

THE VALUE OF REFLECTION IN EPISTEMOLOGY

[FIRST VERSION]

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“Judgment is concerned not with what is eternal and unchanging, nor with what comes into being, but with what someone might puzzle and deliberate about.”

Aristotle, II43a5

o. I am presenting this study for the first time. Since it has not received critical scrutiny from colleagues, it is full of inconsistencies, inaccuracies and, of course, errors. I would like to thank everyone in advance for their generous tolerance and eagerly await their comments, suggestions, objections and criticisms. The way I have practiced philosophy over the years has led me to seek to assuage my afflictions and intellectual doubts as a means of achieving what the ancient skeptics called *ataraxia* – albeit momentary and provisional. I often formulate questions which, in the end, are badly directed; I often follow argumentative pathways which lead nowhere. For this reason, I require only a little light.

The theme of this presentation is the place and value of reflection in contemporary epistemology. Reflection – understood as critical self-examination – has been a recurring theme in philosophy and is almost always associated with the rational agent’s capacity for self-knowledge and self-determination.

One of the reasons that the theme of reflection has become relevant in epistemology is the importance of the problem of the nature and possibility of *epistemic justification* or the states and conditions which might be required for a belief to be based on adequate *grounds*. For some epistemologists, justification is associated with the *reflective access* that the person has to the content of their beliefs and the reasons these are based on, which provides them with guarantees to believe. On the other hand, other epistemologists consider that epistemic justification relates to the natural-causal relationship, where the chain does not necessarily need to be reflectively accessible to the person. This leads to a disagreement between the value of reflection: while some conceive that reflection is a necessary condition for the attribution of valuable epistemic states (such as knowledge, justified belief, understanding), others reject this.

Today, my aim is, on the one hand, to try to understand what is at play in this disagreement about the value of reflection and, on the other, to suggest a new avenue to overcome this dispute.

1. In this paper, I will assert that reflective performance produces something that is epistemically valuable. My argument depends on us stepping back from the scenario in which the dispute about internalism and externalism about knowledge and justification have developed over recent decades, in order to begin to consider certain, so far little explored, *skeptical dialectic scenarios*. These are skeptical scenarios in which individuals are challenged to evaluate and judge whether or not their beliefs are justified. As a rule, a person is presented with reasons to suspect the limitations of their subjective perspective about the *evidence* and reasons that dispose them to believe. In dialectical challenges between epistemic peers, both recognize that they are not in a better position than their interlocutor to believe. In this context, to continue the dialogue requires a critical reflective examination of their initial beliefs (with their evidence and reasons) and, in the end, the achievement of *epistemic change*: the person must improve, expand, deepen, better understand, guarantee, confirm, renounce, or suspend their judgment etc. In this sense, reflection is understood as a performance, an activity in which the person examines the evidence, content and reliability of their own beliefs. This performance may lead to different results, but if someone is capable of critically reflecting on their own beliefs in skeptical-dialectic contexts, this is a positive thing, whatever the result – contrary to people who, in the face of skeptical challenges, simply decide to remain intellectually immobile, maintaining a cowardly, arrogant or dogmatic position.

I will not address this argument here¹. Instead, I merely intend to present the motivations of this argument. This presentation is organized into three parts. In the first part, I will provide a brief evaluation of the problem of reflection in present day epistemology; in the second, I will suggest a change of perspective, from an individualistic point of view, or one centered on a description of the subject's properties, to a dialectical point view, centered on situations where requesting reasons really makes sense. In the third part, I will provide a brief summary of the argument I developed in partnership with Felipe Rocha in the paper, "Disagreement and the value of reflection" (SILVA FILHO & ROCHA, 2016) and will argue that the critical spirit with which someone discusses opinions in the context of dialectical disagreement, submitting them to the scrutiny of reason (that is, to the arguments for or against), is virtuous and has epistemic value. The consequence of this performance, the *epistemic preference*, has a *final value*, since deliberations based on free judgment have *final value*.

1. THE PLACE OF REFLECTION IN EPISTEMOLOGY

2. Since the famous passage in which Socrates (PLATO 38a5-6) says that the unexamined, and therefore non-reflected, life is not worth living, "reflection" has been a diffuse and imprecise term that may acquire different meanings in

¹ This argument has been developed in Silva Filho & Rocha (2016).

ethics, moral philosophy, the philosophy of mind or political philosophy. Two meanings of “reflection” are at the core of the current debate in epistemology:

(R1) in a tradition initiated by J. Locke (1690, p.43), understanding arises from experience, with the mind’s perception of external objects or with the perception of the “operations of our own mind within us, as it is employed about the ideas it has got”. Reflection is the act of understanding which enables the formation of ideas that cannot be directly obtained from external things through empirical experience. This category includes the acts of thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, knowing;

(R2) for many philosophers, reflection is conceived as a metacognitive performance which evaluates its own first-order doxastic states (beliefs, thoughts and desires) and forms second-order doxastic states. In this sense, reflection is a deliberate operation of the mind which, when the subject becomes aware of their own content, they are empowered to judge their own states and believe and act in the light of this judgment.

Both (R1) and (R2) may be contested, albeit from different angles. As a human capacity, generally in a weak epistemic state, (R1) is not the object of great controversy. H. Kornblith (2002, p. 103), a severe critic of the importance of reflection in epistemology, recognizes that reflecting on one’s own belief is characteristic of human life:

“We sometimes wonder whether the beliefs we have are ones we ought to have. And we sometimes wonder about beliefs we might come to adopt, whether we ought to adopt them. More than this, such reflection does not seem, at least typically, to be an idle academic exercise.”

(R1) is therefore important for the human experience, but is *not a condition* for the attribution of a more valuable epistemic state than epistemic states that *fall short of reflection*.

Meanwhile, while (R1) is not apparently problematic for epistemology, one of the consequences of (R2) is the idea that reflection plays an essential role, both in the formation of new beliefs (second-order beliefs) and in the formation of judgments about the reliability and safety of first-order beliefs. For this reason, (R2) may also be described thus:

(R2a) reflection is the process for the formation of second-order beliefs which, in turn, function as reasons (to believe and to act);

(R2b) on reflecting, the individual assesses the reliability of their doxastic states, granting greater or lesser reliability to the process for the formation of their beliefs;

(R2c) reflection produces more valuable epistemic states than states that *fall short of reflection*.

3. There is intense discussion in epistemology about (R2) and its corollaries, which has frequently been polarized into two strongly opposing theses:

(PR) *Pro-reflection*: reflection is a necessary condition for the attribution of valuable epistemic states (such as knowledge, justified belief, understanding);

(CR) *Con-reflection*: reflection is not necessary for the attribution of valuable epistemic states (such as knowledge, justified belief, understanding);

It is possible to conceive of a third position:

(IR) *Irrelevance of reflection*: the subject has the capacity to reflect on their epistemic states, however this does not affect the attribution of valuable epistemic states (such as knowledge, justified belief, understanding);

Although (IR) is apparently encompassed by (CR), those who defend (CR) might say that, even if reflection is not required, there are cases in which one attributes valuable epistemic states (such as knowledge, justified belief, understanding) through reflection; this negates (IR), which, in turn, states that there are no cases in which the role of reflection is relevant. Despite this, it is important for the argument to consider that both are ways of negating (PR)².

A) The epistemic significance of reflection

4. What are philosophers asserting when they argue that reflection plays a relevant role in the attribution of cognitive states? (PR) is a broad family of positions, but one can identify at least three groups of epistemic meanings for reflection:

(*K-reflection*): reflection is required for the definition of knowledge; here, for example, is the notion of reflective knowledge found in E. Sosa (cf. SOSA, 2007; 2009). Typically human knowledge involves not only the

² I would like to thank Felipe Rocha for alerting me to this point.

reliability of the process for the formation of true beliefs, but second-order epistemic evaluation;

(*U-reflection*): reflection is required for a broader form of epistemic state which involves *coherence* and the certification of the reliability of the process for the formation of the belief, namely, *understanding*, but this does not necessarily involve knowledge (cf. PRITCHARD, 2010; 2014; KVANVIG, 2003; 2014);

(*W-reflection*): reflection is not relevant to epistemic states, only to moral ones and is linked to a state such as *wisdom* (cf. GRIMM, 2014; forthcoming).

I will not discuss these points here³. This is only a general hypotheses about the place that reflection occupies in the current epistemological debate.

B) Epistemic Agency

5. Considering these various perspectives about reflection, it seems to me that the notion of *epistemic agency* is the one which best expresses disagreement between epistemologists. We speak of *epistemic agency* when we conceive that an individual consciously *stops* to reflect and ask themselves what they should believe and do; having taken this step, they find themselves in a position that enables them to *credit* their beliefs and make them reliable. When an individual stops to reflect – something that a dog is unable to do – they are transformed into an agent with respect to their doxastic states.

In these terms, unlike animals, we direct our attention to ourselves, to our own internal states and we become conscious of our intentions, desires, beliefs and attitudes and how these states were formed (cf. NAGEL, 1996, p. 200). Our capacity to direct our attention to our own mental activity is also a capacity to distance ourselves from these states and call them into question (cf. KORSGAARD, 1996, p. 93). Although we often act and form our beliefs without reflecting, in order to talk of knowledge and action in a relevant sense, reflection is essential.

C) What's the Matter?

6. But what exactly is at play here? In fact, the philosophical dispute about the epistemic value of reflection revolves around a family of arguments which, generally, include at least one of the following six aspects:

- i. *The issue of epistemic accessibility*: epistemic accessibility asserts that for a person to be *epistemically justified* in having a belief, it is not sufficient for this belief to be true (this is, in fact, necessary, but not

³ I address this subject in the essay “Reflective knowledge and the value of reflection” (in preparation).

- sufficient); in addition, they must have awareness of the reasons that guarantee that this belief is true;
- ii. *The issue of luminosity*: luminosity refers to the requirement that an individual is not only able to know that p (first-order thought), but also – and mainly – to know that they know that p (second-order thought);
 - iii. *The issue of the principle of epistemic responsibility*: for many actors epistemic justification is the essential relationship between the individual and the consequences of their belief and, in this sense, accepting a belief in the absence of such reason is *epistemologically irresponsible*;
 - iv. *The issue of “over-intellectualization”*: From an internalist perspective (which tends to over intellectualize our cognitive activities), knowledge attribution is rare (there are only a few cases of people knowing/finding out about something because they reflect, find reasons and justify their beliefs);
 - v. *The issue of epistemic voluntarism*: when we reflect, our beliefs are typically formed by means of a decision and our knowledge of our own beliefs is explained by the fact that we decide what to believe in and not because of something that we discover about our minds;
 - vi. *The skeptical issue of justification*: if an individual sustains the belief that p and not the belief that $\neg p$, they *must* have a reason for this. If this individual declares that they have such a reason, then we may demand they present it and defend it against the three objections: infinite regress (where the reason refers to another reason which, in turn, refers to another reason, *ad infinitum*), vicious circularity (where this reason is sustained on a previously presented reason), and arbitrary assumption (where the reason is not sustained on anything).

II. FROM AN INDIVIDUALISTIC POINT OF VIEW TO A DIALECTICAL ONE

7. As I have already noted, this is an intense debate and here I am only presenting a simple overview to motivate my hypothesis. Given the space restrictions of this presentation, what is important to highlight is that the *family trait* between the various positions is the centrality of (i) - the issue of accessibility, which is the most general aspect from which the others arise (PAPPAS, 2014, §§ 2-3).

At the beginning of “Prospects for epistemic compatibilism”, Sven Bernecker wrote (2006, p. 81) that if we want to determine “whether someone is justified in holding a certain belief or whether someone knows something, one must do so from some point of view”. Taking this into consideration, he presents an alternative:

- (i) “One can work from the point of view of the subject”. Philosophers who adopt this point of view to make their assessments are *internalists*.

Internalists “perform their epistemic evaluations from the first-person point of view, taking into account only that which is available to the subject at the given time”;

or

(ii) “[One can work] from the point of view of someone who knows all the relevant facts, some of which might not be available to the subject”. Philosophers who adopt this point of view to make their assessments are *externalists*. *Externalists* “evaluate from the point of view of a fully informed spectator”.

Additional to these alternatives, the debate in epistemology is marked by attempts to find a “third way”, which reconciles “a” and “b”, what Bernecker (2006, pp. 83-86) calls *epistemic compatibilism* – which, for its part admits the externalist “truth-effective character of justification while accepting the [internalist] transparency of reason”. Bernecker’s main argument (2006) is “that Sosa’s virtue perspectivism fails to satisfactorily combine internalist and externalist features in a single theory”⁴.

8. In my opinion, despite their differences, internalism and externalism express something which Lammenranta (2011a) calls an *individualistic perspective of justification*. These philosophical positions seek to understand and explain what the epistemic conditions are in relation to the individual subject: in an idealized scenario, what are the states and dispositions that the individual *must* or *could* have, what are the performances that the individual *must* or *could* enact for us to attribute knowledge? This, obviously, restricts epistemic justifications to factors relating to the subject’s mental states (like the internalists) or the causal sources of these states (like the externalists). For evidentialism, for example, justification is a function of the individual’s experiences; for reliabilism, it is a function of the causal origins of the individual’s beliefs.

In relation to the internalism/externalism debate, my thesis is that this is a false dispute, because it does *not* matter whether the agent *only* has true beliefs or whether they have beliefs justified by reasons [This is the problem, but this point needs to be further developed. A careful review of sources is required. It is necessary to demonstrate that there is an important difference between an individualistic perspective and a dialogical/dialectic one. Merely saying that one exists is not sufficient.]

9. I argue for a change of perspective. My proposal involves certain aspects of Virtue Epistemology, but I recommend taking a step that Sosa would not take. While Sosa’s virtue perspectivism establishes a distinction between *levels* (and

⁴ I address this subject in the essay “Reflective knowledge and the value of reflection” (in preparation).

not *kinds*) of knowledge, my proposal suggests a distinction between *epistemic contexts/scenarios*. Different contexts/scenarios establish different epistemic requirements. In skeptical dialectical scenarios⁵, people investigate whether or not their own beliefs, or those of their interlocutor, are justified, and whether or not their reasons are good reasons. The general schemata is:

(DSD) *Disagreement Scenarios or Dialectical Disputes*: about an object, happening, idea, concept - any *f*phenomenon

- (A) J believes that *a*
- (B) K believes that $\neg a$
- (C) K challenges J to explain why J believes *a* and not $\neg a$
- (D) J challenges K to explain why K believes $\neg a$ and not *a*

When only (A) and (B) occur, we imagine that both J and K refuse to continue the dialogue. If we do not consider an idealized individual, whose rationalism requires them to remain in a permanent arena of consistent argument, their willingness to continue the dialogue is not only an epistemic requirement, but also a moral one. We then imagine that, for some reason, the distinction between *a* and $\neg a$ is relevant to both J and K; that for both J and K it is not a matter of indifference whether they believe *a* or $\neg a$, since this distinction affects the epistemic position of these individuals in relation to the world, themselves and other individuals.

I would note that in order to follow my reasoning, I am dealing with a disagreement from the perspective of a dialogue, which involves a second person. I believe that some of my results may be generalized to a perspective in which a subject disagrees with their past or future self, but, at this moment, I intend to remain neutral about this aspect. Similarly, I will avoid the third person perspective, or that of the *omniscient narrator*. In the end, whether or not proposition *a* is true or false does not matter to me; what matters is that, having reflected, the person's epistemic state will be virtuously attained.

At the outset, the interlocutors do *not* assume what the contemporary epistemology of disagreement calls the *Position of Equality*. If J believes *a* and rejects $\neg a$ (and K believes vice versa), they obviously think they are in a superior position. It is necessary to show them, skeptically, that they are not in the superior position that they think they are in. Following the dialogue is a skeptical requirement and the dialogue norms are imposed by the condition that J and K are rational, if fallible, agents. For this reason, the fact that J and K start out with beliefs that they accept as the truth does not prevent them, at the outset, from attributing the condition of epistemic peer to their interlocutors and assuming the *Principle of Humanity* or the *Principle of Charity*. As

⁵ From this point onwards, I have brought together certain fragments from the Silva Filho & Rocha (2016) paper.

Davidson reminds us, this principle is the precondition for two people to be able to talk and disagree about something: in order for an individual to be able to understand the meaning of the utterances of the other, they must suppose that this individual is a rational being who formulates utterances with meaning, which are (in most cases) true (DAVIDSON, 1973).

10. In the epistemology of disagreement, discussions frequently address idealized scenarios and involve hyper-rational beings who strictly obey the laws of classical logic. Here, I restrict my considerations to epistemic disagreements from a Pyrrhonian perspective. From this perspective, agents are fallible beings and have an incomplete understanding of cognitive content, only have access to a partial set of information and may be influenced by feelings and emotions. In this sense, there are no perfect symmetries between J's and K's positions and their doxastic differences, it is difficult for the two subjects to have the *same* evidence – at most, they may only have *similar evidence*. This does not compromise my argument, since even when they are not hyper-rational beings, it is not hard to imagine that two people might be sincerely interested in finding out the truth and might be sincerely self-critical.

III. PREFERENCE AND THE VALUE OF REFLECTION

II. As a result of a rational disagreement, a person may believe, disbelieve, or suspend judgment. These options are normatively established by the conditions required for them to be a rational being. The person must remain convinced of those beliefs for which there are evidence and reasons; and they must renounce beliefs when they recognize that there is no evidence or reason; and, finally, they must suspend judgment about those beliefs for which both they and their interlocutor have reason, but not evidence, when there is no way to decide for or against believing.

If I accept this, there are at least three possibilities:

- (a) Even when we do *not* assume a stubborn or arrogant attitude, we *can* preserve our beliefs;
- (b) Even when we are *not* intellectual or moral cowards, we *can* change our opinion, forming a new belief, and
- (c) Even when we do *not* retreat to find better reasons, we *can* suspend judgment.

Can we say that in (a), (b), or (c) we remain rational agents? What justifies the notion of remaining (epistemically) rational in both preserving and renouncing our beliefs? What makes our performance virtuous and the result of our activity *finally valuable*?

Carl Ginet (2001, 63) presents a situation in which one person judges that another “was not justified in coming to have a particular belief” because “given what she was aware of at the time, she ought not to have adopted the

belief". Everything leads to a belief that this judgment only makes sense because "[we] suppose that a person might come to believe something simply by deciding to do so". In the process of disagreement through critical reflection, the person does not form new knowledge or a new belief, but forms a virtuous attitude of judging and establishing an *epistemic preference*.

12. Reflection is a performance that may provide different results. Clearly, a critical reflective performance does not make people immune to error or false beliefs: to evaluate reasons and present justifications is no guarantee of truth and knowledge. However, reflective work puts people in a position that deserves praise and credit: it avoids precipitation, arrogance, dogmatism and epistemic injustice.

If a person is capable of critically reflecting on their own beliefs as well as on the beliefs of interlocutors who have opposing beliefs, whatever the result, this appears to me to be something positive and valuable. The critical spirit with which a person discusses opinions, subjecting themselves to the scrutiny of arguments for or against, is something virtuous. The gain may be direct: when the person discards unsatisfactory reasons and finds guarantees to believe or disbelieve; but it may also be indirect: leading to a more demanding attitude, mistrustful of certain claims, while curiously, at the same time, becoming more capable of understanding positions different from their own.

This form of disagreement may be found in both daily life and in philosophy. In daily life, in which practical decisions must be made, making a judgment following the exercise of reflection, such as that described, is a gain, even though the belief may be fallible, defensible, etc. In the case of philosophy, whose object is categorically not based on evidence, the suspension of judgment may be a gain – even if people, including dogmatists, think that only justifying a belief is a gain and suspending judgment is a loss.