Beliefs About Belief. Or Whose Folk Psychology?


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It is again respectable to speak of the human mind, of consciousness, and of human nature. The taboos that have weighed on these topics for a century have been lifted. Lively discussion and the study of these topics are now under way in philosophy, psychology and anthropology. Admittedly, each of these disciplines provides its own perspectives--generally more than one--and no consensus is in sight. Still, the exploration is on, and so is the debate.

The structure and function of the human mind is the subject of study of cognitive science, both in contemporary psychology and philosophy, and it is to the issues of concern to them that Stich addresses his book. He does not deal with consciousness, but human nature does come into the discussion, if only marginally and somewhat indirectly. A broader scope which might also include cognitive, symbolic and psychological anthropology, raises questions rooted in a research strategy that differs somewhat from those of either philosophy or psychology, and, equally as important, draws on comparative, cross-cultural data. It is, of course, unfair
to criticize an author for not having written a different book. However, a consideration of the issues raised by a book for one reader reveals how stimulating it may be when we approach it with whatever intellectual baggage we may carry—in this case knowledge in another specialized field, as well as ignorance.

The title of the case states Stich's case more strongly than does the text. He approaches, he says, "with reluctant skepticism" the conclusion reached by some philosophers and psychologists that cognitivism has "reunited the scientific image of the mind and the manifest image" (p. 5). The "manifest image" is that of folk psychology, which he defines as "a loose network of largely tacit principles, platitudes and paradigms" that governs the use of a series of terms that we employ "in our everyday dealing with one another" (p. 1). By cognitivism or cognitive science, on the other hand, Stich means current research concerned with topics such as "memory, language processing, reasoning, problem solving, decision making, and higher perceptual processing" (p. 127). The optimistic conclusion of a reunited image of mind, which he questions, is founded on the renewed utilization by some psychologists of folk notions, a terminology that is traditionally employed by humanistic scholars and "the folk" alike. The terms include nouns such as belief (which is used here paradigmatically), knowledge, desire, plans, goals and the like, or their verbal forms. Folk psychology uses these
to account for our own behavior and the behavior of others, to whom we ascribe mental states similar to our own, or better, to those we perceive ourselves as experiencing.

Cognitive psychology, like all psychology, seeks to discover the laws of behavior. Cognitive psychology, in particular, focuses on laws applying universally to the species Homo sapiens. Cognitive philosophy similarly addresses questions concerning the "human mind" generically. Folk psychology, likewise, assumes, it would appear, reference to human psychology in general. As we shall see presently, these claims for universality are one of the problems that raises difficult issues. We shall return to this point.

Stich divides his book into two parts. In part I, he tells us, he sets out to describe "how folk psychological language of belief is ordinarily used" and the network of assumptions on which it is based (p. 122). In part II he considers whether and how "the folk psychological notion of belief" (ibid) can fit into the contemporary research in cognitive science. Both of these aspects of the problem are to be considered in the following from the perspective of the anthropologist reader rather than that of the philosopher.

After reviewing the rejection of folk psychology by both behaviorists in psychology and logical positivists in philosophy, Stich shows how the patent inadequacies of their theories have led, in turn, to their own rejection by both
contemporary psychologists and philosophers. The burden of the book, however, is the thesis that the folk psychological concept of belief and related notions "ought not to play any significant role in a science aimed at explaining human cognition and behavior..." (p.5) and, moreover, that it does not, as a matter of fact, play any such role in the best current cognitive theories.

Although Stich thoroughly and repeatedly considers the introspective terms of folk psychology involving intentionality and belief--primarily the latter--and does so from a variety of philosophical perspectives, another part of the formulation of the problem is not clearly addressed. Who are the "we" who use the folk psychological language? How broad a range of persons share in a common traditional "loose network of largely tacit principles, platitudes, and paradigms" that make up folk psychology? An identification of the "we", however, is not enough. It will also be necessary to discover, by means of empirical research, rather than philosophical analysis, the nature of the principles, platitudes and paradigms that underlie the usage of the folk notions, as well as the notions themselves. When we have identified the "we" it may well be that the folk psychology, one of potentially many folk psychologies in operation, if we consider our species both cross-culturally and cross-temporally. What is required, I suggest, is some empirical research, the kind undertaken by cognitive anthropologists,
for example, to identify just what the folk psychological image of the human mind consists of, and just who holds that image. As indicated, Stich offers a review of a variety of philosophical analyses, but only one slight example of actually seeking information from what anthropologists would call native speakers. In this case, the "American informants", not identified further, were asked whether two individuals hold the same belief is they use the same English noun, but as speakers if different dialects, refer to different objects and therefore describe them as having different properties. Surprisingly, the majority of those questioned are reported to have thought the two speakers held the same belief. What is involved here is the relationship between language--the speakers say the same sentence--and meaning--the speakers refer to different objects. One would like to know more about this exploratory study.

Since language is involved in the example cited above it appears to open the door to a whole range of questions concerning differences in classification between dialects of the same language and, more dramatically, between languages. Ultimately, then, it raises the question not only of whether translation os possible, but whether people thinking in different languages, using different classification systems, have the same beliefs. An even more basic question is whether they believe in the same way, that is, whether their minds work in the same manner.
Stich remarks that

in social anthropology it has long been common practice to describe a set of exotic folk concepts by detailing their interrelations with one another, with community practices and rituals and with the society's ecology and traditions. Such an account, when well done, can give us deep insight into the conceptual web of exotic folks (p.77).

An example of such a study is to be found in a work familiar to Latin Americanist, Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff's (1971) fascinating account of the Desana Indians of Amazonia, particularly their sexual and religious symbolism. Here the author employs large numbers of Desana terms, indicating both their narrow and their broader meanings. For many, there are no exact English or Spanish equivalents, to cover their range of meanings. Among the people themselves, individuals vary in their degree of knowledge and understanding. Desana distinguish between soul and mind, between "perceiving" and activity of the eye, based on the verbal roots for seeing and knowing, and "conceiving," based in the verbal roots for hearing and knowing. This is a function of the mind, which is located in the brain. Different types of knowledge are distinguished, the deepest of which is reflection that leads to wisdom. These translations must, however, be considered to be no more than limited approximations.

I am suggesting that it is precisely such detailed
research that need to be done for the "we" who subscribe to the folk psychology that is Stich's concern. In the process, not only the machinery of the human mind, as imagined by "us" must be identified; it is also necessary to discover how widespread and how common or diverse the conceptions are. According to Stich, "the hypothesis that beliefs are relations to internally inscribed sentence tokens," held by certain philosophers, is claimed by them to be "compatible with folk psychology" (p. 78). I am suggesting that we find out whether this image is, in some form, part of folk psychology and if so, just whose folk psychology it is.

Stich does take not of an aspect of the problem raised here when he writes: "the descriptive apparatus of folk psychology is not designed to deal with the beliefs of exotic folk" (p. 102). Elsewhere he notes: "our folk psychology evolved its keep where exotic folk were few and far between. When pushed to accommodate such cases, the judgments it renders are often neither clear nor consistent" (p. 104). Stich is here referring to what he calls patently false of "absurd beliefs," a terms he does not define. Instead he illustrates it by using an example from the writings of the British anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1956) about the Nuer, an East African people. The "absurd belief" is one according to which, say the Nuer, the cucumber is an ox. The statement is absurd, that is, one I cannot hold. Therefore, goes the argument, I cannot say that the Nuer who believes it
is in the same belief state I would be in if I held the belief. There is something wrong: my folk psychological theory does not account for people who hold absurd beliefs. Perhaps they have prelogical minds?

Before judging the issue, it seems wise to reread the original passage to which Stich refers. Here it is in full:

When a cucumber is used as a sacrificial victim Nuer speak of it as an ox. In doing so they are asserting something more than it takes the place of an ox. They do not, of course, say that cucumbers are oxen, and in speaking of a particular cucumber as an ox in a sacrificial situation they are only indicating that it may be thought of as an ox in that particular situation; and they act accordingly by performing the sacrificial rites as closely as possible to what happens when the victim is an ox. The resemblance is conceptual, not perceptual. The 'is' rests on qualitative analogy. And the expression is asymmetrical, a cucumber is an ox but an ox is not a cucumber. (Emphasis added) (Evans-Pritchard 1956:65).

What Evans-Pritchard offers us here is a statement concerning symbolic behavior and of analogic reasoning. What matters is the possibility of putting the cucumber and the ox to like ritual use. At various points throughout his book he notes that the cucumber sacrifice is either a temporary
substitute for an ox offering, or one used on occasions of
minor ritual need. Examples of symbolic substitutions are,
of course, to be found all over the world. Symbolism
involves a dimension of thought of immense importance, but
one to which Stich does not refer. In any event, the case
for "absurd belief", I submit, is not made by the example of
the Nuer.

The question of what the Nuer really mean has generated
substantial literature, with numerous incompatible
interpretations. As Barry Hallen and J.O. Sodipo suggest in
their important book *Knowledge, Belief and Witchcraft:*
*Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy* (1986), what we
are dealing with are attempts at translation into English
vocabulary and syntax of ideas phrased in quite a different
language. Translation problems are at the root of a great
many beliefs that appear to "us" as "absurd".

The issue of "absurd beliefs", however, is not
restricted to the Nuer or other far away "exotic folk." Stich
indeed notes that "Other examples can be found closer
to home among the avowed beliefs of people who accept
political, religious, metaphysical, or 'scientific' doctrines
wildly different from our own." And he goes on to say that
these cases will, in general, "be found among the beliefs of
people who are, in one or more domains, very ideologically
dissimilar from us" (p. 98). There may be a cue here toward
the identification of the "we" who consider the world in
terms of "our" folk psychology. One way to discover the "we" is not only to ask about beliefs about belief, about the operation of the human mind, but also about the content of belief. If that content is such as to appear absurd to me, I exclude the speaker from my definition of the "we" by considering alternative characterizations: the speaker is mad, or insincere, or has a "prelogical" mentality. Ultimately, then, in some sense, I question the speaker's humanity. Attempts at imagining ourselves in a radically different network of beliefs does not solve the problem for Stich, since "blatant contradictions" which mark absurd beliefs may still be evident. My elderly neighbor, who thought moon exploration was wrong because the moon was God's country, and besides it was harmful because it caused bad weather--did she hold absurd beliefs from the perspective of NASA space scientists? The people who wrote to John Glenn, asking how could he reconcile his space flights with his belief in God--did they in fact accuse him of holding absurd beliefs? Clearly they were inferring one set of beliefs from Glenn's professed Christianity and another from his actions as an astronaut. And they perceived a patent contradiction between the two sets of beliefs. For a certain category of "us" believing that the moon is God's country or that space flights are acts of trespassing on God's preserve appear as exotic and inconceivable, hence absurd as those of native peoples with alien systems of belief. The Desana, mentioned
above, carry on diagnoses and cures in ways quite foreign to us. Reichel-Dolmatoff describes an ailment in which the patient's abdomen swells and his limbs grow thin. Together with some other symptoms, this indicates to the paye (shaman, here diagnostician/healer) that another paye has malevolently filled the patient's stomach with cotton wool, which must be removed. The actual removal, as in other shamanistic cures, involves a slight of hand. Is this absurd? The cure, it is said, works. Does this prove that the belief is not absurd? Reichel-Dolmatoff refers to various Desana meanings involved in this process: cotton wool is a substance with seminal character, yellow (i.e., seminal) sunlight is used in the cure as is the help of squirrels with bright colors. A phallic-shaped instrument is used in removing the substance. Altogether, Reichel-Dolmatoff interprets this and other diseases discussed as psychosomatic, with hysterical overtones, and due to severe sexual repression. He explains the efficacy of the cures by interpreting them as "symbolic acts of coitus and rebirth, executed by...phallic personifications...which demonstrate a perspicacity and insight into the psychological mechanism that undoubtedly are very efficient in achieving at least a temporary cure" (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971:185).

The claim here is that we must look beyond the physical objects--the cotton wool, the slights of hand, the gourd handle in phallic shape, and so forth--to their symbolic
meanings, which are linked into a network or system of meanings that add up to the Desana's understanding of the universe and its operations. In fact, only some Desana know these meanings; others, probably the majority, know only the concrete manifestations. Moreover, the manipulation of the symbols is said to be effective in spite of the lack of understanding by the patient and other participants. The question then is transformed. It is not: are the individual beliefs of the Desana absurd? Is it absurd (or insincere) to remove (or appear to remove) cotton wool from the distended abdomen of a patient? Is it absurd to believe in harmful magical acts? Rather, if the Desana have a consistent, complex understanding of the universe, one which aids them in their adaptation to a particular ecological niche, which is, however, at variance with out scientific understanding of the universe, are their beliefs absurd? Are they collectively mad, or simply insincere? Or should we, instead, admire their philosophical insights, the imagination and poetry of their intellectual edifice, and not worry about its scientific accuracy or our ability to subscribe to it? Moreover, if they can learn, as we are told some have, our world view, does it not mean that they are neither prelogical nor mad nor insincere? It is sobering to think that current science is often apt to tell us that yesterday's scientific facts were absurd. May not today's scientific beliefs have a similar fate tomorrow?
A major aspect of Stich's thesis is that certain findings of modern cognitive science are at variance with a basic tenet of folk psychology concerning belief (which he refers to as "the assertion that 'p'") and that therefore beliefs do not exist. "It is a fundamental tenet of folk psychology," he tells us (p.231), "that the very same state which underlies the sincere assertion of 'p' also may lead to a variety of nonverbal behavior" (italics in original). Yet various experiments in cognitive dissonance and attribution research, several of which are cited by Stich, appear to indicate that verbal assertion of belief and nonverbal behavior from which behavior may be inferred may be found to be at variance. And when people are confronted with the discrepancy between what they say and what they do, they produce ad hoc explanations. These findings are treated by Stich as startling revelations. The suggest to him that "our cognitive system keeps two sets of books" (ibid), one for verbal statements and another for nonverbal behavior. "And this," he claims (ibid) "is a finding for which folk psychology is radically unprepared...If we really do have two separate verbal and nonverbal cognitive storage systems, then the functional economy of the mind postulated by folk theory is quite radically mistaken."

These claims lead us once more to consider the tenets of folk psychology, both "our" and that of others, and also to consider additional psychological research to which Stich
does not refer. Inconsistencies between what people say and what they do are, of course, not limited to the psychological laboratory, neither are inconsistencies between verbal statements, particularly when unanticipated situations must be dealt with. Take, for instance, members of a fundamentalist snake handling church. They claim they will not be bitten because of the strength of their faith and the purity of their hearts. And yet, when one of them is bitten, as happens not infrequently, they manage to accommodate the dissonance between expectation and experience by finding ad hoc explanations in the will of God to account for the event.

Is Stich arguing that folk psychology does not have room for such inconsistencies, for "making excuses", "explaining away", of discomforting situations? These, in case no new revelations are drawn on for explanations. Has not even the word "rationalization" acquired a popular usage? Isn't "sour grapes" a current expression? As a participant observer in U.S. society, it is my informal impression that folk psychological idiom does indeed make room for inconsistencies and contradictory behavior, both verbally and nonverbally.

Now as to research in support of Stich's "multiple bookkeeping" image of the human mind: research on bilinguals, on consciousness and state connected learning and on the multiple personalities, all, among others, produce evidence that can be interpreted in this manner. One example concerning bilinguals may be cited for dramatic illustration
of this point. Farb gives us this example of bilingual Japanese women married to American men and living in San Francisco. Here are one woman's responses to incomplete sentence stems:

When my wishes conflict with my family's...
...it is a time of great unhappiness (Japanese).
...I do what I want (English).
Real friends should...
...help each other (Japanese).
...be very frank (English).

One is tempted to conclude here that each language is a system of cues producing access to a different system of beliefs, of cognitive storage. The implications for fully bi-lingual, bi-cultural societies, whether in the Americas or elsewhere, are tremendous and have hardly been probed by those concerned with bilingual education. It should be stressed that this fine example of the bilingual Japanese-American women is not an odd or isolated case (Y.S. Erwin 1964).

Research on state dependent learning and retrieval (C.W. Kiefer and J. Cowan 1979) has shown that what is learned in one state of consciousness or in one context, may be retrievable in that state or context but not, or not as easily, in another. This is of particular importance with regard to altered states of consciousness, whether induced by drugs, rituals, meditation or other factors. That learning
from one state may not be easily accessible to another has come as a discovery to psychologists in their research, in particular, on hallucinogenic drugs. It has long been know in the folk psychologies of those societies, in which altered states have an important ritual place. Thus, among the Desana (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971: 150, 171-75) the ritual taking of the hallucinogen yaje leads to a trance state experienced as a separation of the soul from the body and its mystical union with the divinity. All kinds of things are learned that are not available in ordinary states of consciousness. They are learned by the soul, not by the mind. Another example is to be found among those people whose rituals include altered states of consciousness in which spirit personalities are acted out, states that are experienced and conceptualized as possession by spirits. Such possession trance states are found in the Afro-American cults distributed widely throughout the region from Cuba to southern Brazil. They range from Cuban santeria and Haitian vodou to the multitude of Brazilian cults, from batuque to umbanda, from the candombles of Bahia to macumba and many more. They are also found in the many forms of espiritismo (kardecismo) flourishing in Puerto Rico, and Mexico and in U.S. cities with large numbers of Hispanic people, as well as throughout the South American continent. In all these groups, it is expected that persons in their ordinary states of consciousness will not remember the actions carried out
during possession trance, or, in the religious idiom, by the spirits while temporarily inhabiting their bodies. In other words, the separate memories of the spirits, to be recovered on their next visit, are stored in a separate cognitive system, to use Stich's expression, not that of the non-trance personality. Indeed, where several spirits may possess an individual at different times, each of these spirit personalities may have its own memory. In psychological language, each state of consciousness stores its information separately. In the view of the "native", each spirit is a separate personality. Whatever the conceptualization, each analytic system, whether folk psychology or scientific psychology, the same observations are made and accounted for.

It is interesting to note that the concern with altered states, with consciousness, with state dependent learning and the lot came about in cognitive science in response to changes in the culture. These research interests are children of the '60's, of the widespread experimentation and theorizing about hallucinogenic drugs. The folk produced changes in the scientists. Perhaps a study of "our" folk psychology, whatever it may turn out to be, will produce changes in the philosopher's version of folk psychology and theories of belief as well.
References


