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# BAD ARGUMENTS AGAINST A GOOD CASE
## (Laudan's attacks on the strong programme)

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## Abstract

The paper deals with L. Laudan's attack on the symmetry thesis of Bloor's strong programme. It will be shown that Laudan's argumentation is fallacious and therefore his attempt at refuting the symmetry thesis has failed.

*Keywords:* sociology of knowledge, strong programme, symmetry thesis, scientific rationality.

In his new book *Beyond Positivism and Relativism* (Westview Press, 1996) LAUDAN republished (as Ch. 10 of part 5) his (1984) criticism on the strong programme (SP) of the sociology of knowledge. This was, namely, originally published twelve years ago under the title *'The pseudo-science of science'* together with D. BLOOR's reply *'The strengths of the strong programme'* in a volume (J. R. BROWN ed. 1984) containing papers on the sociological turn in the philosophy of science. In the *Appendix* to his (Ch. 10, 1996) LAUDAN acknowledges that he has found BLOOR's (1984) response 'instructive in a number of ways'. (LAUDAN, 1996, p. 205) But, he says, that his 'original uneasiness about the strong program persists' (ibid. p. 209). And since he assumes that 'other readers of Bloor's work may share some of [his] reservations' (ibid. p. 205), so he thinks that his (1984) is worth republishing unchanged (except for the Appendix).

I am, however, one of those readers who have objections and reservations concerning LAUDAN's own argumentation (in his 1984, 1996), so I think it is worth — on his republishing his (1984) in (1996) — pointing out some of the mistakes committed by Laudan in arguing his case.

There is no reason, of course, to repeat what was already stated by BLOOR (1984). In that paper it was amply shown how fallacious Laudan's argumentation was. Namely, in the course of his argument Laudan 'shifts his definition of rationality. It begins as a descriptive concept, but finishes as an evaluative one, and in the course of this evolution it also changes its

reference from being a property of an individual to being a property of a group.' (BLOOR, 1984, p. 84) So, in my paper I intend to highlight two more fallacies: a false dichotomy and a shift of definition, committed by LAUDAN (1984, 1996) and not mentioned by BLOOR (1984).

## 1. The False Dichotomy

Laudan's notion of 'rationality' used in his argumentation against the 'rational symmetry' thesis[1] is the following: 'On this not unfamiliar account – he writes – a belief is rational or reasonable provided the agent can give reasons for it and can show that those reasons were antecedent to the adoption of the belief.' (LAUDAN, 1996, p. 195.) So this notion 'rests on a contrast between beliefs that result from a process of ratiocination and reflection, and those that do not.' (ibid. p. 196). In the new Appendix (added to the 1996 edition) Laudan even equates rational belief with 'deliberative' and irrational belief with 'nondeliberative' belief (1996, p. 207).

Based on this a historical and pragmatic notion of 'rationality', Laudan's argument against the rational symmetry thesis runs essentially as follows: if a belief is rational then the believer arrived at it through a process of ratiocination, he can give reasons for it; while if it is irrational, the believer can give no reasons for it, it is preceded by no process of reasoning or deliberation (it is just logically gratuitously accepted by the agent). Hence, the explanations of a rational and an irrational belief must differ. Namely: the rational belief is to be explained in terms of *reasons*, i.e. we can 'point outside and beyond the belief itself to the background beliefs and deliberative processes of the agent' (1996, p. 206), while the irrational belief has no back-up reasons, so it can be explained only by (sociological and other) *causes*. By this seemingly very plausible reasoning, Laudan thinks to have driven home his counter argument to Bloor's (rational) symmetry thesis.

[1] Laudan distinguishes three different types of interpretations of Bloor's famous symmetry thesis. 'For purposes of exposition then, I think — Laudan says — this is faithful to the spirit of Bloor's enterprise, we might break the thesis of symmetry down into three constituent subtheses:

i. *Epistemic symmetry:* true and false beliefs are to be explained by the same types of cause.

ii. *Rational symmetry:* rational and irrational beliefs are to be explained by the same types of cause.

iii. *Pragmatic symmetry:* successful and unsuccessful beliefs are to explained by the same types of cause.' (LAUDAN, 1996, p.193).

In the following I intend to deal with how Laudan argues against the rational symmetry thesis.

This inference, however, rests on a *false dichotomy,* or in other words, on an equivocation. Laudan, namely, assumes that the rational/irrational dichotomy corresponds to the reasoned/unreasoned or deliberative/ nondeliberative dichotomy. Recall that he equates 'rational' belief with the one that results 'from a process of ratiocination and reflection', and irrational is the belief in which no inferential mechanisms are involved, which are unreasoned (Cf. 1996, pp. 195–196).

But, if we accept this dichotomy, then surely anything goes, any belief for which whatever reasons are brought up will count as rational, including the complete woodoo belief system. Lets take an example given in NEWTON-SMITH (1981). 'For instance, – he writes – one can imagine someone in a pre-Copernican era justifying his belief that there are seven planets by appeal to the belief that there are seven virtues' (NEWTON-SMITH, 1981, p. 253). And he adds: 'Indeed, I may not at first glance be able to understand how he could see one belief as reason for the other' (ibid. pp. 253–254).

There are thus two possibilities for Laudan: he either

(1) accepts that any belief which is anyhow reasoned, (like the above one on why there are seven planets), counts as rational, or else,

(2) refuses to accept certain beliefs (like the one above) as rational, by refusing to accept it as 'reasoned', i.e. by refusing to accept the belief concerning the existence of seven virtues as reason for the existence of just seven planets.

The first case exceeds even Feyerabend, and leads to a complete rejection of the distinction between 'rational' and 'irrational' beliefs in the usual sense. Because, whoever accepts (1), cannot distinguish between the Newton–Kant–Laplace belief (on the number of the planets) and Newton-Smith's seven virtues/seven planets type of belief as to their rationality. Both count as rational because both are reasoned. And, as it is well known, it is usual with people holding however extreme or bizarre beliefs to give reasons for what they actually believe. Tribal people, alchemists and even New Age creationists won't give reasons for, and try to back up their beliefs, either by means of tribal myths, or of the Corpus Hermeticum, or again of the Bible. Should all these systems of beliefs count then as rational for Laudan? My guess is anyway that the set of irrational/unreasoned beliefs (in Laudan's classification) is empty because no human being ever accepts any (however) trivial belief without any reason. (This is, however, an empirical question, to be decided by means of cognitive psychology.)

So I think that in case (1) no place is left for sociological (causal) explanations of beliefs, because – as a matter of fact, if it is a fact indeed

– no beliefs are unreasoned, so all of them can be explained in terms of reasons.

And if Laudan chooses to accept case (2), then he puts the burden of definition (of rationality) and thereby of his whole counterargument on the notion of 'being reasoned' or of 'being a reason for something'. In the seven virtues/seven planets example, however, I would incline to say that Laudan should rather assert that the belief in the seven virtues does not *justify* the belief in the existence of seven planets rather than to say that no reasons were given for the latter belief, or that it is unreasoned, therefore irrational. So, I think, 'giving reasons' for some belief and 'justifying it' should be distinguished by Laudan (as they were for NEWTON-SMITH, 1981). The former is a wider and looser notion than the latter (and what is more important: it is a historically changing concept). In this way he could keep up the rational/irrational distinction, by regarding those beliefs as rational which are justified, i.e. backed up by true premisses (reasons) and arrived at by a correct (valid) inference. Others would count as irrational which are though reasoned (by the believer) but unjustified (for us), i.e. result from an (invalid or) incorrect and/or unsound inference. Of course, as Newton-Smith writes: 'An account which fails to justify a belief, does not necessarily fail to explain it' (1981, p. 253).[2] But in this case then, Laudans argument would involve that *both* rational and irrational beliefs can be explained by reasons. So (again), no place would be left for sociological (causal) explanations.

Laudan seems thus to have forgotten about a *third* possibility: beliefs which are though based on reasons, but on 'bad' ones, i.e. which are backed up by false or (logically) insufficient premisses, which do not justify them (even in a loose sense of the word). These types of beliefs are, however, the results of deliberative and reasoning processes, and inferential mechanisms are involved in their generation. Thus they count as rational in Laudan's sense, but are flagrantly irrational in, say, NEWTON-SMITH's (1981) sense.

[2] My thesis is – writes Newton-Smith – that in many cases one explains why someone, *A*, believes something, that *p*, by discovering what *A*'s reasons were for believing p and showing that in the context those reasons justified a belief in *p* rather than disbelief or the suspension of judgement. Neither the evaluation of the reasonableness of my here and now believing in *p*, nor an evaluation of whether here and now what was taken by *A* as justifying the belief in *p* would give me reason to belive in *p*, is relevant to the explanation. Such explanations of belief will be called *minirat accounts'* (1981, p. 254).
What I think is important to note here, is the distinction between: 'justified for the believer *A*' (in his/her context) and 'justified for me' (here and now), or else 'giving whatever reasons' and 'giving justifying/cogent (necessary and sufficient) reasons'. In my text so far, I used the term 'justified' in this letter sense, to bedistinguished from Laudan's undifferentiated 'giving reasons'.

To sum up this part of my argument, I think what Laudan succeeded to argue is not what he intended to: namely, that Bloor's (rational) symmetry thesis is untenable and that rational and irrational beliefs are not to be explained by the same types of causes, but a strange mirror-image of Bloor's symmetry principle, namely, that *both rational and irrational beliefs are to be explained by the same types of cause, namely, reasons.* And the price he paid for this was either the blurring of the rational/irrational distinction or the blurring of the notion of 'being reason of'.

## 2. The Fallacy of Shifting Notions

Laudan himself might have felt that a way out of this impasse is the 'historisation' of the notion of rationality. So during his argument he shifts from his (above cited) ahistorical notion of rational/irrational and 'being reason of' to a more historical evolutionary conception and then back again.

As indicated above, in discussing case (2), a possibility to keep up the rational/irrational distinction is for Laudan to reduce the notion of 'giving reasons' or 'being reason of', to what *we* would count as reason for something else. The real problem is (as in the case of the seven virtues-therefore-seven planets example) that what counted as good reasons for a belief for people living in different times and in different societies, appear to us today (here and now) as being no reasons at all, as having nothing to do with the belief in question. So when and insofar as Laudan sticks to his ahistorical notion of 'being reason of', then and so far he accepts a very parochial concept of it. Yet, he is able to retain the rational/irrational distinction, e.g. he is entitled thereby to reject the 'there are seven planets' belief as irrational, because he considers the back-up belief, i.e. that 'there are seven virtues' as no reason. (Since it is no reason *for us*).

There are places, however, in Laudan's (1996) where he seems to switch for a historicised, contextualised and relativised notion of rationality and of 'giving reasons'. For instance (1996, p. 197) he writes: 'We know, contra Lakatos, that scientific rationality is not static, but constantly evolving. What social factors play a role in shaping the manner in which rationality itself evolves?' A good question. Laudan even admits that 'One could envision a 'sociology of the rational' which would be concerned to explain why in certain cultures certain things counted as good reasons' (ibid. p. 197). These are the questions Laudan recommends to Bloor for elaboration, instead of the SP, which he tries to argue against.

But if so much is admitted by Laudan, namely, that (even) scientific rationality itself evolves, and that good reasons may turn bad (or no)

reasons for certain beliefs, then it has severe consequences for his whole argument, what Laudan does not seem to realise.

It follows, namely, that a belief $B_1$ which counts as rational, because there are reasons given for it at $t_1$, may later on at $t_2$ count as irrational (in Laudan's sense), because the reasons given for it count as bad or no reasons at all. And also it may happen that a belief $B_2$ which counts as irrational, because no, or no good reasons are given for it at $t_1$ turns out to be later on at $t_2$ as, after all, rational because the reasons formerly thought to be bad, turn out to be good. (Think about, e.g. Kepler's Lunar attraction theory of the tides, which was so vehemently rejected as an irrational, Hermetist belief by Galileo, in favour of his own theory of the tides, which we consider today as supported by bad reasons.) According to Laudan, however, rational and irrational beliefs are to be explained, in contrast to Bloor, differently, i.e. *not* by the *same types* of cause. So $B_1$ and $B_2$ above need different types of explanations, the first one in terms of reasons (as causes) and the second one in terms of sociological (and other) causes. But, if later on their epistemic (rationality) status changes, then the type of explanation they need must also change. So if there is a difference synchronically between $B_1$ and $B_2$ as to their explanations, this may disappear diachronically. But for Laudan's argument to hold water against Bloor's (rational) symmetry thesis it is necessary that there be an essential (unchangeable) difference between the epistemic status of $B_1$ and that of $B_2$. Otherwise it would be even pointless to argue against the symmetry thesis. Because in this case it would be only a matter of time to have explanations by the *same types* of cause (i.e. reasons *and* sociological causes) for both $B_1$ and $B_2$.

*In summing up:* if we draw the consequences of Laudan's shifting of his former (ahistorical) notion of rationality to a more historical one, then we come to the conclusion that what follows from Laudan's own assumptions is that *both rational and irrational beliefs* are to be (sooner or later) explained *by the same types of cause*, namely, reasons *and* sociological causes as well. And that is well *in accordance with Bloor's symmetry thesis*.

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