**EPISTEMIC JUSTIFICATION AND REFLECTION**

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**1. Smithies’s hypothesis**

In this enormously impressive book[[1]](#footnote-1), Declan Smithies presents an hypothesis about the connection between epistemic justification and reflection:

…we use the concept of justification because of its connection with the practice of reflection on the epistemic credentials of our beliefs. According to this hypothesis, justification is the epistemic property that makes our beliefs stable under reflection. (255)

I argue here that there is no such connection.

The suggestion that there is a deep connection between epistemic justification and reflection has a long and distinguished history, and there is no denying that it is an attractive idea. One finds the canonical presentation of this idea, of course, in Descartes’s *Meditations*. One sees it in Hume’s *Treatise*.[[2]](#footnote-2) More recently, one sees it in Richard Foley’s work.[[3]](#footnote-3) The idea, very roughly, is this. When one stops to reflect on the epistemic status of one’s beliefs, one tries to get oneself into reflective equilibrium. One wishes to reach a kind of cognitive stability so that one can satisfy challenges one might put to oneself from within one’s body of beliefs. When one engages in this project of epistemic self-evaluation and correction, it is reflection which sets the standards: what makes a belief justified is nothing more nor less than that it meets one’s reflective standards.

A variant of this idea requires, instead, that one be in a position to defend one’s beliefs from challenges that might be put to one by one’s epistemic community. Such a socialized view of justification is found in Wittgenstein[[4]](#footnote-4); in Wilfrid Sellars[[5]](#footnote-5); in Robert Brandom[[6]](#footnote-6); and in Michael Williams[[7]](#footnote-7).

Each of these ideas sees justification in dialectical terms: having a justified belief involves being in a position to respond to challenges which might be raised to that belief. This is a deeply subjective idea about justification. One can see this by thinking, first, about the socialized version of this idea. If I inhabit a scientific community, my beliefs are justified if I’m in a position to respond to the sorts of challenges which such a community might raise. But, by the same token, if I inhabit a community that resolves disputes by appeal to some local soothsayer, or some sacred text, no matter how addled that soothsayer, or that text, might be, then my beliefs are justified if I can respond to challenges from the community’s preferred source of dispute resolution.

The individualized version of this idea is deeply subjective as well, since my reflective standards and yours might be quite different from one another.

Alternatively, one might identify being justified with meeting certain objectively good standards: from logic, from the probability calculus, from objective reliability, or some such thing. The value of meeting such standards, precisely because they are objective, lends itself to various intuitive explanations: insofar as we value the truth, it seems, these objective standards will be valuable to us. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that these objective standards may be at odds with our own individual epistemic standards, the standards we would endorse on reflection. It is this potential conflict which is the source of the debate between internalists and externalists about justification.

Of course, Descartes, and various rationalists, thought the two approaches could be united in a single coherent view. On Descartes’s view, the perspective of the concerned epistemic agent, given the nature of the rational faculties which our creator has endowed us with, will perfectly match an objective perspective on epistemic norms. Epistemically, this is the best of all possible worlds.

Sadly, Descartes was wrong about this. The perspective of the concerned epistemic agent needn’t line up perfectly, or even roughly, with objectively correct epistemic norms. And this is what makes the debate between internalists and externalists seem so intractable. There is, it seems, a good deal of intuitive motivation for seeing epistemic justification in each of these two ways.

By offering an account of justification in terms of reflection, Smithies seems to line up with the internalist side of the debate. Unlike Foley, however, he does not embrace a full-throated subjectivism. Rather, Smithies wants to base his account of epistemic justification in reflection, but he wants to have his objectivity as well. In this respect, he is very deeply Cartesian, although he is not going to bring in a god to assure that subjective and objective elements align. So the big question for Smithies’s view is how he can bring these two perspectives into alignment—how he can assure that the reflective perspective will line up with something objective—without divine assistance.

**2. The goal of reflecting on our beliefs**

Smithies has a view about the point of reflecting on our beliefs:

The aim of this activity is to bring our beliefs into line with our higher-order reflections about which beliefs we have justification to hold. (256)

I don’t think this can be right.

First, this seems to assign an epistemic priority to higher-order beliefs which they just don’t have. Admittedly, if our first-order beliefs and our higher-order beliefs are out of step with one another, some revision is required to bring our beliefs into reflective equilibrium. One might hold, as Smithies suggests, that higher-order beliefs should always be in the driver’s seat when undertaking any such revision. Alternatively, one might hold that it is first-order beliefs which should always be in the driver’s seat: higher-order beliefs must be brought into equilibrium with them. More plausibly, I would suggest, following Goodman[[8]](#footnote-8), the very idea of reflective equilibrium rejects assigning epistemic priority in either of these ways. Sometimes, one will need to revise one’s first-order beliefs to bring them into line with one’s higher-order beliefs; at other times, it is the higher-order beliefs which will need to give way.

This issue is connected with the special role that Smithies assigns to reflection. Insofar as our higher-order beliefs are a product of reflective activity while first-order beliefs, in the typical case, are arrived at unreflectively, viewing epistemic justification as flowing from reflective activity brings with it this unnecessary valorization of the higher-order. But just as first-order beliefs are sometimes reliably produced and sometimes unreliably produced, the same is true of higher-order beliefs. Furthermore, just as some first-order beliefs may be out of step with our larger body of beliefs, the same is true of higher-order beliefs. There is no reason to assign epistemic priority to higher-order beliefs.

Second, whatever one might think about the issue of epistemic priority, I don’t think that we should see our goal on reflection as reaching equilibrium, or stability, or, to use a less flattering term, self-satisfaction. I notice that others, when reflecting on the epistemic standing of their beliefs, may reach stability not only too easily, but by way of satisfaction with unreasonable epistemic beliefs and unreasonable epistemic norms. Their reflective activity, instead of serving as a corrective to beliefs arrived at in epistemically unsavory ways, may simply serve to form a protective bubble around those beliefs, insulating them from, rather than subjecting them to, correction. Recognizing this, and recognizing, as well, that I may be subject to the same epistemic shortcomings, my goal in reflecting is not simply to reach equilibrium, or stability, or to be satisfied with the conditions of my epistemic house. Considerations of equilibrium for me, however I resolve the issue of epistemic priority, are a mere means, and not an end in themselves. I engage in reflective activity, however successfully or unsuccessfully, in order to make it more likely that my beliefs be true: *that* is my goal. And I similarly regard being in a position to respond to challenges to my body of beliefs, whether from within that very body, or from outside, in my epistemic community, as a means, should I be so lucky, to that goal.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Each of these points suggests that epistemic justification is not so directly connected with reflection as Smithies suggests. Epistemic justification may, at times, be achieved by way of reflective activity, but it bears no essential connection to reflection.

**3. Surviving critical reflection**

Some philosophers hold that in order for a belief to be held in a manner which is epistemically justified, one must have actually reflected on that belief’s epistemic standing and it must have survived such critical reflection. Laurence BonJour holds such a view. BonJour regards an epistemic agent who holds a belief unreflectively as epistemically irresponsible, and, as he explains,

My contention here is that the idea of avoiding such irresponsibility, of being epistemically responsible in one’s believings, is the core notion of epistemic justification.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Such a standard is, of course, extraordinarily demanding. The vast majority of our beliefs are arrived at, and sustained as well, without the benefit of reflection, and so this view has the immediate consequence that, at most, very few of our beliefs are epistemically justified. If one also holds, as BonJour does, that epistemic justification is a necessary condition for knowledge, this view leaves us with precious little knowledge.

Most philosophers who tie epistemic justification to critical reflection have a more forgiving standard than BonJour. They require only that a belief *would* survive reflection if it were to be subjected to such appraisal.[[11]](#footnote-11) Those who offer some such counterfactual test, however, do typically require that the epistemic agent be capable of such reflective checking. Indeed, this may be seen as a reason why, although we regularly talk of non-human animals as knowing all sorts of things about the world around them, talk of such animals having justified beliefs strikes many as simply misguided. If one lacks the capacity to reflect on the epistemic standing of one’s beliefs, on such a view, then one’s beliefs are never held justifiedly. The counterfactual requirement is thus typically presented in a way which leaves non-human animals, and very young children, incapable of achieving justified belief. It is not the fact that these creatures simply fail to reflect on their beliefs that deprives them of such epistemic standing; rather, it is that they are incapable of such reflection.

Smithies, however, is more forgiving still. He does not even require that a creature have the capacity to reflect in order to satisfy his version of the counterfactual requirement. (268) Even animals who are incapable of reflection may be such, on Smithies’s account, that they hold beliefs which would survive critical reflection, if only the animal were capable of such reflection, and so these beliefs count as justifiedly held. Thus, for Smithies, although he argues that there is a tight connection between the property of being epistemically justified and the process of critical reflection, the connection may, in practice, be exceptionally indirect.

Indeed, imagine for a moment that life on earth, and elsewhere as well, had evolved in such a manner that creatures capable of reflection never arose. Still, on Smithies’s view, creatures in such a world might hold beliefs justifiedly, and the explanation for the property these beliefs would have under these conditions would appeal to the process of reflection, a process which was nowhere to be found in the entire history of that world. Such a view seems a very long way away not only from BonJour’s view, which requires that a creature actually reflect in order to hold a belief justifiedly, but from Alston’s as well. One might reasonably wonder at this point to what extent we should view the property of justifiedly holding a belief as intimately tied to reflection on such a view. Features of actual processes of reflection do not seem to be playing any role on this account. If it is merely that certain features of a creature’s body of beliefs are ones which reflection would detect, and it is these features in virtue of which the beliefs are justifiedly held, then reflection has nothing essential to do with justification.

The concern I have here can be further elaborated upon by looking at what Smithies has to say about the processes that actually take place in adult human beings when we stop to reflect on the epistemic credentials of our beliefs.

**4. The actual processes of reflection**

Elsewhere[[12]](#footnote-12), I have examined the role which reflection plays in a number of philosophical projects—views about knowledge, reasoning, freedom, and normativity—and I have argued that the ways in which the psychological processes of reflection actually work make them unsuited for playing such foundational roles. The worries I presented there are, I believe, directly relevant to Smithies’s project.

Consider the way in which skeptical worries are often presented. It is pointed out that many, indeed, the vast majority of our beliefs are arrived at unreflectively, and this casual approach to belief acquisition leaves us open to forming beliefs in ways which no reasonable person would count as justified. We often, it seems, act as if we are crossing our fingers, trusting to luck that our beliefs will be formed in reliable ways, or ways which are appropriately responsive to our evidence, without so much as bothering ourselves to check as to whether this is so. And such a casual attitude not only seems deeply irresponsible, but, given the plain facts that we sometimes form beliefs too hastily, that we are sometimes biased in ways which are not only morally problematic but epistemically problematic as well, that we sometimes fail to do justice to the totality of the evidence we possess, it seems that we are bound to hold a great many beliefs which are epistemically problematic. And the solution to this problem, it seems, is to stop being so casual about the management of our beliefs. We need to take our epistemic lives into our own hands and take responsibility for our beliefs. The obvious route to such responsibility is to reflect on our beliefs and their epistemic standing, and to continue holding beliefs only if they pass reflective muster.

This way of thinking about epistemic matters, natural as it is, makes two different mistakes from the very beginning: it treats our unreflectively arrived at beliefs as epistemically guilty until proven innocent, and it treats our reflectively arrived at beliefs as epistemically innocent until proven guilty. To put things slightly differently, it makes the default assumption that unreflectively arrived at beliefs are especially susceptible to error, while reflectively arrived at beliefs are especially unlikely be a source of error.

I have argued not only that such default assumptions are entirely unjustified, but, in addition, a careful empirical examination of the psychological processes which go to work when we stop to reflect shows that they are especially unreliable in detecting our errors. If this is right, then the idea, common to Smithies and a great many other epistemologists, that reflection somehow sets the standards for epistemic justification, is fundamentally mistaken. The processes of reflection need to be treated just as we treat any other psychological process. We need to examine how it is that they operate in order to determine just how reliable they are. And we need to recognize, or so I argue, that these processes are sometimes very reliable; they are sometimes very unreliable; and they are sometimes largely epiphenomenal with respect to the fixation of belief, even when it seems otherwise from the perspective of the person reflecting.

It is, in my view, a real strength of Smithies’s work that he directly addresses these empirical worries about the nature of our reflective processes. He rightly points out (276) that reflection can, in a number of important circumstances, actually improve our reliability. As it turns out, however, this important point plays no role in Smithies’s defense of his hypothesis connecting epistemic justification with reflection. The reason for this is quite straightforward: it is not the actual processes of reflection, the processes which go on in adult human beings, which that hypothesis concerns. Rather, Smithies’s hypothesis concerns a kind of idealized reflection. More than this, the kind of idealization Smithies has in mind, what he calls a “robustly normative idealization” (278), has, as will become plain, very little to do with the reflective processes which actually take place in human beings.

**5. Idealized reflection**

Idealizations have an important role to play in scientific theorizing and scientific explanation. They are no less legitimate in philosophical theorizing. But not all idealizations are illuminating. Consider the proverbial ball rolling down an inclined plane. It is common, in explaining this kind of behavior, to abstract away from the influence of friction. In practice, of course, friction is always present in any such interaction, and it has an effect on the motion of the ball. But the effect of friction is often so small compared to that of other forces that it may simply be ignored. As a result, an idealization in which we suppose that friction is not even present may be useful, not only in predicting the motion of the ball, but in understanding the role of the other forces at work when the ball moves down the plane, forces which play a far more significant role in determining just how the ball moves. Many idealizations in science are of just this sort.

Of course, it would not make sense to ignore the influence of gravity on the motion of the ball and propose an idealization in which we suppose that there is no gravitational force. This would not be an illuminating idealization and it would serve no purpose in either predicting the motion of the ball or understanding the forces at work when it moves down the plane. If we abstract away from the influence of gravity, we thereby lose all contact with the phenomenon we sought to understand.

Idealizations are present in psychological theorizing as well. If we wish to understand how perceptual processes work, it is often useful to introduce certain idealizations. Just as idealizing away from the influence of friction allows us to better understand the motion of balls rolling down inclined planes, idealizing away from certain factors which commonly or invariably play a role in the uptake of perceptual information may allow us to better understand the workings of perceptual processes. Thus, for example, it may be especially useful to examine how visual perception works under ideal conditions—conditions involving excellent illumination, good contrast between illuminated objects, a complete absence of distractions, and so on—even if, in fact, such ideal conditions rarely if ever obtain. We are better able to see how the perceptual mechanisms actually work by isolating them from a variety of interfering factors and less than ideal conditions.

And the same is true of coming to understand the mechanisms involved in reflection. These mechanisms, as well, are subject in practice to a variety of interfering factors and less than ideal conditions. Even if perfectly ideal conditions never arise in practice, artificially creating such conditions in the laboratory, or approximating them, is a well-established route to understanding how these mechanisms work.

But as Smithies explains (278), his “robustly normative idealization” is not of this sort at all. Smithies is not asking how the various processes involved in reflection might work were it not for interfering factors or any of the sources of distortion which actually arise on occasions when we stop to reflect on the epistemic credentials of our beliefs. Smithies is not asking a question about the processes by which we reflect at all, whether in normal conditions, or substandard conditions, or even ideal conditions. He is, instead, abstracting away, not only from the various interfering factors and less than ideal conditions which come into play when we actually reflect on our beliefs; he is abstracting away, as well, from the very processes of reflection which go to work in whatever conditions we find ourselves. It is for this reason that I think it is quite accurate to say that Smithies’s idealization loses all contact with the phenomenon of reflection. And for this reason, I think it is a mistake to see Smithies as talking about reflection at all.

When Descartes suggested that *scientia* could be achieved by way of reflecting on the epistemic standing of our beliefs, he was making a claim about the actual process of human reflection. He believed that the light of reason was present in all of us, given by our creator, and that, properly used, it would lead us inevitably to true beliefs by way of objectively legitimate epistemic transitions. It was because of his views about human reflective processes and their origins in a beneficent creator that he thought he could show that the beliefs we take to be justified, as viewed under conditions of reflection, would of necessity conform to objectively correct epistemic norms. Descartes may have been wrong about all of this, but he was making a substantive claim about the nature of reflection.

Similarly, when Richard Foley identifies the property of being epistemically justified in one’s believing with the result of a certain reflective process, and he then goes on to deny what Descartes asserted—that beliefs formed by such a process will inevitably line up with correct epistemic norms—he too is making a substantive claim about the nature of reflection and its relationship to epistemic justification.

But when Smithies presents us with the hypothesis that “justification is the epistemic property that makes our beliefs stable under reflection,” he is not making a claim about reflection at all. Smithies’s hypothesis sounds like an exciting substantive claim about reflection and its relation to justification, much like the claims that Descartes and Foley make, but it would be a mistake to read it in this way. Consider Smithies’s summary of some of his central contentions:

In chapter 7, I argued for a version of accessbilism, which says that you’re always in a position to know your normative reasons for belief on the basis of introspection and a priori reflection. Moreover, in chapter 5, I argued that introspection is epistemically privileged over other ways of knowing about the world, including visual perception and explanatory inference. I’m not claiming that the mechanisms of introspection are completely immune from error—they are certainly not—but rather that introspective errors always reflect some failure of epistemic rationality. (278)

Accessibilism—the claim that one is always in a position to know one’s normative reasons for belief on the basis of introspection and a priori reflection—sounds like an exciting substantive claim. The empirical evidence which I’ve alluded to, and which I detailed in my book *On Reflection*, would suggest that such a claim, though exciting, is false. But Smithies is not making the exciting substantive claim that the empirical evidence shows to be false. Much as his use of the term ‘reflection’ does not refer to the psychological process of reflection that human beings sometimes engage in, his use of the term ‘introspection’ also does not refer to any psychological process that human beings ever engage in either. As Smithies acknowledges in the passage above, any such claim about the mechanisms of introspection Is just false. So what is being claimed here? And what is Smithies claiming when he makes the hypothesis that “justification is the epistemic property which makes our beliefs stable under reflection”?

As Smithies explains, his use of the term ‘reflection’ involves a “robustly normative idealization.” On this usage, what is involved in reflecting is engaging in a process which is normatively ideal. It is even misleading to talk about such a *process* here because it is not clear that there even could be any such process, nor is Smithies committed to the claim that such a process could exist. But it is clear that reflecting, on Smithies’s usage, involves conforming to a normative epistemic ideal. But now the claim that justification is the epistemic property which makes our beliefs stable under reflection, that is, when we conform to a normative epistemic ideal, sounds far less interesting, and far less substantive, than it initially sounded.

And much the same is true of Smithies’s version of accessibilism, which sounds like it is a claim about a certain psychological process—namely, introspection—but turns out not to be about that process at all, but instead about a certain normative ideal. It is not a claim about any psychological process, whether actual or possible, but the claim that it is, from an epistemic point of view, normatively ideal to know one’s normative reasons for belief. Put this way, it is clear that accessibilism really isn’t a claim about what we have access to, and it bears little relation to the various internalist theses which other philosophers have defended by that name.

**6. Conclusions**

I raised a question early on in this paper about how Smithies can assure that the reflective perspective should line up with objectively correct epistemic norms. Identifying justification with the property that makes beliefs stable under reflection raises problems for other internalists. Descartes needed to appeal to the beneficence of a divine creator to assure that there would be no gap between the perspective of the reflective epistemic inquirer and objectively correct epistemic norms. And Richard Foley, recognizing that such a gap is inevitable, accepts the consequences by endorsing a conception of epistemic justification which is deeply subjective and may therefore depart in quite dramatic ways from objectively correct standards. But when we see what Smithies has in mind, there is no problem here to address. He does not need the help of the gods to assure that objectively correct epistemic norms will hold sway under conditions of reflection and so he need not worry that, like Foley, he will open a gap, and perhaps a very large gap, between justification and objectively correct norms. Given Smithies’s normatively idealized conception of reflection, there is no problem here to address, no potential gap that needs to be closed. Operating under conditions of reflection just is defined in such a way that it is normatively ideal.

I don’t see this as an advantage of Smithies’s view. The problem of the divergence between an agent’s perspective and objectively correct epistemic norms cannot be solved by definitional fiat. The inevitable gap between the unidealized reflective perspective of human beings and objectively correct epistemic norms has given rise to the debate between internalists and externalists in epistemology. We can, with internalists, identify justified belief with belief arrived at (to a first approximation) under conditions of (unidealized) reflection, and then we need to acknowledge that such a view of justification may depart radically from any reasonable view of objectively correct epistemic norms. Alternatively, we can, with externalists, identify justification with some objective relationship to the truth, thereby assuring objectivity, but simultaneously allowing that such a conception of justification may depart in dramatic ways from the subject’s epistemic perspective. Each of these views, it seems, is forced to accept a deeply unintuitive consequence of their preferred account of epistemic justification, and anyone defending either view therefore owes us some explanation of why the deeply counterintuitive consequence of their view should be regarded as acceptable. Both internalists and externalists have spent a good deal of effort to rise to this challenge. The fact that these efforts have seemed unsatisfying to many has led, as well, to various attempts to offer views of justification which somehow combine internalist and externalist elements or simply allow for the legitimacy of both an internalist and externalist conception of justification. Focusing on normatively idealized reflection rather than the psychological processes that actually go on in us simply bypasses, rather than addresses, this problem. More than this, it presents an account of the epistemology of reflection which has lost all contact with the very phenomenon of reflecting on the epistemic standing of our beliefs, a phenomenon which not only serves as a motivation for engaging in epistemological theorizing, but a phenomenon which we need to understand if we are to understand the nature of justified belief and knowledge.

I have focused on but one aspect of Smithies’s exceptionally interesting and engaging work. I would not want the criticisms I present here to detract from my overall view of this book, that it is an extremely important contribution to the literature from which all epistemologists may learn a great deal.

1. *The Epistemic Role of Consciousness*, Oxford University Press, 2019. Page numbers in the text refer to this volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a particularly valuable discussion of Hume’s working out of this idea, see Louis Loeb, *Stability and Justification in Hume’s Treatise*, Oxford University Press, 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “What Am I to Believe?,” in S. Wagner and R. Warner, eds., *Naturalism: A Critical Appraisal*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1993, 147-162. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd edition, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, Macmillan, 1958. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Science, Perception and Reality*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, Harvard University Press, 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism*, Princeton University Press, 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Fact,* *Fiction, and Forecast*, 3rd edition, Bobbs-Merrill, 1973, 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Smithies cites (277) Christine Korsgaard with approval here as someone who offers a similar account of the goal of reflection. She remarks, “We need reasons because our impulses must be able to withstand reflective scrutiny. We have reasons if they do. The normative word ‘reason’ refers to a kind of reflective success.” (*The Source of Normativity*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, 93.) But Korsgaard’s account has the very same problem. Reaching equilibrium under conditions of reflection is not automatically any sort of normative success at all. One may, instead, as Emerson remarked, thereby achieve nothing more than a foolish consistency. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, Harvard University Press, 1985, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. As Smithies notes (257), William Alston defended such a view in *Epistemic Justification*, Cornell University Press, 1989, 225-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *On Reflection*, Oxford University Press, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)