

Against Kornblith Against Reflective Knowledge Timothy Perrine

Abstract: In *On Reflection*, Hilary Kornblith criticizes Sosa's distinction between animal and reflective knowledge. His two chief criticisms are that reflective knowledge is not superior to animal knowledge and that Sosa's distinction does not identify two kinds of knowledge. I argue that Sosa can successfully avoid both of these charges.

For over twenty years, Ernest Sosa has been distinguishing between animal and reflective knowledge. While the official characterization has shifted,¹ the basic claims about the distinction remain the same, roughly: animal and reflective knowledge are a kind of virtuous/skilled/apt performance; reflective knowledge is animal knowledge plus some type of "perspective" on one's belief and its fit with others; reflective knowledge is superior to animal knowledge; and reflective knowledge brings about epistemic benefits.

In *On Reflection*,² Hilary Kornblith has criticized Sosa's distinction. In section I of this paper, I identify two chief criticisms: (i) reflective knowledge is not superior to animal knowledge; and (ii) Sosa's distinction does not identify two kinds of knowledge. In section II, I argue that both of these charges can be successfully avoided.

I. Kornblith's Criticisms

In this section, I identify two chief criticisms Kornblith has of Sosa's distinction between animal and reflective knowledge.

First, *reflective knowledge is not superior to animal knowledge*. Kornblith's argument is this. Reflective knowledge is superior to animal knowledge only if by reflecting we are able to arrive at more reliable beliefs.³ As Kornblith writes, "The whole point in subjecting one's beliefs to reflective scrutiny... is to increase one's reliability."⁴ But reflection on one's belief does *not* increase reliability.⁵ Kornblith devotes an entire section to defending this claim, and concludes "...there seems little reason to agree with Sosa that reflective knowledge is superior to mere animal knowledge in virtue of the additional reliability which reflection provides."⁶ So, reflective knowledge is not superior to animal knowledge. More schematically:

(P1) Reflective knowledge is superior to animal knowledge only if reflection produces more reliable beliefs.

(P2) Reflection does not produce more reliable beliefs.

¹ Compare Ernest Sosa, "Descartes and Virtue Epistemology," in *Reason, Metaphysics, and Mind*, ed. Kelly James Clark and Mike Rea, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 121; Sosa, *Reflective Knowledge*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009), 75f.; Sosa, *A Virtue Epistemology*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 32; Sosa, "Knowledge and Intellectual Virtue," in his *Knowledge in Perspective*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 240; and Sosa, "Intellectual Virtue in Perspective," in his *Knowledge in Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 278. My concern is mostly with *some* characterization of this distinction being apt. Fortunately, for the most part, my response—and Kornblith's criticisms—do not rest upon the differences between these different formulations.

² (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). I focus on this presentation since it is his most recent; I'll draw upon previous versions of the criticisms when relevant.

³ *On Reflection*, 16, 18.

⁴ *On Reflection*, 16.

⁵ *On Reflection*, 20-6.

⁶ *On Reflection*, 26.

(C1) So, reflective knowledge is not superior to animal knowledge.

We can identify another criticism: *Sosa's distinction does not identify two different kinds of knowledge*. Kornblith's criticism here is closer to a challenge to Sosa to show he has identified two different kinds of knowledge than an argument that Sosa has not. Kornblith introduces his criticism by way of analogy. He considers a (supposed) distinction between what he calls "consultative knowledge"—roughly, knowledge I possess after I consult with a range of friends on some matter—and "non-consultative knowledge"—knowledge I possess when I do not consult with a range of friends on some matter. Kornblith's intuition is that, while there might be two distinct epistemic states here, there are not two distinct *kinds of knowledge*.⁷ Further, he finds Sosa's distinction to be analogous to this distinction, writing "it seems to me that the distinction between reflective knowledge and animal knowledge is *no better grounded* than the distinction between consultative knowledge and non-consultative knowledge."⁸

One might construe Kornblith as here arguing from analogy, roughly: the distinct between consultative and non-consultative knowledge does not identify two kinds of knowledge; Sosa's distinction is analogous to that one; so, Sosa's distinction does not identify two different kinds of knowledge. But this construal does not get Kornblith's criticism quite right.

Sosa has labelled two distinct epistemic states as distinct kinds of knowledge. Kornblith is challenging why they deserve this label. The consultative knowledge/non-consultative case is intended as an illustrative example of two distinct epistemic states that do not deserve to be called distinct kinds of knowledge. Without any positive reason for thinking that Sosa's distinction is unlike the consultative/non-consultative distinction (or many others like it that could be provided), there is no reason for thinking that Sosa has identified two distinct kinds of knowledge. Kornblith's challenge (as we might call it) is to provide some reason for thinking that this distinction identifies two kinds of knowledge.⁹

Before responding to these two objections, let me mention a third possible objection that Kornblith does not clearly separate from the second, namely: *Sosa's distinction is not illuminative; it is not a distinction worth drawing*. He writes that

Not every well-defined distinction, however, is worth making. We could define two different sorts of knowledge, one sort acquired on even-numbered days of the month, and the other acquired on odd-numbered days, but there would be little point in making such a distinction. We need to know why the distinction between animal knowledge and reflection knowledge is an illuminating one.¹⁰

However, as his discussion at that point continues, the criticism shifts to the second criticism, that Sosa has not identified two kinds of knowledge, *not* that the distinction is not worth making or is not illuminating.

It is difficult to identify what argument Kornblith has for this criticism that is distinct from the second, because he does not clearly distinguish between the two. Nevertheless, I intend to understand him such that this third criticism rests upon the other two—*if* Sosa's distinction does not identify two kinds of knowledge, and *if* it does not even pick out a superior epistemic state with reflective knowledge, *then* it is not illuminating or worth drawing. Consequently, because I'll be arguing that the first two criticisms fail, I will not spend any time considering this one.

II. Responses

⁷ *On Reflection*, 19.

⁸ *On Reflection*, 19, italics mine.

⁹ Conversation with Luis Oliveira and Keith DeRose was helpful here.

¹⁰ *On Reflection*, 15-6

In this section I respond to Kornblith's criticism in reverse order.

II.1 Sosa's Distinction Does Not Identify Two Different Kinds Of Knowledge.

Kornblith's challenge is to provide some reason for thinking that Sosa's distinction identifies two kinds of knowledge. Sosa can rise to this challenge.

Sosa is a virtue epistemologist; this means, among other things, that it is a particular cognizer and her performances that are central to epistemic evaluation. For Sosa, knowledge is a kind of excellence performance of a cognizer.¹¹ Thus, for there to be two different kinds of knowledge, there would have to be two different kinds of skills that a cognizer can perform. But animal knowledge and reflective knowledge involve two different general kinds of skills that a cognizer can perform. (At the very least, Kornblith has given us no reason for thinking they are not.) So, Kornblith's challenge can be met: there is a reason for thinking that Sosa has identified two different kinds of knowledge.

Kornblith might object that there is a problem of proliferation here.¹² For it may seem as if this response attempts to meet Kornblith's challenge by allowing for two epistemic states to be different kinds of knowledge if they originated in different kinds of ways. But then "we will have as many different kinds of knowledge as there are processes of belief acquisition and retention. Surely this multiplies kinds of knowledge far beyond necessity."¹³

But this response avoids this problem of proliferation. For the response is not there is a different kind of knowledge for each different way of forming and retaining a belief. The suggestion is that there is a different kind of knowledge for different *kinds of skills*. Further, the kind of skill displayed by reflective knowledge can be found across multiple modalities such as (e.g.) perception or memory. This kind of skill is thus general in nature. Consequently, it does not thereby warrant a proliferation of kinds of knowledge for each way of forming and retaining beliefs. Kornblith's challenge can be met without undue proliferation by understanding knowledge as a kind of general skill.¹⁴

II.2 Reflective Knowledge Is Not Superior To Animal Knowledge.

Recall Kornblith's second criticism:

(P1) Reflective knowledge is superior to animal knowledge only if reflection produces more reliable beliefs.

(P2) Reflection does not produce more reliable beliefs.

(C1) So, reflective knowledge is not superior to animal knowledge.

I press two responses: Kornblith has not done enough to establish (P2), and (P1) is false.¹⁵

Kornblith dedicates an entire section of his book to defending (P2). However, his argument there does not establish (P2). He spends most of his time defending the thesis that introspective scrutiny about belief *p* is an unreliably way to determine whether or not the particular cognitive

¹¹ See, *inter alia*, "Descartes and Virtue Epistemology," 117; *Reflective Knowledge*, 135; *A Virtue Epistemology*, 23, 31, 93.

¹² Cf. Kornblith, "Sosa on Human and Animal Knowledge," in *Ernest Sosa and His Critics*, ed. John Greco, (Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 132.

¹³ "Sosa on Human and Animal Knowledge," 132; cf. *On Reflection*, 19.

¹⁴ Kornblith might object that we should conceive of knowledge as a natural kind (see his *Knowledge and Its Place in Nature*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002)) and not as a skill, and knowledge conceived of in this way would not meet Kornblith's challenge. However, this objection would beg the question against Sosa. Furthermore, it would undermine the significance of Kornblith's criticisms. If one used a different conception of knowledge that Sosa, then perhaps some of the things Sosa says about knowledge will come out false—but this would not be particularly surprising and it would not be clear how this would be a relevant criticism of Sosa.

¹⁵ Kornblith considers three possible objections to (P1)—see *On Reflection*, 26-34—but none are the ones I'll press.

processes that produced p were reliable or due to (e.g.) some anchoring bias. This thesis is plausible, given the empirical evidence he cites, and I do not object to it. However, the problem is that establishing this thesis as true does not show (P2) is true. (P2) claims that *reflection* does not produce more reliable beliefs. This can be false even when *introspection* does not give us insight into the cognitive processes that produce those beliefs.

To begin with an analogy, because I am not a mechanic, paying attention to specific ways my car runs (e.g. the sounds it makes, how slowly it takes to break, etc.) does not give me any insight into the particular mechanics of my car (e.g. what sounds (if any) a crankshaft should be making, how my engine or fuel rod works). Nevertheless, paying attention to how my car runs can result in it running more reliably, since I might take it to a mechanic when I notice it is *not* running as it usually does. Furthermore, even though I am not a mechanic, I know that there are certain things I could do—e.g. filling it with the wrong kind of gas or trying to drive it underwater—that would result in it being more unreliable.

Similarly, there can be multiple ways in which the result of reflection can produce more reliable beliefs even though introspection does not give insight into particular cognitive processes. For instance, perhaps, by reflecting, I realize that many of the beliefs John has told me are actually false or improbable. Upon reflection, this might lead me to be more skeptical of John's testimony and thereby avoid error. Or perhaps I read two newspapers each day. By reflecting, I might keep myself from holding inconsistent beliefs upon the basis of the two newspapers. Indeed, by reflecting on information already available to me, I might realize that one of the newspapers is more reliable than the other and adopt a policy of only accepting what it says when the two conflict. Further, reflective scrutiny can make our beliefs more reliable in indirect ways. For instance, when pressed on a belief, I may not sit back and try to figure out what was going on inside my cranium; I may begin to do research and consult with other sources on that topic. Such research can increase the reliability of our beliefs.

To be clear, my purpose here is to undermine, not refute. This handful of examples is not intended to refute (P2) and thereby show that reflection does produce more reliable beliefs (how could a handful of examples do that?). Rather, I am merely illustrating the many ways in which reflection can produce reliable beliefs without utilizing introspection into the cognitive processes responsible for our beliefs. This undermines Kornblith's argument for (P2)—the defender of Sosa's distinction can concede the lousiness of introspection for certain tasks without thereby having to concede other positive roles that reflection can play.¹⁶

At this point, Kornblith might concede that his argument for (P2) is invalid, but now provide a different argument. I've conceded that introspection does not provide us particularly good insight into the cognitive processes responsible for the formulation of our beliefs. Kornblith might argue that that thesis is sufficient to show that we rarely—if ever—have reflective knowledge. For (he might argue) to have reflective knowledge, introspection must give us insight into the cognitive processes producing beliefs. He might cite Sosa himself:

One has reflective knowledge if one's judgment of belief manifests not only such direct response to the fact known but also understanding of its place in a wider whole that includes one's belief and knowledge of it and *how these come about*.¹⁷

¹⁶ Of course, defenders of some versions of epistemic internalism may not be able to concede this (see Kornblith, *Knowledge and Its Place in Nature*, chp. 4) for argument that they cannot). But I'm not defending epistemic internalism here, but the distinction between reflective and animal knowledge.

¹⁷ "Knowledge and Intellectual Virtue," 240, italics mine.

But since introspection cannot (or rarely does) provide insight into the cognitive processes that produce our beliefs, and reflective knowledge requires it to, there is rarely, if ever, any reflective knowledge. (Note that the conclusion of this argument, while formally consistent with there being two kinds of knowledge (animal and reflective), is still fairly damning for Sosa's view. For the hope of the distinction is to capture distinct epistemic states that people actually possess with some frequency.)

In response, this new argument assimilates Sosa's "how these come about" with the particular cognitive processes that might be studied by a psychologist or a brain scientist. But this assimilation is dubious, and, I think, a poor interpretation of Sosa. As some of the examples Sosa provides illustrate,¹⁸ his "how these come about" is not concerned with one's particular brain state but more general, coarse grained knowledge (acquired through experience) about sources of belief (e.g.) newspapers, vision in the rain, hearing when intoxicated, testimony from politicians, etc. Reflective knowledge requires one to reflect on these more coarse grained origins of one's beliefs. The empirical studies that Kornblith cites does not show reflection cannot do that.

My second criticism is that there is good reason for rejecting (P1), that reflective knowledge is superior to animal knowledge only if reflection produces more reliable beliefs. The problem is, roughly put, this: there are things of epistemic value that reflective scrutiny/knowledge can provide (and reliable belief need not) *even if* reflective scrutiny does not increase reliability. To see this, it is important to recall that, for Sosa, reflective knowledge includes seeing *how one's belief fits among others*. Seeing this brings with it other things of epistemic value both individually and communally. Let me briefly motivate each of these points.

First, seeing how one's belief fits with others can bring with it coherence, understanding, and explanation.¹⁹ For instance, by reflecting on one's beliefs and seeing how they fit together, one can reveal inconsistencies and expunge them—even if (as can occur) the original sources of the conflicting beliefs are highly reliable.²⁰ Thus, reflection can increase coherence (and truth over error) even if one's belief all originated in highly reliable sources.²¹ Further, by reflecting, one can see the necessity of seeking out multiple sources on some matter (e.g. an event), even if one's initial source was highly reliable. (After all, that initial source, while being highly reliable and not containing any errors, might nevertheless fail to include important information or over-emphasize other information.) Thus, reflection can increase understanding, even if one's initial beliefs originated in a highly reliable source. Finally, due to an increase in understanding, one can gain an increase in explanation. To explain something is to answer a why-question by picking out, from a range of information, the relevant information. By possessing reflective knowledge, one can better understand what piece of information is relevant for answering a why-question, even if that reflective knowledge does not (on its own) produce other reliably formed beliefs.

Second, seeing how one's beliefs fit with others can play a role in the spread of truth among a community. As Sosa correctly points out,²² knowledge occurs in a community. Part of the transmission of knowledge in a community may require more than mere animal belief. For

¹⁸ For instance, the example immediately following the cited passage above in "Knowledge and Intellectual Virtue," 241; cf. "Intellectual Virtue in Perspective," 278.

¹⁹ Sosa, *Reflective Knowledge*, 137.

²⁰ Note that this is not the same as merely updating one's beliefs as one receives new information, but reflection on one's beliefs without necessarily receiving new information.

²¹ Cf. Sosa, "Intellectual Virtue in Perspective," 291-2.

²² See, e.g., *A Virtue Epistemology*, 93ff.; "Intellectual Virtue in Perspective," 275.

instance, in academic and theoretical communities more generally, merely reliably formed belief is not sufficient—one needs to argue, explain, and provide coherent accounts of things. For instance, even if a new invention (e.g. the telescope) or a new model (e.g. of weather patterns) is reliable, a theoretical community may initially regard it with skepticism; in such a case, a theorist may have a great deal of animal knowledge, but more is required for the spread of knowledge among that community.²³ So, reflective knowledge can be superior to animal knowledge by bringing about other things of epistemic value besides reliability.

I do not belabor these points because I doubt that Kornblith disagrees. At one point,²⁴ he considers a specific scenario with two people, A and B, where the former has animal knowledge that *p* and the latter reflective knowledge that *p*. He concedes that, in the scenario, “reflection has produced epistemic benefits. It has, on this occasion, improved B’s epistemic situation. I certainly do not wish to deny that this kind of thing can occur.”²⁵ But if Kornblith does not deny that reflective knowledge, partly due to reflection, brings about all these epistemic benefits animal knowledge can lack, why does he assert (P1): reflective knowledge is superior to animal knowledge only if reflection produces more reliable beliefs?

The answer lies in what he says next:

How does having reflective knowledge that *p* put one in a better epistemic situation *with respect to p*? Thus far, the epistemic benefits we have noted in B’s situation have to do with her knowing many other things *in addition to p*, but this, by itself, does not clearly show that her knowledge that *p* is in any respect superior to A’s knowledge that *p*... For all that has been said, A’s belief that *p* may have been produced by a far more reliable process than B’s, even when we include the effects of B’s reflection has on the overall reliability of the way in which she arrived at her belief that *p*.²⁶

On Kornblith’s view, then, there are many things that a *set of beliefs* can have that are of epistemic benefit—e.g. reliability, coherence, understanding, etc.—but that when determining the epistemic superiority of a *single belief*, only one of those benefits, namely reliability, is relevant. In this way, he can concede that reflective knowledge can bring about epistemic values to sets of beliefs while still holding that for any *particular* belief that counts as reflective knowledge it is superior to its animal knowledge counterpart only if it was produced by a more reliable process.

There are two problems with this view. First, this looks like special pleading, and we need some principled reason why reliability is singled out. It would be one thing to claim that coherence, explanation, and understanding are not of any epistemic value.²⁷ But to claim that they are, but not relevant to determining the epistemic superiority of a single belief, is *ad hoc*.

Second, there are counterexamples to the idea that only reliability is relevant to determining the epistemic superiority of a belief. Suppose that A’s belief that *p* is knowledge, and originates in a highly reliable source. Suppose, further, that B’s belief that *q* originates in an even more reliable source, but that on this occasion, B’s belief has been “gettierized,” so that B’s belief that

²³ Jacob Caton suggested to me that perhaps Kornblith might think that these things of epistemic value can be “reduced” to reliability. Note that this suggestion, though, would amount to giving up (P2). For if reflective knowledge brought about these things of epistemic value, and those reduce just to reliability, then reflection would produce more reliable beliefs.

²⁴ “Sosa on Human and Animal Knowledge,” 131.

²⁵ “Sosa on Human and Animal Knowledge,” 131.

²⁶ “Sosa on Human and Animal Knowledge,” 131.

²⁷ Again, one might try to “reduce” these values to reliability, but as pointed out in fn. 23, this would be just to give up the second premise of the argument.

q is mere justified true belief. Despite the fact that B's belief *q* originated in a more reliable process than A's belief that *p*, A's belief—constituting knowledge—is epistemic superior to B's belief, which does not constitute knowledge. So it cannot be that *only* reliability is relevant to determining the epistemic superiority of a belief. So, independent of worries about *ad hocery*, this view is false. Sosa's distinction still stands.²⁸

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