

Kornblith, Hilary. *On Reflection*.

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I. ON REFLECTION

Hilary Kornblith thinks that reflection is overrated. His is the minority view. Though few may sing reflection's praises aloud, it occupies a central and, some think, indispensable role in much of our theorizing across philosophy. It is a familiar, almost commonsensical, thought that what distinguishes us from the earth's "lesser" creatures is our ability to reflect. While cats and dogs run amok in the world, pushed around by their impulses, we rational animals are capable of much more control. We too run amok in the world—but we may also reflect and deem what we believe, want, or do unjustified, alien, right, or wrong. This capacity for first-personal reflection is what makes us human—it is what allows for the possibility of our knowing, reasoning, acting freely, and it is what makes us subject to norms. Or so Kornblith's opponents have argued. He challenges them on all counts. For both logical and empirical reasons, Kornblith argues, the capacity to reflect cannot be a necessary ingredient in knowledge, reason, freedom, or normativity. If any of these is in danger, he argues, reflection cannot secure it.

Though its subject matter is broad, there is a nice unity to Kornblith's project. He identifies a pattern across philosophy: a problem occurs at the first-order level, which (higher-order) reflection is supposed to solve. In the first chapter, the problem is unreliable belief formation. Reflection is meant to police our first-order attitudes and ensure that they aren't the result of wishful thinking, bias, or other sorts of error. In subsequent chapters, Kornblith unearths similar problems for reasoning, freedom, and normativity. Consider creatures who only have first-order states, like lions. Unlike reflective creatures like us, lions aren't subject to normative standards: they don't act for reasons, they aren't free to disobey their inclinations, nor is it true that they should be vegetarians or that we blame them because they aren't.

Kornblith argues that reflection is not the missing ingredient. Take the epistemological case. Our first-order belief-forming processes may well be unreliable, but the same is true of our higher-order belief-forming processes. In fact, we have good empirical evidence that reflection is often unreliable, so it cannot be what ensures our reliability.

This is Kornblith's empirical worry. He also raises a logical problem for those hoping to use reflection to enforce epistemic standards. Our beliefs are only justified, they say, if subjected to reflective scrutiny. However, this is a fully general claim that applies to all of our beliefs—including the reflective, higher-order beliefs. But reflecting on them would require us to form even higher-order beliefs. Since those too must pass reflective scrutiny, we are off on a regress.

A version of this problem arises in each of the remaining cases Kornblith considers. It is most familiar for Frankfurt-type accounts of freedom. According to Frankfurt, we act freely insofar as we do what we want but our wills are free only insofar as we want what we want. Yet there is no principled reason to stop there, Kornblith argues. "Once we recognize," Kornblith writes, "that mental states are not automatically self-legitimizing, we must recognize that this applies not only to first-order states, but to the second-order states we arrive at by way of reflection." There is no higher-order "magic," he concludes (135).

On Reflection is clearly an ambitious work. At less than two hundred pages, it may seem doomed to superficiality. (Though one is often left wanting more, this is true of many great works. Rarely will another thirty pages resolve the matter, and often enough, it will muddle it.) Kornblith avoids this fate. His characteristically crisp and concise prose allows him to accomplish much of what he sets out to do, while giving us a rich, readable, and enjoyable work. It helps that Kornblith's aim is to unearth a repeating pattern: he draws illuminating parallels among rarely juxtaposed ideas. Though separated by philosophical subdisciplines, each chapter builds on the rest, showing us, once again, the pitfalls of overestimating our powers of reflection.

Kornblith's primary goal is negative—to show how similar problems arise in dissimilar areas. Toward the end of the book, Kornblith diagnoses the temptation to succumb again and again to the same problematic dichotomy. We view our first-order processes in a third-personal way. We can thus see them for what they are—warts and all. We tend to view reflection, however, in a first-personal way, which blinds us to its imperfections. A clear view of reflection's strengths and weaknesses—and of what it can accomplish philosophically—can only be had, Kornblith argues, “by way of experimental work in cognitive science. The first person perspective on our reflective powers will not reveal them for what they are” (136).

Though we see the problematic pattern Kornblith presents, we are reluctant to be rid of reflection. This is because we see a potential solution to which Kornblith insufficiently attends. We think that there is a way of reflecting, or a kind of reflection, that can play many of the roles that philosophers have historically wanted reflection to play. We devote the remainder of our review to articulating this understanding of reflection and showing how it might withstand both the empirical and the logical traps which Kornblith sets for it. Our hope is to chart one promising direction for subsequent discussions of *On Reflection*.

II. WHAT IS REFLECTION?

Attacks on reflection can seem self-defeating, like attacks on intuitions in philosophy. These are our tools—our bread and butter—some say. Take them away and you pull the rug from under us. Even Kornblith must reflect to reach his conclusions. And how are we to evaluate his arguments except by relying on our reflective powers? Reflection may thus seem ineliminable, for “the deliverances of [other belief sources] bear properly only through reflections sifting and balancing” (Sosa quoted on 27). To deem a belief source unreliable, one must reflect on it and find it such. Reflection is thus indispensable. If we cannot trust it, then philosophy is a waste of time, everything is terrible, and we should all just give up and die.

This line of thought conflates two senses of ‘reflection’. True, to evaluate anything we must think about it. And the ‘thoughtful’ are sometimes deemed ‘reflective’. By ‘reflection’, however, Kornblith has something much more specific in mind: thinking about “one’s own first-order mental states in a first-personal way” (28). To reflect is to think, yes, but reflection is a particular way of thinking (from the first-person perspective) about particular things (our first-order states). It is not something we do all the time, nor is it obviously something we must do when “reflecting on” (read: thinking about) the reliability of reflection. We can think about the arguments and experiments Kornblith cites without putting our-

selves into it, as the more narrow sense of 'reflection' requires. Kornblith asks us to reflect on our beliefs and belief-forming processes in a third-personal way. If we do, he promises, we will see why reflection, in his sense, cannot do what we want of it.

About this much, we think, Kornblith is right: we can think about our first-order states in a first- or third-personal way. We can, however, distinguish even more narrowly between two ways of reflecting on our first-order mental states in a first-personal way. We may reflect and ask: What do I believe? What are my reasons? What will I do? Or we may reflect and ask: What should I believe? What should my reasons be? What should I do?

Although Kornblith doesn't make this distinction, his focus is quite clearly on questions of the first sort. He thus seems to view reflection as a kind of *observation*: it produces a report about the content of one's mental states. As with any observational report, it can fail to accurately portray its object. (That's no lady sipping that martini.) We can be wrong about what we believe, why we believe it, and what we will do. As cognitive scientists never tire of telling us, we are, in many ways, strangers to ourselves.

If this observational view of reflection is what Kornblith has in mind, he is right: it cannot do what philosophers have traditionally wanted reflection to do. But this is not how we reflect when we ask the questions we care about in philosophy. We don't ask 'what do I believe?' but 'what should I believe?'. While the first question may be of interest to psychologists, it is the second that is of interest to epistemologists. And while sociologists and anthropologists care about what we in fact do, ethicists care about what we should do.

When we seek to answer these normative questions, our reflection bears a much more intimate relation to its object than mere observation does. It's still reflection in Kornblith's sense: it's first-personal thinking about our first-order states. But in reflecting this way we do not learn about an independent object; rather, we *determine* an object. When we ask ourselves, for example, what we should believe, we often thereby self-consciously determine what we do believe.

Though Kornblith considers similar views, they are importantly different. Shoemaker, for example, thinks that for a reflective creature,

Every first-order belief constitutes a second-order belief.

But ours is the weaker claim that:

Every second-order belief constitutes a first-order belief.

This latter claim does not imply that every belief that a reflective creature has is reflective. It merely says that when a reflective creature does form a reflective belief, this belief constitutes its object—the relevant first-order belief. Believing that one believes that *p* entails that one believes that *p*.

III. HOW DOES THIS WAY OF REFLECTING AVOID KORNBLITH'S REGRESS?

Recall the regress problem as it applies to justified belief. If reflective scrutiny is required for beliefs to be justified, then justification is impossible. Each stage of reflection produces a new belief that is itself in need of justification.

If reflection involves just observing our first-order states, from inside our heads, then this regress may well be unstoppable. As we have argued, however, this is not the only way to reflect on our first-order states. Instead of reflecting to determine what we do believe, we can reflect to determine what we should believe. In determining that we should believe that p , we thereby, in the standard case, come to *self-consciously* believe that p . A self-conscious belief that p is one in which the first- and second-order belief (that p and that I believe p) are not distinct states. If normative reflection eventuates in such self-conscious beliefs, then the reflective content of these beliefs cannot be mistaken.

IV. HOW DOES THIS KIND OF REFLECTION AVOID KORNBLITH'S RELIABILITY WORRY?

Hasn't Kornblith shown, however, that reflection not only can be but often is unreliable? Not for the kind of reflection we have identified. Recall the two ways we might reflect: one constitutes an attempt to discover the origin of a belief, intention, and so on, while the other constitutes an attempt to determine whether to continue to believe, intend, and so on. The first way of reflecting is the observational, third-personal reflection we think Kornblith has in mind throughout. It is subject to experimental disconfirmation. But the second kind of reflection is one in which one's reflective judgments constitute one's reasons for belief. This kind of reflection is not subject to experimental disconfirmation. If I don't endorse q as a reason for believing that p , then, even if q originally caused me to believe that p , it is not now my reason for believing that p . And this is true even if q continues to causally sustain my belief that p .

This provides an alternative explanation for the classic experiment meant to show how bad we are at knowing our reasons. True, we may be bad at knowing what our reasons were. But we may still be authoritative about what our reasons are upon reflecting on what to believe.

Kornblith's reliability worry doesn't arise here because it is not possible for this way of reflecting to arrive at inaccurate beliefs about what one believes (intends, etc.). This is not because such reflection is hyperreliable; it is because reflectively believing that one believes that p on the basis of q normally constitutes one's believing that p on the basis of q .

This is not to say that there aren't aberrant cases in which such reflection is an imperfect guide to what I believe. I know that flying is safer than driving. I've seen the statistics, and I believe them. But I also know how nervous I get at the prospect of flying. So I keep the numbers close, studying them as my flight takes off. I believe that I should believe that flying is safe, and I do believe it. At the same time, my behavior evidences another belief: that flying is dangerous. At home, buying my ticket, I'm convinced everything will be OK. On the plane, taking off of the runway, I cannot help but think I'm going to die. Was I wrong to think, when I booked the ticket, that I believe that flying is safe? Or am I wrong now in thinking that, because I grip the hand of the stranger next to me, I must think that flying is not safe? What do I believe? Doesn't the difficulty of answering this question show that reflection really can fail us in just the ways that Kornblith suggests?

No. Just like the aforementioned study, which purportedly showed that we are bad at knowing our reasons, this case is, at best, equivocal. I might believe

that flying is dangerous without knowing it. I might also, at the same time, self-consciously believe that flying is safe. This is may be unusual, but it happens— we sometimes hold contradictory beliefs.

To get evidence that the kind of reflection we have in mind is unreliable, we would need to learn that, sometimes, when we believe that we should believe that p , we form instead only the belief that not- p . But what would that look like? Not the fear-of-flying case: there, reflection doesn't fail to determine its object. Rather, reflection fails to remove another, opposing object. While this might be regrettable, it isn't the kind of failure that undermines reflection's authority as we have described it.

V. A REALISTIC CONCEPTION OF REFLECTION

Kornblith thinks that philosophers have mystified reflection, infusing it with capabilities it cannot possibly possess. The way of reflecting that we have identified, however, is quite mundane. It is a familiar one we engage in—especially in philosophy. There is nothing magical about it. By reflecting, we don't merely discover our minds; we change them. It's as simple as that.

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LeBar, Mark. *The Value of Living Well*.

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What everyone ultimately wants is to live well, or so the ancients presumed. Famously, Aristotle supposed that there is something at which all our actions aim and reported that very nearly everyone says that this is “happiness, and identify living well and faring well with being happy” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1.4 1095a19). But this presumption has fallen out of favor, at least among philosophers, with little or no explicit consideration of the reasons for or against it (23). Mark LeBar's *The Value of Living Well* redresses this neglect. The book aims “to sketch a viable contemporary form of eudaimonism as a theory not only about what we have reason to do but also about the nature of reasons, values, norms, and other important elements of contemporary metaethical theorizing” (3), most noteworthy of these elements being recent Kantian-inspired constructivist approaches in metaethics.

The book has three parts. Part 1 introduces and defends an account dubbed *Virtue Eudaimonism*. Central to this account is the claim that we have a single ultimate end (chaps. 1 and 2). LeBar defends a form of eudaimonism involving five commitments (16):

(UE1) We have *ends*—that is, we “have objects of action that give us reasons for action, that ‘occupy space’ (we might say) in the economy of reasons of a practically rational agent” (10). These (typically external) objects