

A Conflation of Folk Psychologies

A Commentary on Stich's "What is a Theory of Mental Representation?"

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Draft @ July 1992

Appeared in K. Neander & I. Ravenscroft (eds.) *Prospects for Intentionality Working Papers in Philosophy* 3: 42-51. (Research School of Social Sciences, ANU 1993).

Stich begins his paper "What is a Theory of Mental Representation?" (1992) by noting that while there is a dizzying range of theories of mental representation in today's philosophical market place, there is very little self-conscious reflection about what a theory of mental representation is supposed to do. This is quite remarkable, he thinks, because if we bother to engage in such reflection, some very surprising conclusions begin to emerge. The most surprising conclusion of all, according to Stich, is that most of the philosophers in this field are undertaking work that is quite futile:

It is my contention that most of the players in this very crowded field have *no* coherent project that could possibly be pursued successfully with the methods they are using. (p.244)

Stich readily admits that this is a startling conclusion; so startling, he thinks, that some may even take it as an indication that he has simply "failed to figure out what those who are searching for a theory of mental representation are up to" (p.244). But it is a conclusion that he is willing to stand by, and he sets about it defending it in the body of his paper.

Stich, I think, is right about this—I do take his conclusion to indicate that he has failed to figure out what those who are searching for a theory of mental representation are up to. And he has failed to do this largely because he has failed to distinguish between the *theory of mind* that is implicit in our folk psychology and the *mental mechanism* that is responsible for our capacity to make folk psychological judgements. When this conflation is undone, so too is the reasoning that takes Stich to his startling conclusion. This is not to say that the conclusion itself is clearly false; it is merely to say that Stich has failed to show that it is true.

In what follows I will defend this analysis of Stich's self-conscious reflections on what a theory of mental representation is supposed to do. I will begin with a very brief exposition of Stich's survey of the logical terrain in this part of the philosophical landscape and the line of reasoning that subsequently delivers up the aforementioned conclusion. I will then go on to argue that the latter line of reasoning is fundamentally misdirected because of an error in the former survey.

1. A Survey and an Argument

So what are philosophers of mind up to when they set about fashioning a theory of mental representation? In the extensive contemporary philosophical literature on mental representation, Stich delineates just two different families of projects:

(1) There is a family of projects that is concerned with the concept of mental representation that is embodied in our folk psychological practice of identifying mental states by adverting to their content. From this perspective:

A theory of mental representation is supposed to describe the concept or knowledge structure underlying people's ordinary judgements about the contents of beliefs, desires and other intentional states" (p.250)

(2) There is a family of projects that is concerned with mental representation as a natural phenomenon:

On this second account, a theory of mental representation doesn't much care about the commonsense conception of mental representation. The intuitions and tacit knowledge of the man or woman on the street are quite irrelevant. The theory seeks to say what mental representation really is, not what folk psychology takes it to be. And to do this it must describe, and perhaps patch up, the notion of representation as it is used by the best cognitive science that we have available. (pp.251-252)

Only one philosopher—Robert Cummins—is concerned with the second of these families of projects, according to Stich; the rest (and by the rest Stich means Block, Devitt, Dretske, Field, Fodor, Harman, Loar, McGinn, Millikan, Papineau, and Sterelny, to name only those whom Stich himself mentions) are concerned with the first.

With this survey completed, Stich then sets about showing that the projects that belong to this first family here—the projects that engage most of the well known philosophers in the field—are ill-conceived. And his argument is quite straightforward. Philosophical theories about the nature of our commonsense concept of mental representation, he says,

typically offer what purport to be necessary and sufficient conditions for claims of the form:

Mental state *M* has the content *p*

And objections to these theories typically turn on intuitive counterexamples -- cases in which the definition says that *M* has the content *p*, but intuition denies it, or vice versa. (p.248)

But, and here's the rub according to Stich, this exercise of offering necessary and sufficient conditions for such claims is seriously undermined by recent work in psychology that suggests that "the mental structures that underlie people's judgements when they classify items into categories do not exploit tacitly known necessary and sufficient conditions for category membership, or anything roughly equivalent" (p.249)¹. And while Stich notes that there has been no extensive empirical study of the mental structures that underlie our judgements about specifically *intentional* categories, he thinks that it is a safe bet that these too will turn out to be unanalyzable in terms of a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. The upshot of all of this, Stich thinks, is the conclusion with which we are already acquainted:

If using the method of definition and counter-example is the hallmark of a philosophical theory in this area, and if the commonsense concept of mental representation is like every other concept that has been studied empirically, there is a sense in which *there can be no philosophical theory of content*. (p.250)

¹ The work in psychology that Stich is referring to here, of course, is that which was originally undertaken by Eleanor Rosch and her colleagues -- see, for example, Rosch and Lloyd (1978).

2. A Conflation

But Stich's line of reasoning here is fundamentally misdirected. This is because most of the philosophers that it targets are actually engaged in a family of projects that is quite distinct from the one that Stich describes. The fault lies, therefore, with Stich's initial logical geography. And this has gone awry, I think, because he has failed to distinguish between two different conceptions of 'folk psychology' that are current in the literature. In this section I will expose this latter conflation. In the following and final section I will show how undoing it causes Stich's line of reasoning to miss its target.

What is *folk psychology*? Here's what Stich and his coauthor Nichols have to say in another recent work:

Among the many cognitive capacities that people manifest, there is one cluster that holds a particular fascination for philosophers. Included in this cluster is the ability to *describe* people and their behavior (including their linguistic behavior) in *intentional* terms -- or to 'interpret' them, as philosophers sometimes say. We exercise this ability when we describe John as *believing that the mail has come*, or when we say that Anna *wants to go to the library*. By exploiting these intentional descriptions, people are able to offer *explanations* of each other's behavior ... and to *predict* each other's behavior, often with impressive accuracy.... The term 'folk psychology' has been widely used as a label for the largely tacit psychological theory that underlies these abilities. (Stich and Nichols, 1992, p.30)

But now we have a problem, for there are two quite different ways of interpreting the last sentence here. On the one hand, "the largely tacit psychological theory that underlies these abilities" might mean something like "the general theory of mind that is implicit in our intentional descriptions". This is the theory that claims our behaviour is the result of the causal interplay of contentful states such as beliefs and desires. Interpreted realistically, then, this theory makes some *ontological* claims about the kind of entities that exist in the world (in particular, it makes some claims about the kind of entities that exist in our heads): there really are beliefs, desires and so forth, and these mental states really are causally implicated in the production of our behaviour.²

But on the other hand, "the largely tacit psychological theory that underlies these abilities" might mean something like "the internally represented, but largely unconscious, knowledge structure that is accessed by the mental mechanism that is causally responsible for our capacity to make intentional judgements". This is because one very popular strategy for explaining such cognitive capacities, in contemporary cognitive science, is to suppose that the mental mechanism responsible makes use of a knowledge base that encodes information about the relevant task domain. And as Stich and Nichols point out, this knowledge structure is "often described as the agent's 'theory' of the domain in question" (1992, p.29). On this second reading, then, 'folk psychology' doesn't refer to a general theory of the mind, it refers more restrictively to the knowledge base of the mental mechanism that (allegedly) enables us to *practice* folk psychology.

These two folk psychologies must be kept distinct, as they are quite separable. It could turn out, for example, that folk psychology in the former sense is true of organisms who do not even possess a folk psychology in the latter sense. For instance, we might hold that a stripped down version of folk psychology in the former sense is approximately true of chimpanzees (i.e., that chimpanzees really do possess causally active, cognitive states that approximate the beliefs and desires that we commonly ascribe to them). But in doing so we are not thereby committed to the view that chimpanzees possess a folk psychology in the latter sense (e.g., we are not thereby

² See, for example, Fodor (1987), pp.1-16, for a detailed account of this kind of interpretation of 'folk psychology'.

committed to the view that chimpanzees possess a cognitive mechanism, with its requisite knowledge base, that enables *them* to form intentional judgements)³.

It seems to me, however, that Stich, in some of his recent work at least, doesn't keep these two folk psychologies distinct, and this creates a certain amount of confusion. Consider, for example, some remarks he and his co-author Nichols make in the aforementioned paper (Stich and Nichols, 1992). In this paper, Stich and Nichols are concerned to undermine the account of the mental mechanism subserving our capacity to make folk psychological judgements that goes by the name of *simulation theory*⁴. Simulation theorists argue that our cognitive competence in this area is not guided by an internally represented knowledge base that encodes information about the intentional domain, but is instead the result of a "special sort of mental *simulation* in which we use ourselves as a model for the person we are describing or predicting" (Stich and Nichols, 1992, p.30). In short, simulation theorists deny that we possess an internally represented 'theory' of the intentional domain -- they deny, in other words, that we possess a folk psychology in its *mental mechanism* sense.

The details of this debate need not concern us. What is interesting, for our purposes here, is that Stich and Nichols think that there are some "enormously important" consequences if simulation theory turns out to be true. Most importantly, if simulation theory turns out to be true, this will have, they think, a dramatic effect on one of the central debates in the contemporary philosophy of mind:

The issue in the debate is the very existence of the intentional mental states that are appealed to in our ordinary explanations of behavior -- states like believing, desiring, thinking, hoping, and the rest. *Eliminativists* maintain that there really are no such things. Beliefs and desires ... are the mistaken posits of a radically false theory. The theory in question is 'folk psychology'.... But if [the simulation theorists] are right, they will have pulled the rug out from under the eliminativists. For if what underlies our ordinary explanatory practice is not a theory at all, then obviously it cannot be a radically false theory.... The eliminativists claim that there are no such things as beliefs and desires because the folk psychology that posits them is a radically false theory. [The simulation theorists] claim that the theory which posits a tacitly known folk psychology is *itself* radically false, since there are much better ways of explaining people's abilities to interpret and predict behaviour. Thus, if [the simulation theorists] are right, *there is no such thing as folk psychology!* (1992, p.31)

But this is clearly confused. Eliminativism, in the philosophy of mind, is a doctrine that bears upon the ontological commitments of the theory of mind that is *implicit* in our intentional judgements, not on the mental mechanism that is *causally responsible* for our capacity to form these judgements. As far as eliminativism is concerned, it doesn't matter *what kind* of mental mechanism is implicated here. In fact, as far as the debate about the ontological status of intentional entities is concerned, it doesn't matter whether or not the relevant cognitive subjects are even *capable* of forming intentional judgements in the first place. For example, and as we have already noted, it might turn out that chimpanzees really do possess beliefs and desires, even though, unlike us, they are incapable of forming intentional judgements.

In short, if simulation theory is true, *nothing at all* follows for the debate over eliminativism in the philosophy of mind. Why, then, do Stich and Nichols think otherwise? The answer, I suggest, is that they have conflated their folk psychologies. They have assumed that

³ In fact, it is currently a contentious issue whether or not chimpanzees do possess a folk psychology in this latter sense -- see, for example, Premack and Woodruff (1978). This particular debate, however, is not over the question whether chimps possess beliefs and desires (i.e., whether folk psychology as a theory of mind is true of chimps); rather, it concerns the question whether chimps are able, in some rudimentary fashion, to form intentional judgements (i.e., whether chimps are able to *avail themselves* of a theory of mind).

⁴ See Goldman (1989); and Gordon (1986).

the 'folk psychology' that is identified with the internally represented knowledge structure that allegedly underlies our capacity to make intentional judgements is the same 'folk psychology' that, when realistically interpreted, is ontologically committed to beliefs, desires, and other intentional entities. Consequently, they conclude, quite wrongly, that if the former knowledge base doesn't actually exist (as simulation theorists maintain) there is no such thing as the latter theory of mind.

And it is this same conflation, I think, that is responsible for Stich's mistaken survey of the kinds of theories of mental representation that are available in the philosophical market place. Once we undo this conflation, we will find that his pessimism about the prospects of these kinds of theories of mental representation is quite unjustified.

3. Undoing the Conflation

When considering what philosophers might be up to when they are concerned to construct a theory of mental representation based on *folk psychology*, two different answers are possible depending on *which* folk psychology is being invoked. On the one hand, they might be in the business of constructing an accurate *description* of the information about the intentional domain that is encoded in the knowledge base of the cognitive mechanism that is responsible (according to one popular strategy current in cognitive science, at least) for our intentional judgements. On the other, they might be in the business of trying to construct a plausible *explanation* of how mental states such as beliefs and desires possess the intentional properties that we typically ascribe to them.

But, as we have already seen, when Stich surveys the logical terrain in this region of the philosophical landscape, he discerns just one family of projects. And clearly, the central concern of the family of projects that he discerns in this regard is the former *descriptive* exercise:

A prominent feature of our everyday discourse about ourselves and about other people is our practice of identifying mental states by adverting to their content.... Plainly, there must be a mental mechanism of some complexity underlying this ubiquitous practice, and it seems plausible to suppose that the mechanism in question includes a store of largely tacit knowledge about the conditions under which it is (and is not) appropriate to characterize a mental state as the belief or the desire *that p*. If we adopt the relatively loose use of the term "concept" that prevails in psychology, this amounts to the assumption that the mental mechanism underlying our practice embodies a concept of mental representation. And one perfectly plausible goal for a theory of mental content would be to describe that concept. (1992, p.246)

The more substantive *explanatory* exercise does not even rate a mention. And it does not rate a mention, I think, because Stich has again conflated his folk psychologies -- he assumes there is just *one* folk psychology here, and hence thinks there is just *one* family of projects associated with it. Consequently, when it comes to allocating philosophers to a particular family of projects, he simply assumes that all of those who are concerned to construct an account of mental representation *that in some way answers to folk psychology* must be engaged in the descriptive exercise that he describes.

But in fact, once we undo Stich's conflation here, it is perfectly plain that most of these philosophers are actually engaged in the more substantive explanatory exercise⁵. They are in the business, that is, of fashioning a substantive account of how mental states can have the kind of intentional properties that the folk psychological theory of mind tends to ascribe to them. Thus, for example, when Fodor talks in terms of coming up with at least sufficient conditions for

⁵ I say here that *most* of these philosophers are engaged in the more substantive explanatory project, but I actually tend to think that *all* of them are. In fact, I know of no philosopher who *explicitly* undertakes the descriptive project that Stich describes.

claims of the form 'Mental state *M* has content *p*', he is concerned, not to accurately *describe* the knowledge structure that underlies our capacity to make intentional judgements, but to offer an *explanatory* account of how mental representations can have semantic and intentional properties in the first place:

If the semantic and the intentional are real properties of things, it must be because of their identity with (or maybe supervenience on?) properties that are themselves *neither* intentional *nor* semantic. If aboutness is real, it must be really something else...

I [thus] want a *naturalized* theory of meaning; a theory that articulates, in nonsemantic and nonintentional terms, sufficient conditions for one bit of the world to *be about* (to express, represent, or be true of) another bit. I don't care ... whether this theory holds for *all* symbols or for all things that represent.... I'm prepared, that is, that only mental states ... should turn out to have semantic properties *in the first instance*; hence, that a naturalized semantics should apply, *strictu dictu*, to mental representations only.

But it had better apply to them. (Fodor, 1987, pp.97-99) ⁶

We are now almost done. It simply remains to tie up the loose end of the line of reasoning that leads Stich to his startling conclusion that most philosophers working on theories of mental representation "have *no* coherent project that could possibly be successfully pursued with the methods they are using". And I trust that it is now plain that Stich's argument here is misdirected. The argument, even if it is a good argument, only applies to the task of *describing* the concept of mental representation that is embodied in the tacit knowledge structure that might underlie our capacity to form intentional judgements. It doesn't apply to the more substantive task of *explaining* how mental states have intentional properties in the first place. Consequently, as most of the philosophers whom Stich targets are actually engaged in this latter pursuit, his line of reasoning here falls fairly harmlessly on what at most is a thinly populated region of the philosophical landscape.

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⁶ Fodor's talk of a *naturalized* theory of mental representation here might suggest that he is actually engaged in a project that is closer in spirit to the *second* family of projects in Stich's original logical geography (viz., "mental representation as a natural phenomenon"). But the point, of course, is that we need a further distinction here. In addition to the distinction between descriptive and explanatory projects that relate to the concept of mental representation *embodied in folk psychology*, we must also distinguish between two approaches to the *naturalization* of mental representation: one that aims to fashion a naturalistic account of mental representation independently of folk psychology (according to Stich, this is the project in which Cummins (1989) is engaged) and one that aims to naturalize the concept of mental representation that is implicit in the folk psychological theory of mind (this is the project in which Fodor (1987) is engaged).