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The Sociology of Knowledge*

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The so-called 'sociology of knowledge' is an ambiguous discipline. It might merely involve the investigation into why scientific discoveries should be made at one time rather than another. It might show the conditions necessary in society for fostering growth in scientific knowledge and explain why some societies have been more successful than others in furthering scientific progress. The discipline could also show social pressures at work on individual scientists, encouraging or retarding their work. The availability of government aid, the production of specialist journals, or the career structure are all fit topics for what would be an interesting, but somewhat peripheral subject. It would be engaged in surveying the necessary surroundings for the growth of empirical knowledge, but barred from looking at the nature of that knowledge.

There is another interpretation of the discipline that makes it more ambitious and more important. Indeed, if its proponents are right, the sociology of knowledge must take over many of the traditional functions of epistemology. In *Knowledge and Social Imagery* David Bloor puts forward what he terms the 'strong' programme in the sociology of knowledge, whereby sociologists not only explain the context of scientific discoveries, but also their content and nature. The programme may begin by dealing with science, all too often regarded in our culture as the sole custodian of truth, but it threatens the whole notion of objective truth. Bloor even wishes to give a sociological explanation of mathematical and logical truth. A form of sociological reductionism is proposed, whereby belief is explained sociologically. Instead of attention being paid to the content of belief, all effort is diverted to a consideration of the mere fact of belief and the various causal factors at work in producing it. There is a corresponding shift in emphasis from what is believed to the more concrete notion of the man, or society, that believes it. The strong version of the sociology of knowledge is inherently anthropocentric. Bloor tells us (p. 139) that 'men are not governed by their ideas or concepts'. He adds that 'even in mathematics, that most cerebral of all subjects, it is men who govern ideas, not ideas which control men'. Sociology thus deals with men's believing, rather than their beliefs.

The very name of the discipline cloaks some ambiguities. Bloor talks of 'the sociology of knowledge', but it is soon apparent that he is revising what is normally meant by 'knowledge'. He admits (p. 2) that his definition is rather different from that of a philosopher, since the sociologist is concerned with knowledge as a 'natural phenomenon'. Thus he says that 'instead of defining it as true belief, knowledge for the sociologist is whatever men take to be knowledge', and it 'consists of those beliefs which men confidently hold to and live by'. He distinguishes knowledge from belief (p. 3) by reserving 'knowledge' for what is collectively endorsed, leaving individual departures from the norm to count as 'belief'. One response to this is to insist on a more traditional philosophic definition that brings in the notion of truth and distinguishes true belief and

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knowledge by ensuring that knowledge is properly grounded. Such a move may clarify the initial position, and also protect the proponents of the strong programme from having to explain how they are so sure what to count as knowledge. After all, anyone who sets himself up to investigate the social origins of knowledge apparently claims a privileged position for himself from which he can discern truth and thus decide what is knowledge and what is error.

Bloor avoids this 'privileged position' by making no claim about truth. He is, in fact, not dealing with knowledge at all, but only with what passes for knowledge in a particular society. From an orthodox philosophical point of view, he is concerned with belief. There is, though, a snag in putting the position this way, since it implies that knowledge is still attainable. One result of Bloor's position is that nothing is conceivable beyond what is taken as knowledge among particular groups. There can then be no such thing as knowledge as it is traditionally understood. This redefinition is no chance occurrence made for convenience of exposition, but is rather a consequence of the relativism lying at the heart of Bloor's sociology. He avoids linking knowledge to truth because he cannot accept the basic notion of objective truth. Consequently he has to redefine 'knowledge' or hold to the traditional definition and say there is no such thing.

Bloor holds (p. 5) that the 'strong' programme of the sociology of knowledge should adhere to four tenets, causality, impartiality, symmetry and reflexivity. The first refers to the fact that it should be 'concerned with the conditions which bring about belief or states of knowledge'. This involves a commitment to determinism and to the view that sociological explanation is a form of causal explanation. The search for causes of belief presupposes that factors other than the content of a belief are likely to explain it. Social background will tell us why someone thinks one thing true and something else false, in a way in which reference to the content of belief will not. This kind of approach always makes objective truth inaccessible, since it will always be appropriate to ask for the cause of someone's belief. The fact of belief will be considered more interesting than the content. There is, in fact, no way left in which we can ask whether a belief is right, since any answer will itself be causally explicable. Anyone's wanting to say that the belief is correct or mistaken is, it would be held, merely saying what he thinks is true, and there are causal factors at work that would explain why he thinks like that. The task of the sociologist of knowledge is to uncover the social factors. All this impinges on a venerable philosophical debate about the respective merits of reasons and causes, but there is no doubt that explaining the importance of the social background of belief removes attention from the content. Bloor would hold that the task of the sociology of knowledge is to explain the content by relating it to the causal background, so that the validity of a proposition could not be questioned apart from an investigation into the causes of its being believed. That in turn merely ensures that questions about validity can no longer be seriously asked.

Bloor's second tenet demands that the sociology of knowledge 'be impartial with respect to truth and falsity, rationality or irrationality, success or failure', and his third that it should be symmetrical in its style of explanation. In other words, the same types of cause would explain both true and false beliefs. The sociology of knowledge began with the insight that the fact of true belief seemed in need of as much explanation as that of false belief. It may be as curious that someone hit on the truth as that they persisted in error. Once it is accepted that the discipline can be called in to explain why anyone should have held an apparently silly or mistaken belief, it will obviously only be a matter of time before the same technique is applied to true beliefs. Any distinction between truth and falsity is thus challenged, and the fact that a belief is held by someone

seems more important than any evaluation of its truth or falsity. Yet even the willingness to allow a sociological explanation for false belief should perhaps be controversial. It may seem obvious that persons will arrive at the truth unless deflected by external considerations, but this assumes that everyone is perfectly rational, and unable to make mistakes unless causal factors intervene. This view already espouses a form of determinism and seems to leave no room for irrationality. Why should all faulty reasoning and error be explicable in sociological terms? The notion of rationality is not helped by an implicit assumption that only successful reasoning lies outside the domain of causal explanation.

The bracketing together of true and false beliefs for the purposes of the sociology of knowledge is superfluous. The discipline certainly widened its scope with the gradual realization that it could explain why people arrived at the belief in the same way as why they made errors. This progression can, however, only be achieved paradoxically by removing any distinction between truth and falsity. A sociologist who could stand outside a causal system and have some independent criterion of truth would look in and see which beliefs were true, which false, and how each were arrived at. A sociologist in the deterministic world of the sociology of knowledge is subject to the same causal influences as those he is studying. He only has beliefs, themselves completely subject to causal factors, many of which would have their origin in society. His beliefs may reveal something about him and his background, but it seems unlikely that they can tell us much about what is true. He may by some lucky chance be caused to have true beliefs, but we cannot place any reliance on this. He may just as easily be caused to have mistaken beliefs about what constituted truth and falsity. With the assumptions of a deterministic sociology, he ought to treat false belief and true belief in exactly the same way. He can have no reliable method of distinguishing truth from falsity, and this means that Bloor's second and third tenets should be even stricter than they are. The sociology of knowledge requires not merely an impartiality to truth and falsity and searches for the same types of cause for true and false belief. It must abolish the distinction between what is true and what is false. The eagerness to explain belief causally finally removes any possibility of talking of objective truth and falsity. We can examine what men take to be true, but once we see why they take it to be so, there is no way we can reasonably go on to say, 'yes, but are they right or not in believing that?' Any conclusion will merely be our conclusion, heavily influenced by social factors, of which we may be unaware, and itself susceptible to sociological explanation.

Bloor's fourth tenet of the sociology of knowledge is of particular significance since it requires that sociology's patterns of explanation should be applicable to itself. Otherwise, as he points out (p. 5) 'sociology would be a standing refutation of its own theories'. He is honest in this, but the reflexivity involved is somewhat peculiar. At first sight, the admission that sociological explanations are probably only the product of the social *milieu* of those putting them forward undermines their authority. Why should anyone in those circumstances pay any more attention to sociologists than, say, witch doctors? Bloor later confronts what he calls the 'argument from self-refutation', and asks whether the sociologist's admission that his own thoughts are determined means that he has to accept that 'his own claims are false in proportion to the strength of this determination' (p. 13). Putting the problem like this makes it easy for Bloor to point out that the central idea of arguments about self-refutation is 'that causation implies error, deviation or limitation'. Certainly the fact that a belief is caused does not necessarily mean it is false. Indeed, our beliefs about what is in front of us are normally causally related through our perceptual equipment with what is actually there. The problem is not that we cannot be caused to believe what is true but

that there seems no way we can even in principle discover whether our beliefs are true, given the deterministic assumption that all our beliefs are caused. Our decision will itself be the product of a causal chain at each stage, and we can never be sure that our judgement has been causally influenced by the facts, or whether we have been causally predisposed to misjudge them. The social *milieu* of sociologists could encourage them to form true judgements, but it is just as likely to warp their judgement. As Bloor says, the mere fact of its influence does not prove error. We cannot, though, have any grounds for supposing that it may be conducive to truth. Any emphasis on social causation, in fact, merely encourages scepticism about the accessibility of objective truth, and hence about its possibility.

The sociology of knowledge could arise from a setting that ensured that it was able to discern truth, but no one is ever going to be in a position to find out whether it actually does. The ability to discern truth, though, presupposes the very notions of objective truth and falsity that the sociology of knowledge forbids us to have. Bloor's own protestations that causation need not imply falsity seem to rely on some view of objective falsity. Yet once we recognize that there is no way of assessing beliefs rationally and that we can only investigate their causal origins, any reference to truth or falsity must be ruled out. Bloor's argument that causation need not lead to false belief is itself superfluous. He should maintain that this whole idea of 'objective' falsity can be discarded. There is then no possibility of false belief, and the sociology of knowledge is in no danger of saying anything false. The corollary is that there is no way it can say anything true.

Bloor protects the discipline from self-refutation not merely by showing that causation need not imply error. He holds (p. 14) that 'if knowledge does depend on a vantage point outside society and if truth does depend on stepping above the causal nexus of social relations, then we may give them up as lost'. He wishes to redefine truth and, hence, knowledge in a relativistic way, but this threatens the status of the sociology of knowledge. The discipline may be invulnerable to refutation, but then so is every set of beliefs, however outlandish. The more fundamental question is why anyone should take it seriously. Granted that some sociologists choose to see beliefs as socially conditioned; it follows that if they are correct, their own views are also socially conditioned and thus on a par with the beliefs of every other community. There is no reason why their beliefs should command our assent. There is a further snag. Their views may be correct, but this notion of correctness is surely an objective one. It is smuggling in again the very notion of an objective truth abstracted from 'the causal nexus of causal relations' that Bloor is challenging. Without such objectivity their views are their views, and ours ours, and there seems little point in any rational consideration and comparison of each other's position, even if such a thing were possible. Why bother to re-examine one's own beliefs or investigate others' positions, if there is no sense in which we or they could be mistaken anyway?

This conclusion is a serious one for physical science. What are scientists doing, if they are not attempting to discover truth? Perhaps they are merely part of a complex institution with no justification other than that it does happen to exist. Yet this suggests that there is no independent reality whose nature can be discovered. Physical reality is a reflection of scientists' beliefs about it, rather than the other way round. If this is Bloor's position, it means that he is putting forward a brand of idealism. Like most relativists, however, he draws back from the more outrageous conclusions that he ought, if he is to be consistent, to come to. He asks (p. 35) why we should not abandon the notion of truth in science and says: 'It is difficult to see that much would be lost by its absence. There is no

doubt, however, that it is a terminology which comes naturally and is felt to be peculiarly apt'. He points out that it is useful to sort out beliefs and that the labels 'true' and 'false' are as good labels as any, 'although', he says, 'an explicitly pragmatic vocabulary would function just as well'. He suggests that 'truth' has a rhetorical role in recommending a particular claim. We may wonder whether it could still have this role if everyone considered that there were no such thing as objective truth. Claiming truth, then, would obviously provide minimal recommendation, since it would be viewed as the rhetorical device Bloor thinks it is.

Bloor sees that claims to truth take on overtones of transcendence and authority, and then not surprisingly maintains that the authority can only derive from the actions and opinions of men. Nevertheless, he does allow (p. 36) that the notion of truth has what he calls the materialist function, and that often by 'truth' we mean 'how the world stands'. He says: 'All our thinking instinctively assumes that we exist within a common external environment that has a determinate structure.... It is assumed to be the cause of our experience, and the common reference of our discourse'.

This appears as an unambiguous statement of realism, the belief that what exists does so in a manner logically independent of our conceptions of it. Bloor is perhaps being rather quick in his use of the term 'materialism', since that implies that only material objects exist, for which he has produced no argument. He is merely emphasizing 'the existence of an external world-order'. That will certainly include the physical world, but it could include more. Indeed Bloor himself says (p. 36) that 'the world may be peopled with invisible spirits in one culture and hard, indivisible (but equally invisible) atomic particles in another'.

The question remains to what degree Bloor really means what he appears to be saying. Once the notion of an objective world independent of our beliefs about it, and perhaps not corresponding to them, is admitted, it becomes apparent that much that passes for knowledge is not really knowledge, and much that is taken to be true is not true. Reality and men's beliefs about it cannot be identified too closely. This position immediately downgrades the sociology of knowledge to a sociology of belief and makes it apparent that the investigation of the causes of belief is secondary to the more immediate task of finding out how we can gain knowledge of that reality. Epistemology is then vital, and relativism is ruled out as a doctrine about the nature of truth. The mere fact that cultures think about the common external world in differing ways and can people it with either spirits or sub-atomic particles does not entail that their beliefs are true. The existence of the common external world means that either there are spirits or there are not. Different societies may view the world differently, and even have different conceptual systems, but the independent reality of the world ensures that there is something in virtue of which these systems are either correct or mistaken.

Bloor might agree with this. He says: 'There is nothing in the concept of truth that allows for belief making an idea true. Its relation to the basic materialist picture of an independent world precludes this. This schema permanently holds open the gap between the knower and the known' (p. 38). He insists, however, that the acceptance of a theory makes it the knowledge of a group and the basis for their understanding. The separation of knowledge from truth may seem rather curious, but if we replace 'knowledge' with 'belief' his position becomes a mere truism. Groups see the world as they see it, and there may well be social explanations for the fact that they do in one way rather than another. When, however, we go on to ask whether their view of the world is correct, Bloor's determinism dictates that our answer may itself be socially conditioned. Nevertheless, however inaccessible objective truth may be, Bloor apparently allows that the concept is important.

The suspicion still remains, however, that having given a deferential nod to the concept of objective reality, Bloor proceeds to ignore it by insisting that the source of all judgements lies in society, rather than in reality. Theories can never, he believes (p. 34) be matched with reality since 'we never have the independent access to reality that would be necessary', and 'the processes of scientific thought can all proceed, and have to proceed, on the basis of internal principles of assessment'. Reality thus drops out of the picture and, so far from acting as a constraint on the content of our theories, is totally forgotten. Indeed we are told (p. 86) that 'the theoretical component of knowledge is precisely the social component; and Bloor explicitly attacks realism in the field of mathematics. He quotes Frege's definition of objectivity as something over and above the psychological and the material, and gives as an example the mediaeval belief that the whole universe was arranged around the centre of the earth. He points out (p. 87) that the centre of the cosmos was objective in Frege's sense. He continues:

> In another sense it was a theoretical concept, a part of contemporary cosmological theory. In a third sense, it was the received and transmitted world-view.... The conclusion is that the way to give a substantial meaning to Frege's definition of objectivity is to equate it with the social. Institutionalised belief satisfies his definition: this is what objectivity is.

Bloor recognizes that Frege would not like this definition, but his aim is to show that even mathematics is social in character and that its authoritative nature can be explained sociologically. He realizes that he has to explain the apparent uniqueness of mathematics and that, whereas it seems perfectly proper to talk of alternative moralities, the notion of an alternative mathematics seems much more suspect. He says:

> On the present theory the belief that mathematics is unique has exactly the same status as the belief that there is a unique moral truth. But if history demonstrates the variety of moral beliefs, does it not also demonstrate the uniqueness of mathematical truth? [P. 94.]

This quotation is significant not just because of the problem it poses, but because it illustrates the ease with which Bloor switches from beliefs to truth and back again. Why should the variety of moral beliefs by itself prove that there is no unique moral truth, any more than a chance agreement in mathematics would prove the uniqueness of mathematical truth? This tacit identification of what is true with what men agree makes the task of the sociology of knowledge appear more respectable, since its attempt to explain the social origins of agreement is thereby an explanation of the nature of truth. When this anthropocentricity is resisted and it is recognized that men are fallible, moral disagreement does not of itself prove that moral judgements are not true or false, any more than disagreement between scientists shows that there is no such thing as scientific truth. History can certainly demonstrate the variety of beliefs in many spheres, but the rightness or wrongness of the beliefs is a major question that should not be avoided. The mere demonstration of differences in belief does nothing to suggest that the concept of objective truth is inappropriate. Bloor gives examples to show how historical variations in mathematical thought can be traced back to social causes. His conclusion is that 'there is discontinuity and variation within mathematics' (p. 115). Yet this ignores the distinction between mathematics as a body of belief held at a particular time, and mathematics as the timeless subject-matter of mathematical study, comprising truths not necessarily recognized in particular epochs. This shift from what is true to what happens to be believed is merely assumed legitimate and is never explicitly justified. Yet without some argument for it, an investigation into the way Pythagorean thought

differed from our own says nothing about the status of mathematics as a discipline. The ambiguity inherent in the very name 'sociology of knowledge' continues to haunt us. The mere fact of different beliefs is thought to have a bearing on questions concerning the status of mathematical truth.

Bloor is not content with giving sociological explanations of mathematics. He claims that the compelling character of all our reasoning is a form of social compulsion and that even this accounts for the apparent self-evidence of logic. He introduces the concept of negotiation and claims that 'just as men haggle over questions of duty and legality, so they haggle over questions of logical compulsion' (p. 116). Rules of inference are, he claims, embedded in our experience of the physical world, but particular applications have to be negotiated. He says that 'the more formalized the logical principle at issue, the more explicit and conscious is the negotiation' (p. 120). An example given is the syllogism all A is B, C is an A, therefore C is B. His suggestion is that this emerges out of our experiences of things enclosing other things, but he denies that there is an absolute sense in which anyone must accept principles like this. He says: 'If we are compelled in logic, it will be in the same way that we are compelled to accept certain behaviour as right and certain behaviour as wrong. It will be because we take a form of life for granted' (p. 123). He then proceeds to discuss the well-worn example of Azande logic and concludes that the Azande have the same psychology as us but radically different institutions.

Negotiations create meanings, according to Bloor (p. 130), and he holds that 'the boundaries and content of our concepts are no more discovered than are the boundaries of our countries or the content of our institutions'. He maintains that they are created. In one sense, this is perfectly reasonable since concepts are developed and held by people. They do not just float around in mid-air. They do not exist independently of the people who use them, even though they can be shared. We can even accept that different societies may have radically different concepts, because the possibility of alternative conceptual systems should not be ruled out *a priori*. Some would think that even admitting this is to sell out to relativism, but this is not the case. What is needed is a reminder that concepts are always concepts *of* something, and that their purpose is to reflect reality as it is. Some will succeed and others fail in this task, but, however difficult it may be to identify the concepts that adequately represent reality, the mere fact of conceptual divergence need not appal us. Some concepts, and indeed some conceptual systems, will be mistaken. It might be tempting for us to maintain that it is always other persons' concepts that are inadequate, but a moment's reflection will be enough for us to realize that our own conceptual system too must be fallible.

One problem that always arises when the possibility of alternative conceptual systems is entertained is how far they can be understood by outsiders and translated. A thorough-going relativism that removes any objective realm of reality accessible to all systems also apparently removes the possibility of understanding and comparing them. The sociology of knowledge runs the risk of explaining the distinctiveness of conceptual systems so much that it becomes mysterious how any sociologist can ever be in a position to give an account of their different nature. Bloor emphasizes that Azande society is different from ours, but that does not prevent him from saying precisely in which respects this is so. When he says that even logic can vary from society to society, the position looks even more desperate. It is bad enough if we cannot assume that another conceptual system is at least attempting to describe the same objective world we inhabit. When we cannot rely on any similarity of logic, this means all the more that the alien system becomes incomprehensible in principle. Without, for instance, an assumption that the law of noncontradiction applies in the alien

society, how can we be sure that what is being affirmed is not also being denied? That in turn means that we cannot assume that anything is being genuinely affirmed. Some room has to be left for the possibility of illogical systems that are internally incoherent, but the more illogical they are, the more incomprehensible they become.

Bloor is not, in fact, as complete a relativist as he sometimes claims to be. He is happy to admit that 'there is no denying that the strong programme in the sociology of knowledge rests on a form of relativism' (p. 142). Yet he not only accepts the existence of an independent material world, but also insists in a traditional empiricist manner on the similarity of different people's and cultures' perception of it. The public and impersonal character of perception would in fact serve to provide a basis for an understanding of different conceptual systems. He holds that 'cultural variation is plausibly thought of as imposed on a stratum of biologically stable sensory capacities' (p. 26). He thinks that men's perception of the material environment is 'common and constant', but maintains that such perception always takes place against a background of socially conditioned prior belief that produces different responses to the same experience. Bloor himself wonders if it is not ill-advised to incorporate a blatantly empiricist component into the sociology of knowledge, particularly when such a position is philosophically unfashionable. While he may be right not to be too concerned about an empiricist component, he does not examine any of the objections to the possibility of theory-free perceptions. More importantly, he does not consider how far his empiricism changes the character of the sociological relativism he claims to espouse. Understanding alien cultures is certainly made less problematical if societies do not condition how we see the world, but only how we respond to our common perceptions of it. Yet any room for variation between cultures is correspondingly reduced.

Bloor explicitly adopts a form of cognitive relativism, and says (p. 143) that if we can live with moral relativism, we can live with that. He maintains: 'There need be no such thing as truth, other than conjectural, relative truth, any more than there need be absolute moral standards rather than locally accepted ones'. This sounds very bold, and he wishes to apply his view to science, saying that it does not need any ultimate metaphysical sanction to support it or make it possible. It is merely a 'pattern of thought and behaviour, a style of going about things which has its characteristic norms and values'. He helps his case by talking of 'Truth' rather than 'truth', and by dragging in the term 'metaphysical'; as it stands it seems a clear statement of an extreme, but currently fashionable view. Yet how does all this square with his naïve empiricist view of perception? His rejection of 'Truth' seems, too, to be at odds with his insistence on the existence of an external material world. One feels that Bloor is trying to get the best of each position, however incoherent the result may be.

He tries to explain his position as follows: 'to believe in a material world does not justify the conclusion that there is any final or privileged state of adaptation to it which constitutes absolute knowledge or truth' (p. 143). There is, of course, a problem whether the belief in an independently existing objective world entails that there is ultimately only one conceptual system that will describe its nature adequately. Some realists would be happy to talk of the possibility of equivalent and equally valid descriptions of the same world. Nevertheless once the independent reality of an external world is conceded, it seems reasonable to concede that it has some nature and that the task of science is to portray this as best it can. Bloor shifts from a concern about whether any conceptual system can be uniquely correct to a conclusion that there is no goal. 'We have', he says, 'reached the present position in the progress and evolution of our knowledge . . .

with no beacon to guide us, nor any goal'. He rather curiously says that 'as Kuhn has argued with great clarity, scientific progress—which is real enough—is like Darwinian evolution'. Whatever might be said of Kuhn's view of scientific progress, clarity does not appear one of its virtues. Indeed, both Bloor and Kuhn want to have the impossible. They want to keep to a notion of scientific progress, while ditching the very concept of objective truth that alone warrants talk of progress, rather than merely the noting of a temporal succession of different theories.

Bloor's separation of truth and the material world is highly idiosyncratic. As long as he wishes to retain the notion of a material world, its function must surely be as the referent of true scientific theories. It is a truism that we have no independent access to such a world in order to compare it with our theories, but that is just another way of saying that we need a conceptual scheme in order to discriminate between the various sections of the world. Without any idea of an objective world we are left with a variety of conceptual schemes and no reason for altering any of them. Bloor may think that science can survive without a goal, but it is unutterably mysterious why scientists should keep at work testing and reviewing their theories unless they think that there is a prospect of uncovering error and gaining further knowledge. His calm assertion that science has survived so far without a beacon to guide it begs the question. No doubt, as a matter of fact, many scientists go on doing what they are doing, drawing their research grant perhaps, without asking why they are doing it. If, though, it is merely a currently acceptable social practice, the more thoughtful are bound to begin querying why they should continue it, and why they should be concerned when recalcitrant data appear inexplicable under their present theories. An explicit acceptance by scientists of Bloor's view of their activities would change the nature of their activity and make many think that the whole enterprise was pointless. The pursuit of truth, or at least the desire to understand the material world, has in the past been the prime motivating force in scientists' continual revision of their theories. The practice of science has to become a very different kind of social institution, if that is to be ruled out.

Bloor's view of the material world does not, in fact, seem to play any vital role in his theory. Perhaps he thinks that denying its reality and adhering to an explicit form of idealism would make his approach totally unacceptable. Nevertheless, we should not underestimate the strength of the 'strong' programme. Bloor tries, for instance, to uncover the general social origins of Popperian and Kuhnian accounts of science, and holds that 'theories of knowledge are reflections of social ideologies' (p. 65). He holds that without a 'scientific approach' to the nature of knowledge, epistemology becomes implicit propaganda. Philosophy for him deals merely with the 'affirmation of the values and perspectives of some social group' (p. 71). The sociology of knowledge thus not only challenges the status of our knowledge, but also our epistemological reflections themselves.

In its 'strong' version, the sociology of knowledge is an imperialist discipline, since it wants to take over from epistemology, undermine the value of philosophy and even explain the practice of science. Yet when it does none of this in the name of truth, it is difficult to see why anyone should take any notice of it at all. The stronger the programme advocated, the more reflexive it is bound to become, and the more the outpourings of sociologists of knowledge can be seen as merely the expression of the values and perspectives of some group. They may be interesting, but the question why anyone else should choose to adopt them remains unanswerable except insofar as their social background in turn prompts them. We all then act as we do and have the beliefs we do without there

being any reason why we should perform those actions or have those beliefs rather than others. There is, in fact, a debilitating and even paralyzing nihilism lurking beneath the surface in the strong programme.

Whatever the nature of the sociology of knowledge and whatever its baleful consequences, it is doubtful how far Bloor himself really wishes to practice it. There is not just his lingering attachment to the material world or his empiricist view of perception. He also allows in the very first tenet of the sociology of knowledge that 'other types of causes, apart from social ones will co-operate in bringing about belief' (p. 5). This may seem innocuous, even obvious, and is consistent with a determinist view, but it raises basic issues about the scope of sociology. If beliefs can be produced by a process of causation lying in the province of physiology or psychology rather than of sociology, then we must turn to those disciplines, rather than to sociology for an explanation of at least some of the origins of belief. The more it is admitted that the sociology of knowledge cannot tell us the whole story, the less important the subject appears and the less 'strong' its programme can be. The strongest version of all would no doubt hold that everything is to be ultimately explained in sociological terms, and that the utterances of physiologists and psychologists are mere expressions of the perspectives of a social group. It is not clear that Bloor goes quite this far. He is not above lapsing (p. 39) into talking of the requirement that scientific theories make *successful* predictions. He admittedly stresses that this is a conventional requirement, but even so, the very notion of success seems to depend on some view of objective truth. A prediction fails because of the way the world behaves and not just because of some scientist's judgement.

Bloor seems to regard the sociology of knowledge as just one among several sciences, with the same foundations and assumptions as the others. His final sentence expresses the view that the sociology of knowledge 'stands or falls with the other sciences' (p. 144), although it is apparent that this is only because science forms part of our culture. The ambiguities of the book are thus never resolved. The sociology of knowledge appears to explain the origins of our scientific beliefs, and yet it is as much an expression of our culture as those beliefs. Objective truth is jettisoned and yet objective reality is retained. Relativism is extolled and yet an old-fashioned empiricist view of perception is proclaimed. One could go on, but it it is only fair to point out that this is all not so much symptomatic of a weakness in Bloor's portrayal of the 'strong programme' in the sociology of knowledge, as a sign of the internal incoherence of the programme. A consistent and radical relativism in the cognitive sphere is impossible to enunciate. Language itself presupposes the existence of an objective world to which all have access. The consistent cognitive relativist must acknowledge his inability to use language to communicate. Solipsism beckons him. Anyone who wants to get the supposed advantages of relativism while avoiding its more extreme consequences is bound in the end to find himself putting forward an inconsistent position.

This is a challenging book, the arguments of which should be squarely faced. They are presented in a form that appears ephemeral, since this is a so-called 'direct edition', looking like photocopied typescript rather than a 'real book'. It would be a pity if that deterred anyone from giving Bloor's arguments the attention they deserve. The 'strong programme' of the sociology of knowledge attacks the basic assumptions of our thought and language.