

***Are Consensus and Pluralism Compatible? A Reply to Steve Fuller***  
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**Introduction**

I start with Steve Fuller's remark about difficulties in the understanding the procedure of obtaining knowledge:

*How should the pursuit of knowledge be organized, given that under normal circumstances knowledge is pursued by many human beings, each working on a more or less well-defined body of knowledge and each equipped with roughly the same imperfect cognitive capacities, albeit with varying degree of access to one another's activities? (1988, 3, original emphasis)*

As it seems to me, the main idea of this question is that the transition from the empirical reality with a huge variety of things, people and forms of their activity to the theoretical constructions of scientists and philosophers is hard. One cannot but agree with the fact that this transition really is not easy.

Everything exists in the empirical reality and any theoretical design can find confirmation for itself. But in order to understand reality scientists, philosophers, and sociologists cannot be limited to a mere description of it. Even in the everyday life the activity of a man is based on a certain body of knowledge, necessary for him at a particular place and that time.

**Positivist Ideals**

In order to study the surrounding world, the philosopher creates an ideal of it. In logical positivism this ideal was a single language, a uniform science, identical to this world. And Fuller is right, again, when he says that there was a consensus among the representatives of this trend of philosophy at this point. Then, however, my disagreement with Fuller begins. My point is that you cannot consider yourself a supporter of logical positivism and its ideal of science, if you do not make a clear boundary between the discussions in the course of the formation of logical system and the end result of these discussions, in the form of a consensus on the universalist project of science. Fuller agrees with positivistic ideal of "a single science", but he considers it necessary to emphasize (as it is done, he notes, by the positivists themselves), "that any ideals of unified science would need to be socially constructed" (2013, 25).

Positivists have seen and never denied that their ideal of science is created by people, first of all by themselves, which is beyond doubt. But for them is very important that this fact remains outside their logical system. Logic must be free from all social features, connected with the activity on its creation. In this respect, logical positivism was the most consistent expression of the logic of scientific thinking of the modern time (classical science), which was based on the understanding of the world of nature as existing

independently of the person and any of his activities. Therefore, the knowledge of this world, to be true, should be as much as possible free from everything connected with the man. That science is made by the people is an empirical fact understandable by any sane person. The logical positivists considered as possible and necessary to ignore it in their theoretical constructions. Therefore it is inadmissible, from a positivist point of view, to attach to the fact of social construction of ideal objects the same importance as to the need of their conformity to the world of nature, which is embodied in their philosophy in the laws of language.

### **Characterizing Social Epistemology**

If we want to characterize social epistemology specifically, it is not enough to admit the social character of the production of scientific knowledge. Much more important is the place in the process of its construction, where it is put. In the scientific thinking of the modern time any social activity, including scientific activity, was the same thing as any other that subjects the surrounding world to study. Robert Merton, for example, studied the social system of science in the framework of which scientists worked. But this system did not influence the content and logic of scientific knowledge. State policy does not have such influence. It can only, by way of financing for instance, accelerate or change the direction of the development of those or other branches of science, but no more than that.

In social epistemology, on the contrary, scientific knowledge is not only, or rather, not so much knowledge of the world, as of the activity in obtaining it and about the author of this activity. Eminent physicists of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (e.g., Heisenberg, Born, Einstein, Bohr) wrote about this peculiarity of scientific thinking after the scientific revolution. Knowledge is perceived as a work of art. Science is moving closer to art, where the role of the author always was much more significant. The specificity of social epistemology is not in the fact that its representatives conceive a scientist as a social being, but in the fact that scientific knowledge can only be understood, to their mind, as containing the procedure of its creation. The border between the conditions of knowledge production (context) and the received result is moving to the framework of logical system. This theme was developed in detail by Niklas Luhmann.

Thomas Kuhn understood that if the nature of scientific knowledge is determined by a social, cultural context of its production and is not derived from the previous knowledge, then a problem arises of communication between scientific theories-paradigms, as each of them has its own basis, other than the grounds of any other theory. Logical incommensurability, as a result of pluralism in science, becomes a serious obstacle on the way of science studies. Philosophers tried usually to overcome this difficulty in one of two ways.

In the first case the inevitability of inclusion of some social features of the context in scientific knowledge is not denied completely. At the same time, however, the danger of relativism (many contexts, many truths) forced researchers to seek a protection in the return to classical logic with its orientation to one science, one logic, one truth.

In the second case it was recognized the need to find new ways to establish a logical connection between the theories, to create a new logic, which would take into consideration not common for all results elements; but, on the contrary, that which makes them different from one another. As a result the possibility of a dialogue, intersubjective communication among authors of various scientific achievements appears. You see, if we have one science, one truth, one author of the only one true knowledge, any discussion is impossible. It is necessary that there would be at least two persons for any communication could take place. Pluralism in this case does not prevent the achievement of consensus, but it provides it in another way, namely, through the logic of communication, not generalization. My point is that the second way is the only promising one. And in the second half of the last century pluralism in science ceased to be an obstacle for science studies.

Many philosophers come to this conclusion, including those who in the past adhered to the principles of logical positivism. Among them Wittgenstein should be mentioned first of all. Quine, Apel and a number of others representatives of analytic philosophy investigated great difficulties when trying to save the theses of logical positivism in their invariable form. In result the notion postanalytical philosophy was introduced into practice. Philosophers of other philosophical trends also were seeking ways to establish relations between different kinds of knowledge not as a generalization, but as a communication. It is in this direction that the philosophy of science develops inevitably in the case, if the inclusion of social aspects into the results obtained by scientists is recognized as necessary. Habermas, Rorty, Ricoeur, Deleuze, Luhmann and a number of others made much, each of them in his own way, for the understanding the role of social relationships in the structure of knowledge. Russian philosophers faced the same problems. Vladimir Bibler is the author of the philosophy of dialogue. V.S. Stepin began in our country the discussion, continuing up to present time, about the social components of scientific knowledge. Ilya Kasavin made much for the study of such concepts as context, case studies, discourse, and on their basis the notion of social epistemology. In my papers and books I investigated the social problems of philosophy and history of science. Many other Russian philosophers are engaged in the study of these problems.

### **On Fuller's Position**

If I have understood Fuller correctly, he is inclined to the first way of the social epistemology formation. He considers the consensus as to be necessary on the question of single science after the pattern of logical positivism, and pluralism in this case is inadmissible. But at the same time, he wishes to state clearly the social character of the process of knowledge obtaining. I am sure that for logical positivism for the construction of its logical system it does not matter in what way the knowledge was received. The positivists point of view is that everything connected with the activity of a scientist remains outside the logic of theory. Only in this case it is possible to speak about science as a single whole. In social epistemology, on the contrary, the knowledge contains in itself the way of its getting, and only when we take that into account, the relation between

different theories can be understood in the frame of some logic, different from the classical one.

Fuller explains his commitment to the spirit of universalism, pursued by the logical positivists, with the wish for facilitating the understanding several social-epistemological problems at once. I cannot agree, however, with the formulation of these problems as belonging to social epistemology. It is hardly in place to use political terminology, to speak about democratism or anti-democratism of experts, when we analyze their work, at least without any attempt to show any internal logical connection (if it exists) of their activity with scientific knowledge. Such approach doesn't facilitate the analysis of science from the social epistemology position. Then, it is useless, to my mind, to recover the self-transcending character of the scientific project. In social epistemology scientific knowledge, on the contrary, is emerging out of context, and not from the previous knowledge (of course there are many points which need to be explained and studied in this case).

The third problem in Fuller's formulation again returns us in the classics of modern time. He appears to suggest the placing autonomous individual back in the epistemic frame, where his freedom would be restricted by a number of possible "decisions". This problem is much more the problem of Kuhn's normal science, and the solution that Fuller offers does not contribute to the transition from classical science to social epistemology. Finally, the positive role of positivistic universalism to his point is that it "subverts what might be called 'horizontal scientism', which results when a scientific theory that is successful in one domain expands to colonize domains that are not equipped politically and/or epistemologically to resist it" (2013, 26). I would like to remind that in the process of social epistemology formation such problem as the problem of scientific knowledge truth and some others connected with it are becoming common both for the philosophy and sociology of science. The investigations in this direction have yielded good results for both disciplines. This is a new type of interdisciplinarity peculiar to social epistemology. It is not compatible both with the spirit of universalism of logical positivism and sociological understanding of society influence on science as external.

## **Conclusion**

There is a noticeable trend in social epistemology to study not so much the vertical development of science from the past to now, but conditions of the emergence of new knowledge. The context of creative scientific activity is not in the past. Space plays much more important role than time. That is why, in my opinion, in current evolutionary theories it is more important not simply the decrease of the time of living species existence (Fuller's point of view), but ideally reducing it to zero.

My objections to Fuller may be out thusly: Fuller, with difficulty, gives up the notion that some crucial ideas of classical thinking continue to be central in the social epistemology. As a result, his own position is not logically consistent.

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Markova, Lyudmila. 2013. "Are Consensus and Pluralism Compatible? A Reply to Steve Fuller." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 2 (7): 35-39.  
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