# **Expounding the Absence of Ernest Sosa's Situation Component in Gettier Cases**

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# Abstract

The virtue epistemological account of knowledge which Ernest Sosa espouses - in his works from the year 1980 to 2015 - is one of the propitious accounts in contemporary epistemology. According to this account, which postulates both belief and action as *performances*, knowledge is a case where the *success* of the belief *manifests* the *competence* of the agent. *Skill*, *Shape*, and *Situation* are the components for the success to manifest competence. This paper explicates how these notions can be delineated in the Gettier cases. It argues that *skill* and *shape* are present in the Gettier cases. However, this paper points out that the component of *situation* is absent in most of the Gettier cases. Nonetheless, this paper notes that there are Gettier cases where all these components are present such that *Skill*, *Shape and Situation* are not rendered as sufficient for *success* to *manifest competence* and thereby for knowledge.

**Keywords**: Virtue, Epistemology, Sosa, Gettier, Situation, Competence

#### 0. Introduction

The notions of *Skill*, *Shape*, and *Situation* are vital in the virtue epistemological account of Ernest Sosa. In Sosa's account, for an agent to have knowledge, the agent's belief's truth must be *because of* the epistemic competence (intellectual virtues)<sup>1</sup> of the agent. This will be obtained only if the *truth* of the belief *manifests* competence. For the truth to manifest competence, it has to fulfill the conditions of *Skill*, *Shape*, and *Situation*. The aim of this paper is to examine as to how these notions play a role in the Gettier cases. One should expect that at least one of these conditions should be absent in the Gettier cases as they are not cases of knowledge. However, how exactly this is the case is not articulated clearly in the works of Sosa.<sup>2</sup> This paper attempts to throw light on this issue.

First, in section 1, the virtue epistemological account of Ernest Sosa, available in his works from the year 1980 to 2015, is presented. In section 2, the Gettier

problem is presented. Section 3 examines the role of *Skill, shape, and Situation*, which Sosa introduces, in Gettier cases. It is obvious that the component of Skill and shape are present in the Gettier cases. The component of situation seems to be missing in them. This paper examines the ways in which this happen in the Gettier cases. It also points out that there is a Gettier case where all the three components – Skill, Shape and Situation – are present to suggest that the *Skill, Shape, and Situation* are not jointly sufficient for knowledge.

# 1. Virtue Epistemology of Sosa

According to Ernest Sosa both belief and action are *performances*. Hence, they both have the same normative criteria. Both belief and action can be either successful or failure. A belief is successful/accurate if it is true and a failure if it is not true. An action is successful if it attains its aim and a failure if it does not. For instance, when archer shoots at a target and hits it, the performance is a successful/accurate one. Sosa holds that as archery has the goal of hitting the target, belief formation has the goal of getting it right. These goals need not necessarily be intentional. For example, if one is standing still like a statue for several hours, while her mind is wandering elsewhere, can be considered as a performance. Sosa construes performances in a broad fashion such that mechanical processes and natural world can be included under the notion. In his view, a heart's pumping of blood, and a ship's withstanding a storm are cases of performances. This is so since the pumping the blood and withstanding a storm are goals of heart and ship respectively. One might even wonder whether Sosa is humanising the natural world in an attempt to naturalise intentions.

Another level of evaluation is that of *adroitness*. An action can be done adroitly. When the archer shoots at a target if she exercises the relevant archery skills properly, then it can be called as an *adroit* shot. A shot might be considered as *adroit* even when it is not successful. For example, even after shooting well the archer might fail in hitting the target due to factors such as an unexpected wind. Similarly, a belief can be formed adroitly too. A belief can be true/successful because of its adroitness. An action can be successful/accurate because of its adroitness too. A performance that is successful because of its adroitness is called as *apt performance*. Knowledge is an instance of *apt performance*. Knowledge is *apt belief*. In the case of an *apt performance*, the *success* of the performance *manifests competence*. Notice that a performance manifesting competence is different from its success manifesting competence. A performance can manifest competence even when it is not successful. So, in the case of knowledge, the *truth* of the belief *manifests* the epistemic competence of the agent. This is the gist of the elegant account of knowledge which Sosa provides.

This notion of *success manifest competence* is a central notion in Sosa's account. As we have seen, Sosa characterizes apt performance as a *performance* whose success (accuracy) is *because of* competence. Sosa painstakingly unpack the because of clause in his account with the help of the metaphysical notion of

success manifesting competence. Sosa takes this notion to be a familiar one which enables us to understand the normativity of performances: both belief and action.

# 1.1 Conditions for 'Success Manifests Competence'

In cases where the success *manifests* competence, in Sosa's account, the following three conditions are satisfied: (a) *shape*; (b) *situation* and; (c) *skill/seat.*<sup>3</sup>

# **1.1.1 Shape**

To succeed with the aid of the *skill*, the agent should be in a proper *shape*. For instance, the agent should be sober, awake and so on. Suppose that Ajay is driving a car. Though he is a competent driver, Ajay is drunk at the moment. As a result, he is currently not able to drive the car properly. We don't want to say that Ajay does not have driving skills. Rather, we would say that the relevant driving skills which Ajay possess are not manifested in the performance. This is so since Ajay, the agent is not in a proper *shape*<sup>4</sup>

#### 1.1.2 Situation

For an agent's skill to be manifested in the performance, (s)he has to be in right kind of *situation*. Suppose that Ajay, who possesses driving skills, is driving on an oily road and thus is not able to drive properly. In this case, it is not correct to say that Ajay does not have driving skills. Though Ajay has driving skills, he is unable to drive properly since he is in an improper *situation*<sup>5</sup>

### 1.1.3 Skill / Seat

Whether one has a *skill* / Seat is a modal matter. If one has the skill, one is likely to succeed in most of the cases. But one is not likely to succeed under any circumstance. One (who possesses the relevant skill) is likely to succeed in instances where *shape* and *situation* conditions are present. Sosa says the following

"Competences are a special case of dispositions, that in which the host is disposed to succeed when he tries, or in which the host seats a relevant skill, and in the proper shape and situation, such that he tries in close enough worlds, and in the close enough worlds where he tries, he reliably enough succeeds"

The skill remains in the agent even if one is not in the proper *shape* and *situation*. For instance, if one is asleep, one is not in proper *shape* to exercise certain skills such as driving skills. However, the basic skill ('innermost skill' as Sosa sometimes calls it) is retained even while the agent is asleep. Similarly, though one is a skillful driver, one may not be able to drive properly on an oily road. In such a scenario, though the agent is not able to drive properly, the basic driving skills of the agent is retained. For an agent to succeed reliably, (s)he has to exercise her/his *skill* in the appropriate *shape* and *situation*. In the case of driving,

for example, there is a range of *shape* and *situation* conditions one needs to satisfy to drive well.

#### 2. The Gettier Problem

Edmund Gettier<sup>7</sup> shows that justified true belief is not a sufficient condition for knowledge. Gettier proposes some counter examples to the definition which holds knowledge as justified, true belief. Later on, following Gettier's examples, many counter examples have been formulated which have resemblance with the structure of Gettier's original examples. All these examples which follow the structure of Gettier's original examples are referred to as *Gettier cases*. Linda Zagzebski<sup>8</sup> holds that Gettier cases have a mutually cancelling bad luck/ good luck structure. First, in the belief formation, a bad luck happens which can thwart the agent from getting her/his belief true. However, a good luck scenario emerges which cancel the effect of the misfortune. Thus, at the end, the agent ends up having a true belief. Zagzebski points out that all Gettier cases have this structure.

Allan Hazlet classifies Gettier cases as follows:

a) "Cases in which someone reasonably infers a true conclusion from a false premise that she believes with justification" 9

Eg. Gettier's original cases. Here is one such case provided by Gettier.

Jone's Ten Coins: Smith and Jones appeared for a job interview. Smith has strong reasons to believe that Jones is the man who will get the job. The president of the company told Smith that Jones is the man who will get the job. Smith had counted the coins in the pocket of Jones a few minutes ago and he believes that Jones has ten coins in his pocket. On the basis of these, Smith reasonably infers that 'the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket'. However, the information which Smith received from the president of the company is false. It is Smith who will get the job and not Jones as the president of the company told to Smith. Unknown to Smith, Smith himself has ten coins in his pocket. Thus, Smith's belief that 'the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket' is true.<sup>10</sup>

Smith has a justified true belief: 'the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket'. We would not want to count this justified true belief as knowledge. This is so since one of the premises that are used in the inference is false (the premise that 'Jones is the man who will get the job')

Another type of Gettier case which Hazlet<sup>11</sup> mentions is the following.

b) Someone believes in a true proposition. (S)he is justified in believing it. But the agent's belief is caused by something other than the state of affairs due to which the proposition true.

Eg. Roderick Chisholm's case of the sheep in the field.

**Sheep in the Field**: "A person *takes* there to be a sheep in the field and does so under conditions which are such that, when under those conditions a person takes there to be a sheep in the field, then it is *evident* for that person that there is a sheep in the field. The person, however, has mistaken a dog for a sheep and so what he sees is not a sheep at all. Nevertheless it happens that there *is* a sheep in another part of the field".

Here, the person's belief is justified since he formed his belief through perception; which is a reliable way of forming beliefs. The person's belief is true since there indeed is a sheep in the field. Thus, the person has a justified true belief. However, what the person sees is not a sheep; it is a dog. The person mistakenly believes that the dog which (s)he sees is a sheep. So, it is not the case that the presence of the sheep in the field causes the person to believe the proposition that 'there is a sheep in the field. What makes this proposition true is the fact that there is a sheep in the field. What causes the agent to believe the true proposition is the fact that he sees the dog in the field (which the agent erroneously believes to be a sheep). That is to say that in the above-mentioned case of Chisholm, the agent's belief is caused by something other than the state of affairs due to which the proposition true. Since the justified true belief is caused by something other than the state of affairs due to which it is true, it is not qualified to be knowledge.

The third type of Gettier kind of case, according to Hazlet<sup>13</sup> is the following.

c) Someone believes a true proposition on some basis. The agent is justified in believing the proposition. But the abnormal environmental condition makes it such that the agent would easily have believed a false proposition on the basis of the same or a similar basis.

E.g. The fake barn case of Alvin Goldman

**Fake Barn Case**: Henry drives in a fake barn country where the area is full of fake barns which are indistinguishable from the real barns. There is only one real barn that exists in that area. The fact that the area is filled with fake barns is not known to Henry. Henry sees a barn at a distance and believes that what he sees is a barn. He indeed was looking at a real barn which happens to be the only real barn in that area<sup>14</sup>

Henry could have got his belief false very easily. Had he looked at a fake barn, he would have still believed that what he sees is a real barn. It is only out of sheer epistemic luck that he happened to be looking at a real barn which is the only real barn in that entire area. Thus, in some sense, it is a matter of serendipity that Henry got his belief to be true. So, one might think that though Henry has a justified true belief, it cannot be counted as a piece of knowledge.

# 3. Skill, Shape, and Situation in Gettier Cases

It would seem as a platitude that the condition of *skill* and *shape* are fulfilled in the Gettier cases. In all the Gettier cases, the agent forms the belief with the application of epistemic competence. The agents in the epistemic cases do their best by properly applying their epistemic competence while they form their beliefs. Also the examples are construes in such a way where the agents are not having defects on their part. That is why one will have to hold that they are in proper shape. That is precisely why it is considered uncontroversial that the agents in the Gettier cases are justified in holding the beliefs they do. However, the status of *situation* is not so clear. The following discussion shows that the component of situation is absent in most of the Gettier cases. It also shows that there are some Gettier cases where all the *skill*, *shape*, *and situation* components are obtained.

#### 3.1 Situation Condition in Gettier Kind of Cases

It seems that the condition of the *situation* is not satisfied in several Gettier cases. This section examines some of the Gettier kind of cases and shows that the condition of proper *situation* is not satisfied in those cases. However, I point out that there is a Gettier kind of case which satisfies the condition of *situation* along with *skill* and *shape* and thereby establishing that *skill*, *shape* and *situation* are not jointly sufficient for the success to *manifest* competence.

#### 3.1.1. 'Situation' in Jones Ten Coins

Let us examine the following Gettier case- which is one of Gettier's own examples.

Jone's Ten Coins: Smith and Jones appeared for a job interview. Smith has strong reasons to believe that Jones is the man who will get the job. The president of the company told Smith that Jones is the man who will get the job. Smith had counted the coins in the pocket of Jones a few minutes ago and he believes that Jones has ten coins in his pocket. On the basis of these, Smith reasonably infers that 'the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket'. However, the information which Smith received from the president of the company is false. It is Smith who will get the job and not Jones as the president of the company told to Smith. Unknown to Smith, Smith himself has ten coins in his pocket. Thus, Smith's belief that 'the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket' is true. Thus, Smith has a belief which is both justified and true. But we do not want to hold that Smith knows that 'the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket'.

The testimony is received from a reliable source: the president of the company. It is a reliable source of testimony on this matter. The President of the company is one of the highest officials who take important decisions in the interview board.

However, the information which Smith received from the president (of the company) is false due to some reasons. <sup>16</sup> The *situation* condition is not satisfied here. The agent is situated in an unfortunate scenario where the testimony (from the president) is false despite the testifier (the president of the company) is reliable in general. Thus, we can say that the agent is not in the right *situation*.

It might seem that to maintain that the agent, in this case, is not in the right situation is to construe 'right situation' in a too narrow fashion. It might seem that generally testimonies in the kind of scenario where the agent is present, we should say that the agent is in the right situation. It might be argued that the fact that the testimony turned out to be false in one particular case should not lead us to say that therefore, the agent is not in the right situation. Generally, in this kind of scenario the agent gets a testimonial belief which is true. Therefore, it might be argued, though the testimony in this particular case turned out to be false, it is not appropriate to say that the condition of right situation is not satisfied. The consideration behind such a position can be that if one usually gets testimonial beliefs true in certain kind of scenarios, we should hold that the right situation condition is satisfied in such scenarios, though sometimes we get false testimonial beliefs. It might be argued, though the testimonial belief in this particular case is false, the 'right situation' condition is satisfied since testimonial beliefs in this kind of scenarios are generally true. This suggests that the condition of 'right situation' should be construed broader than the way I did to diagnose the Gettier case Jone's ten coins above.

However, such an attempt to characterize the condition of 'right *situation*' has some unintuitive consequences. Consider the following case:

**Batter on the Sand Pitch**: Suppose that a cricket batter is batting on a sand pitch<sup>17</sup> during a practice session. Among the several pitches that are there on this ground, the curator of the pitch mischievously prepared one pitch with sand just to fool the batters. The pitch is built in a sophisticated way such that it is not easy to figure out that the pitch is filled with sand. The batter in the example is batting on this pitch (which is made of sand). However, all the other pitches on the ground are normal pitches. The batter failed to strike the ball due to the unexpected behaviour of the ball on the sandy pitch.

In the above example, one can hold that the condition of 'right situation' is not satisfied. It is true that all the other pitches on the ground are normal pitches that are not built by sand. Therefore, it is true that the batter can hit the cricket ball properly in a very near possible world (all the other pitches on the ground). The batters can hit the cricket ball properly on all the other pitches on the ground. It is also true that usually curators of the pitch do not prepare such sandy pitches like the curator in this case did. These considerations suggest that batters in similar kind of scenarios (i.e. batting on a pitch on a cricket ground) can usually bat well. Now the question is, should we be saying that the batter on the sandy pitch

should be considered as being in a scenario where the 'right situation' condition is satisfied? That does not seem to be the case. Though batters in this kind of scenarios - batting on a practicing pitch on a cricket field- usually succeed in hitting the ball well, the batter in our example is not in the right situation as far as batting in cricket is concerned. Intuitions suggest that the batter is not in the right situation for batting. In the light of this example, we can hold that in a similar manner Smith, in the example Jone's ten coins, does not satisfy the right situation. In Jones ten coins example, the testifier's testimony is false. Though a testimony in such a scenario is highly reliable, in this particular case, the testimony is false. In a similar fashion, pitches on cricket grounds for practicing are usually reliable pitches. They usually have predictable features. However, the pitch on which the batter in the example bats, is a peculiar one which is made out of sand and hence has unpredictable features (such as uneven bouncing of the ball). Thus, though testimonies in general are reliable, the particular case of testimony in this example does not satisfy the condition of right situation. Similarly, though pitches on a cricket ground are generally reliable, the pitch on the ground where the batter in the example bats is not a reliable one. Despite the fact that these are normal situations in general, they are not right situations in these examples mentioned. So, the 'right situation' condition is not satisfied in this Gettier case – *Jone's ten coins*.

In the case of the above example, an exact opposite scenario also will hold. Suppose that the batter is batting on the only normal pitch that is built on that ground. All other pitches are built with sand (in a sophisticated way where it is difficult to figure out that it is made out of sand) by the curator who is out of his mind. In this case, we can say that the batter is batting in the right situation. It is true that easily the batter could have batted on one of those sandy pitches. But given that he is batting on the normal pitch, he fulfills the requirement of 'right situation': the condition of the 'right situation' is satisfied. What matters is whether the conditions are satisfied in the actual scenario though they might have easily been not satisfied in a very near possible world.

# 3.1.2 'Situation' in Fake barn Case

Construing 'situation' in this manner is the reason why Sosa holds that the agent in the *Fake barn case* has knowledge.

**Fake Barn Case**: Henry drives in a fake barn country where the area is full of fake barns which are indistinguishable from the real barns. There is only one real barn that exists in that area. The fact that the area is filled with fake barns is not known to Henry. Henry sees a barn at a distance and believes that what he sees is a barn. He indeed was looking at a real barn which happens to be the only real barn in that area. <sup>18</sup>

Henry could have gone wrong very easily. However, given that he is looking at the real barn, the condition of 'right *situation*' is satisfied. Here, the *skill*, *shape*,

and *situation* components are satisfied. Henry knows that what he sees is a barn. <sup>19</sup> This further suggests that the analysis of the *Batter on the sand pitch* given above and the diagnosis of the Gettier case *Jone's ten coins* are in the right direction.

The condition of 'right situation' is not satisfied in many of the Gettier kind of cases. However, the *sheep in the field case*<sup>20</sup> which Chisholm presents is a case where the condition of 'right *situation*' is satisfied. Thus, this Gettier kind of case shows that satisfying all the conditions which Sosa suggests for success to *manifest* competence- *skill*, *shape*, and *situation*- are not sufficient conditions<sup>21</sup> for success to manifest competence.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper discussed the central ideas of Ernest Sosa's virtue epistemological account of knowledge. It discussed the three paramount components involved in the notion of 'success manifests competence': *skill, shape, and situation*. It notes that the conditions of *skill* and *shape* seem to be present in all the Gettier cases. However, the component of *situation* is absent in several Gettier cases. The paper provides an analysis as to how the *situation* component is absent in many of the Gettier cases. However, the paper notes that the *situation* component is also present in some of the Gettier cases. Thus, the paper argues that the *Skill, Shape,* and *situation* components are not sufficient for *success to manifest competence* and thereby for knowledge.

#### References

- 1. The terms such as intellectual virtues, competences, intellectual abilities etc. are used interchangeably in the virtue epistemological literature in general. Though there could be subtle differences among these notions on a closer inspection, as it does not matter much for the purpose of this paper, this paper also use them interchangeably as it is typically done by the virtue epistemologist in general and Ernest Sosa in particular.
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- and the pyramid: Coherence versus foundations in the theory of knowledge." *Midwest studies in philosophy* 5 (1980): 3-25
- 3. For a detailed account of these notions, see Sosa, Ernest *Judgment and Agency*. Oxford UP, 2015. pp. 26-30. In his 2010 work, Sosa uses a slightly different terminology for "Shape" and "Skill/Seat". instead of "Shape" Sosa uses the term "Condition"; and instead of "Skill / Seat", he uses the term "Constitution". This is a mere terminological difference and there is no difference in the idea. For details see Sosa, Ernest "How Competence Matters in Epistemology." *Philosophical Perspectives*, vol. 24, 2010, pp.465-475.
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- 13. Hazlett, Allan. "The maturation of the Gettier problem." *Philosophical Studies* 172.1, 2015. p.2
- 14. Goldman, Alvin I. "Discrimination and perceptual knowledge." *Causal Theories of Mind*, 1976: 174. p.772.
- 15. Gettier, Edmund L. "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" Analysis 23, 1963: p.122
- 16. We can assume that Smith has no reason to think that the president of the company will be dishonest to him. It is possible that the president of the company made a false testimony due to his confusion regarding the names, or since some files got misplaced in the interview board etc.
- 17. As we know, pitches for cricket are not supposed to be made of sand.
- 18. Goldman, Alvin I. "Discrimination and perceptual knowledge." *Causal Theories of Mind*, 1976: 174.

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- 19. Sosa holds that Henry has *animal knowledge* though he lacks *reflective knowledge*. Some of the results from Experimental Philosophy shows that the agent in Fake Barn case has knowledge. For example see Colaço, David. Wesley Buckwalter, Stephen Stich, and Edouard Machery. 2014. "Epistemic Intuitions in Fake-barn Thought Experiments." *Episteme* 11 (2): 199-212. Results from the experimental philosophy work in Machery, Edouard. Stephen Stich, David Rose, Amita Chatterjee, Kaori Karasawa, Noel Struchiner, Smita Sirker, Naoki Usui, and Takaaki Hashimoto. 2015. "Gettier across cultures." *Noûs* 50 (2) 1-20 suggest that the intuition that there are no knowledge in Gettier kind of cases is universal. However, this study does not consider the fake barn case specifically.
- 20. **Sheep in the Field:** "A person *takes* there to be a sheep in the field and does so under conditions which are such that, when under those conditions a person takes there to be a sheep in the field, then it is *evident* for that person that there is a sheep in the field. The person, however, has mistaken a dog for a sheep and so what he sees is not a sheep at all. Nevertheless it happens that there *is* a sheep in another part of the field" Chisholm, Roderick M., et al. *Theory of knowledge*. Vol. 3. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1989.
- 21. This point is argued in detail by Sreejith, K. K. "A Defense and Critical Appraisal of Sosaesque Virtue Epistemology." *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research* 35.2, 2018: 333-351.