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In the chapter “Do We Really Care Whether Our Beliefs Are True” in his book The Fragmentation of Reason Stephen P. Stich argues that having true beliefs is not as clearly valuable, intrinsically or instrumentally, as most of us seem to think. In this paper I will argue that while Stich seems to have pointed out an interesting possibility his argument (1) does not show that we should not care about whether our beliefs are true and (2) does not even make as strong a case against the instrumental value of truth as he seems to think.

The first thing Stich deals with is the idea that truth is of intrinsic value. He claims, correctly, that he cannot prove in any substantial way that some people do not value truth as an end in itself. He argues, rather, that when looked at from a particular perspective there does not seem, to many people, to be any reason to value truth as an end in itself as opposed to any other relation between psychological states and propositions or truth conditions. He gets us into this perspective by analyzing what it means for a belief to be true. This is done by focusing on the so-called “interpretation function” that pairs the beliefs with propositions. I am willing to grant him, for the sake of this paper, that if thinking clearly about the issue, many people would not value truth as an end in itself. It seems extraordinarily difficult to argue with much force one way or another on this issue since it is in fact an empirical question about what or how people would value truth given a certain set of circumstances. To challenge his claim here without any empirical evidence to back it up would be nothing more than asserting that my intuitions are different than his. And, that, I would bet is of little interest to many. (But of course that is just another intuition about an empirical claim!)

The most interesting and certainly the most controversial claim of Stich’s is that truth does not have instrumental value. He writes at the beginning of the chapter, “What I propose to

argue in this chapter is that once we have a clear view of the matter, most of us will not find any value, either intrinsic or instrumental, in having true beliefs” (101). I’ve given him the conclusion concerning the intrinsic value of truth but I will not do the same with his claim about truth’s complete lack of instrumental value.

There seems to be at least a couple of ways in which to attack Stich’s argument here. One is by arguing that, sure, truth might not be more instrumentally valuable than all other options but it is certainly the most useful option on the table at the moment. The second is to point out Stich’s neglect of the fact that humans are limited creatures who seem to have a special affinity for truth and might have real trouble latching onto any of the other options that he presents. (This is closely related to the first strategy. If it is the case that we have trouble latching onto Stich’s alternatives to truth, then this will contribute to the relative usefulness of truth *to us*. Because the easier truth is for us to pick out and the harder the other options are to pick out, the more relative instrumental value truth has to us given our practical limitations.)

One of Stich’s main points has to do with the aforementioned interpretation function. At this point it is necessary to explain in more detail what an interpretation function is. An interpretation function pairs beliefs or psychological states with propositions or truth conditions. For instance the interpretation function of truth pairs the belief ‘Luka ate sushi today’ with the proposition that Luka ate sushi today. But that’s obviously not the only proposition that that belief could be paired up with. We could pair the belief ‘Luka ate sushi today’ with the proposition that Luka ate a hamburger today or that Luka ate a peach on Tuesday or any of an infinite amount of possibilities. Stich claims that at least *a* reason that we are partial to the interpretation function of truth is because of culture and tradition. And our intuitions reflect that fact. So, says Stich, just because we are intuitively attracted to truth does not mean that truth is of

greater instrumental value than other properties. He is right about this. Truth is not of the greatest relative instrumental value *just* because we are intuitively attracted to it. But the fact that we are attracted to it might *contribute* to its relative instrumental value to us. This is a point that I will address a little later on. First, I want to lay out other essential elements of Stich's argument.

To say that truth has instrumental value is to say that it helps achieve some different end. Stich claims that when trying to decide the instrumental value of truth we need to compare it to our other options. That is, just because truth might help us achieve our ends sometimes does not mean that it helps us achieve our ends better than falsehood or some other option. And we are supposed to be concerned with the option that *best* serves our purposes. The other options are what he labels TRUTH*, TRUTH**, TRUTH***...*. These are alternative relations (different categories from truth and falsehood that may overlap with either of them but are not exactly the same) between psychological states and propositions. He writes,

What really needs to be shown is not just that true beliefs are more conducive to some independently desirable goal than false beliefs but also that true beliefs serve us better than TRUE* ones or TRUE** ones or any of the other categories of belief picked out by interpretation functions that don't happen to be favored by intuition and tradition (121).

This sounds right. We are, it seems, most interested in figuring out whether or not truth is more instrumentally valuable than our other options, all things considered. So if Stich can show that one of the other options, falsehood, TRUTH*, TRUTH**, etc, then he has done his job.

The way in which Stich goes about trying to accomplish this is by showing that true beliefs are not *always* useful in fact in a lot of situations it can be more useful to have false beliefs. He uses the example of a man, Harry, who believes that his plane is supposed to take off at 7:45a.m. His belief is true. He does everything necessary to get to the plane on time. He gets to the plane on time, boards it, and it crashes killing poor Harry. This, says Stich, certainly seems like a case in which having a not true belief would have helped Harry achieve a fundamental

goal, survival. Now, this shows that true beliefs are not always more useful than beliefs that are not true. It does not show that true beliefs are not, in general, more useful than not true ones. And it seems fairly obvious to me that having true beliefs is, in general, more useful than having false beliefs. Here's one reason why.

For any particular situation, take the Harry example, there are an infinite number of false beliefs that Harry could have about what time the plane is leaving. He could think it is leaving at 7:55, 7:56, 7:57, and so on. On the other hand, there is only one true belief that he could have about this matter. It leaves at 7:45. Now, in this particular situation it just so happens that the further away from the truth, in one direction, that Harry is in his belief the greater the chance of him achieving his goal of survival. That is, the further away from the truth (in a future-oriented direction) he thinks the plane is leaving, the less chance there seems to be that he will be on the plane when it crashes. But not all situations are like this one. In fact, it might be that most are not. Stich brings in this example in order to show that it is *sometimes* serves our goals better to have false beliefs. And no sensible person would argue with him on this point. But it does seem fair to question what he really gains from making the point. To draw an analogy, I can point out that it *sometimes* better serves our fundamental goals to bet our life's savings on a hand of blackjack. Here is a little story to illustrate my point.

A woman named Mary walks into a Las Vegas casino with a bag full of money; \$60,000. She takes a seat at the blackjack table and places the money on her first hand. She gets 21. She has just more than doubled her life's savings. One might object that this type of thing does not really happen very often at all. In fact, it is probably extremely rare. And that is probably right. But that's okay. Because Stich's argument relies on a rare sort of occurrence as well, a commercial airline crash. And even though it might not be as rare as my gambling example, that

doesn't matter. Because the point is not that these are examples of things that happen all the time. The point is that these things *sometimes* happen. And if Stich wants to argue for something stronger, then *he* needs to give an example that has more of a day-to-day sort of relevance.

So, there are situations in which having a belief that is not true (whether it is false, TRUE*, TRUE**...*) serves us better than having a true belief. And it very well might even be the case that there is some category here (false, TRUE*, TRUE**...*) that having that type of belief *in general* does help us achieve our goals better than having true beliefs does. And if we could latch onto *that* category of beliefs, we would be better off. But that's a big "if", for two reasons. It seems fine and good that Stich has identified the possibility that there are other categories of belief that might help us get along better in life by helping us to achieve our goals. And that is interesting. But there needs to be some burden on him to give a plausible alternative; to give more details about TRUTH* such that we can actually compare it to truth and see which one serves us better. And even given the assumption that those categories exist and are identifiable does not necessarily mean that, given our nature, we have or can develop any reliable means of arriving at those types of beliefs. In other words, just because he has identified the possibility that TRUE* would be good for us does not mean that we should (practically speaking) do anything different than we are right now. It might be the case that we just are not at all good at tracking whether beliefs are TRUE*, TRUE**...*. And the fact that they *would* be good for us *if* we had them (or even that they are good for us when we unknowingly have them) does not entail that we have a good enough ability to know whether or not we have them for us to abandon our pursuit of true beliefs in order to pursue these other types of beliefs.

We might want to ask ourselves what is really at issue here. It seems as though we are trying to figure out whether or not to change our strategy of how we pursue our goals in life. If

so, then what Stich needs to do is show us not only that there are some types of beliefs that would be of greater value to us *if* we had a reliable way of pursuing them, but that there *actually is* a type of belief that is more instrumentally valuable to us than true beliefs *and* that we have enough of an ability (or can easily enough develop one) to figure out whether our beliefs are of this nature. But that does not seem to be what he is doing.

Here is something that Stich neglects to mention. Our ability to tell whether or not a belief is true, false, TRUE*, etc. should be included in our assessment of which types of beliefs we should pursue as means to our further or more fundamental ends. To understand my point, consider this. If TRUE**** beliefs are of the type that they guarantee the achievement of any goal directly or indirectly related to the facts that they are about but we have no way to arrive at them, then they are of no use to us in a practical sense. Here is a decent analogy. It surely is the case that if we had a way to take oxygen out of the air and turn it into energy that would run our vehicles, we would be much better off in general. But that does not mean that such a project is even a real option. Suppose it isn't. Imagine that it is in principle impossible to do such a thing, that it somehow goes against the laws of physics. Then we want to say that pursuing such a project is not a good idea. And this line of thinking does not only apply to cases where there is no chance of success in the pursuit of some good. It seems that there can be situations where it is extraordinarily hard to pursue the good and relatively easy to pursue some lesser good. In such a situation the case can be made that pursuing the lesser good is, all things considered, the better strategy. Let us take another example. Suppose that we discover that making energy out of oxygen is in principle possible but that, using this method, it costs \$1 trillion to produce the amount of energy necessary to run a motorized scooter. In that situation it seems that sticking

with fossil fuels (or some other much cheaper energy source) is the strategy that best serves our goals.

If either of these examples are relevantly analogous to the truth vs. other options issue, then it looks like Stich needs to show that we have the ability to easily enough figure out whether beliefs are TRUE*, etc. That does not look like an easy job and it does not look like a job that he has accomplished in this chapter.

Let's consider some possible options, of TRUTH*-type examples, and see where it leads us. Let TRUTH* be the interpretive function that maps our psychological states to the world in such a way that a belief is TRUE* if and only if it is (1) true and most instrumentally valuable to us or (2) false and most instrumentally valuable to us. So in the poor-Harry-dies-in-a-plane-crash example, Harry did not have a TRUE* belief. If he would have had the false belief that his plane left at 8:45, then he would have also had a TRUE* belief. How then, it seems reasonable to ask, can Harry be expected to know whether his belief about the departure of the plane is TRUE*? It seems as though he is going to need some type of knowledge about whether or not the plane is going to crash. But that is a fact that he doesn't really have access to. This seems to be the type of problem that we are going to continue to run into given our current definition of TRUE*. We are continually going to need knowledge about the future that we just do not have access to.

What if we change our definition of TRUE* to be such that a belief is TRUE* if and only if it is "just false". And a belief is "just false" if and only if it is not far from the truth but also not exactly the truth. So, back to our Harry example. If Harry's belief was TRUE* by our new definition, then he might have been saved. If his belief was that his plane was taking off at 8:00a.m., then he would have not made the flight and would have lived. Yea Harry! But wait. His belief would have been TRUE* if he believed that his plane was taking off at 7:30a.m. And

that would have put him in a position to make the flight. That's not what we are looking for. And it seems that this notion of TRUE* will continually run into this type of problem since it does not distinguish between instrumentally valuable just false beliefs and ones that are not instrumentally valuable. Back to the drawing board.

The point here is not that we have gone through anything like a comprehensive list of possible TRUE*'s. That list is infinite. But, taking a couple possibilities off the top of my head that sounded somewhat interesting at first glance did not turn out to be all that fruitful. This, of course, does not mean that a useful TRUE* cannot be found. It merely gives us a hint that if TRUE* can be found, it might take some hunting. And if Stich wants his view to be taken seriously, he probably should lend a hand. Presumably, he wants his view to be useful for knowers in the real world. As a pragmatist he is concerned with practical means to achievable ends. The abstract sketch that he has laid out in this chapter does not seem to give us much to go on in terms of practicality.

My earlier claim that we have a better chance of figuring out whether or not a belief is true than we do trying to figure out whether or not a belief is TRUE*...* is one that needs to be argued for. One reason it seems at least possible is that, as Stich notes, we are conditioned to see the world in a particular way. Our learning environment as we develop molds us in such a way that we develop certain cognitive habits. One of these habits is looking for the property of truth when examining claims or beliefs. Presumably, the more we do this, the more natural it seems until we reach a point, hopefully, where the process seems second-nature to us. This is not to say that we become infallible in terms of our judgments about whether or not a belief is true. Only that we become relatively better and that the process becomes relatively easier in some important sense. And the longer we engage in this practice the harder it becomes to go against it. If that is

true, and if pursuing some strategy of achieving beliefs that are TRUE*...* necessitates going against the grain of our already deeply instilled habit, then it might be the case (depending upon our ability to change such a habit) that trying to develop a habit of identifying whether or not a belief is TRUE*...* is just too hard a project to undertake given the fact that all of us have a limited amount of time (the rest of our lives) and at least most of us have a lot of things that we would like to accomplish during that time.

Another point is that it might be the case that we have a genetic predisposition that allows us to latch onto truth and falsehood better than the other options that Stich alludes to. Stich does not think that evolution has equipped us with the ideal cognitive abilities. And maybe he is right. But it has given us *some* cognitive abilities. And the nature of these abilities needs to be taken into account when deciding what cognitive habits we want to cultivate.

Now, all of this of course hangs on an empirical question about the nature of human psychology and the extent of our cognitive abilities including our ability to change our habits. But Stich seems to be assuming that we do have the ability to easily enough change in such a way that we can take full (or enough) advantage of TRUTH* or TRUTH**...* to make the project of retraining ourselves worthwhile. A last option, that Stich mentions, is that even though we might not be able to retrain ourselves we might be able to train our children to identify TRUTH* to TRUTH**...*. But it seems again, that such a claim is assuming our ability to easily enough identify things that we may not be able to easily enough identify in order to pass the knowledge along to our children. It just seems like another possible dead end.

Bibliography

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