

***Fuller’s Categorical Imperative: The Will to Proaction***  
**J. Britt Holbrook, Georgia Institute of Technology**

“I love those who do not know how to live, except by going under, for they are those who cross over.” — Nietzsche

**Abstract**

Two 19th century philosophers — William James and Friedrich Nietzsche — and one on the border of the 18th and 19th centuries — Immanuel Kant — underlie Fuller’s support for the proactionary imperative as a guide to life in ‘Humanity 2.0’. I make reference to the thought of these thinkers (James’s will to believe, Nietzsche’s will to power, and Kant’s categorical imperative) in my critique of Fuller’s will to proaction. First, I argue that, despite a superficial resemblance, James’s view about the risk of uncertainty does not map well onto the proactionary principle. Second, however, I argue that James’s notion that our epistemological preferences reveal something about our ‘passional nature’ connects with Nietzsche’s idea of the will to power in a way that allows us to diagnose Fuller’s ‘moral entrepreneur’ as revelatory of Fuller’s own ‘categorical imperative’. But my larger critique rests on the connection between Fuller’s thinking and that of Wilhelm von Humboldt. I argue that Fuller accepts not only Humboldt’s ideas about the integration of research and education, but also — and this is the main weakness of Fuller’s position — Humboldt’s lesser recognized thesis about the relation between knowledge and society. Humboldt defends the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake on the grounds that this is necessary to benefit society. I criticize this view and argue that Fuller’s account of the public intellectual as an agent of distributive justice is inadequate to escape the critique of the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake.

Keywords: Humanity 2.0; Fuller; James; Humboldt; Nietzsche

**1. The Will to Believe**

In *Preparing for Life in Humanity 2.0* Steve Fuller introduces a heroic figure in whom we are asked to believe: the moral entrepreneur. Fuller’s moral entrepreneur is a master of the “fine art of recycling evil into good” (2012b, p. 63). A moral entrepreneur is one who takes a crisis (often one of her own making, according to Fuller) and converts it into an opportunity for learning something new. For the moral entrepreneur, the world is ‘reversible’ — losers can become winners, evil can become good. The moral entrepreneur thus embodies — though not in the same way as Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, for whom ‘I am my body’ — the spirit of the [proactionary principle](#).

The essence of the proactionary principle seems to be one's attitude toward risk. Regarding the proactionary attitude toward risk, Fuller appeals to James' argument against Clifford presented in *The Will to Believe*. As a proactionary, Fuller is an advocate of what he takes to be the Jamesian attitude toward epistemic risk:

For the Jamesian voluntary believer, epistemology is about leveraging what we know now into a future we would like to see. For the Cliffordian ethical believer, epistemology is about shoring up what we know so that it remains secure as we move into an uncertain future. The former seeks risks and hence errs on the side of overestimating our knowledge, while the latter avoids risk and hence errs on the side of underestimating our knowledge. (2012a, 10)

According to Fuller, the proactionary exhibits this Jamesian attitude, while the precautionary exhibits the Cliffordian attitude. Put slightly differently, the proactionary would be more prone to so-called type-1 errors (false positives), whereas the precautionary would be more prone to so-called type-2 errors (false negatives). As James marked the contrast between himself and Clifford, there are two fundamentally different ethics of belief at work: *believe truth!* and *shun error!* But James himself is not content with this simple opposition. Despite his refusal to allow Clifford's ethic of belief to decide the question religious belief for him, James, too, would like to avoid error.

For this reason, James distinguishes circumstances under which we may — “lawfully,” as he puts it — allow our passional natures — our wills — to decide the question. The option between believing two hypotheses must be a “genuine” option, which is to say that it must meet three criteria:

1. Both hypotheses must be “live” options.
2. The choice between the two hypotheses must be forced.
3. The choice between the two hypotheses must be momentous.

In addition, James insists that the option must be such that we cannot decide on purely intellectual grounds.

Although Fuller goes some distance in *Preparing for Life in Humanity 2.0* toward arguing that our choices about the future of humanity are becoming increasingly momentous, it is unclear whether he is concerned with whether any of the options he presents are actually live options for his readers; nor are they clearly forced options. Instead, it seems that Fuller is content to assert a certain similarity of style with James when it comes to modality. But where James says we are, under certain circumstances, justified in asserting our will to believe, Fuller asserts, “*I believe that we increasingly come to turn into reality whatever we conceive*” (2012a, 6 — emphasis in original). There is, then, a real difference in the scope of these claims.

Another difference arises when we consider Fuller's discussion of the relationship between epistemic and moral values (2012a). For Fuller, epistemology and morality both pursue the same value — the betterment of humanity; the difference between the two

ought to be regarded in terms of time. Fuller holds that epistemology is a long game, played according to the rule that knowledge sought for its own sake will ultimately benefit humanity. This leads Fuller down the road of taking seriously the claim that the ends justify the means. James (2009 [1896]) might be read as suggesting something quite similar:

It matters not to an empiricist from what quarter an hypothesis may come to him: he may have acquired it by fair means or by foul; passion may have whispered or accident suggested it; but if the total drift of thinking continues to confirm it, that is what he means by its being true. (§25)

However, James is not speaking of the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Nor is he suggesting that the ends justify the means, despite the fact that James insists, “Not where it comes from, but what it leads to is to decide [whether an hypothesis is true]” (*Ibid.*) Read in context, James is contrasting his own ethic of belief — fallibilism, or what he calls “empiricism” — with the dogmatism of the “absolutists” who reason from unquestioned first principles. When Fuller suggests that the only difference between moral and epistemic values is that the latter operate on a longer time horizon, the real similarity in belief is with Wilhelm von Humboldt (more on this later). James, on the other hand, is actually closer to Kant’s notion of the primacy of the practical.

## 2. The Will to Power

Speaking of Kant, I think it also makes sense to think of *Preparing for Life in Humanity 2.0* as something like Fuller’s version of Kant’s *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Just as Kant there introduces his categorical imperative, Fuller here offers his own. In its ethical (*ÜberPopperian*) formulation, Fuller (2013) proposes:

We should aim to increase the world’s reversibility so as to maximise the ‘openness’ of the open society (79).

In characterizing this formulation of Fuller’s categorical — or proactionary — imperative as *ÜberPopperian*, I am following Fuller’s own characterization of this view as going beyond Popper’s claim that reversibility is a precondition of the open society.

It is not by chance that I titled this section ‘The Will to Power’ — though it may seem odd, given all this talk of categorical imperatives. In the preface to *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche describes himself as having discovered *his own* categorical imperative (to question the value of morality). This self-description must be read in the context of Nietzsche’s view of philosophy and his psychology of philosophers. Although these views are expressed across his works (as Nietzsche claims in *Ecce Homo*, he has left witnesses), one of the clearest expressions of Nietzsche’s view of philosophy and philosophers is to be found in *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*. Nietzsche discusses the case of Thales, whose claim “All is water” is obviously false. What, Nietzsche asks, is the value of Thales? If what he claims is so clearly false, why not simply conclude that Thales was all wet (Holbrook, 2004)?

Nietzsche's answer — in defense of Thales and the other Pre-Platonic philosophers — is that Thales was the first to make the godlike move of declaring that 'all is one'. Philosophers since Thales have followed suit. Nietzsche himself claimed that the world is will to power — and nothing else! By showing that such a move was possible, by being an example for others to follow, Thales justified himself. To dismiss him because 'all is water' is false is to betray a lack of sensitivity to the aesthetic (and perhaps moral) value of Thales.

The will to power is not essentially a metaphysical claim. It is, rather, a means of diagnosing what Nietzsche calls the 'order of rank' of a philosopher's drives or instincts. A philosophy ought not, for Nietzsche (and this is in keeping with his reading of Thales) to be read in terms of whether it is true or false; nor should a philosopher be judged by whether he or she is uttering true propositions. Instead, we should read a philosopher's work as evidence of the order of rank — the will to power — of the philosopher's instincts. It is worth noting that James's view of our passionate nature determining our beliefs is along the same lines as Nietzsche's view. If we were to read Fuller in this way, what would his proactionary imperative reveal about the order of rank of his instincts?

### 3. The Will to Proaction

Fuller offers three examples of people whom he considers moral entrepreneurs: Robert McNamara, George Soros, and Jeffrey Sachs. But I wonder whether there isn't a better example: Fuller himself. He writes:

In my popular book, *The Intellectual*, I defended a person who is more concerned with the whole truth than only the truth (Fuller [2005](#)). The intellectual would prefer to utter falsehoods that are subsequently eliminated, attenuated or mitigated than utter truths that turn out to prevent the pursuit of further truths, either by declaring an end to a line of inquiry or threatening that a heterodox line of inquiry would render the inquirer pathological. In short, overstatement invites participation from others—however negative the consequences for the utterer herself—whereas understatement carries what Paul Grice used to call the "implicature" that individuals should worry most of all about their own personal epistemic status. (My recent interest in proactionary vs. precautionary attitudes towards risk ... is arguably an outgrowth of this awareness.) (Fuller 2012a, 4)

In presenting the moral entrepreneur, Fuller is embodying the spirit of his own ideal. He is, as he says, a 'realizationist' — in conceiving the moral entrepreneur, Fuller seems to aim to [bring such a character to life](#). Or does he? Is he serving here in the role of the Intellectual, for whom 'overstatement invites participation by others' (Holbrook and Briggie, 2013)? Or should we take him seriously, 'whatever the cost' to Fuller himself? Must Fuller, the Intellectual, sacrifice himself in order to realize the moral entrepreneur?

I argue elsewhere (Holbrook, 2004) that Nietzsche's position is both self-affirming and self-undermining. It is tempting to see something similar going on with Fuller. He

certainly risks uttering falsehoods and defending positions that are ripe for attenuation, mitigation, or elimination. I mention only two: 1) the already mentioned claim that the end justifies the means in the pursuit of knowledge (I did not mention before that Fuller cites Nazi scientists as worth taking seriously in some respects); and 2) Fuller's notorious defense of intelligent design. I think it is not risky to say that Fuller practices what he preaches. But neither of these claims is the object of my critique.

Instead, I want to challenge the idea that the autonomous pursuit of knowledge for its own sake will result in benefits to humanity. This may seem an odd target, since it is perhaps one of the most widely accepted claims Fuller makes (even if he speaks of 'marketing' ideas so that people will choose them 'freely'). That an activity pursued for its own sake is of more value than an activity pursued for the sake of something else (that intrinsic value is higher than instrumental value) is well articulated by Aristotle in his *Nichomachean Ethics*. The view also has various expressions throughout history, including the discussion of the pure science ideal in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Hounshell, 1980). The same idea underlies controversy surrounding the use of broader societal impacts criteria in the peer review of grant proposals (Holbrook, 2012a). Indeed, this idea is arguably the foundation of most 20<sup>th</sup> Century science policy. Godin (2006) and Holbrook (2010, 2012b) link Wilhelm von Humboldt's argument that societal benefits will result from the autonomous pursuit of research for its own sake with Vannevar Bush's (1945) justification for public support for basic research.

Fuller also defends the idea that research for its own sake is justified on the grounds of benefits to humanity, linking to Wilhelm von Humboldt. Humboldt's 'On the spirit and organizational framework of intellectual institutions in Berlin' (1970 [1809/10]) puts the point this way: "The state must always remain conscious of the fact that it never has and in principle never can, by its own action, bring about the fruitfulness of intellectual activity. It must indeed be aware that it can only have a prejudicial influence if it intervenes. The state must understand that intellectual work will go on infinitely better if it does not intrude" (Humboldt, 1970, 244). This intellectual work will also benefit the state: "[The state] should instead [of interfering] adhere to a deep conviction that if the universities attain their highest ends, they will also realise the state's ends too, and these on a far higher plane" (Humboldt, 1970, 246). Although Humboldt is most often identified with the idea of the integration of research and education, the idea that ensuring the autonomy of researchers to pursue whatever research they desire — justified purely intrinsically — will *eventually* result in societal benefit is just as truly Humboldtian.

Of course, this Humboldtian idea is echoed in Fuller's claim that the values pursued by ethics and epistemology are the same, but the timeline for the latter is longer. A more interesting connection, perhaps, is in terms of what counts as the efficient pursuit of knowledge. Humboldt's justification of autonomy quoted above explicitly appeals to efficiency. Fuller (2012a) connects this idea of efficiency to his idea of 'deviant interdisciplinarity':

In contrast [to normal interdisciplinarity], deviant interdisciplinarity is more concerned with finding more efficient means of reaching comparable or superior epistemic ends that would allow, at the limit, anyone to know

everything. The foundational character of philosophy in the modern Humboldtian university derives from this latter image, an image most imaginatively developed by the German idealists following Kant.

Fuller's rhetoric of the transcendence of limits, of becoming gods, of knowing everything, of opening up new lines of enquiry and reversing closed lines, of taking epistemic risks, including the risk of being wrong — all of this is essentially an extension of the idea of the modern Humboldtian university.

So, what's the problem? There are two main problems, one theoretical and another practical. The practical problem is that society (whether the state or its citizens) no longer buy the idea that the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake will benefit society — it is simply no longer a live option. Demands for demonstrable results, the impact agenda, calls for diploma mills, and so forth are merely symptoms of this incredulity. Although philosophers may value the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake over the pursuit of knowledge for the sake of some practical end, it is fairly clear at this point that society reverses that valuation.<sup>1</sup>

The theoretical problem is perhaps even worse. To claim that supporting the unfettered pursuit of research for its own sake is justified on the grounds that this will result in benefits to society (eventually and on a higher plane) is to justify the intrinsic value of research on instrumental grounds. Either the endless pursuit of knowledge is intrinsically valuable, or it is valuable for the sake of something else. If it is intrinsically valuable, then any appeal to a utilitarian calculus or a cost-benefit analysis — any appeal to the consequences of the pursuit of knowledge — seems like a category mistake. If, on the other hand, the pursuit of knowledge can only be justified instrumentally, then talk of the intrinsic value of knowledge is pointless. So the question presents itself: Why should we pursue more knowledge?

I am not sure we have a very good answer to this question. I do think we can answer why we *do* pursue more knowledge, however — institutional inertia. Even if the idea that anyone can know everything sounds farfetched, the idea that everyone needs to go to college (in order, of course, to get a good job, not to pursue knowledge for its own sake) is widely accepted today. And, of course, faculty must publish or perish. As we continue to reconfigure the university to meet the demands of students and job providers — our main user groups of what has become our separate teaching function (academic peers are the main users of our research) — I wonder whether we (all of us, including academics) are thinking in the best ways. I myself see much more effort directed toward managing universities — both teaching and research, though separately — than toward designing them with well-conceived goals in mind. I am far from convinced that the endless pursuit of knowledge for its own sake — especially if that activity is also justified on instrumental grounds — is a well-conceived goal.

---

<sup>1</sup> The European Research Council may be an interesting counter example. This deserves more study.

Thinking of distributive justice as applying to ideas in addition to people (Fuller, 2006) is a live option for academics motivated by the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. I can even see how a charismatic teacher might get some students, who showed up at the university just because that's what one needs to do to get a job, excited about the idea. But I don't see the long term appeal to a broader audience; nor do I see how this idea can be saved, short of sacrificing many institutions now called universities in order to preserve a very few. But this, I fear, is just the sort of calculation that may sound appealing to Fuller. But there's always hope that a champion of distributive justice concerning ideas is up for an attack on his own convictions.

**Contact details:** [britt.holbrook@pubpolicy.gatech.edu](mailto:britt.holbrook@pubpolicy.gatech.edu)

## References

- Bush, Vannevar. *Science — The endless frontier* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1945). Available online at: [www.nsf.gov/about/history/vbush1945.htm](http://www.nsf.gov/about/history/vbush1945.htm). Last accessed 19 February 2013.
- Fuller, Steve, 2012a. "Social epistemology: A quarter-century itinerary." *Social Epistemology* 26 (3-4): 267-283.
- Fuller, Steve, 2012b. *Preparing for life in humanity 2.0*. Palgrave Pivot.
- Fuller, Steve, 2006. "The public intellectual as agent of justice: In search of a regime." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 39 (2): 147-156.
- Godin, Benoît, 2006. "The linear model of innovation: The historical construction of an analytical framework." *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 31 (6): 639-667.
- Holbrook, J. Britt 2004. "Selfing Nietzsche." PhD dissertation.
- Holbrook, J. Britt, 2010. "Peer review." In *The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity* edited by Robert Frodeman, Julie Thompson Klein, Carl Mitcham, 321-332. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Holbrook, J. Britt 2012a. "[Re-assessing the science — society relation: The case of the US National Science Foundation's broader impacts merit review criterion \(1997 — 2011\)](#)." In *Peer Review, Research Integrity, and the Governance of Science — Practice, Theory, and Current Discussions* edited by Robert Frodeman, J. Britt Holbrook, Carl Mitcham, and Hong Xiaonan, 328-362. Beijing: People's Publishing House:
- Holbrook, J. Britt 2012b. "Designing research evaluation: A view from the perspective of a large, multidisciplinary university in the United States of America." *Rassegna Italiana di Valutazione* 52. DOI: 10.3280/RIV2012-052004.
- Holbrook, J. Britt and Adam Briggie. 2013. "Knowing and acting: The precautionary and proactionary principles in relation to policy making." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 2 (5): 15-37. <http://wp.me/p1Bfg0-KQ>.
- Hounshell, David A. 1980. "Edison and the pure science ideal in 19th-century America." *Science*, 207 (4431): 612-617.
- Humboldt, Wilhelm von. 1970. "On the spirit and the organizational framework of intellectual institutions in Berlin." *Minerva* 8: 242-250.
- James, William. 2009 [1896]. "The Will to Believe." In *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. Project Gutenberg edition. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/26659/26659-h/26659-h.htm>.