

Knowledge and Social Practice: Robert Brandom and the Strong Programme

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Abstract

This paper revisits the debates around David Bloor's 1976 *Knowledge and Social Imagery*, which introduced the 'strong programme' in the sociology of scientific knowledge. We summarise the methodological precepts of the strong programme, and the most prominent criticisms directed at it, including particularly charges that the strong programme devolves into anti-scientific relativism. We argue that the impasse suggested by these debates could potentially be resolved using some of the tools provided by the recent work of philosopher Robert Brandom. While not explicitly operating within the sociology of science, Brandom's metatheory, we suggest, can point the way towards a social theory of knowledge which is causal, impartial, symmetrical and reflexive in Bloor's senses, while also retaining a robust concept of objectivity.

Introduction

The 1976 publication of David Bloor's *Knowledge and Social Imagery* can be seen as a watershed moment in the sociology of science. Both building upon and 'radicalising' the insights of Kuhn's (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, and articulating ideas developed by the Science Studies Unit of the University of Edinburgh (especially Barnes 1972; 1974), Bloor argues that sociologists have something to say, not just about the institutions that produce knowledge, or the norms that guide scientific research, but about scientific knowledge itself. For Bloor, epistemological questions traditionally reserved for the philosophy of science can also be raised - indeed, can best be answered - by sociologists studying the concrete practices of working scientists.

Bloor's proposed research programme - the 'strong programme' in the sociology of scientific knowledge - prompted wide-ranging and often fractious debate. On the one hand, the strong programme was praised for debunking a Whiggish developmental narrative that occluded many of the most important social components in the production of scientific knowledge (e.g. Hesse 1980: 29-62; Douglas 1973). On the other hand, it was fiercely criticised for its apparent assault on the ideals of objectivity, truth and reason (Laudan 1984; Slezak 1989; Sokal 1998; Kemp 2005).

In this paper we revisit Bloor's influential 1976 text, and argue that some of the debates it prompted can be clarified by a set of theoretical resources drawn from a different intellectual tradition: the pragmatist philosophy of Robert Brandom (1994; 2000a; 2008). We argue that Brandom's work can 'square the circle' of several key tensions in the original strong programme,

showing us how it might be possible to make good on *both* Bloor's programmatic commitments to 'symmetry' and 'reflexivity', *and* his critics' rejection of the strong programme's relativism.

The paper is organised as follows. In section I, we summarise Bloor's position, the most prominent criticisms directed at it, and Bloor's more recent responses. In section II, we outline Brandom's philosophy, and draw out some of the connections between Brandom's metatheoretical apparatus and Bloor's programmatic commitments. Section III concludes by schematically highlighting the potential for a new self-understanding of the sociology of science, which transcends the dichotomies that characterised earlier debates over the field.

I - The Strong Programme

In his 1976 book, Bloor introduces the strong programme by polemically contrasting it with its methodological rivals. Opponents of the sociology of knowledge, Bloor writes -

divide behaviour or belief into two types: right and wrong, true or false, rational or irrational. They then invoke sociological or psychological causes to explain the negative side of the division. Such causes explain error, limitation and deviation. The positive side of the evaluative divide is quite different. Here logic, rationality and truth appear to be their own explanation. Here psycho-social causes do not need to be invoked (1976: 9).

On this picture, Bloor argues, there are two classes of explanation for belief: true beliefs can be explained by their truth; false beliefs should be explained by social causes, which prompt

otherwise inexplicable deviation from truth. Knowledge itself is immune from sociological explanation; sociology studies error alone.

By contrast, Bloor presents four methodological guidelines for the 'strong' programme in the sociology of scientific knowledge - a programme that would analyse the production of truth, as well as error, using sociological methods:

1. It would be causal, that is, concerned with the conditions which bring about belief or states of knowledge. Naturally there will be other types of causes apart from social ones which will cooperate in bringing about belief.
2. It would be impartial with respect to truth and falsity, rationality or irrationality, success or failure. Both sides of these dichotomies will require explanation.
3. It would be symmetrical in its style of explanation. The same type of cause would explain, say, true and false beliefs.
4. It would be reflexive. In principle its patterns of explanation would have to be applicable to sociology itself. Like the requirement of symmetry this is a response to the need to seek general explanations. It is an obvious requirement of principle because otherwise sociology would be a standing refutation of its own theories (1976: 7).

These four principles - of causality, impartiality, symmetry and reflexivity - sum up the strong programme. Much of the rest of Bloor's work - indeed, the work of the Edinburgh school more broadly - can be seen as an attempt to elaborate and begin to implement these methodological precepts.

Bloor's programmatic claims generated both enthusiasm and hostility. Research informed by the principles of the strong programme generated important empirical and theoretical works (MacKenzie 1981; Pickering 1984; Shapin and Schaffer 1985). At the same time, Bloor's methodological precepts were criticised from a range of directions.

From within the sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK) tradition, Bloor was criticised - most prominently by Latour (1992) - both for his apparent residual positivism, and for an uncritical distinction between the natural and the social. From outside the SSK tradition, critics were typically more concerned by Bloor's apparent commitment to relativism (Laudan 1984; Slezak 1989; Sokal 1998; Kemp 2005). This broad line of criticism - which was often directed not just at Bloor, but at SSK more generally - can be summarised in two points. Critics asked:

First, how is it possible to say that the same type of cause would explain both true and false beliefs, when the physical behaviours of the objects of scientific study have a causal role in determining the outcomes of scientific observations? If true beliefs correspond to real events or objects, and false beliefs do not, must there not be an intrinsic asymmetry in the causal processes that produce these classes of belief? (e.g. Slezak 1989: 584-5)

Second, how is it possible to reflexively apply the principles of impartiality and symmetry to sociology itself without giving up sociological research's own claims to truth? If a methodological principle of the strong programme is indifference to truth or falsehood, and these principles must be applied to sociological research, does this not commit us to a relativism in which no truth claims can be made? (e.g. Laudan 1984: 54)

These criticisms seemed particularly cogent since Bloor and Barnes themselves were willing to embrace many of the apparently relativistic consequences of their positions. As Bloor writes:

There is no denying that the strong programme in the sociology of knowledge rests on a form of relativism. It adopts what may be called 'methodological relativism', a position summarised in the symmetry and reflexivity requirements that were defined earlier. All beliefs are to explained in the same general way regardless of how they are evaluated (1976: 158).

Or as Bloor and Barnes put it in an important later paper:

For the relativist there is no sense attached to the idea that some standards or beliefs are really rational as distinct from merely locally accepted as such. Because he thinks that there are no context-free or super-cultural norms of rationality he does not see rationally and irrationally held beliefs as making up two distinct and qualitatively different classes of things (Barnes and Bloor 1982: 27-8).

For critics of the strong programme, these kinds of statements suggested, not the previously underappreciated methodological value of relativism, but rather the epistemological bankruptcy of the entire research programme (e.g. Rosenberg 1985: 379).

Perhaps because these prominent criticisms of the strong programme were more commonly *metatheoretical* than *empirical*, in later work Bloor engaged his critics on largely philosophical terrain. In two later books, Bloor (1983; 1997) draws on the work of Wittgenstein to make the

case for a practice-theoretic epistemology. Bloor presents Wittgenstein as developing a 'social theory of knowledge', as against recent individualist interpreters, and draws important connections between this theoretical orientation and the research programme of the sociology of scientific knowledge.

Like many theorists who aim to put Wittgenstein's philosophy 'to work' in concrete analysis of the specific *ways* in which social practice generates knowledge, Bloor must however push against the strong *anti-explanatory* orientation of Wittgenstein's own approach. For Wittgenstein, the rules we follow are apparently to be explained by social 'forms of life', which are seemingly understood as admitting of no further analysis, and which therefore serve as a short-circuit that disrupts an infinite regress of further investigation. In Wittgenstein's words:

If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned.

Then I am inclined to say: "This is simply what I do." (1953: §217)

Or, elsewhere:

We must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place. (1953:

§109)

This anti-explanatory quality of Wittgenstein's thought seems largely incompatible with a social-scientific explanatory project. For this reason and others, Bloor's attempt to establish a philosophical warrant for the strong programme's methodological principles failed to convince

many of the tradition's critics. At the same time, Bloor's criticisms of 'teleological' sociology of science remain influential within SSK. The debate appears at an impasse.

II - Robert Brandom's Social Theory of Knowledge

One possibility for moving beyond this impasse, we suggest, lies in an appropriation of resources drawn from more recent analytic philosophy - specifically, the work of US pragmatist philosopher Robert Brandom (1994; 2000a; 2008). Like Bloor, Brandom has devoted his much of his career to the elaboration and extension of the Wittgensteinian insight that knowledge can be analysed in social, practice-theoretic terms. Brandom's work, however - especially his magnum opus, 1994's *Making It Explicit* - offers a much more fully developed theoretical apparatus than Bloor's.

Brandom's system is complex and at times technical - we cannot here do more than summarise, very schematically, some of its most relevant components. Our goal, therefore, is not to *make the case* for these theoretical commitments, but to present them in a way that draws out some of the most striking connections between Brandom's system and Bloor's. If Brandom's system is found persuasive, it offers the possibility of addressing the concerns and commitments of *both* strong programme advocates *and* many of their critics. Specifically, Brandom's work enables an articulation of the key strong programme commitments of a symmetrical, reflexive, practice-theoretic social epistemology, *without* requiring the apparent corollary commitment of relativism.

In the philosophical literature - including his own work - Brandom is most commonly presented as an 'inferentialist' philosopher of language, offering an alternative account of the foundations of semantics (Brandom 2000a; Wanderer 2008; Weiss and Wanderer 2010). For our purposes, however, this aspect of Brandom's work - important and influential though it is - will largely remain offstage. Instead, we propose to summarise Brandom's *theory of practice* in terms of *six key elements*. Many of these elements, taken individually, are shared by other theoretical perspectives; Brandom's work is unusual, we claim, in the resourceful way it combines these elements to construct an original social theory of knowledge.

The six key elements of Brandom's system are as follows.

1) Brandom's work is social-perspectival. Like his supervisor Richard Rorty, Brandom argues that there is no possibility of a 'bird's-eye view' from which knowledge-claims can be evaluated (Brandom 2000b). Every claim, Brandom argues, must be understood as grounded in a specific social location - or made from within a specific social perspective - and there can be no 'master perspective' that has any *intrinsic* (or 'metaphysical') superiority over others. Any ranking of social perspectives is itself the product of a specific social perspective, and should be understood as such (1994: 608).

2) Brandom's work sees social perspectives as grounded in practice. The commitments that form our perspectives are, for Brandom, first and foremost *implicit* in our social practices (1994: 29-30). Brandom thus shares with Wittgenstein - and Bloor - the idea that we inhabit forms of life that guide our actions, without the details of those forms necessarily being present to - or

formed by - conscious deliberation. The 'rules of the game' - the 'habitus' that guides our actions (c.f. Bourdieu 1990) - are embodied in practice before they are comprehended in thought.

3) Nevertheless, for Brandom the implicit norms that govern our actions and our thoughts can in principle be *made* explicit, discursively. Although Brandom sees us as inhabiting 'forms of life', he does not regard these forms as the bedrock upon which our analytic spade turns. We are under no obligation to 'explicitate' the norms implicit in our practices, but this possibility is always available (1994: 26). Thus Brandom rejects the anti-explanatory component of Wittgenstein's practice theory.

4) Social space, for Brandom, is not homogeneous. For Brandom, we do not participate in a *single* 'habitus' or 'form of life', but *countless* forms, generated by countless different elements of our social practice (compare Sen 2007). Because the norms that govern different elements of our social practice may, in some circumstances, be incompatible, this heterogeneity of the social field allows each social perspective to provide standpoints from which others can be criticised (Brandom 1994: 54-5). Each of us inhabits multiple social perspectives, including the social perspectives of others with whom we interact, and this gives us a recurrent experience of comparing social perspectives to each other, and selecting among them (1994: 597; c.f. Haraway 1988).

5) One of the mechanisms by which we select among social perspectives is what Brandom (following Sellars 1956) calls the "game of giving and asking for reasons" (Brandom 2000: 189; 1994: 141-98). For Brandom, part of what characterises sapient beings is the ability to ask each other for the reasons for our actions and beliefs. Further, the reasons given in this 'game' can

lead us to change our actions and commitments. This social fact about us - the fact that we are “reason-mongering” (1994: 173) creatures, vulnerable to “the force of the better reason” (5), gives Brandom a very ‘slimline’ rationalism. Brandom’s apparatus does not dictate *which* reasons are better - that is a question that cannot be answered ‘metatheoretically’, but must be worked out in the thickets of social practice. But it suggests that we cannot but participate in this game of reason-mongering - we are intrinsically ‘rational’ beings in this minimal sense.

6) Finally, Brandom is able to bring these resources together to give a purely ‘formalist’, social-perspectival account of objectivity. On Brandom’s account, we are recurrently confronted by the dual experience of seeing the same commitments from multiple social perspectives, and finding incompatibilities within our own perspectives. These experiences open the awareness that we may well come to see our own current perspectives as incorrect, even in our own terms (1994: 592-601). This possibility in turn allows Brandom to derive a ‘slimline’, ‘formalist’ concept of objectivity. This possibility of objectivity, on Brandom’s account, does not derive from access to some transcendent perspective - a ‘bird’s-eye view’ from which all other perspectives can be judged. Rather, it derives from the continual awareness that we may - with further information and experience, after further discussion and negotiation - find our own current perspectives to be flawed.

This possibility means that we are never subject to the homogenous ‘closure’ of social perspective that worries some critics of relativistic positions. Further, because “the game of giving and asking for reasons” is one of the principal mechanisms by which we choose between perspectives, we are not left without mechanisms for selecting between alternative commitments. The choice of action or belief, on Brandom’s account, is not arbitrary - but neither

is it dictated by a transcendent 'master-perspective' - it is worked out in a constant process of social negotiation.

Brandom thus provides a metatheoretical framework that is *practice theoretic* and *social-perspectival*, while still permitting both *rationalism* and the possibility of *objectivity*.

Brandom's system therefore seems to 'square the circle' mentioned earlier - meeting many of the key desiderata of both the strong programme and its critics.

In Bloor's terms, Brandom's analytic framework is:

- Causal. The social practices that generate different commitments and perspectives can be analysed empirically (1994: 271).

- Impartial. For Brandom, because even true claims are judged true according to socially generated norms, the study of truth and falsehood alike requires the identical study of the social practices from which these norms emerge (599-601).

- Symmetrical. Although Brandom's system does not require us to relinquish our commitments about the nature of reality, it does not *metatheoretically* privilege a specific causal account (599-601).

- Reflexive. Finally, Brandom is centrally concerned with the problem of explaining the status of his own work in the same terms in which he explains the emergence of other social

perspectives - indeed, this is one of the key criteria of adequacy by which he evaluates the success of his project (1994: 641-3).

At the same time, it meets these conditions by reformulating, rather than abandoning, ideals of objectivity and rationality that the strong programme appeared to undermine.

III - Conclusion

This summary is necessarily highly telegraphic; many crucial arguments and nuances have been omitted. Our purpose here, therefore, is not to make the case for the metatheoretical adequacy of Brandom's work. Rather, we wish to draw attention to a set of underappreciated but profound connections between these two seemingly unrelated research programmes - and to suggest that both critics of and advocates for the strong programme could profit from engagement with Brandom's theoretical work. We hope that such engagement might make clear that some of the battle-lines between different theoretical commitments in the sociology of scientific knowledge could be drawn differently - or abandoned.

Like the strong programme and its successors, Brandom aims to achieve a causal, impartial, symmetrical, reflexive, practice-theoretic account of the social production of knowledge.

Brandom's approach, however, suggests practice-theoretic means of avoiding allegations of relativism, anti-scientism, or self-refutation commonly leveled at the strong programme, by redefining objectivity as an ideal implicit in everyday social interactions, intelligible as an ideal to diverse social actors whose multiplicity of perspectives provides manifold vantage points from

which the objectivity of any given perspective may be called into question. This “slimline”, practice-theoretic understanding of objectivity avoids the problematic appeal to truth as a causal force that has been effectively criticised by the strong programme. It is also compatible in many respects with other recent attempts to theorise scientific authority in the social sciences (Collins 1992; Polanyi 1962; 1967). Yet it provides the metatheoretical resources to avoid the trap of equating the social and practical embeddedness of knowledge with relativism and inability to form intersubjectively-meaningful value judgements about scientific practice. Brandom’s work explains why a strong programme in the sociology of knowledge need not give up on truth.

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