QUESTIONING STEPHEN STICH’S EPISTEMIC PRAGMATISM: WHAT IS WRONG WITH ITS CONSEQUENTIALIST APPROACH TO REASONING STRATEGY ASSESSMENT?

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Abstract: In this paper, I examine and then criticize the two main assumptions underlying Stephen Stich’s Epistemic Pragmatism and the resulting consequentialist approach to reasoning strategy assessment, and namely (1) the rejection of truth as our main epistemic goal and (2) the relativity of any assessment of reasoning strategies. According to Epistemic Pragmatism, indeed, any evaluation of reasoning strategies is to be made in terms of their conduciveness to achieving what their users intrinsically value. As I will attempt to show, however, since neither Stich’s argument supporting the dismissal of truth as our main epistemic goal, nor his relativistic view on reasoning strategy assessment are well supported, I will conclude that Epistemic Pragmatism alone cannot provide an adequate consequentialist framework for comparatively assessing people’s reasoning strategies and their epistemic merits.

Key Words: Stephen Stich, Epistemic Pragmatism, reasoning strategy assessment, consequentialism, relativism.

1. Introduction

Over the last twenty years, various forms of epistemic consequentialism have emerged as rivals to the standard analytic way of doing epistemology. According to the latter, knowledge is conceived as a special kind of true belief, namely justified true belief. Since belief and truth are not, strictly speaking, epistemological concepts (but rather psychological and semantic concepts, respectively) the standard analytic way of doing epistemology has focused on justification, which is conceived as the property that distinguishes knowledge from mere true belief. According to standard analytic epistemologists, epistemology should aim to provide an appropriate analysis of the concept of justification and work out the conditions that beliefs must satisfy in order to count as justified true beliefs, that is, knowledge.¹ In contrast to this position, some epistemic consequentialists have argued that epistemology should have a more practical concern. According to them, the main aim of an epistemological

¹ For a recent survey of the most relevant approaches to the analysis of knowledge in epistemology, see Ichikawa and Steup 2014.
enquiry is to determine how to properly assess and improve the reasoning strategies for belief formation and revision by attending to their consequences (see, e.g., Stich 1990; Goldman 1999; Kornblith 2002; Bishop and Trout 2005). Insofar as these consequentialist approaches to epistemology aim to develop ways to evaluate people’s reasoning strategies for belief formation and revision, justification, which is standardly taken to be a property of belief tokens, plays a marginal role (if any at all) in their analysis. In their view, epistemology should shift to how people reason, rather than focus on the conditions for knowledge. However, insofar as they claim that people’s reasoning strategies have to be evaluated by attending to their consequences, these consequentialist theories have first to determine the epistemic goal(s) of the reasoning strategies under consideration. More generally, any epistemic consequentialist needs to address the following questions: what (if any) is the primary epistemic goal? Is it truth? What else might replace truth in that role?

This paper focuses on a well-known pragmatist answer to these questions provided by Stephen Stich (1990), and based on his so-called “Epistemic Pragmatism”. My aim is to show that Stich’s Epistemic Pragmatism cannot alone provide an adequate consequentialist framework for evaluating people’s reasoning strategies. More specifically, I will argue that the two main assumptions underlying it, which are (1) the rejection of truth as our main epistemic goal and (2) the relativity of any reasoning strategy assessment, either do not hold or are not well-supported. I will conclude by proposing that Stich’s Epistemic Pragmatism does not appear fit for purpose, that is to say, for making a comparative assessment of people’s reasoning strategies and their epistemic merits.

2. Epistemic consequentialism and naturalism

According to the standard analytic way of doing epistemology, which involves focusing on the conditions under which a belief counts as knowledge, the epistemic subject is taken to be irrelevant in the process of knowledge acquisition. However, some recent consequentialist theories have placed great emphasis on the role of psychological and social conditions in epistemological theorizing, since their target is to assess and improve the reasoning strategies thanks to which people can form and revise their beliefs appropriately. Indeed, epistemic consequentialist theories, particularly those developed by Stich

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2 Even while keeping their distance from the standard analytic approach to epistemology, other consequentialist theories are still interested in the concept of justification, holding that the justifiedness of one’s beliefs is to be spelled out in terms of the reliability of their generating processes (see, e.g., Goldman 1986; Henderson et al. 2007; Leplin 2007; Comesaña 2010; Graham 2012).
(1990), Goldman (1999), Kornblith (2002) and Bishop and Trout (2005), are interested in investigating what reasoning strategies should be adopted by actual – and not ideal – subjects, meaning subjects who possess a cognitive system and live in a social world, regardless of how we conceive them. Because of their interest in the psychological and social aspects involved in the process of belief formation and revision, these approaches to epistemology are usually classified as naturalistic (see Bishop and Trout 2005: 22-23, 112-118).³ There has been lively debate in the last few decades about the appropriateness of naturalistic approaches in epistemological theorizing (see, for example, Kitcher 1992; Bonjour 1994; Kornblith 1999; Knowles 2002; Pacherie 2002). Unlike the so-called replacement thesis (Kornblith 1994: 4), namely that epistemology should be set aside in favour of psychology, the consequentialist theories to which I am referring take a moderate stance towards the naturalization of epistemology, and do not aim to replace epistemology with psychology (Quine 1969), because according to these theories, epistemology has more to do with concerns about epistemic norms than with describing epistemic performances. More specifically, the aim of these theories is to build a normative framework for the comparative assessment of the epistemic quality of reasoning strategies in terms of their conduciveness to achieving certain goals. Accordingly, there is place for a more substantive concept of epistemic goodness, taking into account, among other things, the nature and value of the goals pursued by the epistemic subjects. As Stich (1993: 5) has pointed out, that involves determining “[…] which goal or goals are of interest for the assessment at hand”: a step which, according to Stich himself, is “fundamentally normative”. Indeed, an empirical inquiry cannot explain what people’s goals should be.

3. Epistemic goals: truth and beyond

According to consequentialist approaches, epistemologists have to determine what the epistemic goals of reasoning strategies ought to be, and which reasoning strategies will best lead to those goals, given the cognitive and environmental constraints of the epistemic subjects. However, whatever goal an epistemologist opts for, she has to explain why it matters from the epistemic point of view.

Looking at the epistemological literature, we see that most naturalistic theories have maintained that truth is the most fundamental goal of our epistemic practices (see, e.g., Nozick 1981; Goldman 1986; Papineau 1993; Plantinga 1993). Leaving aside his former claim that epistemology should become part of psychology, for example, Quine (1986: 664-665) stated that

³ The term “naturalistic approach” is used here in a loose sense, without referring to a specific way of conceiving naturalism in epistemology.
naturalization of epistemology does not jettison the normative and settle for
the indiscriminate description of ongoing procedures. For me normative
epistemology is a branch of engineering. It is the technology of truth-
seeking, or, in a more cautiously epistemological term, prediction […].
There is no question here of ultimate value, as in morals; it is a matter of
efficacy for an ulterior end, truth or prediction. The normative here, as
elsewhere in engineering, becomes descriptive when the terminal parameter
is expressed.

A well-known form of this sort of epistemic consequentialism is Goldman’s
Reliabilism (Goldman 1986; 1999). According to him, good reasoning strategies
should be aimed at producing true beliefs, and their outcomes can be taken to be
justified if they come from reliable cognitive processes, that is, cognitive
processes that generally lead to true beliefs. Accordingly, reasoning strategies
are to be assessed by their success in leading to true beliefs. But, as Hilary
Kornblith (2002: 123) observes

how is it that truth acquires this status as our goal and thereby confers
normative force on the recommendations to pursue certain reasoning
strategies of belief acquisition and retention, namely, those which are
conducive to achieving it?

In other words, why does truth matter? Two answers to this question may be
proposed. The first is that truth has an intrinsic value, which means that holding
true beliefs is intrinsically valuable. The second is that, even though an
epistemic subject aims at having true beliefs, she does so because having true
beliefs may be useful in order to attain other more valuable goals: truth as an
epistemic goal has a merely instrumental value. According to the latter view,
having true beliefs is valuable because true beliefs help us to attain our goals. 4
In place of these two truth-centered answers, a pragmatist may replace truth as
the main epistemic goal with more practical objectives. In particular, according
to Stephen Stich’s Epistemic Pragmatism, truth should be set aside in favour of
things such as the totality of goals people value. In Stich’s view, an
epistemologist should consider the consequences of using this or that reasoning
strategy with respect to their conduciveness to achieving such or such personal
goal.

4 It is implicitly assumed that true beliefs are more conducive to valuable practical
consequences than false beliefs are.
4. Stich’s Epistemic Pragmatism

The first formulation of Stich’s Epistemic Pragmatism can be found in his influential book *The Fragmentation of Reason* (1990), while some of its more recent applications and developments are presented in a series of papers co-authored with Michael Bishop, Luc Faucher and Richard Samuels (Samuels et al. 2002; Samuels et al. 2004). As I will try to show, Epistemic Pragmatism is grounded on two main assumptions, that is, (1) the rejection of truth as our main epistemic goal and (2) the relativity of any assessment of reasoning strategies. This section focuses on (1) by working through the reasoning Stich provides in its support in *The Fragmentation of Reason* (Section 4), while the following section deals with (2) by showing how reasoning strategy assessment is performed according to Epistemic Pragmatism (Section 5).

4.1 Descriptive and normative cognitive pluralism

In *The Fragmentation of Reason* (1990), Stich argues for what he calls “cognitive pluralism”. In his view, cognitive pluralism is divided into two theses, which are called descriptive cognitive pluralism and descriptive cognitive monism, respectively. In descriptive cognitive pluralism, people differ significantly in their ways of reasoning, and of forming and revising beliefs. A supporter of descriptive cognitive monism, on the other hand, would hold that if there are differences in how people reason, these will be not significant, and she would therefore conclude that all people reason in fundamentally the same way (Stich 1990: 13). While descriptive cognitive pluralism and descriptive cognitive monism are based on empirical considerations – they do not have any normative import –, normative cognitive pluralism is about the reasoning strategies people ought to use. In particular, this thesis holds that while people use a variety of reasoning strategies that significantly differ from each other, they may all be normatively appropriate. In opposition to that, a supporter of normative cognitive monism would hold that there is only one normatively appropriate way of reasoning, regardless of whether different people use different and sometimes competing reasoning strategies. According to the normative monist, you can always find universal criteria that distinguish between correct and faulty ways of reasoning. So, returning to the general idea underlying cognitive pluralism, Stich maintains not only that (i) people reason in different ways but also that (ii) there is no single, universal normative standard for assessing which way of reasoning is better than another.

Starting with (i), what is the evidence for descriptive cognitive pluralism? When Stich wrote *The Fragmentation of Reason*, he held that the main empirical evidence for descriptive cognitive pluralism came from studies of human reasoning made by cognitive psychologists such as Peter Wason, Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (for a survey of these empirical studies see, e.g.,
Gilcovich, Griffin and Kahneman (2002). According to Stich (1990: 7-9), this experimental research shows that people belonging to the same culture or society employ different reasoning strategies, particularly heuristics, and go on even when it is explained to them that their reasoning strategies are normatively inappropriate for the given task. This is a controversial claim, however. Nenad Miščević, for example, has noted that there is no variety of wrong answers given at the selection or conjunction tasks, and this uniformity is a testimony to the importance of the experimental paradigm itself. The tests have been performed on people of very different degrees of sophistication and age, but the biases seem to be uniform; they do not, at least prima facie, support any kind of descriptive pluralism. (Miščević 1996: 28)

According to Miščević, the results of classical studies on human reasoning can be interpreted as indicating that almost all people possess and use the same heuristics in order to solve reasoning problems and he thereby concludes that, contrary to Stich’s claim, such data might actually support descriptive cognitive monism. However, in these classical studies most, if not all, of the experimental subjects were Westerners. At that time, no systematic research was done on human reasoning involving people from different cultures which could really support descriptive cognitive pluralism.

Since the late nineties, cognitive psychologists have produced new evidence that seems to support Stich’s claim. In particular, the social psychologist Richard Nisbett and his collaborators have conducted several psychological experiments to test whether “Western” and “East Asian” people think and reason differently when faced with the same cognitive task (see, e.g., Nisbett et al. 2001; Norenzayan 2002; Nisbett 2003). Their results show significant differences among the cognitive (including reasoning) strategies used by Westerners and East Asians. According to their proponents, these studies question the idea that all people share a basic core of cognitive strategies regardless of their own culture and education.

In particular, Nisbett and his collaborators characterize the cognitive strategies used by Westerners as being more analytic. Such a way of reasoning involves

[…] detachment of the object from its context, a tendency to focus on attributes of the object to assign it to categories, and a preference for using rules about the categories to explain and predict the object’s behaviour. Inferences rest in part on the practice of decontextualizing structure from content, the use of formal logic, and avoidance of contradiction. (Nisbett et al. 2001: 293)
Instead, cognitive strategies employed by East Asians are characterized as being more holistic. Their ways of reasoning involve

[…] an orientation to the context or field as a whole, including attention to relationships between a focal object and the field, and a preference for explaining and predicting events on the basis of such relationships. Holistic approaches rely on experience-based knowledge rather than on abstract logic and are dialectical, meaning that there is an emphasis on change, a recognition of contradiction and of the need for multiple perspectives, and a search for the “Middle Way” between opposing propositions. (Nisbett et al. 2001: 293)

Moreover, according to Nisbett and his colleagues, such differences between ways of thinking can be used as evidence that people not only use very different cognitive strategies, but they also differ in their beliefs about how the world is. Insofar as the results of these experimental studies can be taken for granted, Stich’s descriptive cognitive pluralism might be said to be vindicated. As stated above, however, descriptive cognitive pluralism is a descriptive thesis which as it stands, does not necessarily lead to normative relativism about epistemic evaluation. The fact that people from different cultures use different reasoning strategies when dealing with the same reasoning problem does not mean that their reasoning strategies are all equally good.

4.2 Normative cognitive pluralism: beyond truth as our main epistemic goal

Why should epistemologists be interested in descriptive cognitive pluralism? According to Stich (1990: 74), the existence of significant differences among people’s cognitive strategies means that a consequentialist framework needs to be constructed with which to make a comparative assessment of those cognitive strategies and their respective epistemic merits. This project begins with a fundamental question: how can epistemologists assess the different ways people reason? As the studies of Nisbett and his collaborators have shown, other similar questions can be raised: what can we say about the normative status of different systems of reasoning strategies such as those demonstrated by Nisbett and his colleagues? Is one of them objectively right and the rest of them objectively wrong? In supporting his normative cognitive pluralism, Stich wants to show that there is epistemic incommensurability between different ways people reason, and thus that there is no such thing as a universal criterion for distinguishing between good and faulty ways of reasoning. In consequentialist

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5 For the sake of the argument, although some philosophers and psychologists have raised objections to the works of Nisbett and his colleagues, I take for granted here both Nisbett and his colleagues’ experimental results and their interpretations (for some of these criticisms, see for example Huss 2004; Engel 2007; Mun Chan and K.T. Yan 2007).
terms, this means that there is no common goal that might enable us to compare reasoning strategies across situations as to their effectiveness. Of course, in order to rebut Stich’s relativist conclusion, a monist consequentialist could appeal to some common epistemic goal as a universal criterion of evaluation, and that might be the goal of having true beliefs. While accepting that people of different cultures and societies reason in significantly different ways, the monist consequentialist would hold that all of their reasoning strategies aim at truth, and therefore truth would emerge as the best candidate as regards the epistemic goal with which to comparatively assess different reasoning strategies (see Section 3). These considerations are based on the idea that truth is the fundamental goal (either intrinsically or extrinsically or both) for all epistemic subjects. Against such a monistic epistemological position, Stich has put forward two arguments aimed at showing that having true beliefs may not really be valuable either intrinsically or instrumentally (Stich 1990: 101-127).

His first argument purports to demonstrate that the notion of truth (and its related interpretation function), being idiosyncratic and culturally bound, is useless as a universal standard for evaluation. According to this view, people should not care whether their beliefs are true rather than TRUE*, TRUE** or TRUE*** etc. (where TRUE*, TRUE** or TRUE*** etc. represent plausible or counter-intuitive options alternative to “true”). The core of Stich’s argument rests on “the existence of a function that maps certain brain-state tokens (including beliefs and perhaps some others) onto entities that are more naturally thought of in semantic terms, entities like propositions, or content sentences, or specifications of truth-conditions” (Stich 1990: 104). In other words, what Stich also calls “interpretation function” maps certain brain-state tokens onto entities which, according to him, can be true or false. For example, this interpretation function maps a brain-state token, such as a belief, onto the proposition “The cat is on the mat”. The interpretation function attributes a content to the belief, that is, that the cat is on the mat. According to Stich’s argument, the belief will be true if and only if the proposition “The cat is on the mat” (to which it is mapped) is true. However, as Stich (1990: 114) points out, “a function is just a mapping, and if the items in one set can be mapped to the items in another set in one way, they can be mapped in many ways”. This means that there might always be an indefinite number of possible interpretation functions, according to which we can map brain-state tokens, such as beliefs, onto propositions. To return to the previous example, we could map the belief that the cat is on the mat onto many different propositions, such as “The cat is on the table” or “The cat is on the table in the kitchen”. But which interpretation function is the right one among them? What makes it so? In Stich’s opinion, by characterizing the “right” interpretation function, analytic philosophers, such as epistemologists and philosophers of language, aim at examining “the judgments of the man or woman in the street about what content sentences or truth conditions get paired
with the ordinary beliefs of ordinary folk” (Stich 1990: 105). In the standard analytic approach to epistemology, the people epistemologists refer to belong to a very definite culture and society and so, according to Stich, the interpretation function sanctioned by their judgments will be very idiosyncratic, and probably differ from that sanctioned by the considered judgments of people belonging to other cultures and societies. In his view, there is not only one but many competing interpretation functions and “the fact that we have inherited this idiosyncratic interpretation function rather than some other one is largely a matter of cultural and historical accident” (Stich 1991: 138). Consequently, Stich holds that there is nothing intrinsically valuable in having beliefs that are mapped on true propositions sanctioned by the idiosyncratic interpretation function because those who find intrinsic value in holding true beliefs (rather than TRUE* ones, or TRUE** ones, ...) are accepting unreflectively the interpretation function that our culture (or our biology) has bequeathed to us and letting that function determine their basic epistemic value. In so doing, they are making a profoundly conservative choice; they are letting tradition determine their cognitive values without any attempt at critical evaluation of that tradition. (Stich 1990: 120)

Stich holds that, while supporters of the standard analytic approach who like to be conservative in epistemic matters may feel their claims are reinforced by that argument, once most people become aware of what is involved in intrinsically valuing true belief, they realize that they do not usually do so.

His second argument against truth as the main epistemic goal is that not only is holding true beliefs not intrinsically valuable, but there is also no good reason to assume that holding true beliefs has an instrumental value (Stich 1990: 121-124). According to him, the fact that true beliefs are good at achieving one’s goals does not mean that they are more intrinsically valuable than their competitors, such as TRUE* beliefs, TRUE** beliefs or even false beliefs. Stich argues that we should not focus, therefore, upon whether true beliefs which are in certain cases instrumentally valuable are good at achieving one’s goals, but rather whether true beliefs which are sanctioned by our idiosyncratic interpretation function are more valuable, intrinsically, than those assumed to be true by other competing interpretation functions. If these alternative options give rise to different advice about what to do in a given situation and so lead us to take different courses of action, they might prove to be more valuable, instrumentally, than our idiosyncratic notion of truth. By way of example, Stich

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6 For empirical data supporting the claim that considered judgments about philosophical questions, such as the Gettier problem and the problem of the reference of proper names, differ among people belonging to different cultures or societies, see respectively Weinberg et al. 2001; Nichols et al. 2003.
describes a hypothetical survival situation in which having true beliefs turns out to be less useful than having false beliefs (Stich 1990: 122). Suppose a man called Harry rightly believes (he has a true belief) that his plane is scheduled to take off at 7:45 a.m. He arrives at the airport just in time, picks up his boarding-card at check-in, and boards the plane, but the plane crashes after take-off and Harry is killed. In such a case, Stich argues, having a not true belief, for example, that the plane was scheduled to take off at 8:15 a.m., would have saved Harry’s life; in other words, having a not true belief would have helped him achieve a basic goal, namely his survival. According to Stich, this example shows that having false beliefs sometimes help us to achieve our (fundamental) goals more than having true beliefs. He then concludes from this example that “[...] the instrumental value of true beliefs is far from obvious, and those who think that true beliefs are instrumentally valuable owe us an argument that is not going to be easy to provide” because “it is surely not the case that having true beliefs is always the best doxastic stance in pursuing goals” (Stich 1990: 124).

5. Stich’s consequentialist approach to reasoning strategy assessment

If truth is not the common epistemic goal of people’s epistemic practices, and so cannot be used as the fundamental criterion to evaluate their reasoning strategies, what can? If the systems of reasoning of different cultures are epistemically impossible to compare, how can we judge which is the best? Stich proposes replacing truth, understood as an absolute cognitive value, with an indefinite multiplicity of values which are relative to people’s preferences and to those of the societies to which they belong, and which may even be in competition with one another:

if the argument about the value of truth could be sustained, the natural upshot for the normative theory of cognition would be a thoroughgoing pragmatism which holds that all cognitive value is instrumental or pragmatic – that there are no intrinsic, cognitive values. (Stich 1990: 21)

In his pragmatist view, it is appropriate to give one’s preference to the reasoning strategy “that would be most likely to achieve those things that are intrinsically valued by the person whose interests are relevant to the purposes of the evaluation” (Stich 1990: 131). In other words, good reasoning strategies for a reasoner to employ are the ones more conducive to the state of affairs she considers intrinsically valuable, which according to Stich (1990: 25) are states of affairs that help people to control nature or improve their living conditions. In his view, reasoning strategies should be deemed to be cognitive tools and evaluated consequentially, that is, in terms of their effectiveness in attaining
things which people who use them endow with intrinsic value, regardless of whether they produce true beliefs.

Within this pragmatist framework, it is easier to understand Stich’s “cognitive pluralism” (see Section 4.1). According to him, neither the goals nor the means of achieving those goals will be the same for all reasoners. People aim at different and competing goals depending on their interests and desires, and interests and desires usually vary among persons and cultures. Since it seems impossible to find one single criterion of evaluation for assessing people’s reasoning strategies, the only method left to discover which of the various reasoning strategies people adopt is the best one (if Nisbett and his collaborators’ claims are correct) is to use situational or personal standards of evaluation. In particular, according to Stich’s Epistemic Pragmatism, reasoning strategies can only be assessed consequentially by examining how efficiently they are likely to satisfy one’s desires and personal goals, or in other words, by looking at their consequences.

As highlighted in a paper by Richard Samuels, Stephen Stich and Luc Faucher (2004: 166), a pragmatist approach to reasoning strategy assessment such as that just presented is of great value since it provides a justification of rationality: indeed, it explains why people should be trying to reason in a normatively appropriate way: that is, it justifies our attributing normative force to the recommendation to rely on certain reasoning strategies rather than others. The justification is clear and simple: good reasoning is desirable because it helps us to achieve what we intrinsically value. In other words, we try to reason well because it is a necessary condition for attaining things that we intrinsically value. It is not, as many epistemologists claim, aiming at truth in itself that explains why reasoning in a normatively correct way matters (see Section 3); it is instead the desire to attain our goals which gives normative force to the adoption of certain reasoning strategies.

Let us now consider how Epistemic Pragmatism can be applied to reasoning strategy assessment. Stich observes that

when we ask whether subjects are reasoning well, perhaps what we really want to know is whether their cognitive system is at least as good as any feasible alternative, where an alternative is feasible if it can be used by people operating with some appropriate set of constraints. (Stich 1990: 154)

First of all, when assessing reasoning strategies, we are comparing one reasoning strategy with certain competitors. In this sense, no reasoning strategy is normatively appropriate or inappropriate in any absolute sense. In evaluating a given reasoning strategy, we should compare it to alternatives that are feasible (in contrast with any other logically possible alternative reasoning strategies). According to this view, before making any negative evaluation about a reasoning strategy, one must be sure there is an alternative that “is both
pragmatically superior and feasible” (Stich 1990: 156). Thus various cognitive and situational constraints have to be taken into account when deciding which criteria of evaluation to employ. But which constraints should be counted as appropriate? Stich states that

in deciding which constraints are relevant, or which alternative cognitive systems we will count as feasible, we must look to our purposes in asking the question. Or, as William James might put it, we must ask what the “cash value” of the question is – what actions might we take as the result of one answer or another. (Stich 1990: 155)

What reasoning strategies a reasoner should adopt depends upon her desires, goals, and preferences in various ways and whether one reasoning strategy is appropriate in order to successfully solve a reasoning task will always depend in part on what questions she wants to answer. Here is the core of the consequentialist framework for assessing reasoning strategies which emerges from Stich’s Epistemic Pragmatism:

the pragmatic assessment of a cognitive system will be sensitive to both the value and the circumstances of the people using it. Thus it may well turn out that one cognitive system is pragmatically better than a second for me, while the second is pragmatically better than the first for someone else. (Stich 1990: 25)

Any assessment of a reasoning strategy should be sensitive to people’s values and the circumstances in which it is used (Samuels et al. 2004: 167). Starting from these considerations, two fundamental types of constraints can be identified: (a) good reasoning is characterized by its conduciveness to achieving one’s desires and goals; (b) reasoning strategy evaluations should be relativized to specific ranges of context. As to (a), we need first to identify the goals which people value. Once these are identified, we need to determine what reasoning strategies best serve these goals. With regard to (b), we need to specify the kind of cognitive and situational constraints relative to which reasoning strategy assessments should be made.

6. Against Stich’s Epistemic Pragmatism

In this section, I will try to show that the two main assumptions underlying Stich’s Epistemic Pragmatism – (1) the rejection of truth as our main epistemic goal and (2) the relativity of any assessment of reasoning strategies – do not hold, or at least can be said to be not well-supported. If I am right, and the two assumptions are indeed flawed, then Stich’s Epistemic Pragmatism itself can be
questioned and so too can the consequentialist framework for assessing reasoning strategies which derives from it.

6.1 The value of truth

Stich rejects truth as our main epistemic goal on the grounds that, once we understand what truth is and compare it to some of its competitors, we should accept that truth is not as valuable as we had previously thought. Here I consider whether Stich’s argument in support of the claim that truth is not our main epistemic goal has an actual impact on our way of assessing the epistemic quality of reasoning strategies, or whether its conclusion merely states a possibility.

As we have seen in Section 4.2, Stich holds that there might be situations in which having beliefs that are not true (whether we call that false, TRUE*, TRUE**, TRUE*** etc.) is more conducive to the things which we intrinsically value than having true beliefs but gives only one example about such kind of situations. However, let us assume that these situations may occur and that beliefs may exist which are not true (they may be false, TRUE*, TRUE**, TRUE*** etc.), through which we can achieve the things we intrinsically value more than relying on true beliefs. Following Stich’s argument, we are led to assume that people who have those beliefs, sanctioned by the appropriate interpretation function, will have a better life in the long run (and perhaps even in the short term). Is this really the case? It seems to me that Stich needs to explain just what these alternatives to the classical notion of truth are and how they can be characterized, so that we can compare them with truth and thereby conclude which ones are better at achieving our goals. On perusing his theory, however, we find no further details regarding TRUTH*, TRUTH** and TRUTH***. If it is only logically possible that having not true beliefs is more useful than having true beliefs in order to best achieve our goals, this is still insufficient to make us change our minds and induce us to aim instead at having not true beliefs (true* beliefs, true** beliefs, false beliefs etc.). It is one thing to say that these beliefs exist and are (arguably) identifiable; it is quite another to say that people can find reliable and feasible strategies with which to arrive at those types of belief. Just how can we distinguish between these different types of beliefs? The conditional statement proposed by Stich, according to which if we had these types of belief, they would lead us to reliably achieve our goals (even if we do not know we have them), is not enough to make us change our reasoning strategies by replacing our notion of truth and its related interpretation function with an alternative one. Before we change our ways of reasoning, we need to know something more about what kind of beliefs we should aim at and more importantly, whether our cognitive abilities are up to figuring out what these beliefs are and if necessary, achieving them. Stich, then, must be the one
to show us what exactly these alternatives to truth amount to: the burden of proof is on him and the supporters of his claims.

Let us think back to the example of Harry, who did not achieve a basic goal (his survival) because he had the true belief that the plane was scheduled to take off at 7:45 a.m. According to Stich, if Harry had had a false belief about his flight’s departure time, it would have saved his life. However, Harry would only have saved his life by having a false belief by accident. Harry’s case is not enough to lead us to conclude that having false beliefs systematically results in us achieving what we intrinsically value – its conduciveness to this is closely related to specific conditions being present. More generally, if we want to evaluate which one among true beliefs, true* beliefs, true** beliefs, and so on, it is better to have in order to achieve goals we intrinsically value, we have to first figure out what true* beliefs, true** beliefs etc. consist of. But as we have already seen, Stich does not provide us with any examples of what true* beliefs, true** beliefs etc. amount to. Consequently, we are unable to make any systematic connection between having true* beliefs, true** beliefs etc. and achieving goals we intrinsically value, and therefore are unable to weigh up whether one of them is better than true beliefs at achieving such goals.

It is therefore possible to conclude that we have no reason to dismiss truth as our main epistemic goal and it may thus be considered to be a relevant criterion by which to assess the epistemic quality of a given reasoning strategy for belief formation and revision. However, we can accept one point of Stich’s argument: it is true that not everyone agrees on how truth should be characterized and it is also true that sometimes, depending on the context in which we find ourselves, we may have different intuitions about the truth-value of a sentence (see Austin 1962: 142-145; Carston 2002; Recanati 2010).

6.2 Relativism and the invariant pragmatist criterion

The other objection that comes up quite naturally with regard to Stich’s Epistemic Pragmatism is that it leads to a radical form of relativism. According to Edward Stein (1996: 242), such an approach, which presupposes what he calls the relativist picture of rationality, assumes that “what counts as rational is indexed to each human being, so what counts as rational is (at least potentially) different for each human being”. Characterized in these terms, Stich’s position leads directly to nihilism, foregoing any attempt to distinguish between good and bad reasoning strategies, so that “anything goes”. Having once accepted that there is no external and independent standard against which to assess people’s reasoning, we find ourselves in a situation where epistemic anarchy rules. This seems to be rather too extreme a characterization of Stich’s proposal, however, because as outlined above, he holds that the consequentialist approach provides criteria of evaluation, but that these are relativized to cognitive and situational constraints. That is what he means when he refers to reasoning strategies “used
by people operating within some appropriate set of constraints”. Even though Stein has missed the point, however, I think that an even stronger objection can be levelled against the consequentialist approach to reasoning strategy assessment set by Stich’s Epistemic Pragmatism. One may indeed wonder whether this approach is really applicable in every situation. As Michael Bishop has argued (2009: 120),

Stich is a pluralist about a great many things, but when it comes to normative, evaluative matters, he is a methodological monist. Regardless of the item one is evaluating, the evaluative considerations that arise are the same: what is most likely to bring about those things one intrinsically values?

The very fact that this question is always relevant may be held to provide a general and universal criterion for evaluating different reasoning strategies. As suggested by Baghramian (2004: 176), in spite of its alleged relativism, Stich’s consequentialist approach may therefore be held not to be radically relativistic. Its invariant pragmatist criterion might be characterized as follows: inasmuch as a reasoning strategy helps people to achieve goals they intrinsically value, it counts as epistemically valuable. Clearly, although this principle seems to be universally applicable, it does not specify what its content is, and in particular, how to distinguish between goals that are valuable and goals that are not, and what it actually means for a reasoning strategy to be epistemically valuable, apart from its conduciveness to achieving valuable goals. This under-specification can be conceived of as the relativistic side of Stich’s invariant pragmatist criterion. But, insofar as there is no general criterion to be applied for comparatively assessing the epistemic value of two or more reasoning strategies, it is unclear how we are supposed to decide which one of them is better at achieving certain specific goals. Furthermore, while Stich does give some simple examples of what people intrinsically value, such as controlling nature and having a fulfilling life, it is not very easy to work out the exact connection between achieving these things and using specific reasoning strategies. For example, if two or more people in a given situation are tackling the same problem but take different goals to be valuable in attempting to solve it, how can we decide which of the reasoning strategies available is the most epistemically valuable in that situation? It seems to me that if we were to apply Stich’s invariant pragmatist criterion and accept that the epistemic value of a reasoning strategy is to be relativized to the achievement of what its user intrinsically values, then the consequentialist approach set forth by his Epistemic Pragmatism begins to look rather unstable. Indeed, there is some conflict between Stich’s wish to support a relativistic view on reasoning strategy assessment and the need to attain results which are stable enough in each situation. But, if the consequentialist approach advocated by Stich cannot
resolve this problem, then it would appear to be unfit for comparatively evaluating people’s reasoning strategies: while the scope of his pragmatist invariant criterion is general, this criterion is not universally applicable, after all.

7. Concluding remarks

In opposition to the standard way of doing epistemology, some consequentialist theories have proposed giving epistemological inquiry a more practical aim, holding that its main task should be to assess and improve the reasoning strategies of belief formation and revision by attending to their consequences. As a particular case of a consequentialist theory, this article focused on Stich’s Epistemic Pragmatism, according to which any evaluation of reasoning strategies is to be made in terms of the reasoning strategy’s conduciveness to achieving what its users intrinsically value. In particular, I first examined and then criticized the theoretical background upon which this consequentialist framework for the evaluation of reasoning strategies is grounded. I tried to show that the two main assumptions underlying Epistemic Pragmatism, and namely (1) the rejection of truth as our main epistemic goal and (2) the relativity of any reasoning strategy assessment, are not well-supported. On the one hand, Stich’s argument in support of the claim that truth is not our main epistemic goal leads to the conclusion that having beliefs that are not true can be more conducive to what we intrinsically value than having true beliefs, but as I tried to show, this conclusion seems to have no impact on our actual way of assessing people’s reasoning strategies. At the same time, since Stich claims that there is no other criterion upon which to base a comparative assessment of the epistemic value of two or more reasoning strategies except their conduciveness to achieving goals their users intrinsically value, his relativistic view on reasoning strategies’ assessments cannot satisfy the need for a stable conclusion as to whether one reasoning strategy is epistemically better than another in a given situation. Accordingly, since neither Stich’s argument in support of dismissing truth as our main epistemic goal nor his relativistic view on reasoning strategy assessments are well supported, the consequentialist approach propounded by Epistemic Pragmatism does not appear to be fit for purpose.

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