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On a Study of Steve Fuller

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Francis Remedios and Val Dusek have written a thorough and exhaustive account of Steve Fuller's work, ranging (mostly) from 2003 to 2017. Fuller's earlier work was addressed in Remedios' previous book, *Legitimizing Scientific Knowledge* (2003) – to which this one is the logical continuation. Back then Remedios introduced the reader to Fuller's inaugurated field of research, “social epistemology”, encompassing the philosopher's work from the late 1980's until the turn of the century.

Given that Steve Fuller is one of the most prolific authors alive, having published (so far) 30 books and hundreds of articles, Remedios & Dusek's book (as Remedios' previous book), fill a practical need: It is hard to keep up with Fuller's elevated rate of production. Indeed, both the seasoned reader and the neophyte to Fuller's fairly overwhelming amount of writing, will need a panoramic and organic view of his breathtaking scope of research. Remedios & Dusek successfully accomplish the task of providing it.

The Bildung of a Person and His Concepts

Remedios & Dusek's book starts with a Foreword by Fuller himself, followed by an Introduction (Ch. 1) by the authors. The bulk of the monograph is comprised by several chapters addressing Fuller's ideas on Science and Technology Studies (Ch. 2), Social Epistemology (Ch. 3), the University & Interdisciplinarity (Ch. 4), Intelligent Design (Ch. 5), Cosmism & Gnosticism (Ch. 6), and the Proactionary principle (Ch. 7).

There is some connective overlap between chapters. In each one of them, Remedios & Dusek provide an articulated landscape of Fuller's ideas, the occasional criticism, and a final summary. The book ends up with an appropriately short Conclusion (Ch. 8) and a PostScript (Ch. 9) – an interview's transcription.

It is worth pointing out that the work is chronologically (and conveniently) in sync with Fuller's own progressive intellectual development, and thus, the first part roughly focuses on his earlier work, whereas the second part on his later writings.¹

The first chapter after the Introduction (Chapter 2, “Fuller on Science and Technology Studies” (STS), already provides a cue for a theme that would transfix the arc of Fuller's thoughts spanning the last decade. As I see it, Steve Fuller is arguably going to extents that some may deem controversial (e.g., his endorsement of some type of Intelligent Design, his backing up of transhumanism, his gradual “coming out” as a Catholic) due to one *main* reason: A deep preoccupation with the future of humanity vis-à-vis pervasively disrupting emerging technologies.

Accordingly, Fuller wants to fuel a discussion that may eventually salvage whatever we find out that being human consists of – even if this “human” will resemble little the “humans” as we know them now. At this point, the “cue” is not self-evident: Fuller does not like Bruno

¹ With the exception of the PostScript, which is a transcription of an interview with Steve Fuller mostly regarding the first period of his work.

Latour's Actor-Network theory. In Fuller's view, Latour's framework triggers both an epistemological and an ethical problem: it diffuses human agency and by extension, responsibility – respectively. Equating human agency with the causal power attributed to the “parliament of things” ultimately reverberates in an erosion of human dignity. Here the cue becomes clearer: It is precisely this human dignity that Fuller will later defend in his attack of Darwinism.

Humanity Beyond the Human

Chapter 3, “Fuller's Social Epistemology and Epistemic Agency”, provides a further clue to Fuller's agenda. Remedios & Dusek coined a sentence that may constitute one of the most succinct, although fundamental, pillars in Steve Fuller's grand framework: “For Fuller, humanity would continue if *homo sapiens* end”.² This statement ingeniously captures Fuller's position that “humanity” (a “project” started during the Medieval Ages and developed during Modernity), is something that *homo sapiens* earn – or not. Biology might provide a compatible receptacle for this humanity to obtain, but it is by no means an automatic occurrence. One strives to get it – and many in fact fail to reach it.

In the context of this theme, Fuller steers away from an “object-oriented” (social) epistemology to an “agent-oriented” one: Instead of endlessly ruminating about possible theories of knowledge (which would render an accurate picture of the object – social or not), one starts to take into account the possibilities that open up after considering transforming the knowing agent itself. This transition foretells Fuller's later view: a proactionary approach³ to experimentation where the agent commits to the alteration of reality – as opposed to a precautionary stance, where the knower passively waits for reality's feedback before further proceeding.

In chapter 4, “The University and Interdisciplinarity”, Remedios & Dusek treat Fuller's views on the situation of institutions of higher education currently confronting the relentless compartmentalization of knowledge. Fuller praises Wilhelm von Humboldt's reinvention of the notion of the university in the 19th century, where the individual would acquire a holistic formation (*bildung*), and which would produce in return tangible benefits to society out of the growth of knowledge in general and science in particular.

This model, which catapulted Germany to the forefront of research, and which was emulated by several Western nations, has been gradually eroded by neoliberalism. Neoliberal stances, spurred by an attention to clients' requests, progressively severed the heretofore integral coexistence of research and teaching, creating instead pockets of specialization – along with their own idiosyncratic jargon. This fragmentation, in turn, has generated an overall ignorance among scientists and intellectuals regarding the “big picture”, which ultimately results in a stagnation of knowledge production. Fuller advocates for a return to

² Remedios & Dusek 2018, p. 34

³ Remedios & Dusek 2018, p. 40

the Humboldtian ideal, but this time incorporating technology as an integral part of the overall academic formation in the humanities.

Roles for Religion and God

Chapter 5, “Fuller’s Intelligent Design” (ID), deals with the philosopher’s controversial views regarding this position, particularly after the infamous Dover Trial. Remedios & Dusek have done a very good job at tracing the roots and influences behind Fuller’s ideas on the issue. They go all the way back to Epicurus and Hume, including the strong connection between these two and Charles Darwin, particularly in what concerns the role of “chance” in evolution. Those interested in this illuminating philosophical archeology will be well served after reading this chapter, instead of (or as a complement to) Steve Fuller’s two books on the topic.⁴

Chapter 6, “Fuller, Cosmism and Gnosticism” lays out the relationship of the philosopher with these two themes. Steve Fuller recognizes in Russian cosmism an important predecessor to transhumanism – along with the writings of the mystical Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin.

He is lately catering to a re-emergence of interest among Slavs regarding these connections, giving talks and seminars in Russia. Cosmism, a heterodox offspring of Russian Orthodoxy, aims at a reconstruction of the (lost) paradise by means of reactivation of a type of “monads” spread-out throughout the universe – particles that disperse after a person dies. Scientific progress would be essential in order to travel throughout the cosmos retrieving these primordial “atoms” of people of the past, so that they could be one day resurrected. Russia would indeed have a cosmic ordering mission. This worldview is a particular rendition of the consequences of Christ’s Resurrection, which was denounced by the Orthodox Church as heretical.

Nevertheless, it deeply influenced several Slavic thinkers, who unlike many Western philosophers, did have a hard time reconciling their (Orthodox) Christianity with reason and science. This syncretism was a welcomed way for them to “secularize” the mystical-prone Christian Orthodoxy and infuse it with scientific inquiry. As a consequence, rocket science received a major thrust for development. After all, machines had to be built in order to retrieve these human particles so that scientifically induced global resurrection occurs.

One of the more important global pioneers in rocket engines, Konstantin Tsiolkovsky (who later received approval by Joseph Stalin to further develop space travel research), was profoundly influenced by it. In fact, increasingly more scholars assert that despite the official atheism of the Soviet Union, cosmism was a major driving force behind the Soviet advances, which culminated in the successful launch of the Sputnik.

⁴ Fuller 2007 and Fuller 2008

Chapter 7, “Proactionary and Precautionary Principles and Welfare State 2.0”, is the last chapter before the Conclusion. Here Remedios & Dusek deal with Fuller’s endorsement of Max More’s Proactionary Principle and the consequent modified version of a Welfare State. The proactionary approach, in contradistinction with the precautionary principle (which underpins much of science policy in Europe), advocates for a risk-taking approach, justified partly in the very nature of Modern science (experimentation without excessive red tape) and partly in what is at stake: the survival of our species. Steve Fuller further articulates the proactionary principle, having written a whole book on the subject⁵ – while More wrote an article.

The Roles of This Book

Remedios & Dusek have done an excellent job in summarizing, articulating and criticizing the second half of Steve Fuller’s vast corpus – from the early 2000s until last year. I foresee a successful reception by thinkers concerned with the future of humanity and scholars interested in Fuller’s previous work. As a final note, I will share a sentiment that will surely resonate with some – particularly with the younger readers out there.

As noted in the opening remarks, Remedios & Dusek’s book fill a gap in what concerns the possibility of acquiring an articulated overview of Fuller’s thought, given his relentless rate of publication. However, the sheer quantity to keep up with is not the only issue. These days, more than “the written word” may be needed in order to properly capture the ideas of authors of Fuller’s calibre. As I observed elsewhere,⁶ reading Fuller is a brilliant read – but it is not an easy read.

It may be fair to say that, as opposed to, say, the relatively easy reading of an author like Steven Pinker, Steve Fuller’s books are not destined to be best-sellers among laymen. Fuller’s well put together paragraphs are both sophisticated and precise, sometimes long, paying witness to an effort for accurately conveying his multi-layered thought processes – reminding one of some German early modern philosophers. Fortunately, there is now a solid source of clarity that sheds effective light on Fuller’s writing: his available media. There are dozens of video clips (and hundreds of audio files⁷) of his talks, freely available to anyone. It may take a while to watch and listen to them all, but it is doable. I did it. And the clarity that they bring to his writings is tangible.

If Fuller is a sophisticated writer, he certainly is a very clear (and dare I say, entertaining) speaker. His “talking” functions as a cognitive catalyst for the content of his “writing” – in that, he is returning to the Humboldtian ideal of merged research and teaching. Ideally, if one adds to these his daily tweets,⁸ now we have at reach the most complete picture of what would be necessary to properly “get” a philosopher like him these days. I have the feeling

⁵ Fuller 2014

⁶ Malapi-Nelson 2013

⁷ warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/staff/sfuller/media/audio

⁸ Some of which are in fact reproduced by Remedios & Dusek 2018 (e.g. p. 102).

that, regardless of our settled ways, this “social media” component, increasingly integrated with any serious epistemic pursuit, is here to stay.

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