

Hilary Kornblith, *On Reflection* (Oxford, 2012), 171 pages. ISBN: 978-0199563005 (hbk). Hardback: \$41.

Chris Tweedt, *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 12, pp. 656-659 (2015)

In this short book, Hilary Kornblith argues that there isn't any reason to think reflection is more valuable than unreflective processes. This is because reflection doesn't have any special powers above what unreflective processes have, and, in fact, reflection isn't even different in kind from unreflective processes. We don't learn all of this, though, until the end of the book. In the beginning, Kornblith gives two arguments against views that afford reflection a special power that unreflective processes don't have. He then applies these arguments to four philosophical areas: knowledge, reasons, freedom, and normativity. These areas correspond to the first four chapters of his book. In the fifth chapter, Kornblith tries to put reflection into the proper perspective by arguing for the views I gave above, and by doing so he hopes to show why the philosophers who have placed so much value on reflection have gone wrong.

Here's what the views Kornblith argues against in the first four chapters have in common. There is a problem at the first-order level. Our beliefs may not be accurate (knowledge), one of our beliefs may not be serving as a reason for another (reasons), we may not be exercising free will (freedom), or we may not be believing or desiring as we should (normativity). In these cases, we are passive with respect to what happens on the first-order level—things happen to us. The solution to the problem happens on the second-order level. Reflection provides this solution. We need to form beliefs about the accuracy of our beliefs (knowledge), we need to form beliefs about the relationship between some beliefs and others (reasons), we have to have certain second-order desires (freedom), or we need to evaluate our first-order states (normativity). In each case, we are active with respect to what happens on the second-order level, and what happens there solves the first-order problem.

Kornblith has two arguments against these views. First, he offers an infinite regress argument. Suppose there's a problem on the first-order level that requires reflection to solve. Whatever problem there is on the first-order level happens at the second-order level, too. Our second-order beliefs may not be accurate (knowledge), our second-order beliefs may not be based on reasons (reasons), our second-order desires may not be the result of our exercising free will (freedom), or our evaluation may not be done as it should (normativity). There is nothing special about reflection that insulates it from the problems on the first-order level. If reflection solves our problems, then we need to reflect on our second-order states. There is, of course, nothing special about third-order states, either, so

we need to reflect on them, ad infinitum. If we need reflection to save us from problems, we still have those problems.

Second, empirical studies have shown that reflection is often very inaccurate. Rather than helping us correct our first-order mistakes, reflective scrutiny “gives us the misleading impression that first-order beliefs which were in fact mistaken and which were in fact arrived at in terribly unreliable ways, are perfectly accurate and were arrived at in a fully reliable manner” (p. 3). So second-order processes are unreliable just as first-order processes are, so they’re not helpful in correcting first-order errors.

Kornblith applies these general arguments to four philosophical areas. First, he applies them to epistemology, specifically Lawrence Bonjour’s view—a subject is justified in believing a proposition only if the subject has reflected on those beliefs—and he gives his two arguments against that view. He then considers a distinction Ernest Sosa makes between animal knowledge and reflective knowledge. This distinction avoids the regress, but Kornblith argues that the distinction isn’t well-motivated. It’s not motivated by making beliefs more valuable epistemically, because reflective scrutiny isn’t needed to make beliefs more reliable. It’s not motivated by explaining skepticism, because that’s not, to Kornblith, a strength of a view. And it’s not motivated by explaining epistemic agency, because epistemic agency isn’t by itself epistemically valuable. Kornblith then considers whether reflective knowledge is special because it’s grounded in a first-person perspective, and he argues that there’s nothing epistemically special about a first-person perspective. What is epistemically valuable, says Kornblith, is the reliability of a belief, whether or not it’s accompanied by reflection.

Second, he applies his main arguments to certain views about reasons. According to these views (which he attributes to Sydney Shoemaker, Michael Williams, Robert Brandom, and Donald Davidson), for one belief to provide us with a good reason to believe another, we need to have a second-order belief: that the first belief is a good reason for believing the second. Kornblith then gives his infinite regress argument against that view. To motivate his view, Kornblith describes three kinds of living things—a wasp, a bird, and an adult human—and he argues that what marks a distinction between these kinds of living things is sensitivity to reasons, which doesn’t require self-scrutiny.

Third, Kornblith applies his arguments to Harry Frankfurt’s view of freedom. To Frankfurt, an agent’s will is free only if she has a second-order desire for her first-order desire to be effective in producing action. He holds this because without this second-order desire, the first-order desire may be alien, and if a desire is alien, it’s not free. Problem: the second-order state may be alien, too, so a third-order state is required, ad infinitum. So, higher-order endorsements are not necessary for free will. Higher-order endorsements aren’t sufficient for free will, either, because some people with mental disorders are not free but

endorse destructive first-order desires, and some people fail to understand their own motives, so they endorse the wrong desire. There is nothing special about second-order states; they can be just as mistaken as first-order states. To Kornblith, what matters for freedom is reason responsiveness. Kornblith then focuses on a special kind of agency—epistemic agency, which does not require voluntary action, and he argues that “the appeal to epistemic agency seems to be nothing more than a bit of mythology. A demystified view of belief acquisition leaves no room for its operation.” (p. 90) He examines a couple appeals to legitimize epistemic agency (first-person appeals, deliberation) and finds them inadequate.

Fourth, Kornblith applies his arguments to views about normativity. Kornblith argues against Christine Korsgaard’s view: a belief or action meets normative demands just in case it withstands reflective scrutiny. Problem: perhaps the standards I bring to bear on my reflection aren’t standards I should have. They, then, need to be reflectively scrutinized, and so on ad infinitum. Further, reflective scrutiny is often misguided. As experiments have shown, after reflection we often end up more confidently holding the same misguided first-order beliefs. Again, Kornblith argues that what is relevant to normativity is whether my standards are reliable and reason-responsive. Kornblith then calls into question Korsgaard’s optimistic view of the powers of human reasoning, her explanatory enterprise, and her view of the self. He concludes that looking inside oneself only gives one reason to believe descriptive claims, which don’t give us any solutions to puzzles about the sources of normativity. Reflection, then, cannot solve those puzzles.

Last, Kornblith aims to put reflection in the proper perspective. He argues that the processes involved in reflection are not different in kind from those involved in unreflective mental processes. When philosophers think reflection is especially valuable, it’s not because of special properties reflection has; it’s because they have misunderstood reflection. Philosophers look at reflection from a first-person perspective, but they look at unreflective processes from a third-person perspective. (He gives examples on pp. 154-7.) Because of this, they see unreflective processes, but not reflective processes, as mechanical, and they see reflective processes, not unreflective processes, as constitutive of our agency. Kornblith argues that although it’s natural to see things that way, there’s no reason to shift our perspective. He uses experimental literature on the distinction between automatic and unconscious processes (System 1) and controlled, conscious processes (System 2) to show that the kind of reflection philosophers value largely involves work by System 1. Kornblith then argues that even System 2 heavily involves System 1, even if we (falsely) think we have full control during the operation of System 2. Both reflective processes and unreflective processes heavily involve uncontrolled unconscious processes, so there is no (relevant) difference in kind between reflective and unreflective processes. The

appearance of a difference in kind between these processes is due “entirely” from the shift in perspective philosophers undergo when they think about the processes. (p. 159)

That’s a summary of the book. Here’s a worry one might have with Kornblith’s project: one might wonder whether Kornblith’s project engages in in the very same kind of reasoning he is arguing against. Kornblith’s book is a project in second-order reflection: we have some beliefs, reflect on those beliefs, then wonder whether our reflection is accurate. Kornblith argues that we don’t have good reasons to think that beliefs accompanied by reflection are any more accurate than they were without any reflection. One might wonder, then: do we have any reason to think that first-order beliefs accompanied by reflection are more accurate when they are also accompanied by second-order reflection than they are when they’re not so accompanied? It seems that Kornblith’s conclusions would have us answer in the negative. Just as we don’t have any reason to think that first-order beliefs are more accurate with reflection than without, we also don’t have any reason to think first-order beliefs under reflective scrutiny are more accurate when also accompanied by second-order reflective scrutiny than without. In fact, Kornblith’s infinite regress argument relies on a claim like this: since first-order beliefs may not be accurate and so require reflection, second-order beliefs may not be accurate either (and, as a result, first-order beliefs accompanied by reflection may not be accurate); thus, our second-order beliefs require reflection and so on *ad infinitum*. But if the main argument in *On Reflection* is successful, we should think that our first-order beliefs under reflective scrutiny *are* more accurate when accompanied by second-order reflective scrutiny than without. They’re more accurate because we’re bringing the considerations of *On Reflection* to bear on our first-order beliefs as they are when they’re under reflective scrutiny. So it seems that if you’re convinced the main arguments work, you should be convinced they don’t. Reflection may not be as valuable as philosophers think it is, but perhaps not for the reasons Kornblith gives.