatrice's desire is motivated by concerns with alienation is that firsthand insight is especially suitable to secure non-alienation. This can be appreciated by comparing their patterns of compatibility and incompatibility with testimony, guidance, brute force argument, and insightful argument. I claim that these patterns exactly line up. For example, if Beatrice deferred to her friends about the aesthetic qualities of the season finale, then this would result in various forms of alienation. She would remain disconnected from the show itself. She would be unable to participate in discussion and appreciation on an equal standing with her friends. And her own integrity would be in jeopardy if, say, she mimics their enthusiasm over the seasons' overall success. None of these forms of alienation would result if Beatrice's friends were to re-watch the season finale with her and comment on what to look for in order to appreciate the aesthetic qualities they have found in it. Similarly, if Beatrice made her aesthetic judgment based on mechanical application of an aesthetic theory or an inductive argument from previous season finales in the series, then that would prevent her

¹¹ An anonymous referee posed the following challenge. Given that both contact with reality and alienation are both gradable, aren't they on par when it comes to addressing the demandingness worry? Contact-theoretic and alienation-theoretic approaches to the value of firsthand insight will both need to specify an appropriate grade, be it of contact or of non-alienation, whose value motivates Beatrice's desire. Part of the point is well-taken. Let's say Beatrice's desire is motivated by the value of a certain grade of non-alienation. Another part of the point is open to question: as noted in the text, unintelligibility is a paradigm source of alienation, but it is not clear that it is an impediment to contact with reality. We need more theory surrounding the idea of contact with reality. Suppose it turns out that there is a grade of contact with reality that secures non-alienation. Then we can say: Beatrice's desire is motivated by the value of a grade of contact with reality that secures non-alienation. Suppose it turns out that grades of contact with reality do not work this way. Then the value of contact with reality cannot fully account for Beatrice's desire. Either way, the value of non-alienation seems to me to have a useful role to play.

from ordinary participation in aesthetic discussion and appreciation. Relying on aesthetic theory or aesthetically similar examples as guides to viewing, however, would not create the same problem. These observations suggest that a state can address alienation only if it is like firsthand insight in being compatible with guidance and insightful argument, but incompatible with testimony and brute force argument.

Sosa makes several observations about the value of firsthand insight, and a third point in favor of the view I've sketched is that it neatly accommodates these observations. These are summarized in the following passage:

Humanistic understanding can thus be desirable for at least two sorts of reasons. First, it can be required for the understanding of values and choices that should guide a rational animal. Second, it can also be desirable just for its own sake, for the satisfaction of our curiosity. This latter is crucial in the humanities, and in the liberal arts more generally, as with geometry. (Sosa 2021, pg. 10)

"Humanistic" picks out the approximate range of questions that are likely to call for answers based on firsthand insight. Examples in the range that Sosa discusses are why questions about the truth of the Pythagorean Theorem (4), the success of an artwork (8), the wrongness of an action (9), and the social constitution of artifacts (10). Examples outside the range that Sosa mentions are questions about the utilities associated with financial, legal, and medical options (4). This division lines up with the division between areas where alienation is more likely to be a concern and areas where alienation is less likely, though I wouldn't say impossible, to be a concern.

Sosa describes two sorts of reason for desiring firsthand insight into a truth. Reasons of the first sort are reasons that all rational animals have. Reasons of the second sort are reasons that depend on contingent and individual circumstances, specifically on the direction of a person's curiosity. Both sorts of reason can be seen to derive from concerns with alienation, and their relationship to each other can be understood in terms of how they derive from concerns with alienation.

Reasons of the first sort derive from concerns with alienation that are attributable to any rational animal. In general, rational animals shouldn't be alienated from the norms that guide them. Norms imposed without reason and norms imposed by compelling deductions that nonetheless obscure their ground are alienating. So, rational animals should have firsthand insight into the norms that guide them. I would identify such insight with what Sosa describes as "the understanding of values and choices that should guide a rational animal."

Reasons of the second sort that Sosa identifies do not derive from concerns with alienation that are attributable to any rational animal. They derive from concerns with alienation grounded in contingent and individual circumstances. Let's consider the case of geometry. Arguably, solving problems using the Pythagorean Theorem without firsthand insight into its truth is alienating. This is because in the context of solving those problems the Pythagorean Theorem expresses a rule that governs the course of your thinking. If your thinking is governed by a rule that remains opaque to you, then to that extent your own thinking becomes mechanical and alien. Not every rational animal needs to study geometry. Those whose curiosity leads them in that direction, however, will thereby be in circumstances that

ground the fact that failure to attain firsthand insight into certain geometrical truths results in a problematic separation that amounts to self-alienation.

So, tracing desires for firsthand insight to concerns with alienation shows how the two sorts of reason Sosa identifies are variations on an underlying unity. The underlying unity is concern with alienation. The variations derive from the different grounds for concern with alienation. Some grounds are general enough to apply to all rational animals. Other grounds are specific to persons, or kinds of persons, and depend on their contingent and individual circumstances.

Conclusion

One way to develop the widely recognized idea that in some cases the pursuit of knowledge is only satisfiable by some kind of firsthand, immediate, or face to face confrontation with the facts is to give an account of the nature and value of firsthand insight. This is also a way to answer Sosa's question, "Just when is a desire for outright understanding satisfiable only through firsthand insight?" (Sosa 2021, pg. 6).

According to the view I've defended, firsthand insight is knowledge that something is true that is based on experience of what makes it true, and it is valuable because it addresses concerns with alienation. To conclude, I want to sketch how this view of the nature and value of firsthand insight might illuminate some ongoing discussions in the theory of value.

These discussions concern the Acquaintance Principle in aesthetics, according to which "judgments of aesthetic value...must be based on first-hand experience of their objects and are not, except within very narrow limits, transmissible from one person to another" (Wollheim 1980, pg. 233). While many find the Acquaintance Principle suggestive of some truth about aesthetic judgment, few have endorsed Wollheim's exact formulation of that truth. One issue is how to understand "first-hand experience." Experiences of adequate reproductions should count as firsthand, and, arguably, firsthand experiences of non-perceptual art such as conceptual art should be possible. A second issue is the kind of normativity expressed with "must." The principle admits of constitutive, epistemic, dialectical, and evaluative readings. For example: only those judgments which are based on firsthand experience can count as *aesthetic judgments* (constitutive); alternatively, only those aesthetic judgments which are based on firsthand experience can be *justified* or *amount to knowledge* (epistemic), can be *appropriately asserted* or *given as reasons* in aesthetic debate (dialectical), or *can realize certain values* we pursue when engaging with art (evaluative).

My suggestion is to understand the Acquaintance Principle as indicating one central range of cases in which the pursuit of knowledge is only satisfiable by some kind of firsthand, immediate, or face to face confrontation with the facts. The example of Beatrice and the season finale falls within, or at least close to, this range. Given the suggested understanding of the principle, the account of the nature and value of firsthand insight offered here applies and yields the following interpretations. First, the principle should be read evaluatively. It says how aesthetic judgments can realize the value of non-alienation, or, more positively, reconciliation. This value is closely associated with post-Kantian writings about art, but it has resonances in

much work that foregoes any romantic or idealist commitments.¹² Second, “based on first-hand experience” should be equated with “based on experience of a truth-maker for the aesthetic judgment.” Reproductions are adequate when they reproduce the relevant truth-maker. If shape and color are key, then a reproduction might work; if size is important, then maybe not. Additionally, it should be clear from the examples I considered in developing the account of firsthand insight that experiences of truth-makers are not limited to perceptual experiences.¹³

The foregoing illustrates one way the account of the nature and value of firsthand insight developed here might bear on broader issues in the theory of value. The account suggests how to explicate and subsume a central principle governing aesthetic evaluation. I believe there are other useful applications of the account too, such as intervening in debates about the alienation objection to moral theories and providing a framework for comparing difference conceptions of moral perception, but I must leave these developments to another occasion.

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¹² (Nguyen 2020) also develops an evaluative reading of the principle’s normativity. His reading, however, centers on the values of autonomy and achievement. In this respect it is similar to (Zagzebski 2013) and (Pritchard 2016), and I believe some of the same reservations canvassed in Section 2 apply.

¹³ In a helpful explication and evaluation of objections to the Acquaintance Principle based on conceptual art, (Hanson 2015) sketches a congenial understanding of firsthand experience.

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