What epistemologists talk about when they talk about reflection*

Sobre o que falam os epistemologistas quando falam sobre a reflexão

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Abstract: In contemporary analytic philosophy, while some epistemologists claim that reflection—understood as a critical self-examination of belief—is a necessary condition for the attribution of valuable epistemic states, others reject this claim and maintain that philosophers tend to overestimate the value of reflection in their reports of epistemological phenomena. In this essay, we present a brief overview of this debate and outline the elements that constitute disagreement between epistemologists. Our diagnosis is that, despite radical disagreement, these positions converge, because they deal with reflection from an individualistic point of view, defining it as an agent's private metacognitive performance of her own epistemic states. As well as being a reason for disagreement, this conception of reflection may be the reason that epistemologists misunderstand its place and value.

Keywords: Agency. Epistemic individualism. Epistemic justification. Reflection.

Resumo: *Na filosofia analítica contemporânea, enquanto alguns epistemólogos afirmam que a reflexão – entendida como autoexame crítico das crenças – é uma condição necessária para a atribuição de estados epistêmicos valiosos, outros rejeitam essa afirmação e sustentam que os filósofos tendem a superestimar o valor da reflexão em seus relatos de fenômenos epistemológicos. Neste ensaio, apresentamos um breve panorama desse debate e indicamos os elementos que constituem o desacordo entre epistemólogos. Nosso diagnóstico é que, a despeito do radical desacordo, essas posições convergem porque tratam a reflexão de um ponto de vista individualista, uma vez que a definem como uma performance metacognitiva privada de um agente sobre os próprios estados epistêmicos. Além de ser um motivo de desacordo, essa concepção de reflexão pode ser a razão de uma compreensão equivocada dos epistemólogos sobre o lugar e valor da reflexão.*

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* This title is inspired by Raymond Carver's *What we talk about when we talk about love* (1989) and Haruki Murakami's *What I talk about when I talk about running: a memoir* (2005).

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Palavras-chave: *Agenciamento. Individualismo epistêmico. Justificação epistêmica. Reflexão.*

Data de recebimento: 16/09/2020
Data de aceite: 26/10/2020
DOI: 10.23925/2316-5278.2020v21i2p307-320

"The better way of thinking that is to be considered in this book is called reflective thinking: the kind of thinking that consists in turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious and consecutive consideration."

John Dewey, How We Think

1 Introduction

This essay presents a broad and critical view of the concept of "reflection" in epistemology. Our argument is that, in general, epistemologists understand reflection as a *metacognitive activity* of an individual subject who examines her own beliefs and thoughts according to her own judgment. We call this understanding of reflection the *individualistic conception of reflection* (ICR). After presenting the broad lines of this conception, we will state that the epistemological debate would benefit from understanding reflection as an activity that occurs in the *exchange* of disagreed beliefs in the dialectical dialogue setting. In this scenario, the best thing that epistemic agents should do is to examine their own beliefs in the light of the criticisms and objections of their interlocutors and, in the same way, they should examine the beliefs and statements of their interlocutors.

This brief essay is organized in six sections. In the first section, we present the issue that has been motivating the epistemological debate on reflection, that is, the subject of epistemic justification and of epistemic agency. In the second section, we present a more general sense of "reflection" and three divergent positions: Pro-reflection, Against-reflection and the Irrelevance of reflection. In the third section, we present the most common meanings of "reflection" in the epistemological debate. The fourth section is composed of a small panel of recurring problems in the disputes between epistemologists on this subject. The fifth section is dedicated to the presentation of two hegemonic positions in the debate about epistemic justification and reflection, namely, epistemological internalism and externalism. In the sixth section we present and criticize what we call an *individualistic conception of reflection* (ICR). According to this (ICR), despite differences and divergences regarding the place and value of reflection, epistemologists from both sides of this dispute understand the notion of "epistemic reflection" in an individualistic and idealized manner. We conclude in the last section with the suggestion that the epistemological debate could benefit from a non-individualistic conception of reflection.

2 The problem

Since the famous passage in which Socrates (PLATO 38a5-6) says that an unexamined, and therefore, unreflected life is not worth living, "reflection" has been a fundamental term in philosophy, although the notion is diffuse and imprecise, and has acquired different meanings in ethics, moral philosophy, philosophy of the mind, and political philosophy. In epistemology, in particular, there is radical disagreement about the status of reflection.[1]

Does reflection, understood as a critical self-examination of one's own beliefs, have epistemic value? Is there any epistemic good that can only be achieved as the result of reflection? In what sense would an epistemic state achieved through reflection be more valuable than an epistemic state achieved without it? In contemporary analytic philosophy, some epistemologists conceive of reflection as a necessary condition for the attribution of valuable epistemic states, such as knowledge and understanding. Other epistemologists reject this and maintain that philosophers tend to overestimate the importance of reflection in epistemic phenomena.

Before answering the above questions, it is necessary to examine another, more basic, one: what is at stake in the disagreement about the value of reflection in epistemology? To be more precise: what do epistemologists disagree about when they disagree about the value of reflection? To answer these questions, it seems to us that we need to understand that there are at least two main motivations for this disagreement.

One of the reasons why the subject of reflection has become relevant to epistemology is the importance of the discussion about the nature and possibility of *epistemic justification* (in the sense of doxastic justification), which involves discussion about the states and conditions that may be necessary for a subject to have beliefs based on proper foundations. As we know, knowledge has traditionally been defined as a justified true belief. For some epistemologists, justification is associated with the reflective access a person has to the content of their beliefs and the reasons that person can consciously mobilize to sustain and defend her beliefs against skeptical challenges. However, other epistemologists consider epistemic justification to be related to the natural-social-causal processes (external to reflective consciousness) that produce true beliefs in the subject's mind; from this perspective, the causal chain does not necessarily need to be reflectively accessible to the person.

Another issue that has motivated disagreements about the epistemic value of reflection is the notion of *epistemic agency*. It is clear that, most of the time, we form first-order passively and unthinkingly passive and unthinking beliefs from our involvement with the physical and cultural world, and act in reaction to internal and external stimuli. However, in many crucial situations in human experience, such as in the context of knowledge allocation and moral action, we need to apply another capacity in order to form a special kind of attitude. This does not refer to the objects, states and events of the world, but to our own mental states, ensuring we have the competence to perform a particular kind of behavior, not motivated by desire and belief, but by rational will. Agency is the result of a subject's ability to form

1 One of the first publications to systematically address the place and value of reflection in philosophy, particularly in epistemology, is Silva Filho & Tateo (2019).

second-order beliefs (beliefs about her own beliefs) and to act in the light of self-assessments. While first-order beliefs do not imply free will, since these beliefs are caused by the world independently of us, second-order beliefs denote a subject's control and freedom over her cognitive states. Many philosophers, therefore, argue that the alleged ability to examine our own attitudes enables us to exert some control over what we think, believe and do. For these authors, this argument is committed to a kind of voluntarism in relation to beliefs, since it determines that a rational agent is one who *decides* and *chooses* her beliefs.

Since our exclusive intention is to present a broad and comprehensive overview, we have avoided making references to authors and works in epistemology.[2]

3 What does "reflection" mean?

Roughly speaking, there are two meanings of "reflection" at the heart of the philosophical debate:

> (R1) According to a tradition that began with classical empiricism, *understanding* arises from experience, or when the mind perceives external objects, or when the mind perceives the *inner operations of the mind itself and the ideas contained in it*. Reflection is the act of understanding that enables the formation of ideas that are not obtained directly from external things through empirical experience. This category includes the acts of thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, and;
>
> (R2) For many rationalist philosophers, reflection is conceived as a metacognitive performance that evaluates first-order doxastic states (beliefs, thoughts and desires) and forms second-order doxastic states. In this sense, reflection is a conscious and deliberate operation of the mind that directly accesses, examines and scrutinizes the contents of the mind's own states, giving it the power to judge them and to believe and act in light of that judgment.

Both (R1) and (R2) may be discussed and criticized, although from different angles. As a human capacity, usually in an epistemically *weak* sense, (R1) is not the object of much controversy. In everyday life, we have thoughts whose objects are not observed things or events or the accounts of other people, but our own beliefs or actions. In this sense, "reflecting" is a common mental activity. In fact, (R1) has some importance for human experience, but is not a condition for considering an epistemic state to be more valuable than epistemic states that *fall short of* reflection.

2 The literature on the subject is extensive and complex. Among the references we use to elaborate our argument are (in alphabetical order): Alston (1989), Bergmann (2008), Bonjour (1998), Chisholm (1973; 1989), Doris (2015), Elgin (2013), Frankfurt (1971), Goldberg (2018), Goldman (1979), Greco (2010; 2013), Hieronymi (2014), Kahneman (2011), Kornblith (2012), Korsgaard (1996), Kvanvig (2003), Mayr (2011), McDowell (1994), Proust (2013), Ransome (2009), Silva Filho & Rocha (2015; 2018), Skorupski (2010), Smithies (2019), Sosa (2009; 2015), Tiberius (2008), Zagzebski (1996).

On the other hand, (R2) is indeed controversial. This is because 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. A subject who has this capacity could justify and guarantee her beliefs, since she has examined and tested them, establishing their reliability. She could also provide reasons for her actions, since she has considered her first-order states (her first-order beliefs and desires) and freely chosen the course of her actions. This subject is a *rational agent* and the source of normativity is in her free and reflective nature. For this reason, (R2) can also be described as:

> (R2a) Reflection is the process of forming beliefs of a higher order which, in turn, function in the cognitive economy as reasons for believing and acting;
>
> (R2b) By reflecting, the individual evaluates the reliability of her own doxastic states, granting more or less reliability to the process that forms her beliefs, and;
>
> (R2c) Reflection produces more valuable epistemic states than states that *fall short of* reflection.

In epistemology there is no consensus about (R2a-c). This discussion has often been polarized into two opposing theses:

> (PR) *Pro-reflection*: reflection is a necessary or relevant condition for the attribution of valuable epistemic states (such as knowledge, justified belief, understanding) and;
>
> (AR) *Against-reflection*: reflection is not a necessary or relevant condition for assigning valuable epistemic states (such as knowledge, justified belief, understanding).

It is possible to put forward a third position:

> (IR) *Irrelevance of reflection*: the subject has the ability to reflect on her epistemic states, but this does not significantly affect the assignment of valuable epistemic states (such as knowledge, justified belief, understanding).

Although (IR) is apparently covered by (AR), those who argue (AR) may say that, even if reflection is not necessary, there are cases where valuable epistemic states (such as knowledge, justified belief, understanding) are attributed through reflection; this denies (IR), which in turn states that there are no cases where the role of reflection is relevant. Nevertheless, it is important for this paper's reasoning that both are considered to be forms of denying (PR).[3]

3 We would like to thank Felipe Rocha for alerting us to this point.

4 The epistemic significance of reflection

From the value point of view,[4] we find two positions:

(VR) reflection has value;

(~VR) reflection has no value.

Those who maintain (VR) can, in turn, state two different things:

(VRME) Reflection has as much moral value as epistemic value.

(VRM) Reflection has value, but only moral, not epistemic value.

It is common for philosophers and non-philosophers alike to accept that reflection has value for human life (as in (R1) above), but this obviously does not mean they assume it has an epistemic value and that it produces better epistemic states than states produced without reflection. Some of these philosophers argue (VRM) that the value of reflection is only moral or practical, because reflection is an intellectual activity that makes us capable of evaluating the objectives of our actions, judging whether they are right, noble or commendable in the course of our practical lives.

The attitude in favor of (VRME) involves two different paths, a *strong* position (+) and a *weak* one (-):

(VRME+) *Strong Perspective*: reflection is valuable because it produces a type of higher epistemic good, namely, reflective knowledge; knowledge based on reflection is more valuable than animal knowledge or the mere true belief that is achieved without reflection and;

(VRME-) *Weak Perspective:* reflection is valuable because it produces other types of epistemic achievements, such as an understanding or a broad understanding of the world, but it does not produce a high form of knowledge in the strictest sense.

Arguments around (VRME+/-) are at the center of discussions among philosophers who have different perspectives about the Epistemology of Virtue. Considering this literature, we can say that (VRME) constitutes a wide family of positions, but that at least two groups of epistemic conceptions of reflection can be identified:

(*K-reflection*): Reflection is necessary for the assignment of *knowledge*; typically human knowledge involves not only the reliability of the process

4 Here, we are referring to both the sense of "instrumental value" (that reflection is a process that is instrumentally more likely to produce epistemic goods that are important and valuable) and the sense of "intrinsic value" or "final value" (that reflection in itself has a value and that any result derived from reflection will be a superior epistemic good).

for forming true beliefs, but also an epistemic evaluation of a higher order, such as judgment;

(*U-reflection*): Reflection is necessary for a broader form of epistemic state that involves coherence and an understanding of the doxastic contents and meaning of something, that is, it produces understanding, but this does not necessarily involve knowledge and truth.

In addition to those two conceptions, we may add a third, although this position denies that reflection has a strictly epistemic value, only a practical one:

(*W-reflection*): Reflection is not relevant to epistemic states as knowledge, but is important for the formation of a perspective on the very life of the agent and favors a state such as *practical wisdom*.

(*K, U, W-reflection*) represent a spectrum of positions and theses that attach some value to reflection in the formation of valuable cognitive states. In the case of (*W-reflection*), which states that reflection is not strictly epistemic, but moral, the idea of *wisdom* involves certain intellectual virtues that lead the subject to ponder the ends of her action. Wisdom has a clearly practical-moral aspect, but also a meaning that involves the ability to more comprehensively examine life, thoughts and attitudes. In any case, this can surely be described as something that has epistemic value.

5 On which there is no agreement

What is in dispute in the disagreement about reflection? There is no one point exactly, but a family of problems and challenges that usually include at least one of the following four aspects:

(a) *the issue of luminosity*: luminosity refers to the requirement that an individual not only knows what *p*, but also knows that *p* by reflection;

(b) *the issue of epistemic accessibility*: the argument in favor of epistemic accessibility states that for a person to be epistemically justified in having a belief, it is not enough that this belief is true, it should also be possible for a person to become aware by reflecting on the reasons that ensure this belief is true or is probably true;

(c) *the skeptical challenge of justification*: if a person holds the belief that *p* and not the belief that *~p*, she must have a reason for it. If the individual declares that she has such a reason, then we may ask her to present it and defend it against the three objections: infinite regression (where reason refers to another reason, *ad infinitum*); vicious circularity (where this reason is sustained by a previously presented reason), and; arbitrary supposition (where reason is not sustained by anything) and;

(d) *the principle of epistemic responsibility*: for many epistemologists, epistemic justification is the essential relationship between the individual and the consequences of her beliefs and, in this sense, accepting a belief in the absence of such a reason is epistemologically irresponsible. Therefore, reflection seems to be a necessary condition for a review of our reasons and for epistemic responsibility.

In the current debate, these points may appear separately or together. In general, it is these topics that epistemologists are disputing. Among critical positions, there is often a suspicion that if (a-d) is the case, falling into the *problem of rarity* and *superintellectualization* is inevitable. Requiring reflection could transform true attributions of knowledge into something rare: there are only a few cases where, in fact, we could guarantee that people know because of reflection, namely, when these people are in a position to produce an argument in order to justify their beliefs; the intellectual examination of one's own cognitive performances and achievements is not a requirement that can easily be satisfied in everyday life (perhaps it is found in philosophy congresses and some laboratories).

6 Internalism vs. externalism on epistemic justification

As we said at the beginning, it is likely that the issue that has led to the disagreement over the value of reflection relates to the idea that there should be a criterion for establishing whether a person is an epistemic agent, whether she is justified in believing what she believes and, consequently, whether she knows. There are those who support the need for the *internalist* requirement, that is, for a person to be *epistemically justified* in having a belief, it is not sufficient for that belief to be true; the person must also be aware of the reasons that ensure the belief is true. In this sense, one may speak of internal conditions characterized as the subject's reflective access, critical self-examination, and calibration. The requirement of reflective access implies that only internal conditions can legitimately determine the justification: facts that confer justification must be of a kind whose presence or absence is accessible to the agent.

For a convinced *epistemological internalist*, the concept of justification is internal and immediate, in the sense that a person can discover directly, through reflection alone, what she is justified in believing at any moment. A consequence of the *internalist theory of knowledge* is that the epistemic requirement is imposed by the actual conscious state in which the subject finds herself at that moment. From this point of view, reasons are an essential part of this broader conception of epistemology: epistemic agents need to look not only at the beliefs they already have, but at the beliefs they should have. In this way, it is possible to understand how subjects can answer the question "What should I believe?"

The main criticism of this thesis can be expressed in the following terms: if we accept that the only facts qualified to justify an agent's belief that p at time t are facts that the agent readily knows at t, for these to be justified, we must commit ourselves to a kind of "doxastic voluntarism". Voluntarism holds that when we reflect, our beliefs are typically formed through a decision, and our knowledge of our own

beliefs is explained by the fact that we decide what to believe. Moreover, if, in order to know whether we should believe that *p*, we have to reflect upon our own mental states, the outcome of this reflective process—whether or not this provides permission or prohibition to believe that *p*—must itself be assessed upon further reflection. This, of course, leads to a vicious regress.

Now, consider *epistemological externalism*, the view that beliefs may be justified regardless of whether the subject can access them. Accordingly, beliefs are justified in virtue of how they are formed. The most elaborate version of externalism is *reliabilism*, according to which a belief is justified if it is produced or sustained by a reliable process that tends to produce more true beliefs than false ones. Given certain non-defeating conditions, perception, memory, and testimony are reliable. Thus, valuable epistemic states do not depend on the reflective scrutiny of the individual subject.

In general, based on solid empirical studies and naturalistic argumentation, several philosophers have questioned the intellectualist and rationalist assumptions of the notions of justification and agency. The various problems include, for example, the idea that only second-order beliefs can provide reasons and that only reflection engenders rational action, and that this can lead to the fallacy of a *regress to infinity* (because a higher-level belief can always be demanded). This is because the role of reflection in our cognitive economy often tends to be exaggerated, resulting from the idea that by reflecting on beliefs we can give these beliefs some form of protection or epistemic guarantee, or allow our actions to be more rational, which seems to be an illusion.

7 An individualistic conception of reflection

Despite the differences between internalism and externalism, when epistemologists talk about reflection, they are talking about something Lammenranta (2011, p. 4) calls an *individualistic perspective of justification*. Disputes in contemporary epistemology about justification are centered on the conditions of justification that pertain to the individual subject, restricting justification factors to the subject's mental states or to the causal sources of these states. And this seriously affects the way the epistemic function of reflection is understood.

For this reason, we call the concept of reflection in contemporary epistemology an *Individualistic Conception of Reflection* (ICR):

> (ICR) is the position that reflection is an operation of the mind whereby an individual epistemic agent consciously accesses, explores, evaluates, endorses and calibrates the content and reliability of her own beliefs.

For analytic philosophers, it is natural to think of reflection as a subjective self-review that refers to a self-critical agent who anticipates the possibility that her beliefs are not secure enough, or a person who is critical of her ability to achieve her epistemic goals. Critical reflection is thought to be a higher-order scrutiny of the credentials that justify our beliefs, and a justified belief requires the agent to be reflective and responsive to these reasons.

The philosophical (PR), (AR) and (IR) positions described above aim to understand and explain the epistemic conditions in relation to the individual subject. The basic question, almost always using idealized scenarios, is: *what are the states and dispositions that the individual should or could have, what are the performances that the individual should or could perform so that we can assign knowledge?* It is a question of whether the individual has privileged access to her beliefs; whether the individual's reflection produces new beliefs; whether the individual's second-order performances are more reliable than their first-order ones, etc.

This obviously restricts epistemic justification to factors related to the subject's mental states (internal factors) or the causal sources of these states (external ones). Epistemologists are inclined to *accept* or *reject* the notion that justification is a function of the individual's experiences or a function of the causal origins of the individual's beliefs.

8 A non-individualistic conception of reflection

However, in our opinion, this debate is misguided. The non-trivial meaning of rationality and agency is based on three assumptions: (i) that the subject has the power to evaluate herself; (ii) that the subject has the power to evaluate the epistemic performance of others; and; (iii) that the subject has the power to perform her actions based on this evaluation. We suspect that this reflective evaluation cannot be described as a metacognitive psychological act (such as (ICR). The relevant cases in which this phenomenon of evaluation occurs are, most of the time, in the external and intersubjective space of conversational dialogue, in the legitimate epistemic disagreement between agents, and must include the person's own thoughts (what I have to say in favor of my belief) and the thoughts and actions of the other person.

Neither should reflection be understood as a simple second-order activity, since the person considers, with equal weight, her own beliefs and those of her peers within the dialogic dynamic.[5] Reflection is not therefore conceived as self-referential, i.e., as limited to the self-ascription and self-evaluation of one's own mental states, for it is by engaging in conversational dialogue that we reflect upon our own states *and those of other people*. Moreover, this is how we attain clarity on whether our reasons provide appropriate support for our beliefs and on what the correct or acceptable way to reason is. By reconceiving reflection in these terms, we are able to acknowledge that reflection plays a central role in the issue of epistemic normativity, without committing to a vicious regress (ROLLA, 2014).

In following (ICR)-based reasoning, epistemologists neglect a central aspect of our lives as epistemic agents: when we talk about "justifying", "being justified" or "presenting reasons", "defending oneself from objections" etc., we are actually dealing with performative acts that we do for other people, with other people and in tension with them. In this sense, these acts could be described in the same way we describe the acts of affirming, asking, doubting, counting, believing, knowing something relative to the world: acts that a person shares with other speakers. At this point, we are assuming that it is in the nature of an epistemic agent to be a talking agent in the social arena where epistemic phenomena really occur (MORAN 2018).

5 We would like to thank Sven Bernecker for alerting us to this point.

For the interlocutor to be able to say "I know", "I believe" etc., their reflective understanding of their speech act should incorporate their interlocutor's point of view and assume that they are in fact playing their part in the conclusion of this speech act, just as the assimilation of their interlocutor must incorporate their own understanding of the meaning of their speech. However, this involves more than the acquisition of (first order) beliefs about the interlocutor's beliefs and reasons.

Let us call this perspective *a dialectical and non-individualistic point of view*. We use the term "dialectical" (and sometimes "conversational" or "dialogical") because, in our opinion, the main motivation to evaluate attitudes and actions is a dialogical disagreement. We could call a dialectical disagreement a unique case of conversation motivated by a conflict of opinions on relevant issues, which may not be resolved by resorting to empirical and logical evidence (if we disagree with an observation about the weather, just open the window; if we disagree with a mathematical demonstration, just recalculate). But in this type of dialectical disagreement, participants ask questions and demand reasons, because they do not agree with the reasons to believe that *p* (or *not p*) or to make decision *y* (or *x*) or to perform action *A* (or *B*).

We can find this dialectic in all spheres of ordinary human life, in situations from the grocery market to the court of law. The important thing is that a dialectical challenge, even in the simplest daily activity, creates demands and expectations that force the agent to evaluate both the justifiable credentials of her own beliefs and the justifiable credentials of her interlocutor's beliefs. This evaluative examination is carried out in relation to the motives that the person presents in the public epistemic domain and that conflict with opposing motives (presented by her interlocutors, opponents or by the person herself).

There is no reason not to seriously consider that, given this scenario, the best we can do is to reflect and that this will produce some relevant epistemic good.

9 Concluding remarks

In this essay we have presented a brief overview of the debate about the place and value of reflection in epistemology. This is, of course, a provisional and imprecise overview, but it reflects a scenario that welcomes a significant number of excellent works in epistemology. In contemporary analytic philosophy, while some epistemologists claim that reflection is a necessary condition for the attribution of valuable epistemic states, others reject this claim and maintain that philosophers tend to overestimate the value of reflection in their accounts of epistemological phenomena.

Our conclusion is that, despite radical disagreement, these positions converge because they deal with reflection from an individualistic point of view, defining it as an agent's private metacognitive performance of her own epistemic states. However, this is not the whole story and it neglects the place of sincere and legitimate conflict between epistemic agents who are in disagreement about something relevant and whose best option, and most virtuous attitude, is to reflect.

In our opinion, the epistemological discussion on reflection is misguided because epistemologists typically (and often uncritically) assume (ICR) and its agenda. In the first place, (ICR) conceives of reflection as an exclusively individual metacognitive activity. Secondly, following an idealistic tradition, (ICR) ignores

that epistemic exchanges between agents involve considering and examining the beliefs of others and (and sometimes against) one's own beliefs. An ordinary, non-individualistic, and dialectical sense of reflection, as presented here, could motivate a new and broader agenda about the evaluative capacities of epistemic agents, including their own beliefs and thoughts.[6]

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6 The first version of this essay was presented at the regular CONCEPT seminar at the University of Cologne, Germany, during an internship as Visiting Researcher of Waldomiro Silva Filho. We thank Sven Bernecker for his criticism and suggestions. We also thank the anonymous peer for the critical comments and suggestions that were very helpful to improving our argument. Waldomiro Silva had the support of CNPq (Proc. 422262/2016-1, 312111/2016-9, and 311816/2019-3).

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