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Virtuous agency as the ground for argument norms

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ABSTRACT: Stephen Stich has criticized the possibility of providing a legitimate set of norms for reasoning, since such norms are justified via reference to pretheoretical intuitions. I argue that through a process of perspicuously mapping the belief sphere one can generate a list of intellectual virtues that instrumentally lead to true beliefs. Hence, one does not have to rely on intuitions since the norms of reason are derived from factual claims about the intellectually virtuous agent.

KEYWORDS: argument norms, doxastic sphere, intellectual virtue, Nussbaum, reflective equilibrium

1. INTRODUCTION

The goal of this paper is to argue that the intellectual virtues can be the ground, or foundation, for argument norms. This position is formulated as a response to a position developed by Stephen Stich. Stich has criticized the possibility of providing a universal and legitimate set of norms for reasoning, and therefore argument, on the grounds that such norms are justified via a reference to pretheoretical intuitions. These pretheoretical intuitions, according to Stich, are too variable and therefore cannot provide a legitimate set of rational norms. In response to Stich I will argue for a causal theory of such norms. More specifically, I will rely on Martha Nussbaum's method of perspicuously mapping different spheres of human experience to generate a set of rational norms. The specific sphere to be mapped is the doxastic, or belief, sphere. The idea is that through mapping this sphere one can generate a list of intellectual virtues, or character traits, that reliably and instrumentally lead to true beliefs. One would not have to rely on intuitions, and therefore Stich's criticism could be avoided, since the ground for claims concerning norms of reason would be grounded in empirical data; i.e. through observation of those traits that reliably and instrumentally lead to true beliefs. With such a position, then, the norms of reason, or argument, would not rest in language but instead in the intellectually virtuous agent. I will begin the development of this position with a consideration of Stich's criticism.

2. STICH'S CRITICISM OF REFLECTIVE EQUILIBRIUM AND ANALYTIC EPISTEMOLOGY

Stich formulates his criticism in a book called *The Fragmentation of Reason*. The

specific target of his criticism is a position developed by Nelson Goodman who, according to Stich, attempts to “ground an account of the justification of cognitive norms in an *analysis* or *explication* of the common sense notion of justified inference” (Stich, 1993, p. 75). The process that Goodman endorses for identifying justified valid inferences, either deductive or inductive, is called a process of *reflective equilibrium*. It is a process where one can determine the rules of valid inferences by checking them against accepted practices of valid inferences. More specifically, we check them against judgments about specific inferences and then generate our rules on the basis of these specific judgments. We can then employ the rules generated in this way to pass judgment on future specific inferences. Goodman admits that this process appears somewhat circular. We come up with rules by consulting specific sanctioned inferences and then we use these rules to assess the validity of other specific inferences. How Goodman addresses this charge of circularity is by proposing that it is a virtuous, and not a vicious, form of circularity. This is because both rules of inference and specific inferences themselves are deemed justified by “being brought into agreement with each other” (Goodman, 1965, pp. 66-67). It is a delicate process where we make “mutual adjustments between rules and accepted inferences” to generate agreement between the two (Goodman, 1965, pp. 66-67). This is why it is called a process of *reflective equilibrium*, as it involves a reflective process where one attempts to generate agreement between rules and accepted inferences. And, according to Goodman, this is all the justification that is required for our rules of valid inference (Goodman, 1965, pp. 66-67). Even further, Stich interprets this position offered by Goodman to be definitive of justification. That is, justified inferences simply are those inferences that pass the reflective equilibrium test. So the reflective equilibrium test, according to Stich’s interpretation, does not merely provide good evidence for the claim that certain inferences are justified, but instead is constitutive of justification. Consequently, Goodman’s reflective equilibrium test would seem to fulfill an important role in determining the norms of argument as any inferences that pass that test determine what justification is (Stich, 1993, p. 78).

Of course, the circularity of this process may be enough for many to reject it. I will not focus on this criticism, though, but instead Stich’s criticism of Goodman’s position. One thing I would like to note before setting out Stich’s criticism is that he makes a distinction between cognitive norms and the rules of logic, and his main concern is with the former. Stich thus admits that Goodman’s position can be interpreted as an attempt to identify the rules of logic and not cognitive norms, but Stich proposes that he will interpret it as an account of the latter. Although I will not defend this claim right now, but possibly in discussion after, I will to some extent reject this distinction. That is, I do not accept a sharp distinction between the rules of logic and cognitive norms. I admit that not all cognitive norms are grounded in valid argument forms, as I interpret the intellectual virtues as psychological dispositions and yet also cognitive norms, but it seems quite plausible to me that any inference deemed valid within logic should be included on our list of legitimate cognitive norms; or norms of thinking that people should adopt. I will, of course, offer some remarks on the relationship between cognitive norms and the rules of logic later in the paper (Stich, 1993, p. 78). For now, let’s turn to Stich’s criticism of

this position offered by Goodman.

Stich offers a two-prong attack; one prong directed specifically at Goodman and the other at what he calls analytic epistemology in general. The first prong, directed at Goodman specifically, proposes that it is quite possible that if we engaged in the reflective equilibrium test we would have to accept as justified inferences certain inferences that are obviously unjustified. Stich cites the gamblers paradox as an example – or the illegitimate inference that the more times one does not roll a seven increases the probability of rolling a seven with the next throw of the dice. This inference is unjustified, but nonetheless it is typically sanctioned by most people when they are engaged in the process of reflective equilibrium. Hence, it passes the test of reflective equilibrium and should be considered a justified inference. Of course, those who we can call experts in the analysis of inferences would not want to count such an inference as justified but how can we dismiss it as a unjustified inference if reflective equilibrium is the only test we have (Stich, 1993, pp. 83-86)? It is a possible solution to this problem that then leads to the other prong of Stich’s criticism which is directed at analytic epistemology in general.

The proposed solution to the problem of sanctioning illegitimate inferences involves conceptual, or linguistic, analysis, and ultimately reference to what are called ‘pretheoretical intuitions’ concerning rules of justification. Stich considers such a procedure to be definitive of analytic epistemology, and he claims that it is an irrelevant failure (Stich, 1993, pp. 90-91). The main problem, which already may be obvious, is relativism. That is, if the method to be employed to identify legitimate inferences is reference to ordinary language, and our pretheoretical intuitions concerning justification, then it is always possible that divergent, and possibly incompatible, justification rules will emerge. That different linguistic communities, when consulting their language and supposed pretheoretical intuitions, will come up with completely different sets legitimate inferences. This result is not very reassuring, since it appears that favouring any one set justified inferences is simply the result of cultural, or linguistic, bias. One would have no grounds to dismiss the merits of conflicting lists of justified inferences, since they would result from the same justificatory process as one’s own (Stich, 1993, pp. 90-93). They also appear to be the only means by which we can determine justification, according to Stich’s account of analytic epistemology, so that divergent sets of justification rules would be equally justified; even if they contradict one another. Such a procedure would therefore not get us very far in identifying, or establishing, a legitimate set of argument norms, unless one wants to embrace relativism. I would feel uncomfortable with such an embrace, and hence I will attempt address Stich’s criticism by consulting a position developed by Martha Nussbaum and apply it to the identification of intellectual virtues. I will then propose that these intellectual virtues, or various aspects of intellectual character, can provide a foundation for argument norms.

3. NUSSBAUM’S METHOD OF PERSPICUOUS MAPPING

Nussbaum derives her position for virtue identification from Aristotle. She proposes that Aristotle did not limit himself to simply offering an account of what is good for a

human life on the whole, but also sets out what would be considered appropriate for specific spheres of human experience. What the process of virtue identification involves is first identifying some sphere of human experience which all human agents typically encounter, and then setting out the proper way to act within that sphere. Examples of such spheres include: “Fear of important damages esp. death,” “Management of one’s personal property, where others are concerned,” and “Distribution of limited resources” (Nussbaum, 1998, pp. 261-262). Nussbaum refers to these spheres of human activity as ‘grounding experiences.’ Faced with the ‘grounding experience’ one can then discern what would be the best way to respond, and, according to Aristotle, this usually involved adopting some virtue that is a mean between a deficiency and an excess. The above examples would entail courage, generosity and justice respectively (Nussbaum, 1998, 261-263). It is therefore the sphere of experience, or the grounding experience, which fixes the range of evaluation. It limits the choices one can make, and through analysis of that sphere, or grounding experience, one can determine the best way to act; i.e. identify specific virtues.

To accomplish this task, Nussbaum continues, we first offer a ‘thin,’ or ‘nominal,’ definition of what is appropriate to the particular sphere – the term ‘courage’ would be an example of such a nominal definition – and then, through a ‘perspicuous mapping’ of the grounding experience, we can move on to give a more precise indication of what is required to act appropriately within the sphere of human experience. The virtues then emerge as the most appropriate motivations/dispositions for people to have once the sphere of experience has been ‘perspicuously mapped’ (Nussbaum, 1998, pp. 263-263, 269)

4. THE DOXASTIC SPHERE, INTELLECTUAL VIRTUE AND ARGUMENT NORMS

This method advocated by Nussbaum could then be employed in an attempt to identify the intellectual virtues. This could then allow one to avoid relying on pretheoretical intuitions to provide a set of universal argument norms in the following way. First, we identify the appropriate sphere of human experience, which in this case, I propose, would be the doxastic, or belief, sphere. Then, through a perspicuous mapping of the doxastic sphere we can determine which psychological dispositions, or virtues, are conducive to the formation of true beliefs, and which are conducive to false beliefs. Those dispositions that are conducive to the formation of true beliefs we would identify as intellectual virtues and those conducive to false beliefs as intellectual vices. The intellectual virtues would then represent the standards of excellence associated with the doxastic sphere, since they facilitate the acquisition of true beliefs. The constituents of intellectual character would therefore be derived, at least in part, from the observation of actual human agents and their belief forming habits, and not through consulting pretheoretical intuitions. Through reflection on the doxastic sphere we would thus have empirical input from a non-culturally specific sphere of experience, i.e. the doxastic sphere.

The list of intellectual virtues that emerge from this perspicuous mapping could then provide the foundation for arguments norms. This is because such virtues are identified as truth-conducive, and therefore would facilitate the

identification of argumentative structures that are themselves truth-conducive. That is, via her intellectual character the intellectually virtuous agent would be able to identify which argument structures are conducive to truth in particular contexts. It could be the case that the argument structures, or norms, could vary from one context to another, but this flexibility would not be perceived as problematic since the intellectually virtuous agent and the doxastic sphere would be the sources of stability in the process of identifying argument norms.

Of course, it may be possible for Stich to apply his criticism of relying on pretheoretical intuitions to this position. The application would likely run as follows. Stich proposes that the problem of relying on pretheoretical intuitions to identify argument norms is simply that these intuitions can vary greatly since they are cultural products. That is, they are derived from different cultural practices, and as cultural practices vary so too will pretheoretical intuitions about appropriate reasoning processes (Stich, 1993, pp. 90-93). Similarly, then, Stich could argue that any attempt to identify certain virtues as truth-conducive will depend heavily on the beliefs of a particular culture. As cultures vary so too will their list of truth-conducive psychological dispositions or intellectual virtues. So one culture may identify being open-minded as an intellectual virtue, on the grounds that such a virtue leads to true belief, while another culture may hold behaviours such as deference to authority and dogmatism to be intellectual virtues for the same reason. Consequently, the introduction of the idea of mapping the doxastic sphere would not solve the problems of Stich's original criticism, according to this argument, and cannot provide a universal set of argument norms.

In addressing this possible criticism offered on Stich's behalf it must be first acknowledged that a lot of its sting can be removed by explicating further the claim that the identification of the aspects of intellectual character occurs through a perspicuous mapping of the doxastic sphere and is not the result of an unreflective acceptance of shared, or common sense, intuitions. A significant aspect of Stich's original criticism is that rational norms are to some extent identified via an unreflective acceptance of inherited intuitions which result from cultural transmission (Stich, 1993, pp. 90-93). But the process of identifying those character traits on our list of intellectual virtues, outlined above, does not entail the unreflective acceptance of inherited intuitions. Such virtues are not identified by consulting the desires, or intuitions, of agents, nor even various cultural practices; at least not exclusively. Instead the sphere of experience, or the grounding experience, provides significant input for identifying which traits are truth-conducive. Thus, in this case, it would be the doxastic sphere that would limit the choices one can make regarding which traits make the list or not, and it is through analysis and observation of this sphere, or a perspicuous mapping of it, that one determines those traits that are intellectual virtues. In this way, as Nussbaum proposed, progress in our understanding of what is virtuous is analogous to progress in our scientific understanding of the world, since through our perspicuous mapping of grounding experiences we come to formulate a more accurate and fuller specification of the types of problems human agents encounter and the appropriate, or virtuous, ways to respond to such problems (Nussbaum, 1998, pp. 263-264). The focus is therefore on actual human experiences and not on simply explicating

shared, or inherited, intuitions. Such a process is also reflective, since the perspicuous mapping of the doxastic sphere will entail critical engagement with that sphere in order to determine which traits actually facilitate true belief. Quite generally, then, the doxastic sphere provides something independent of both human intuitions as well as cultural practices which can be analyzed to determine which character traits would make the list of intellectual virtues.

Of course, as noted, divergent communities may identify different traits as intellectual virtues, which then appears to make the identification of the aspects of intellectual character relative to specific cultures. This possibility must be admitted, but it does not necessarily preclude the possibility for either consensus or accuracy to be achieved in regard to which traits are intellectual virtues. Since we are not relying on inherited intuitions to identify which traits are intellectual virtues, but rather reflection upon the empirical input of the doxastic sphere, there is the possibility that relativism could be removed and both consensus and accuracy in our list of intellectual virtues achieved. Such consensus and accuracy is especially possible if the agents who are attempting to identify truth-conducive character traits are sincerely attempting to be intellectually virtuous. This is because the agent who sincerely attempts to become intellectually virtuous will desire truth for its own sake. And such a desire should then compel the agent to not favour those traits identified by her community, but rather favour achieving true beliefs. This favouring of true beliefs, if it is sincere, should then also lead the agent to be open to changing the list of intellectual virtues if some trait is discovered not to be truth-conducive. So, the intellectually virtuous agent would not unquestionably defer to some other authority, whether it is a class of scholars or some text, but instead take care to ensure that such deference is actually truth-conducive. If it is not truth-conducive, then the intellectually virtuous agent should not attempt to habituate such a disposition. Unless a reason for holding that relativism is inevitable in such a situation can be provided, then this possible objection from Stich is not really a problem. This is simply because, in principle, such relativism could be removed and both consensus and accuracy achieved for our list of intellectual virtues through a perspicuous mapping of the doxastic sphere; especially if members of the community are sincerely attempting to be intellectually virtuous. It would assuredly not be an easy task to achieve such consensus, but it does not appear to be impossible in principle.

5. CONCLUSION

The goal of this paper has been to argue for a shift away from the focus on language when determining the norms or argument and to instead focus on the intellectually virtuous agent. The presumed goal of argument is to achieve true belief, and the claim is that by mapping the doxastic sphere truth-conducive virtues can be discovered that could then be relied on to guide agents when they are engaged in the process of offering and developing arguments. In order to display the merits of such a position a criticism of the attempt to derive argument norms, offered by Stephen Stich, was consulted and addressed. It was proposed that reliance on unreflective intuitions can be avoided if we instead focus on the doxastic sphere and

perspicuously map it to identify truth-conducive virtues. There are still a lot of details to work out with such a position, but hopefully what has been presented here has displayed some of its initial merits.

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