

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

Paolo Labinaz

University of Trieste

plabinaz@units.it

Abstract: In this paper, I examine and then criticize the two main assumptions underlying Stephen Stich's Epistemic Pragmatism and its resulting consequentialist approach to reasoning strategy assessment, that is, (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. However, since, as I will try to show, neither Stich's argument supporting the dismissal of truth as our main epistemic goal nor his relativistic view on reasoning strategies' assessments are well supported, I will conclude that Epistemic Pragmatism cannot provide by itself 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*

In the last twenty years, different 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, that is, justified true belief. Since belief and truth are not, strictly speaking, epistemological concepts – they are a psychological and respectively a semantic one –, 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

This paper draws on some of the arguments developed in the fourth chapter of my PhD dissertation, which I defended at the University of Trieste in May 2010.

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 reasoning strategies of 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 of belief formation and revision, justification, which is standardly taken to be a property of belief tokens, plays (if any) a marginal role in their analysis.² 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 to first determine to what epistemic goal(s) reasoning strategies have to be directed. More generally, any epistemic consequentialist has to address the following questions: which is (if any) the primary epistemic goal? Is it truth? What else could replace truth in that role?

In this paper, I will focus on a famous pragmatist answer to these questions that has been provided by Stephen Stich (1990) on the basis of his so-called "Epistemic Pragmatism". My aim is to show that Stich's Epistemic Pragmatism cannot provide by itself an adequate consequentialist framework for evaluating people's reasoning strategies. Specifically, I will argue that the two main assumptions underlying it, that is, (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 then conclude by claiming that Stich's Epistemic Pragmatism does not appear to be adequate for its purpose, that is, for comparatively assessing people's reasoning strategies and their epistemic merits.

2. Epistemic consequentialism and naturalism

While in the standard analytic way of doing epistemology, 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, some recent consequentialist theories have placed great emphasis on the role of her psychological and social conditions in epistemological theorizing, since their target is to assess and improve reasoning strategies thanks to which people can form and revise their beliefs appropriately. Indeed, epistemic consequentialist theories, particularly those developed by Stich (1990), Goldman (1999), Kornblith (2002) and Bishop and Trout (2005), are interested in investigating

² Other consequentialist theories, while taking distance from the standard analytic approach to epistemology, 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).

what reasoning strategies should be adopted by actual – not ideal – subjects, that is, subjects who possess a cognitive system and live in a social world, regardless of how we conceive them. Because of this attention for 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 In the last decades, there has been a lot of discussion about the appropriateness of naturalistic approaches in epistemological theorizing (see, e.g., Kitcher 1992; Bonjour 1994; Kornblith 1999; Knowles 2002; Pacherie 2002). Contrary to the so-called replacement thesis (Kornblith 1994: 4), namely the thesis that epistemology should be set aside in favour of psychology, the consequentialist theories to which I am referring assume a moderate position about the naturalization of epistemology. Its supporters do not aim to replace epistemology with psychology (Quine 1969), because, according to them, epistemology has to do with concerns about epistemic norms rather than with the description of epistemic performances. Specifically, these theories aim at developing a normative framework for comparatively assessing 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, which takes 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 requires to “[...] determine 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 what reasoning strategies will best lead to those goals given the epistemic subjects’ cognitive and environmental constraints. 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 Here I use the term “naturalistic approach” 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 confers normative force to the recommendations to pursue certain reasoning strategies of belief formation and revision, namely, those which are conducive to achieving it?

In other words, why does truth matter? Two answers can be offered to this question. A first answer is that truth has an intrinsic value. This means that holding true beliefs is intrinsically valuable. A second answer is that, although an epistemic subject aims at having true beliefs, she does so because having true beliefs may be useful to attain other more valuable goals: truth as an epistemic goal has merely an instrumental value. According to this second view, having true beliefs is valuable because true beliefs help us to achieve the goals we aim at.⁴ Alternative to these two truth-centered answers, a pragmatist may replace truth as the main epistemic goal with more practical purposes. In particular, according to Stephen Stich's Epistemic Pragmatism, truth should be set aside in favour of other goals, 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. Stich's Epistemic Pragmatism

The first formulation of Stich's Epistemic Pragmatism can be found in his famous book *The Fragmentation of Reason* (1990), while some of its recent

⁴ It is implicitly assumed that true beliefs are more conducive to valuable practical consequences than false beliefs are.

application 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. In this section, I will focus on (1) by tracking back the reasoning Stich provides in its support in *The Fragmentation of Reason* (Section 4). In the next section, I will turn to (2) by showing how reasoning strategies 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, that is, descriptive and normative cognitive pluralism. According to descriptive cognitive pluralism, people differ significantly in their ways of reasoning, and of forming and revising beliefs. Contrary to that, a supporter of descriptive cognitive monism would hold that, if there are differences in how people reason, they will be not significant, and thereby she would 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, coming back 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.

To begin 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., Gilovich, 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 they are explained that their reasoning strategies are normatively

inappropriate for the given task. This is a controversial claim, however. Nenad Mišćević, 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. (Mišćević 1996: 28)

According to Mišćević, the results of classical research 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 so, he concludes, such data might support, contrary to Stich's claim, descriptive cognitive monism. However, in this classical research most, if not all, experimental subjects were Western people. At that time, no systematic research concerning people of different cultures was done on reasoning strategies that might 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 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 we take for granted the results of these experimental studies, Stich’s descriptive cognitive pluralism can be said to be vindicated.⁵ As said above, descriptive cognitive pluralism is, however, a descriptive thesis and, 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 requires the development of a consequentialist framework for the 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, that is, there exists no universal criterion for distinguishing between good and faulty ways of reasoning. In consequentialist terms, that means that there is no common goal that might enable us to compare reasoning strategies across situations as to their effectiveness. However, in order to defeat Stich’s relativist conclusion, a monist consequentialist might appeal to some common epistemic goal as a universal criterion of evaluation, and that might be the goal of having true beliefs. Even accepting that people of different cultures and

⁵ Although some philosophers and psychologists have raised objections against the works of Nisbett and his colleagues, for the sake of the argument, I will take for granted here both Nisbett and his colleagues’ experimental results and their interpretations (for some of these criticisms, see, e.g., Huss 2004; Engel 2007; Mun Chan and K.T. Yan 2007).

societies reason in significantly different ways, the monist consequentialist would hold that all their reasoning strategies aim at truth. The best candidate as a epistemic goal with respect to which to comparatively assess different reasoning strategies would then be truth (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 provided two arguments aiming to show that having true beliefs may not be really valuable either intrinsically or instrumentally (Stich 1990: 101-127).

Consider his first argument, which aims to demonstrate that the notion of truth (and its related interpretation function) is idiosyncratic and culturally bound and, as such, cannot be used as a universal standard for evaluation. On 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 that, he assumes, can be true or false. Thus, for example, such 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. Coming back 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? According to Stich, in 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. So, Stich holds, 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.⁶ According to this view, there are 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). As a consequence, 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 reinforced by that argument, most people, once they are led to understand what is involved in intrinsically valuing true belief, will realize that they do not usually do so.

Consider now his second argument against truth as the main epistemic goal. Stich (1990: 121-124) not only argues that having true beliefs is not intrinsically valuable, he also does not find any good reason to assume that holding true beliefs has an instrumental value. According to him, the fact that true beliefs are good at achieving one’s goals does not mean that they are more valuable, intrinsically, than their competitors, such as TRUE* beliefs, TRUE** beliefs or even false beliefs. So, Stich argues that we should not focus on whether true beliefs that are in certain cases instrumentally valuable are good at achieving one’s goals, but rather whether true beliefs that 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 to take different courses of action, they might prove to be more valuable, instrumentally, than our idiosyncratic notion of truth. Stich makes reference to one example about one’s survival where having true beliefs turns out to be less useful than having false beliefs (Stich 1990: 122). Suppose that a man, call him 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, receives the boarding-card at the check-in, boards the plane, but, after taking off, the

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.

plane goes down and crashes killing Harry. In such a case, Stich argues, having a not true belief, for example, that the plane is scheduled to take off at 8:15 a.m., would have saved Harry's life, that is, having a not true belief would have helped him achieve a basic goal, that is, 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 systems of reasoning of different cultures are epistemically incommensurable, how can we judge among them? Stich proposes to replace truth, understood as an absolute cognitive value, with an indefinite multiplicity of values which are relative to people's preferences and those of the societies which they belong to, and which may 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)

On 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 those that are more conducive to the state of affairs she considers intrinsically valuable, that is, states of affairs such as, according to Stich (1990: 25), those that help people to control nature or that contribute to 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 intrinsically value, regardless of their producing true beliefs.

Within this pragmatist framework, it is possible to better understand Stich's "cognitive pluralism" (see Section 4.1). According to him, neither the goals nor the means to achieve those goals will be the same for all reasoners. People aim

at different and competing goals depending on what their desires and interests are, and desires and interests usually vary among persons and cultures. On this view, it seems impossible to find a single criterion of evaluation for assessing people's reasoning strategies. So, the only method available to us for finding which one among the various reasoning strategies that – if Nisbett and his collaborators' claims are correct – people adopt is the best one, 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, that is, by attending to 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 aim at reasoning in a normatively appropriate way, that is, why we are justified in acknowledging normative force to the recommendation to rely on certain reasoning strategies rather than others. The justification is simple and clear: good reasoning is desirable because it helps us achieving what we intrinsically value. In other words, we aim at reasoning well because this is a necessary condition for attaining things that we intrinsically value. It is not, as many epistemologists maintain, our aiming at truth that by itself explains why reasoning in a normatively correct way matters (see Section 3); rather, it is our desire and interest 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 to 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). On this view, before any negative evaluation about a reasoning strategy is made, one must be sure there is an alternative that “is both pragmatically superior and feasible” (Stich 1990: 156). Thus, several cognitive and situational constraints have to be taken into account when deciding which criteria of evaluation to employ. But which constraints should we count 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 it is the core of the consequentialist framework for assessing reasoning strategies coming 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 picked out: (a) good reasoning is characterized in terms of its conduciveness to achieving one's desires and goals; (b) reasoning strategies' evaluations should be relativized to specific ranges of contexts. As to (a), we need first 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 strategies' 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, that is, if the two assumptions are flawed, then Stich's Epistemic Pragmatism itself can be questioned and so too the consequentialist framework for assessing reasoning strategies coming 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 have previously thought. Here I consider whether Stich's argument supporting 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 only 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 and gives only one example about such kind of situations. However, let us assume that these situations may occur and that there may exist beliefs that are not true (they may be false, TRUE*, TRUE**..., TRUE*** etc.) and through which we can achieve the things we intrinsically value more than relying on true beliefs. Following Stich's argument, we are lead to assume that people who have those beliefs, sanctioned by the appropriate interpretation function, will have a better life in the long run (and maybe also in short-term). Is it really so? It seems to me that Stich needs explain what these alternatives to the classical notion of truth are, how they can be characterized, so that we can compare them with truth and thereby conclude which of them are better at achieving our goals. However, if we look at his theory, we can see that he does not give any detail about TRUTH*, TRUTH** and TRUTH***. If it is only logically possible that having not true beliefs is more useful than having true belief in order to best achieve our goals, that is not still enough to change our mind and prompt us to aim at having not true beliefs (true* beliefs, true** beliefs, false beliefs etc.). One thing is to say that these beliefs exist and are (maybe) identifiable; another is to say that people are able to find reliable and feasible strategies to arrive at those types of beliefs. But, how can we distinguish between these different types of beliefs? The conditional statement held by Stich, according to which if we had these types of beliefs, 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 changing our ways of reasoning, we need to know something more about what kind of beliefs we should aim at and, more prominently, whether our cognitive capacities are enough to figure out what these beliefs are and, in the case, to achieve them. So, it is Stich that has to show us what such alternatives to truth amount to: the burden of the proof is on him and the supporters of his claims. Furthermore, recall the example of Harry who does not achieve a basic goal, that is, his survival, because of his having the true belief that the plane is scheduled to take off at 7:45 a.m. According to Stich, in such a case Harry's having a false belief about the departure time of the flight would have saved his life. However, it is only by accident that Harry might have saved his life by having a false belief. From Harry's case, we cannot conclude that having false beliefs leads systematically to achieving what we intrinsically value – its

conduciveness to achieving things we intrinsically value is tied to the occurrence of particular conditions. More generally, if we want to evaluate which among true beliefs, true* beliefs, true** beliefs etc. it is better to have in order to achieve goals we intrinsically value, we should figure out what true* beliefs, true** beliefs etc. consist in. But, as we have seen before, Stich does not give us any exemplification of what true* beliefs, true** beliefs etc. amount to. Accordingly, we cannot detect any systematic connection between having true* beliefs, true** beliefs etc. and achieving goals we intrinsically value, and so we cannot decide whether one of them is better than true beliefs at achieving such goals.

It is possible then to conclude that we have no reason to dismiss truth as our main epistemic goal and hence to consider it as a relevant criterion in order to assess the epistemic quality of a given reasoning strategy of belief formation and revision. However, we can take one point of Stich's argument: it is true that we do not all agree on how truth should be characterized and sometimes, given the context where we are located, we 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 quite naturally up against 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 from each human being". Characterized in such a way, Stich' position leads directly to nihilism, giving up any attempt to distinguish between good and bad reasoning strategies, and so "anything goes". So, once we accept 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. However, that is too extreme a characterization of Stich's proposal. As seen above, he holds that the consequentialist approach provides criteria of evaluation, but they are relativized to cognitive and situational constraints. That is what Stich means when he speaks of reasoning strategies "used by people operating within some appropriate set of constraints". Even if Stein has missed the point, however, I think that starting from his considerations a stronger objection can be levelled against the consequentialist approach to reasoning strategy assessment set by Stich's Epistemic Pragmatism. Indeed, one may wonder whether this approach is actually applicable in any situation. As argued for by Michael Bishop (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 is suggested by Baghramian (2004: 176), Stich's consequentialist approach, notwithstanding its professed relativism, may be therefore held not to be radically relativistic. Its invariant pragmatist criterion could be characterized in the following way: to the extent that 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, particularly how to distinguish between valuable goals and those that are not and what it is for a reasoning strategy to be epistemically valuable, regardless of its conduciveness to achieving valuable goals. This underspecification can be conceived 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 not clear how we can decide which one among them is better at achieving some specific goals. Furthermore, while Stich makes some simple examples as to what people intrinsically value, such as controlling the nature and having a fulfilling life, it is not so easy to understand how to detect the relationship between their achievement and our reliance on specific reasoning strategies. For example, if in a given situation two or more people are dealing with the same problem and in the attempt of solving it they take to be valuable different goals, how can we decide which one among the available reasoning strategies is the most epistemically valuable? It seems to me that insofar, according to Stich's invariant pragmatist criterion, the epistemic value of a reasoning strategy is to be relativized to the achievement of what its user intrinsically values, the consequentialist approach set by his Epistemic Pragmatism appears to be very unstable. Indeed, there is a tension between Stich's willingness to support a relativistic view on reasoning strategies' assessments and the need for determining how such assessments are to be done. But, if the consequentialist approach Stich advocates cannot solve this tension, then it appears to be inapplicable to comparatively evaluate people's reasoning strategies: while the scope of its pragmatist invariant criterion is general, such a criterion is not universally applicable, after all.

7. Concluding remarks

In opposition with the standard way of doing epistemology, some consequentialist theories have proposed to give a more practical scope to the

epistemological enquiry, holding that its main task is to assess and improve reasoning strategies of belief formation and revision by attending to their consequences. As a particular case of it, I focused on Stich's Epistemic Pragmatism, according to which any evaluation of reasoning strategies is to be made in terms of its conduciveness to achieving what their users intrinsically value. In particular, I have examined and then criticized the theoretical background on which this consequentialist framework for the evaluation of reasoning strategies is grounded. As I tried to show, the two main assumptions underlying Epistemic Pragmatism that is, (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 side, Stich's argument supporting the claim that truth is not our main epistemic goal leads to the hypothetical conclusion that having beliefs that are not true can be more conducive to what we intrinsically value than having true beliefs, but, as I have tried to show, this conclusion seems to have no impact on our actual way of assessing people's reasoning strategies. On the other side, insofar there is a tension between Stich's willingness to support a relativistic view on reasoning strategies' assessments and the need for determining how they are to be done, the consequentialist approach set by his Epistemic Pragmatism cannot come to a stable conclusion as to whether a certain reasoning strategy is epistemically better than another in a given situation. Accordingly, since neither Stich's argument supporting the dismissal of truth as our main epistemic goal nor his relativistic view on reasoning strategies' assessments are well supported, the consequentialist approach set by Epistemic Pragmatism does not seem to be adequate for its purpose.

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