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A Critique of Reflective Equilibrium

In *The Fragmentation of Reason*, Stephen Stich explores what are considered to be normative standards for cognition with the ultimate goal of refuting each of them. Specifically, he begins with a particularly influential account of how normative principles of cognition are to be discovered and defended, and this is the account presented by Nelson Goodman.¹ This proposal has led to various other arguments, including that of L. Jonathan Cohen, and the neo-Goodmanian account, which each attempt to capture the commonsense notion of justification. It is Stich's position to reject each of these accounts, and if he is correct, he suspects this threatens more than Goodman's project, namely the value of truth itself. Though Stich makes some excellent points, I must take issue with his stance on both intrinsic and instrumental values, thereby denying his attack on these views.

Stich begins his analysis with the account presented by Goodman, which attempts to explain what makes one system of cognitive processes better than that of another given that there is cultural diversity.² Goodman's approach describes "a process of bringing judgements about particular inferences and about general principles of inference into accord with one another."³ This is the notion of *reflective equilibrium*, which is the central theme among each of the cases Stich attacks. The general point of this system is that in justifying an inference, we are in fact verifying its conformity to valid rules.⁴ More specifically:

A rule is amended if it yields an inference we are unwilling to accept; an inference is rejected if it violates a rule we are unwilling to amend.⁵

Initially, this is all we learn of Goodman's approach, though it does lead us to that of Cohen's.

¹ *The Fragmentation of Reason* (Ch4), Stephen Stich. P75.

² *The Fragmentation of Reason* (Ch4), Stephen Stich. P76.

³ *The Fragmentation of Reason* (Ch4), Stephen Stich. P76.

⁴ *The Fragmentation of Reason* (Ch4), Stephen Stich. P77.

⁵ *The Fragmentation of Reason* (Ch4), Stephen Stich. P77.

Cohen's argument is based upon a subject's underlying psychological competence. What is of central importance in this case is the issue of *performance errors*, which indicate that the judgements an individual reports do not always correctly reflect their own underlying competence.⁶ This amounts to the fact that though speakers may occasionally report errors, it is only due to a distraction or some other factor, rather than the underlying principles within the subject. "According to Cohen it is impossible for a person's inferential competence, his underlying psycho-logic, to be anything other than normatively impeccable."⁷ A serious problem arises here though, since the psychologist and analyst could automatically attribute any problems with an individual's inferences to that of a performance error, thereby eliminating any underlying defects within the individual. This allows us to proceed to a discussion regarding Stich's attack on reflective equilibrium.

"The reflective equilibrium account does not capture anything much like our ordinary notion of justification"⁸ according to Stich. The argument here is that often times what are considered unacceptable rules of inference can in fact pass the reflective equilibrium test. The example offered is that of the gambler's fallacy, where players assume their odds increase each time a loss is experienced. This is obviously not the case, and this creates serious problems for Goodman's approach.

At this point, Stich turns to a discussion of a Neo-Goodmanian project, whereby the defenders of reflective equilibrium attempt to create further variations to better capture our concept of justification.⁹ The assumption is that we do in fact do something to determine whether an inferential practice is justified, and if this is the case, then we must also be able to

⁶ *The Fragmentation of Reason* (Ch4), Stephen Stich. P80.

⁷ *The Fragmentation of Reason* (Ch4), Stephen Stich. P82.

⁸ *The Fragmentation of Reason* (Ch4), Stephen Stich. P83.

⁹ *The Fragmentation of Reason* (Ch4), Stephen Stich. P86.

describe this procedure. “When we have succeeded at this we will have an account of what it is for an inferential practice to be justified.”¹⁰ Though Stich concedes that he was himself under the spell of the neo-Goodmanian approach, he now raises some objections to this line of thinking. The objections he lays out concern 1) The details of the program, and 2) That neither the neo-Goodmanian approach nor any alternatives help in deciding whether and how their own cognitive processes or those of others might be improved.

Stich’s first reaction to the neo-Goodmanian project is that we don’t even have reason to expect that reflective equilibrium plays a role in our procedure for assessing the justification of a cognitive process.¹¹ This may be true, but it seems to be a very minor objection to me, for it may in fact turn out that the case Stich himself argues is not the case either. To suggest that a theory is useless due to a lack of concrete evidence directly refutes the point of a theory in the first place. Though it may be the case (we may not have good reason to believe) that reflective equilibrium doesn’t play a role in our justification process, we could similarly suggest that we have no reason to believe that Shaquille O’Neil will play a major role in the forthcoming NBA championship. Such a stance itself appears to be useless, since no scientific progress would ever be made without having ‘hunches’.

Similarly, Stich challenges two further assumptions of the neo-Goodmanian approach. Supposedly, “we ordinarily invoke only *one* notion of justification for inferential processes and that this is a *coherent* notion for which a set of necessary and sufficient conditions can be given.”¹² Yet again, Stich takes issue with the fact that these are only assumptions. He questions whether or not there could in fact be numerous notions of justification, since there might be a semantic difference in what each of us mean by “justified”. This again seems quite problematic,

¹⁰ *The Fragmentation of Reason* (Ch4), Stephen Stich. P86.

¹¹ *The Fragmentation of Reason* (Ch4), Stephen Stich. P87.

and does not successfully attack the neo-Goodmanian. I would argue that to suggest a different meaning of “justified” may or may not even make a difference to the task at hand. It could very well be that one’s definition, though different, is completely compatible with another’s. And even if they were not compatible, this does not seem to be a major blow to the argument.

A final difficulty for Stich, is that the neo-Goodmanian assumes that the test or procedure used for assessing the justification of cognitive processes exhausts our concept of inferential justification and thus that we will have characterized the concept when we have described the test.¹³ But again, Stich only challenges assumption. Though there is merit in such a strategy, it doesn’t appear to be very effective since all theories must include assumptions. It is possible that reflective equilibrium may only be a part of the final answer, but does this really refute reflective equilibrium itself? I don’t think it does, and I think this is Stich’s weakest argument.

Stich proceeds with his attack by outlining the framework of analytic epistemology in general. According to Alvin Goldman, one of the major projects of epistemology is to develop a theory of epistemic justification, which is to say which cognitive states are justified and which are not.¹⁴ This leads to articulating a set of rules (justificational or J-rules) evaluating the justificatory status beliefs and other cognitive states. But, though there may be more than one right system of justificational rules, not all systems are correct. This leads us to the *criterion of rightness*, which will specify a set of conditions that are necessary and sufficient for a set of J-rules to be right.¹⁵ Unfortunately, theoretical disputes arise among theorists in determining this criteria. According to Goldman, the “correct criterion of rightness is the one that comports with

¹² *The Fragmentation of Reason* (Ch4), Stephen Stich. P88.

¹³ *The Fragmentation of Reason* (Ch4), Stephen Stich. P88.

¹⁴ *The Fragmentation of Reason* (Ch4), Stephen Stich. P89.

¹⁵ *The Fragmentation of Reason* (Ch4), Stephen Stich. P90.

the conception of justifiedness that is embraced by everyday thought or language.”¹⁶ Though there may be a fair amount of vagueness, and no unique criterion, the claim is that there is a common core of justifiedness. This seems fairly plausible to me, and I find it interesting that Stich also apparently agrees, given his prior concerns.

Stich concludes with his account of Goldman by giving us a definition of what he considers analytic epistemology:

any epistemological project that takes the choice between competing justificational rules or competing criteria of rightness to turn on conceptual or linguistic analysis.¹⁷

This leads us to the question of how we can determine whether our cognitive processes are good ones considering the great diversity available. The analytic epistemologist suggests that we must analyze our concept of justification. This gives us a criterion of rightness for justificational rules, which we can then use to determine if our own cognitive processes accord with them. The problem here is that we have no reason to think that the notions of evaluation in our own language or culture are any better than alternative notions.

Stich continues with an evaluation of value. He assumes that people can and do *intrinsically* value a variety of things, rather than just one (i.e. happiness in the monist’s view), yet having cognitive states or to invoke cognitive processes are not viewed as such. Stich posits two considerations: 1) Other cultures invoke concepts of cognitive evaluation different from our own. 2) Our local notions occupy only a small area in a large space of alternative concepts. Once this is discovered, most people are not inclined to say that they are having justified beliefs to be intrinsically valuable. Such a claim might be arguable, but I could concede that at least intrinsically, justified beliefs may not be considered valuable. I do not agree with Stich in

¹⁶ *The Fragmentation of Reason* (Ch4), Stephen Stich. P90.

suggesting that they can not be *instrumentally* valuable however. There are again two considerations regarding instrumental value: 1) The evolutionary argument holds that since our current concepts of epistemic evaluation are the result of a long evolutionary culling process, they almost certainly do an excellent job of fostering survival and thinking.¹⁸ But natural selection cannot be considered to be the best option among those available (nor those that are possible). 2) Having justified beliefs may not be intrinsically valuable, but having true beliefs is. Justified beliefs are more likely to be true than unjustified ones. The problem in this case is linking justification and truth.

Unfortunately, I don't find much merit in either of Stich's points concerning instrumental value. Considering that his ultimate goal is to reject the value of truth itself, it is obvious that he would not value anything related to it (or perhaps anything at all). Stich concludes that reflective equilibrium is not the touchstone for normative principles about cognitive processes, though he seems to have made minimal arguments in favor of such a view. Secondly, he suggests that in deciding among alternative systems of cognitive processes, the fact that a system accords with the standards embedded in everyday thought/language is not of much interest. I believe the contrary, that Goldman is in fact correct and that our common notions of thought and language are of significant importance, and Stich does not appear to make any valuable headway in arguing against the notion of reflective equilibrium.

¹⁷ *The Fragmentation of Reason* (Ch4), Stephen Stich. P91.

¹⁸ *The Fragmentation of Reason* (Ch4), Stephen Stich. P96.