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Returning to Bloor and the Strong Program: A Brief Rejoinder to Shahryari

Finn Collin, Aalborg University, cps957@ku.dk

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In his article, “The Strong Program and Asymmetrical Explanation of the History of Science: A Reply to Collin” (Shahryari 2022b), Shahram Shahryari responds to my comments (in Collin 2022) upon his original article, “A Tension in the Strong Program: The Relation between the Rational and the Social” (Shahryari 2022a). I believe that in this new contribution, Shahryari changes the subject as compared to our original discussion. Hence, before I comment upon his recent contribution, I want to recapitulate briefly the content of that discussion.

Contradiction and Opacity

In his original paper, Shahryari claimed that in his Strong Program, David Bloor contradicted himself in arguing that there is only one kind of explanation, viz. the social kind, specifically denying the existence of “rational” explanation, while simultaneously stating that traditional philosophers deploy both social and rational explanation. In my comments on this, I argued that there is no contradiction here: Bloor may use the term “rational explanation” without thereby granting that this term has any actual instances. Bloor’s claim that traditional philosophers deploy both social and rational explanation articulates this explanatory practice *as those philosophers themselves would describe it*, without Bloor being thereby committed to the reality of that duality. In technical terms, Bloor’s statement is *referentially opaque*, which means that he can describe traditional philosophers of science as deploying rational explanation without thereby admitting the existence of such a thing.

There is a familiar difficulty of formulation here, since in order to report informatively on somebody else’s thoughts, actions and projects—as Bloor does vis-a-vis traditional philosophers—one is compelled to describe them using their own terms, even when one denies the applicability of those terms. A biologist might e.g. describe a film crew from *Animal Planet* as setting out to get live footage of Bigfoot, without thereby granting that such a creature exists. The biologist would have to describe the film crew’s project in this accommodating way, although he knew quite well that Bigfoot does not exist. It would be uninformative for him just to say that the crew set out to film something that does not exist, since this would not disclose *what it is* that does not exist, in a way relevant to the film crew’s undertaking: Namely Bigfoot, and not mermaids, the Yeti, or unicorns. Language has devices for handling this challenge, but at the cost of the confusing “referential opacity” of the sentences that describe people’s beliefs and actions.

Somewhat surprisingly, Shahryari seems to grant this point in the present article, as he states the following, although rather as an aside and as if this was not indeed the very key to our disagreement: “In addition, Collin rightly argues that Bloor’s use of the word “rational explanation” does not commit him to two kinds of explanation.” (Shahryari 2022b, 32). With this admission, Shahryari no longer has any basis for claiming that Bloor contradicts himself in asserting that traditional philosophers use both social and rational explanation, while simultaneously denying the reality of rational explanation. For it is now agreed that the former assertion does not commit Bloor to accepting the existence of rational explanations. This is the argument I advanced in my response to Shahryari’s original article. Unfortunately, Shahryari still does not see things in this way, since in the penultimate sentence of his

response to me, he once again saddles Bloor with this commitment: "... by calling the teleological model "asymmetrical", Bloor has committed himself to two kinds of explanation and two kinds of cause." (Shahryari 2022b, 36). So apparently Shahryari is still entangled in the puzzles that are engendered by "referentially opaque" statements.

Shahryari Introduces a New Topic

I have nothing to add to this issue beyond what I already laid out in my original comment on Shahryari. Instead, I shall address the new topic that Shahryari introduces in his response. He writes as follows:

The controversy between Collin's interpretation and mine, then, is whether, when criticizing his opponents, Bloor himself comprehends rational explanation and sociological explanation in opposition to each other, or he attributes this duality only to them and is not committed to it. In other words, we must see whether Bloor's criticism of his opponents is why they offer an indefensible asymmetrical explanation of the history of science, or, instead, he complains about why they have mistakenly considered rational and social explanations as opposed to each other and therefore asymmetrical (Shahryari 2022b, 32).

Let me repeat, just for the record, that this is not what our original controversy was about. What is more, I emphatically reject the above account of my understanding of Bloor's position. But before I get to that, I note that Shahryari's presentation of our supposed disagreement still suffers from the ambiguities that result from referential opacity. Shahryari presents two different tenets that he attributes to Bloor, but of which he believes that I fail to recognize one. But I do indeed recognize both, my objection is merely to the way Shahryari presents them. I do indeed agree that "Bloor himself comprehends rational explanation and sociological explanation in opposition to each other..", but *only as the situation appears from the perspective of his opponents*. Bloor himself rejects this perspective, but he cannot very well criticize it without first articulating it. Thus, it is both true that "Bloor himself comprehends rational explanation and sociological explanation in opposition to each other" and that "he attributes this duality only to them and is not committed to it". Bloor is in the same situation as the biologist who cannot effectively criticize the futility of the film crew's efforts without mentioning that it is *Bigfoot* they are after, not grizzlies or moose, but without thereby accepting the existence of this mythical creature.

In my comments on Shahryari, I characterized Bloor's charge against traditional philosophers of science as follows:

... [T]hey *falsely believe* that there are two kinds of explanations, rational and social ... Philosophers of science also *falsely believe* that they have often been able to provide explanations of the preferred kind, i.e. rational explanations, of significant episodes in the history of science, while presenting social explanations of such abnormalities as Lysenkian biology. Both beliefs are mistaken, according to Bloor (Collin 2022, 70).

The second of these points corresponds roughly, I would have thought, to Shahryari's statement that "Bloor's criticism of his opponents is why they offer an indefensible asymmetrical explanation of the history of science". Shahryari takes me to disagree with this statement, but that is not so. I certainly do not hold that Bloor objects only to his opponents' false belief in the existence of two kinds of explanation, while paying no attention to their actual practice of deploying supposedly "rational" explanation. Bloor takes issue with traditional philosophers of science on both counts, and the whole point of my original response to Shahryari was indeed to show how Bloor can do so without contradicting himself. Hence, I am a bit surprised to find that Shahryari now takes me to recognize only one side of this supposed contradiction.

I conclude that the new disagreement that Shahryari believes to find between himself and me is not genuine. Unfortunately, it seems on the other hand that our original dispute remains unresolved. Shahryari still holds that by stating that traditional philosophers of science employ asymmetrical explanation, Bloor is committed to the existence of such an explanatory duality; a duality which he at the same time explicitly rejects. By contrast, I still hold that this apparent contradiction is only the effect of the familiar "referential opacity" one has to contend with when reporting other people's views.

References

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