

## Book review

*On Reflection*, by Hilary Kornblith. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. x + 173. H/b \$47.95

There are first-order mental states such as believing that it will rain. There are second-order mental states such as believing that one believes that it will rain for good reasons. Reflection, let us suppose, is a process whereby we ensure our first-order mental states can be ratified by second-order mental states: we keep believing that it will rain just in case we believe that we believe that it will rain for good reasons.

Traditionally philosophers have championed reflection in at least one of two ways. Either they impose a reflection requirement: mental states meet a certain standard only if they survive reflection. Or they simply value reflection: mental states that survive reflection are better with respect to a certain standard than those that do not.

In *On Reflection*, Kornblith opposes both tendencies. Reflection requirements face logical regress challenges. Valuing reflection runs afoul of results in psychology. This dialectic plays out in the case of belief and the standards of being justified (Ch. 1) or based on reasoning (Ch. 2) and the case of choice and the standards of being free (Ch. 3) or responsive to norms (Ch. 4). Science will help us sort things out (Ch. 5).

From a distance Kornblith's project looks bold and subversive. Examined up close, however, this is not so clear. Kornblith makes many sensible observations. I doubt they constitute a strong case for revolutionizing how we think about the role of reflection in epistemology, action theory, moral psychology, and value theory.

Let us consider justified belief in some detail. One reflection requirement on justified belief states: your belief that  $p$  is justified only if it survives reflection. On the understanding of reflection as a process whereby we ensure our first-order mental states can be ratified by second-order mental states, this requirement implies that your belief that  $p$  is justified only if, after considering it, you believe that you believe that  $p$  for good reasons. As Kornblith convincingly argues (pp. 12–13), this view leads to a regress. For either your belief that you believe that  $p$  for good reasons is justified or not. If it is not justified, then it cannot contribute toward making your belief that  $p$  justified. If it is justified, then it must meet the reflection requirement, and so there is a regress. Kornblith's regress argument undermines *some* reflection

requirements. But this result is limited, for there are other more plausible reflection requirements it leaves standing.

Call reflection understood as a process whereby we ensure our first-order mental states can be ratified by second-order mental states *reflective scrutiny*. There are other ways of understanding reflection. Your first-order mental states might fit those second-order mental states for which you have good reasons. For example, you only believe what you have good reason for thinking you have good reason to believe. Call this *reflective standing*. Your first-order mental states might fit those second-order mental states you are in and for which you have good reasons. For example, you only believe what, for good reasons, you believe you have good reason to believe. Call this *reflective endorsement*. Reflective scrutiny is a process. Reflective standing and reflective endorsement are states. The difference between them is that reflective standing does not require being in second-order mental states, but reflective endorsement does.

These differences make a difference. The regress argument does not undermine reflection requirements on justified belief formulated in terms of reflective standing. Suppose your belief that  $p$  is justified only if you have good reason to believe that you believe that  $p$  for good reasons. Say you believe that here is a hand because you see a hand. Your believing that here is a hand because you see a hand might itself be a good reason for believing that you believe that here is a hand for good reasons. You do not need to think about the first-order belief. You do not need to form the second-order belief. The possibility of reflection requirements on justified belief formulated in terms of reflective standing is not a mere curiosity. They capture a plausible form of epistemic internalism. Kornblith writes as if all forms of epistemic internalism are undermined by his regress argument (p. 30), but this is a mistake.

Now let us consider the value of reflection—understood as reflective scrutiny. Are beliefs that survive reflective scrutiny epistemically better than those that do not? The basic outline of Kornblith's psychological argument (pp. 14–26) for a negative answer is this: (1) Beliefs that survive reflective scrutiny are epistemically better than those that do not only if they are thereby more reliable. (2) They are thereby more reliable only if reflective scrutiny is reliable. (3) Reflective scrutiny is reliable only if we can reliably identify the reasons for which we hold beliefs. (4) Psychology shows that we cannot reliably identify the reasons for which we hold beliefs. So: reflective scrutiny is not reliable, beliefs that survive reflective scrutiny are not thereby more reliable, and beliefs that survive reflective scrutiny are not epistemically better than those that do not.

Here are two limitations of this argument. First, the psychological studies Kornblith cites fail to support (4). At most—and space imitations prevent discussion of why this is more of a concession than is warranted—they show that introspection often misleads us about the reasons for which we hold

beliefs. But reflective scrutiny need not rely on introspection alone in identifying the reasons for which we hold beliefs. Maybe some philosophers think it should. But this is just one option out of many. Second, premiss (1) incorporates a controversial, unsupported assumption about epistemic value, namely that it just depends on reliability. In a later discussion (pp. 26–34) it looks as if Kornblith is prepared to explore other possible determinants of epistemic value, such as autonomy, but even there the argument depends on the unexamined assumption that reliability is the sole determinant of epistemic value: ‘From an epistemological point of view, we should value reflection to the extent that, and only to the extent that, it contributes to our reliability’ (p. 34). So as with the regress argument, Kornblith’s psychological argument might cut against *some* ways of valuing reflection on *some* conceptions of reflection, but it leaves open many alternatives.

Do Kornblith’s discussions of reasoning, freedom, and normativity fare similarly? The differences between reflective scrutiny, reflective standing, and reflective endorsement continue to matter. Inferential internalists endorse reflection requirements on reasoning. Even if Kornblith’s regress argument undermines reflective scrutiny or endorsement requirements, it fails to undermine a reflective standing requirement: your belief that  $p_n$  is based on your beliefs that  $p_1 \dots p_{n-1}$  only if you have reason to believe that  $p_1 \dots p_{n-1}$  support  $p_n$ . Paul Boghossian has raised different regress problems for such requirements, but Kornblith does not discuss them. The differences between different conceptions of reflective scrutiny also continue to matter. In the chapter on normativity Kornblith considers and dismisses the view that reflection is the source of reasons, assuming the idea must be that to find reasons in the world ‘we should look inside ourselves’ (p. 134). But a natural alternative is that the relevant form of reflection includes substantive a priori investigation. These are quick observations. At most they show that Kornblith’s negative claims cannot be properly assessed without drawing finer distinctions and formulating exacter arguments.

In chapter five of *On Reflection*—titled ‘Reflection Demystified’—we get Kornblith’s positive claims about reflection. He counsels philosophers to be empirically informed, especially about dual-process psychology. The nutshell version: there are ‘system one’ processes that are fast, automatic, and unconscious; there are ‘system two’ processes that are slow, deliberate, and conscious; they interact. This picture leaves out a lot of details. But what I found striking about Kornblith’s discussion is how little that matters.

He defends two positive claims about reflection. Firstly, ‘There is no basis for the view that reflection involves a kind of agency that does not exist without it’ (p. 153). The opposite view is that during reflection changing our beliefs becomes a kind of action we can perform. Kornblith points out that while we might engage in actions—such as reviewing evidence—that result in changes in beliefs, this is not the same as changes in beliefs being actions that we perform. This seems correct, but it is an observation one can

make, and Kornblith seems to make, quite independently of any specific empirical results. The second claim Kornblith defends is: ‘Just as first-order mental processes are realized in complex mental mechanism, we can only understand second-order mental processes by understanding the complex mental mechanisms which realize them’ (p. 154). The opposite view is that second-order processes — for example, reflective scrutiny — are less mechanistic than first-order processes. According to Kornblith the philosophers he criticizes in earlier chapters subscribe to this ‘mystified’ view and do so because while they think about first-order processes in a ‘third-personal’ way they think about second-order processes in a ‘first-personal’ way. I leave it to the reader to assess this. But I would like to observe that Kornblith’s commitment to this second claim seems independent of any specific empirical results. I endorse Kornblith’s counsel to be empirically informed. But being empirically informed surely means more than giving an overview of some empirical results before going on to give empirically isolated arguments for some further theses.

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