

## Abstract

Larsson, Jonas, *Finitism and Symmetry: An Inquiry into the Basic Notions of the Strong Programme*, Ph.D. Dissertation in English, Department of History of Ideas and Theory of Science, Göteborg University, 2003. ISBN 91-628-5784-3.

At the heart of the strong programme, there is a conviction that scientific knowledge cannot be adequately understood without due attention to knowledge-in-use and, in consequence, without due curiosity relating to the goals and interests that inform its use. The present study investigates the central ideas associated with the strong programme's view of scientific knowledge, namely the thesis of finitism and the requirement of symmetry. While the thesis of finitism draws attention to the conventional aspects of knowledge-in-use, the requirement of symmetry invites sociologists to search for the social factors – e.g. the goals and interests – that contribute to explaining all knowledge claims, including knowledge within logic, mathematics and the sciences. These are my most important conclusions:

Although the strong programme is successful in explaining the actions and beliefs of individuals and social groups by reference to the goals and interests that they pursue and the prior beliefs to which they subscribe, it is, arguably, perfectly possible to construe precisely the conflict between the rational and the social on the basis of these explanatory resources. Thus, the most problematic case for a strong programme in the sociology of knowledge is to be found within the explanatory resources that pertain to the strong programme itself.

This observation led me to investigate the consequences of meaning determinism and meaning finitism for explanations that involve goals, interests and prior beliefs. Throughout the analysis, I consider examples where agents pursue various goals and interests and embrace various prior beliefs about the world. Given these goals, interests and prior beliefs, the question is whether such agents may ratiocinate and thereby ascertain what further beliefs and courses of action they are thereby committed to. Rational explanations, arguably, presuppose that the agents undertake actions or embrace beliefs that are rational in the light of their goals and prior beliefs. I shall argue that rational explanations are open exclusively to the advocates of meaning determinism. Finitism is, in effect, lethal to rational explanations and their asymmetries. However, I claim that actual examples of interest explanations may be properly considered as rational explanations. That is to say, in the case studies considered it seems fair to say that the strong programme, wittingly or unwittingly, limits sociologists to the study of how goals and interests enable precisely the kind of rational actions, judgments, beliefs and inferences that the thesis of finitism, ultimately, calls into question. Thus the original conflict between the strong programme and its rationalist counterpart is inherent in the strong programme's focus, however legitimate, on knowledge-in-use, goals and interests.

**Keywords:** strong programme, sociology of scientific knowledge, finitism, determinism, symmetry, asymmetry, rational explanation, social explanation, goals, interests.