

*Transcendental and Circular Reasoning* Ernest Sosa

Our topic is circularity in epistemology, which we take up in four sections:

*Section I. Blatant Bootstrapping.* Two forms of bootstrapping are explained, two forms of circular reasoning that seem vicious. One is the inference from the content of a perceptual belief to the conclusion that in so believing we are not misled about the perceptual conditions. A second questionable form of reasoning is the inductive inference from the track record of a gauge, assembled by repeatedly trusting its readings, to the conclusion that it is a reliable gauge. Each is formally valid, yet neither form of reasoning could possibly provide adequate justification for its conclusion. Why is that so? This first section offers an explanation.

*Section II. Beyond Bootstrapping.* That explanation is restricted, however, to bootstrapping that reasons to the conclusion that some reason-based way of acquiring and sustaining beliefs is reliable. A more general problem concerns also bootstrapping to the reliability of a *non*-reason-based competence. We cannot hope to provide a faculty with its required epistemic standing just by drawing the conclusion that it is reliable from a track-record argument based exclusively on data acquired through trusting that very faculty. Such a faculty, such a disposition to acquire and sustain beliefs, does need epistemic standing: epistemically good dispositions to form beliefs must still be distinguished from epistemically bad ones. But this sort of standing need not derive wholly from any reasoning, whether of a bootstrapping sort or of any better sort. The fundamental epistemic standing of our basic faculties derives rather from their serving us well in the harvest of information proper to a rational animal.

*Section III. Virtuous Circles.* Although our basic competences acquire epistemic status in the way explained, this status might still be enhanced with the help of proper reasoning. How such circularity can be virtuous is the topic of this section.

*Section IV. A Transcendental Argument.* An argument is advanced in defense of trust in our epistemic faculties, one that involves circularity of a sort. A transcendental argument with that conclusion, based on content externalism, has been prominent in recent years. The transcendental argument in this section is different, though complementary.