Social Epistemology for the One and the Many: An Essay Review

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Early in *Knowing Humanity in the Social World* (2018), Remedios and Dusek treat the reader to a breathless summary of Steve Fuller’s exceptionalism (10-11). Fuller “by far” outpaces his interlocutors’ learning and knowledge while engaging with “wit and panache” in an “endlessly ironical dialectic” (10). Bookending Fuller’s eminence in a postscript, a 2014 interview, Remedios asks him directly in third person, “Is Fuller the super-agent” (131)? According to Remedios and Dusek, super-agents possess “godlike capabilities through extension of human capabilities with science and technology” (131). Fuller demurs. 

Undeterred, Remedios re-asks the question: “So what about Steve Fuller as super-agent” (132)? Fuller then refers obliquely to a “knowledge policy maker person” (132). Despite Fuller’s reticence, Remedios’s questions recall the book’s hyperbolic opening and highlights the desired rhetorical effect. The authors instruct their readers to see that embodied in Steve Fuller, and in following the path of *his* social epistemology—*his word* (as it were)—we find a regulative ideal of the unity of knowledge, if not godhood.

### Through a Gleaming City Walks What Was Once a Man

*Knowing Humanity in the Social World*, in a compact 7 chapters with a conclusion, postscript interview, and glossary, wrestles determinedly with Steve Fuller’s most thorny ideas and debates. The book examines insightfully the development of Fuller’s scholarly activity since the year 2000. The authors contend that Fuller’s project shifts from epistemology and collective knowledge policy-making, to metaphysics and agent-oriented knowing. The emphasis on agents—epistemic agents need not be human individuals (25)—speaks to a form of idealism advanced in Fuller’s distinct conceptualization of transhumanism.

Concentrating on Fuller’s more recent work, especially during and after the publication of *Humanity 2.0* (2011), Remedios and Dusek aim to weave a unified narrative. It is a formidable undertaking. Fuller’s atypical range of interests, inveterate work style, and academic activism, complicate the matter. Unfortunately, by lionizing Fuller or, rather, in abstracting and projecting his seeming attributes onto social epistemology writ large, Remedios and Dusek offset much of the wider impact of their book. In the vain attempt to maintain a unified narrative, and keep a through line to social epistemology, the authors resort to Fullerism.

Fullerism, I argue, projects idealized versions of Fuller himself, his scholarship, and his reasoning, onto a contrived series of social roles, events, and debates. For Remedios and

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1. Such a person gives the impression of being a properly trained university administrator who can advise and lead on matters regarding knowledge transfer and distribution. As Fuller suggests in *The Academic Caesar* (2016), proper training refers to knowing and practicing the ways of social epistemology—particularly if one is a university administrator. Perhaps a “proto- Academic Caesar” lives in Michael Crow of Arizona State University. See “A Response to Michael Crow,” Steve Fuller (https://goo.gl/WwxFmW, 2015).

2. In the Acknowledgements, Remedios and Dusek graciously mention a small conference in May 2017 in which the participants discussed the book in its infancy (xiii). During a spirited exchange, I expressed concerns that the project seemed like a hagiography of Fuller. I also worried that Remedios and Dusek left unaccounted in the project their own efforts, and the vital efforts of conference participants and the Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective, in building and advancing social epistemology.
Dusek, Fuller models the actions of an “agent-oriented” epistemologist who regularly triumphs, in a more or less qualified fashion, at academic brinkmanship. The singular positioning of Fuller tells the story of social epistemology as a decidedly *asocial* process—as though the field arose and proceeds largely on the basis of individual initiative and brilliance. In essence, Remedios and Dusek envision social epistemology through “great man,” or “super-agent,” theory or, using Fuller’s slightly less exaggerated pejorative term, by “genius mongering” (1993).

Fuller wrote the book’s Foreword. In it, he claims “significant continuity” (vii) in his work if one reads appropriately. In overdetermining Fuller’s rational authority owing to a working belief in academic charisma (Weber 1922 [1978], Clark 2005), as I suggest later, Remedios and Dusek succeed in nullifying the continuity they, and Fuller, intend to promote. Social epistemology, on Fuller’s initial formulation (1988), took up the organization and pursuit of knowledge by human beings with “imperfect cognitive capacities” (3) and incomplete access to one another’s activities.

This characterization, and resulting aim, seemingly applies to all humans—unless we posit new, upgraded humans and their inevitable cognitive perfection. Perfection being just a matter time, how do post-2000 social epistemologists address these issues? They promote the illusion of proactive agents until the future arrives. Time now to retire the epistemic policy maker that inhabited the pages of *Social Epistemology*.

Remedios and Dusek impose a transhumanist narrative, bolstered by an unalloyed technological determinism, onto Fuller’s lauded intellectual biography. Fuller’s learnedness and interventionist role-play in various controversies gives lessons for aspirants to follow on the path of social epistemology. The path leads unremittingly to humanity 2.0—the “unstoppable Singularity” (Horner 2017). When the Singularity arrives (in 2045) as foretold by Ray Kurzweil, and assured to us by his Silicon Valley brethren, we perfect our imperfect cognitive capacities and have complete access—by uploading our consciousness to a computer cloud-like function (or some such)—to all our epistemic activities.

We might ascend to our perfection and unification sooner if we adopt Fuller’s metaphysical turn and regime of self-experimentation and risk-taking supported by proactionary social policies. Still, even if we aspire to be less than active, or proactive, epistemic agents—or humans (even so!)—an unshakable belief in technological determinism covers all bets made by futurists.4

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3 Fuller published *Thomas Kuhn: A Philosophical History for Our Times* in 2000 (paperback edition in 2001). While Remedios and Dusek give the book passing treatment, one might return to *Thomas Kuhn* on the occasion of this review not only as “philosophical history,” but also as a prescient allegory regarding the far-reaching unintended, even harmful, consequences resulting from an overwrought staging of a singular scholar and their work.

Critique of a Shadow

In the three parts of this essay review I articulate the tensions, if not contradictions, and consequences for the conduct of social epistemology, if we accept Remedios and Dusek’s account. I believe these consequences go well beyond their book and affect the general conduct, and our reflexive understanding, of the field of social epistemology that stems more or less directly from Steve Fuller’s work. 5

The sui generis nature of the work and the distinct normative landscape it inhabits, calls for a critical approach that Remedios and Dusek cannot articulate fully in the truncated framework of Knowing Humanity in the Social World. Remedios and Dusek’s shortcuts precipitate conflating Fuller with Fullerism and Fullerism with social epistemology. I maintain the following:

First, Remedios and Dusek present social epistemology wholly as Fullerism; that is, current social epistemology amounts to glorifying Fuller’s supposed acumen and prolificacy.

Second, Remedios and Dusek depict the epistemic agent as a social actor by staging roles and casting Fuller in them—“knower of the future” (3), public intellectual (5), intellectual provocateur (121), or designated, or aspiring, super-agent (131-132). Social epistemology inhabits a tediously didactic world in which social intercourse imparts triumphal object lessons owing to Fuller’s academic charisma.

Third, Remedios and Dusek submit to a powerful form of technological determinism as expressed in the Californian ideology (Barbrook and Cameron 1996), packaged by Ray Kurzweil (2005), and elaborated in Fuller’s “trilogy on transhumanism” (vii). Such determinism leaves unexamined the questionable, if not absurd, claims made on behalf of transhumanism, generally, and in Fuller’s “own promethean project of transhumanism” (99).

In the conclusion, I express consternation about social epistemology’s current state and future course. Among the broader field’s participants, we can expect a continuation of crosstalk and general indifference. 6 Analytic philosophers studying social epistemology, given their relative institutional security and faithful puzzle-solving, will persevere. I continue to believe we might fruitfully reimagine social epistemology through our necessarily collaborative textual practices. Yet always ahead, a glimmering personal future replete with academic favor, beckons and awaits.

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5 In his 2003 book, Remedios identifies the social epistemology related to Fuller’s work as “political social epistemology” (99). However, the phrase does not appear in the current book. I am unclear about the conceptual relation between “political social epistemology” and “Fuller’s social epistemology” aside from the apparently settled issue of who possesses it.

6 Edward Hinchman’s recent review (2018) of Patrick Reider’s Social Epistemology and Epistemic Agency illustrates this crosstalk and the predictable retreat to comfortable conceptual environs (https://ntdra.me/2NzvPgt).
Part I: Social Epistemology as Fullerism

Remedios and Dusek present social epistemology wholly as Fullerism; that is, current social epistemology amounts to glorifying Fuller’s supposed acumen and prolificacy.

Fullerism’s Narrow Scope

Fullerism oversimplifies the processes and aims of social epistemology. If Knowing Humanity in the Social World just extolled Fuller and explicated and his corpus, Remedios and Dusek would have written a book within an established genre in academic publishing—a very crowded genre, to be sure, of titles about august individual thinkers. However, in Remedios and Dusek’s presentation, Fullerism becomes conflated with social epistemology. Ultimately, Fullerism requires one to wait briefly and then react to Fuller’s next publication or scholarly incursion.

Fullerism’s origin story takes root in Fuller’s extraordinary education at “… two of the best programs in the world in philosophy and history of science” (we get class ranking for good measure), which led to work “… socially and historically richer by far than that of most philosophers and far more philosophically sophisticated than that of other sociologists” (10, emphasis mine). One will not miss the point amid the clunky phrasing that Fuller’s “breadth of reading in the humanities and social sciences is extraordinarily broad” (10).

Remedios and Dusek catalogue Fuller’s great learning by listing multiple subjects and fields about which he either possesses knowledge or “extensive familiarity.” Too, Fuller’s “range is far wider than most philosophers of science, including medieval scholastic philosophy” (emphasis mine). Readers should not ignore Fuller’s philosophical mastery and uncanny ability to get the root of a particular matter (11).7

Fuller deploys “great originality” (10) against the “many philosophers, historians, and sociologists of scientific knowledge [who] are simply failed scientists” (10). Remedios and Dusek’s unsubtle dig at the founders and early practitioners of STS tries to lend heft to Fuller’s broadsides against the field. Fullerism remains a game that Fuller wins by outsmarting any and all interlocutors. After all, Fuller “even if hyperbolic … has a point” (19).

Remedios and Dusek, and Remedios in his earlier book (2003), give notice that reader will encounter “Steve Fuller’s Social Epistemology.” For the precious few scholars informed on such matters the phrase gestures, in part, to an internecine scrum regarding the field’s proper origin and pursuit. Remedios and Dusek fortunately avoid the temptation to repot social epistemology’s history. Doing so would only rehearse a tired historiography that has hardened into a meme. Still, by not redressing this narrative, Remedios and Dusek reinforce the fiction that social epistemology is Fullerism.

7 In the book, getting to the root of the matter frequently amounts to the revelation that it isn’t what you think it is or thought it was.
Remedios and Dusek strike a deferential critical posture that also serves as a model for readers as they observe and assess Fuller’s performances. The reader should temper their judgments and entertain, say, a casual embrace of eugenics (116-117), or the past and future benefits of human experimentation (123), because Steve Fuller is a singular, prophetic thinker. Fuller sees the future—although the future, to be sure, looks suspiciously like Silicon Valley neoliberalism promulgated by entrepreneurs since the mid-1990’s.

**Double Movement: Expansion in Contraction**

In *Knowing Humanity in the Social World*, Fuller gets to impose his ideological will not only because of his unique personal powers, but because of how Remedios and Dusek treat the “social” in social epistemology. The book proceeds in a manner found in much of academic philosophy (and, so, in a way antithetical to a social epistemology). Broadly, academic philosophers tend to present arguments against a frictionless background to focus on definitional clarity, logical structure, internal consistency and the like. On certain practical grounds, one can understand attending less to cultural factors than, say, fallacies in a philosophical account.

However, as a consequence, Remedios and Dusek render the world as a passive constraint to the active knower. On the odd occasion, then, when the world pushes back, as in *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District*, it is the judge that “largely misconstrued [a] major part of Fuller’s presentation” (72).

Remedios and Dusek forward a myopic view of social epistemology all the while extolling the grandiosity of Fuller’s corpus. Owing, in part, to Fuller’s hyper-productivity, a tension arises immediately in *Knowing Humanity in the Social World*. While extolling his virtuosity (particularly in Chapter 1), the book fails to address adequately the majority of Fuller’s work. Focusing on publications since the year 2000 and primarily on one, *Humanity 2.0* (2011), of approximately two dozen total books, Remedios and Dusek pay little critical attention to Fuller’s collective body of work.

A few articles play minor supporting roles. Moreover, Remedios and Dusek deal only with print media. As of this writing, 180 audio, and dozens of video, presentations reside online.

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8 As of 13 May 2018, Fuller’s vita (https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/staff/sfuller/vita1.docx) comes in at 76 pages.

9 Remedios can point to his first book *Legitimizing Scientific Knowledge* as wrestling with the first half of Fuller’s career. Thomas Uebel’s review, for *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (https://ntrda.me/2uT2u92) notes a similar problem in not addressing the reception of Fuller’s work—the “paucity” of responses to counter arguments: “Calling notions contested does not absolve us from the task of providing defenses of the alternatives put forward.”


11 While writing this essay, I received notice of yet another book authored by Fuller *Post-Truth: Knowledge As A Power Game* (Anthem Press).
Certainly, one can sympathize with the monumental effort in dealing with such inordinate output; yet, Remedios and Dusek set out such a task in the title of their book.

Remedios and Dusek trade a great deal on the virtue of knowledge making, and makers, and the power of association. (The maker-versus-taker ethos underwrites the epistemic agent’s risk taking.) Fuller’s prolificacy demonstrates superior knowledge making, if not knowledge, and thus confers greater agency on himself and agents acting in kind.

A social epistemologist pre-2000 would have considered how and why knowledge-makers deploy resources in support of a singular epistemic source. That social epistemologist would also have questioned if epistemic power should accrue to agents, and their claims, by virtue of associating with other powerful agents. The unaccounted-for influence of powerful epistemic agents, and their surrogates, looms in the book’s background.

More importantly, Remedios and Dusek’s practically ignore Fuller’s critical reception. Even when the authors take up reception, they misapprehend the state of affairs. For example, Remedios and Dusek assert: “Despite the existence of several schools of STS, the Paris School led by Bruno Latour is the main competitor of Fuller’s social epistemology” (11). The rest of the passage gives a cursory explanation of Latour’s views, and Fuller’s opposition, but shares no evidence of responses by members of the Paris school, or actor-network theorists and practitioners, to social epistemology. Perhaps social epistemologists (read Fuller) view Latour as a “main competitor.”

However, STS practitioners think little, or nothing, about social epistemology. One will not locate current social epistemology as a going concern in leading (or otherwise) STS journals, textbooks, or classrooms. I find no contrary evidence in Knowing Humanity in the Social World. Presenting social epistemology as Fullerism, Remedios and Dusek promote a narrative in which academic caricatures fight for supremacy on a dialectical battlefront. Ironically, the narrative evades how human knowledge amounts to a collective achievement (a central tenet of social epistemology itself).

Instead of taking up compelling questions that emerge from the contexts of reception, Remedios and Dusek conceive the social world much as the circumscribed space of a poorly taught philosophy course. In this class, a student tries explaining a commonplace or self-evident idea and, through the instructor’s haphazard application of the Socratic method, discovers greater uncertainty, more questions, and, more often than not, defaults to the instructor’s authority. Thus, in Fullerism, the student discovers the superiority of Fuller.

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12 Remedios and Dusek put Latour and Fuller into conversation predominantly in Chapter 2. As framed, Fuller “speaks at” views held by Latour (uncharitably summarized by Remedios and Dusek), but no direct exchange, or dialectic, occurs. Emblematic of this state of affairs is a “debate” between Latour and Fuller in 2002 (published in 2003), regarding what defines ‘human’ and ‘non-human’, that concludes with this editorial note: “[The debate] was least successful, perhaps, in making the issues clear to the audience, especially to those who were not familiar with the work of Bruno Latour and Steve Fuller” (98).
Where All Is Fuller

Pursuing Fullerism, we share our unrefined intuitions regarding human experimentation (113), or inspirations for doing science (67), or technological enhancement (94). Likely, we express our intuitions as absolutist declarations. Supplied with more information on, say, the efficacy of the Dachau hypothermia experiments, we are asked to revisit and refine our intuitions. To keep the lesson alive, the epistemic agent (Fuller being the model agent) can stir in other pieces of information, shift perspective, relay different social, historical and cultural frameworks, refer to controversies, supply voluminous references to the philosophical canon, or appeal to various philosophical schools of thought.

At each turn, we might further refine our ideas, retrench, grow bored—but in recognizing Fullerism’s true didactic aim we should rightly be impressed and supplicant. The performance of our epistemic agent should replace our certitude about obvious nonsense with gnawing doubt. Darwin was certainly a scientist, right (73)? Maybe eugenics (116-117) gets a bum rap—especially if we see human experiments “… in the cause of human progress and transcendence” (117). Sure … the overblown fear of humans “playing God” with technology just needs a little enlightened philosophical recalibration (87).

This philosophical dialectic depends on the active forms of agency attributed to Fuller. How epistemic agents learn, for example, remains captive to Fullerism’s dialectic. The “deep learning” of computers receives some attention (123-124), but the dialectical process appears an end in itself. Remedios and Dusek defer to displays of learning by Fuller and seem less interested in exploring how epistemic agents learn to make knowledge to act in the world.

Remedios and Dusek set out the distinctiveness of Fuller’s learning in the book’s opening:

Other than Steve Fuller’s work, there is no other discussion in current literature of sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK), science and technology studies (STS), sociology of science, philosophy of science, epistemology of science, and analytic social epistemology on the impact of scientific knowledge on humanity. (emphasis mine, 1)

The claim’s bold start, dissipated by an ending cluster of vague prepositional phrases, compels the reader to consider Remedios and Dusek’s credulity. How could half a dozen fields of academic inquiry investigating science (to varying degrees) successfully avoid a single discussion of the impact of scientific knowledge on people?

Knowledge Becomes a Means to Transcend

We find, reading further, the matter at hand is not scientific knowledge per se, rather, knowing how to perform the accounting necessary for best achieving a preordained human future. Remedios and Dusek, like Fuller, abide in the unquestioning faith that “nanotechnology, robotics, and biotechnology” (1) will develop and converge and,
inevitably, humans will transcend their biology. For the next thirty years until the Singularity, we can train ourselves to tamp down our agnosticism.

Lest we forget, we can rely on Fuller’s “very well informed and richly informed historical account with delineation of varieties of theodicy” (my emphasis, 72) that include discussions of Leibniz, Malebranche and Gassendi. For Remedios and Dusek, historical analysis frequently translates into Fuller’s citational range; thus, a good argument depends on the ability to bring numerous references, preferably unexpectedly related, to bear on an issue.

For example, Fuller wins a debate with A. C. Grayling (in 2008) on intelligent design because “the historical part of Fuller’s argument is very accurate concerning early modern science. Figures such as Boyle, Newton, Leibniz, and many other figures of seventeenth-century science saw their religion as tied with their science” (my emphasis, 72). A trivially true even if “very accurate” point.

In the same paragraph, Remedios and Dusek go on to list additional clever and apt observations made by Fuller. As the adjectival emphasis suggests, Remedios and Dusek direct the reader to allow the perspicacity of Fuller’s insights suffice as an effective argument. As Remedios and Dusek lightly resist Fuller’s loose historical claims (particularly in Chapter 5), they give counter-arguments, from themselves and other scholars, short shrift. Fuller’s proactive encyclopedism assures us that we both reside in, and can actively reconstruct, the western intellectual tradition. In truth, Fullerism entails that we willingly suspend disbelief during Fuller’s ideational performance.

The social world of the book’s title remains largely unburdened by cultural complexities, and populated sparsely with one-dimensional interlocutors. Fullerism, then, is both plenum and void—space completely filled with the matter of Fuller’s creation, and void of external influences and meaning in collective effort.

Part II: Impoverishing Critical Engagement

Second, Remedios and Dusek depict the epistemic agent as a social actor by staging roles and casting Fuller in them—“knower of the future” (3), public intellectual (5), intellectual provocateur (121), or designated, or aspiring, super-agent (131-132). Social epistemology inhabits a tediously didactic world in which social intercourse imparts triumphal object lessons owing to Fuller’s academic charisma.

Knowledge as Flux

Knowing Humanity in the Social World poses a central question: “What kind of being should the knower be” (3)? An initial answer: The knower should be an epistemic agent who practices agent-oriented epistemology. An epistemic agent, Remedios and Dusek tell us, occupies (or potentially occupies) numerous positions, contingent upon shifting “boundary conditions”

13 Slightly different iterations of the trinity that will converge to give us the Singularity include Ray Kurzweil’s “nanotechnology, robotics, and biotechnology” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ray_Kurzweil), and “genetics, nanotechnology, and robotics” (https://bit.ly/2LZ42ZB).
(4). Shifting boundaries regarding race, religion, or technology, for example, demand that we continually reconsider what being human means.

Nevertheless, being human always entails being an epistemic agent. To show an epistemic agent “making knowledge to act in the world” (31), Remedios and Dusek choreograph social intercourse as action tied to particular roles. Take, for example, the role of “intellectual provocateur” (121), which runs throughout the book. Steve Fuller, who prominently plays the role, proactively assumes great risk by intervening against the scourge of consensus belief. The intellectual provocateur thus demonstrates his superiority to the “passive” agent in the “passivist tradition [which] includes Malthus, Spencer and Darwin” (70).

I will show that Remedios and Dusek regard Fuller as an academic charismatic. William Clark’s (2007) thesis of academic charisma posits that “a group of people ascribe certain extraordinary abilities or power to a person. That person has charisma in relation to the ascribing group, whose members become active or passive disciples or followers or fans” (15).

Academic charisma, as Clark indicates, reproduces an institutional rationality historically associated with the European research university. I suggest that Remedios and Dusek’s notion of the epistemic agent can be reduced to academic charisma, as embodied by Fuller, thus replicating the institutional logic of the research university. The aspirational epistemic agent ultimately functions within a risk-averse environment normed by self-regulating scholars.

Fuller models epistemic agency by partaking in seemingly edifying social roles and intellectually consistent actions (we are assured). See Fuller testify in Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District (70–71), and then act as self-appointed guardian and reinventor of intelligent design theory (79). See Fuller oppose “ecological correctness” while defending Nazi science (118). See Fuller embrace post-truth (122). See Fuller invent risk-taking proposals for others to secure our enhanced human future (Chapter 7). See Fuller point out the theological assumptions at work in contemporary science (27) to help re-enchant students’ pursuit of scientific inquiry (5). Fuller carries out these actions on behalf of a futurist agenda. As we will become humanity 2.0, Fuller’s academic charisma authorizes the proper lessons for us to learn as we follow the path of social epistemology.

Remedios and Dusek attempt a philosophical rationale for Fullerism’s vision of the epistemic agent by proposing an “agent-oriented epistemology”:

Focuses on the agent, unifying knowledge in terms of the agent’s worldview and purposes. It rejects or [sic] the division of intellectual labor and total deference to experts, at most critically accepting expert opinion. It has affinities with idealism (bold in the original indicating the term is in the

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14 See John Horgan (2015) on the joys of being rightly provoked by Fuller.
Appendix). (141)

A Paradoxical Expert Against Expertise

Knowing Humanity in the Social World reads as a sustained argument for agent-oriented epistemology. Agent-oriented epistemology rejects deference to expertise. The practical, and emphatic, treatment of Fuller as an expert whose even curious pronouncements deserve serious consideration contradicts the book’s argument. To be sure, Remedios and Dusek hedge that agent-oriented epistemology rejects total deference. Even accepting this hedge, the meaning of “total deference” remains unclear and potentially mischievous.

That said—referring to first part of my review—I find Remedios and Dusek’s deference to Fuller complete (if not total). Moreover, Remedios and Dusek call for interlocutors to recognize—and, in so doing, assent to—Fuller’s wisdom based, in part, on his great expertise and mastery of dialectical method.

From the definition of agent-oriented epistemology, the agent sets the terms for how to achieve, and what counts as, unified knowledge given their worldview and purpose. Such appears in keeping with idealism, which they define as “the doctrine that reality is mental” (145). The relation between idealism and agent-oriented epistemology tends to be sketched by gesturing to canonical figures in eighteenth and nineteenth century German and British philosophy.

Additionally, Remedios and Dusek rely on repeated portrayals of agents—“Fuller’s preferred epistemic agent follows proactive rather than reactive or precautionary principles” and “advocate[s] greater risks on the part of scientific researchers and the encouragement of arrangements whereby people can knowingly volunteer as subjects of risky or dangerous experiments” (37)—with little analysis as to the “kind of being” that would advocate such measures.

The reader receives little understanding—beyond the dialectical arrangement of prominent scholars—of the potential stakes in the comparative dispositions of agent- and object-centered epistemology. For example, Remedios and Dusek regularly observe that the “Cartesian knower,” the kind of knower associated with analytical (not Fuller’s) social epistemology, “does not make knowledge” (32-33). Rather, she gains knowledge by deriving, or receiving (e.g., from experts, 38-41), true relations between a statement and an actual state of affairs in the world.

For Remedios and Dusek, being really human in the social world entails doing the things that epistemic agents prefer—now and in the future. Now, the epistemic agent “makes knowledge to act in the world” (2). In the future, scientifically and technologically enhanced humans will, given their godlike predispositions, become godlike. A folk religious

My notation points to what I gather is a typographical mistake—the unintended inclusion of the word ‘or’—as the sentence makes sense if posed: “It rejects the division of intellectual labor and total deference to experts, at most critically accepting expert opinion.”
psychology, integrated with “cognitive economics” (36), underwrites Fuller’s conception, as depicted by Remedios and Dusek, for human action. In short, humans “leverage beliefs to action” (31). We hypothesize what will happen in particular circumstances, use our beliefs to maximum advantage, and engage in a process of making (‘constructing’ seems a less preferred term) knowledge “to act in the world” (32). “To act in the world” remains a hopelessly vague designation that Remedios and Dusek try to vitalize, in Chapter 3, through repetition.\footnote{Remedios and Dusek use the infinitive form of the verb ‘act’ exclusively in describing this process. As such, the epistemic agent seemingly must make knowledge \textit{first} in order to \textit{then} act. In addition, Remedios and Dusek state that agents can also “leverage belief into action” (6, 31, 32, 36). While similar, these formulations invite confusion regarding the agent’s status, and holding knowledge or belief, and the subsequent processes involved in act and action (Do we also leverage belief to act (as opposed to? Are the actions based on leveraged belief somehow different than the actions based on making, or made, knowledge?)}

\textbf{Always Unanswered}

Repetition does not answer the raft of questions regarding, for example, the implied status relations among humans, agents, and makers—a status, we are told, that will assuredly change for the better in our enhanced future. Disconcertingly, “object-oriented” (32) epistemic agents appear lesser since they are not makers of knowledge but, rather, takers of knowledge from experts (38).\footnote{The maker versus taker ethos, in light of Fuller’s cognitive economics model, appears particularly insidious.}

In addition, such agents neither broker their beliefs (cognitive naïfs perhaps), nor assume the extraordinary risks to achieve the necessary goals on the path to our hardwired purpose to transcend humanity. Lacking a general explanation of what acting in the world entails, Remedios and Dusek resort unironically on the social role-playing of the ur-agent, Steve Fuller.

Remedios and Dusek’s rely heavily on establishing and reiterating Fuller’s own Promethean character and the Promethean character of associated projects (7, 67, 98, 99).\footnote{I offer the adjective \textit{own} to underscore how one might compare competing, and complementary, Promethean projects and character. As Fuller explains regarding another such project: “Well, the thing is— Well I think look, the attractive feature about Trump I think to a lot of these transhumanists is his Promethean character. Like, there \textit{is} no limit, right. Trump leaves all the options open. And I think that’s a very attractive—This is the libertarian streak in transhumanism coming out, right. That in some sense you don’t imagine that there’s some limit already there. So not even the laws of the government can stop me, right. This is why Trump in the beginning got into all this trouble with the judiciary in the United States. Because he was constantly just making laws up on the hoof through executive orders” (original emphasis, https://bit.ly/2mE8vCs).} In part, what licenses Fuller’s apparently rebellious creativity in unsuccessfully defending Intelligent Design theory and in, among many other acts, “heroically arguing” (5) for humans’ centrality in creation—despite Copernicus and Darwin’s centuries of influence—derives from how one sees the role of public intellectual.

Fuller occupies many normative guises to convey social interaction. The social epistemologist and knowledge policy maker (128), of course, but Fuller also devises roles for
many settings and possible worlds—“humans 1.0” and “humans 2.0” (109), deviant (and normal) interdisciplinary agents” (51), techno-Goethes (51), proactionaries (109), academic Caesars (120)—the list goes on as do the changing duties assigned to the roles.19

Fuller supplements his dizzying array of original appellations with reconfigurations of more familiar roles—the intellectual (ix), the public intellectual (5), the teacher and the researcher (55). Fuller deserves credit for creative staging. The roles he envisions, and re-envisions, lend themselves to a kind of re-enactment of Peter Abelard’s exploits in which orthodox thinkers (Darwin’s defenders substituting for doctrinaire Christians) get their comeuppance through well-timed or overwhelming intellectual maneuvering.

Our actors can follow Fuller’s example as he “has mastered … both philosophical dialectic and ‘the higher gossip’ with an uncanny ability to find the educational and social roots of thinkers: natural scientists, social scientists, and philosophers to shed light on the roots and motivations of their thought” (11). Such a presentation reminds one of the criticisms of the disingenuousness of certain Socratic dialogues. In a similar way, Fuller represents the master dialectician who reveals not only the errors in their interlocutor’s thinking, but also their true motivations.

**Puck Tenured**

Fuller’s various roles as a social agent complicate Remedios and Dusek’s idea of how we enact knowing. Take, for example, Fuller’s role as an intellectual provocateur. Remedios and Dusek tell us:

> As an intellectual provocateur, Fuller has taken on Darwinism and defended Intelligent Design (ID). Fuller has taken on Kuhn, upset sociologists and philosophers of science, and defended his version of normative social epistemology. Fuller has taken on science and technology studies (STS) on several issues including post-truth and defended his version of normative social epistemology. (2)

Evidently, we should afford Fuller the prerogatives arising from his role as dissenter in these cases. In the framework detailed in Chapter 1, and carried throughout the book, Remedios and Dusek insist we credit Fuller for “taking on” seeming sacred cows and dominant views. When Fuller questions whether Darwin was a true scientist (71), or forwards a “very original” (69) version of ID, do we occupy the realm of intellectual provocation or silliness (assuredly, the two are not mutually exclusive)? The novitiate epistemic agent begins at a disadvantage when confronting Fuller’s ideas on terms prescribed by Fuller, or if we tilt the meaning a bit, by his epistemic agents.

On occasion, however, Remedios and Dusek locate Fuller in the contested terrain of live

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19 “When people ask me what social epistemologists should be doing, my answer is that they should be in university administration, they should run the corporation. You know at the end of the day, you want to be running the corporation, you will be the manager of the corporation” (130).
debates; the most well-known of these being *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District.* In the Foreword, Fuller manages our expectations:

> Generally speaking, my work tends to be contextualized in terms of already existing debates, where my interventions are often difficult to accommodate and hence easily misunderstood, if not outright dismissed. Remedios and Dusek identify those dialectical contexts well, often introducing figures whose positions are relevantly compared to my own ... as well as adjudicate on what counts as fair and unfair criticisms of my positions. (emphasis mine, vi)

Fuller indicates that “already existing debates” (e.g., regarding intelligent design) are not capacious, or conceptually rich, enough to supply the necessary resources to be properly understood (such terminological poverty may also result in being dismissed). Fuller refers to the dialectical contexts of his interventions, and Remedios and Dusek echo and amplify this idea as “endlessly ironical dialectic” (10). Thus, if the stage does not accommodate the designated social role we shift the temporal horizon to the future (134), or to the boundless, while further suggesting our interlocutors may not yet know the full significance of their words or actions.

In contrast, William Lynch (2016) criticizes Fuller’s theodicy as underwriting great misery and suffering in support of an ill-conceived transhumanist future. Lynch’s profound and detailed criticism (even referenced by Fuller in the Foreword) of Fuller’s religiously inspired history commands attention. Remedios and Dusek give the argument two sentences (73) before shifting to a brief discussion of evolutionary selection mechanisms for human abstract reasoning. I mention the lack of attention to Lynch’s work to illustrate the kind of critical shallowness not uncommon in the book.

**Stepping Back From Their Greatest Risk**

Allow me to mention what I understand as an additional hedge at the moment of critical encounter. Remedios and Dusek, and Fuller, invite the interlocutor to consider fully, or accept, certain commitments (discursive, normative, ontological, metaphysical, and so on) as designated, in part, by a particular social role. Such requests—often implied, misapprehended, and inseparable from specialist discourse—seem in keeping with the spirit of the philosophical principle of charity. But let me offer an example where such

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20 The world of pre-existing debates consists of decidedly more difficult social terrain for epistemic agents to traverse. The Wikipedia entry on *Kitzmiller* notes: “Fuller’s testimony was cited by lawyers for both the plaintiffs and the defense in their closing statements” (my emphasis). Margaret Talbot (2005) lends additional context: “In Harrisburg ... the defense offered as a witness Steve Fuller ... Fuller, who wore thick-framed Woody Allen-style glasses, waved his arms a lot, and delivered profuse answers at a breathless pace, said that he thought evolution offered a better explanation of biological diversity than intelligent design, but he also argued that it was ‘kind of bad news epistemologically’ to have ‘taken-for-granted theories’ like evolution ‘in any given discipline.’ Besides, he added, it might be interesting if science was ‘reconfigured so that the notion of design would be taken as a kind of literal unifying concept.’ Fuller bounced with glib, manic energy as he riffed on the history of science (at one point, the Judge suggested taking a break — ‘water or decaf only’), dispensing postmodern lingo about science as ‘a self-perpetuating elite’ committed to ‘policing’ its own boundaries” (77).
commitments can run afoul of differing, completely understandable, interpretations:

Though we support the advantages of Fuller’s notion of epistemic agency ... we find fault with some aspects of Fuller’s notion of agency that he attributes to the scientist ... We note that Fuller’s notion of “scientist,” which lacks psychological richness and is associated with a thin notion of agency, seems to be incompatible with Tversky’s and Kahneman’s experimental results ... which seem to favor a thick notion of agency ... Fuller argues that the thick notion of “scientist” excludes the notion of “scientist” as one who is trained to have a “scientific mindset.” (40-41)

The ceaseless kind of terminological calibration illustrated above—the relative thinness or thickness of the agency of “the scientist”—keeps academics employed and, at best, results in tedium. Remedios and Dusek explain less well the role, if any, of the social agent (they do not employ this term). For example, the jockeying above regards the relative agency of the scientist—a plain reference to a professional social group and, so, not to an individual unifying knowledge in terms of idiosyncratic purposes.

Given the vague neo-Kantianism on offer, Remedios and Dusek sketch “reactive” epistemic agents (37) referring to the work of Alvin Goldman and, in passing, Nelson Goodman (70), and Catherine Elgin (36-38). Goodman’s solution to the problem of induction and his resulting constructivism tagged as “conservative” Goodman and agents act passively insomuch as they believe, and react to, experts (with certain allowances for independent knowledge). Fuller’s agents, then, are active and proactive knowledge makers, whereas Cartesian agents are passive (reactive) and precautionary.

The problems of reference and context—presented above as terminological calibration and social agency—arise commonly in philosophical critiques of neo-Kantism or mental constructivism. Remedios and Dusek try to provide workarounds—an rough admixture of Fullerism, theodicy, technological determinism—packaged as agent-oriented epistemology.

On reading Knowing Humanity in the Social World, I revisited William Clark’s Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University (2007). I remain fascinated by the relation among the material aspects of scholarship, the academic reward system, and epistemic influence and obedience. Clark offers particular insight into the attitudes—the awe, mystery, and reverence—resulting from epic individual productivity.

When Biography Becomes Theory

Earlier, I claimed that Remedios and Dusek model their epistemic agent on Fuller. He represents an unrivaled intellectual and social force given brute productivity and official recognition.21 Remedios and Dusek show that Fuller takes his occasional lumps during debates, but wins when the proper hermeneutic aperture widens in the end. Yet, Fuller’s

21 Fuller holds the Auguste Comte chair in Social Epistemology.
sociological backstory remains undertheorized. Clark’s thesis regarding “rational authority” and “academic charisma,” in particular, demystifies some of this missing theoretical backstory. His socio-historic insights speak to why and how Remedios and Dusek pursue their project, and explain the sociality of the university in way Fuller’s Humboldtian ideal (47) or University 2.0 (48) do not.

Clark defines academic charisma and rational authority this way:

The original charismatic religious figure was the sorcerer, then later the priest and especially the prophet, the herald of a new cult. Regarding academia, part of academic charisma sprang from this topos—the teacher as spiritual or cultic leader ... [and] ... Part of academic charisma sprang from this topos—the martial, agonistic, polemical cast of academic knowledge as it developed in medieval Europe ... A group of people ascribe certain extraordinary abilities or power to a person. That person has charisma in relation to the ascribing group, whose members become active or passive disciples or followers or fans. (14-15)

... The rational shares with the traditional the virtue of stability. Rational authority or rationalization—such as embodied in state bureaucracies and managerial capitalism—have the power to alter or even revolutionize a traditional social order, but achieve relative social stability at the same time ... But rationality can be charismatic ... Like modern capitalism, the research university achieved an amazing “dynam  

equilibrium” (M. Norton Wise) by the cultivation of charismatic figures within a broader sphere of rationalization. (15-17)

... Academic charisma at the research university inheres more in individuals than in collective, corporate, collegial bodies ... If an Isaac Newton or an Immanuel Kant has sat in a particular chair, then the ghost or spirit of that individually famous academic infuses the chair. One of Stephen Hawking’s many claims to fame is that he occupies “Newton’s chair.” (19)

Remedios and Dusek’s reliance on Fuller as a model for the epistemic agent participates in this parasitic culture of academic charisma—an idea that derives from Max Weber’s broader concept of charisma.22 A way to understand Fuller in Knowing Humanity in the Social World is as a prominent (if not canonized) academic who endorses and follows the normative conventions set by the traditional research university. Remedios and Dusek also accept these conventions—most prominently, I find, in working presumptions about behaving in accord with the academic merit and privilege established in Chapter 1. These presumptions yield

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22 Weber clarifies: “The term ‘charisma’ will be applied to a certain quality of individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a ‘leader’.” (1922 [1978], 241)
explanations as to how we should regard Fuller’s provocations, for example. Clark opens up Remedios and Dusek’s presumptions to socio-historic scrutiny that reveals the epistemic agent to be a manifestation of charismatic academic.

Recall that the epistemic agent rejects “the division of intellectual labor and total deference to experts” (141). In Remedios and Dusek’s model, Fuller’s ascribed encyclopedism substitutes for the division of intellectual labor. Put plainly, if an epistemic agent possesses encyclopedic knowledge, they need not rely on the social conventions governing intellectual labor.

**Do You Need a Hero?**

In a similar vein, Remedios and Dusek regard Fuller as an expert in everything but name. The more refined point, derived from Clark, is that Remedios and Dusek accept academic merit—and Fuller’s particular standing and agency—as a form of rational authority that transcends expertise. Our Fullerian epistemic agent, then, does not need to defer to expertise given his rationality. Practically speaking, Fuller’s power conveys from the sociality of the university. In Fuller, we see embodied the bureaucratic rational authority of the university transfigured by charisma—the exceptional powers of an exemplary individual.

Fuller heralds a belief system, social epistemology, if not a new cult, his particular version of transhumanism. *Knowing Humanity in the Social World* imparts extraordinary power to Fuller which, in turn, rationalizes wrongheaded, if not desperate, positions marked as necessary for human advancement. Here, in particular, my concern grows about our (broadly speaking) inability to detect bullshit in the effusive work of an academic charismatic. As Frankfurt (2005) argues, the bullshitter cares only if the listener is persuaded, and cares nothing about truth or falsity. Note Remedios and Dusek’s interpretive soft-shoe on the idea of truth:

> Though the epistemic agent is socially constructed, the standard by which the epistemic agent is evaluated is truth-oriented. For Fuller, truth is a systematic representation of reality, a grand unified theory of everything. To achieve this type of scientific knowledge, it is an open question as to the type of agent that would be most appropriate. (emphasis mine, 34)

The epistemic agent worries, to varying degrees, about being in the ballpark of truth. However, since we do not know who, or what, an agent is now, or will be in the future, we cannot situate the kind of truth needed to the kind of agent that needs it. The evaluation of whether or not an epistemic agent is truth-oriented awaits a unified scientific theory. So, does the epistemic agent care about truth? Yes, apparently, to the degree that caring about truth yields, or does not yield, knowledge.

If bullshitting yields knowledge, then on with bullshit. In the confusion of where and when to locate, or model, either agency or truth, why not default to the privilege of spirit of the charismatic academic? Referring to Clark’s thesis on academic charisma, and given my reconting of Fullerism, one can read *Knowing Humanity in the Social World* as an exercise in
extending Fuller's agency to make acceptable immoral and contradictory ideas. Accepting such ideas validates and extends the charismatic power on which Fuller’s futurism depends.

Knowledge-making remains an inescapably social process, but I also assert that academic scholars, in particular, fail to recognize the practicalities and normative obligations that arise in the process of this work. While Remedios and Dusek need not account fully for these obligations and materialities, the subject of their book resides firmly in the logic of academic production. The bureaucratic discipline imposed on Fuller, on Fullerism, and on social epistemology that results in such a bizarre vision of the future goes unquestioned.

This vision also goes unquestioned because a charismatic figure with extraordinary abilities and platform spouts it. Yet, our reactions and reception of these ideas seems very much in keeping with the university’s logic of “novelty and conservatism” (Grafton 2006) that Clark chronicles. To know humanity in the social word of the book means, perhaps, to know only the sociality of academic charisma.

Part III: We’re all Californians Now

Third, Remedios and Dusek submit to a form of strict technological determinism as promulgated in the Californian ideology (Barbrook and Cameron 1996), packaged by Ray Kurzweil, and amplified by Fuller in his “trilogy on transhumanism” (vii). Such determinism leaves unexamined the questionable, if not ridiculous, claims made on behalf of transhumanism, generally, and in Fuller’s “own promethean project of transhumanism” (99).

Of Technological Ontology

Missing in the list delineating Fuller’s “extensive familiarity” (10) with an unbelievable array of academic fields and literatures are the history and the philosophy of technology. (As history, philosophy, and “many other fields” make the list, perhaps I am being nitpicky.) Still, I want to highlight, by way of contrast, what I take as a significant oversight in Remedios and Dusek’s account of Fullerism—a refined conception of technology; hence, a capitulation to technological determinism.

Remedios and Dusek do not mention technological determinism. Genetic determinism (69) and Darwinian determinism (75, 77-78) receive brief attention. A glossary entry for “determinism” (143) focuses on Pierre-Simon Laplace’s work. However, the strict technological determinism on which Fullerism stands goes unmentioned. With great assuredness, Remedios and Dusek repeat Ray Kurzweil’s Singularity mantra, with a Fullerian inflection, that: “converging technologies, such as biotechnology, nanotechnology, and computer technology, are transforming and enhancing humanity to humanity 2.0” (33).

23 “Ray Kurzweil, Google’s Director of Engineering, is a well-known futurist with a high-hitting track record for accurate predictions. Of his 147 predictions since the 1990s, Kurzweil claims an 86 percent accuracy rate. At the SXSW Conference in Austin, Texas, Kurzweil made yet another prediction: the technological singularity will happen sometime in the next 30 years” (https://bit.ly/2n8oMkM). I must admit to a prevailing doubt
J. Collier

Kurzweil’s proclamations, and Fuller’s conceptual piggybacking, go absent scrutiny. Unequivocally, a day will come in 2045 when humans—some humans at least—“will be transformed through technology to humanity 2.0, into beings that are Godlike” (94).

The “hard determinism” associated with Jacques Ellul in The Technological Society (1964), and, I argue, with Fuller as relayed by Remedios and Dusek, holds that technology acts as an uncontrollable force independent from social authority. Social organization and action derive from technological effects. Humans have no freedom in choosing the outcome of technological development—technology functions autonomously.

Depending on the relative “hardness” of the technological determinism on offer we can explain social epistemology, for example, as a system of thought existing for little reason other than aiding a technological end (like achieving humanity 2.0). Specifically, Fuller’s social and academic policies exist to assure a transhuman future. A brief example:

How does the university’s interdisciplinarity linked [sic] to transhumanism? Kurzweil claims that human mind and capacities can be uploaded into computers with increase in computing power [sic]. The problem is integration of those capacities and personal identity. Kurzweil’s Singularity University has not been able to address the problem of integration. Fuller proposes transhumanities promoted by university 2.0 for integration by the transhumanist. (51)

As I understand the passage, universities should develop a new interdisciplinary curriculum, (checkily named the transhumanities) given the forthcoming technological ability to upload human minds to computers. Since the uploading process will occur, we face a problem regarding personal identity (seemingly, how we define or conceive personal identity as uploaded minds). The new curriculum, in a new university system, will speak to issues unresolved by Singularity University—a private think tank and business incubator.24

I am unsure how to judge adequately such reasoning, particularly in light of Remedios and Dusek’s definition of agent-oriented epistemology and suspicion of expertise. Ray Kurzweil, in the above passage and throughout the book, gets treated unreservedly as an expert. Moreover, Remedios and Dusek advertise Singularity University as a legitimate institution of higher learning—absent the requisite critical attitude toward the division of intellectual labor (48, 51).25 Forgiving Remedios and Dusek for the all too human (1.0) sin of inconsistency,

(what are the criteria?) regarding Kurzweil’s “86 percent accuracy rate.” I further admit that the specificity of number itself—86—seems like the kind of exact detail to which liars resort.

24 Corey Pein (2017, 260-261) notes: “It was eerie how closely the transhuman vision promoted by Singularity University resembled the eugenicist vision that had emerged from Stanford a century before. The basic arguments had scarcely changed. In The Singularity Is Near, SU chancellor Kurzweil decried the ‘fundamentalist humanism’ that informs restriction on the genetic engineering of human fetuses.”

25 Pein (2017, 200-201) observes: “... I saw a vast parking lot ringed by concrete barriers and fencing topped with barbed wire. This was part of the federal complex that housed the NASA Ames Research Center and a strange little outfit called Singularity University, which was not really a university but more like a dweeby doomsday congregation sponsored by some of the biggest names in finance and tech, including Google. The
we confront the matter of how to get at their discussion of interdisciplinarity and transhumanism.

**Utopia in Technology**

Remedios and Dusek proceed by evaluating university curricula based on a technologically determined outcome. The problem of individual identity, given that human minds will be uploaded into computers, gets posed as a serious intellectual matter demanding a response from the contemporary academy. Moreover, the proposed transhumanities curriculum gets saddled with deploying outmoded initiatives, like interdisciplinarity, to render new human capacities with customary ideas of personal identity.

University 2.0, then, imagines inquiry into human divinity within a retrograde conceptual framework. This reactive posture results from the ease in accepting what must be. A tributary that leads back to this blithe acceptance of the future comes in the techno-utopianism of the Californian ideology.

The Californian ideology (Barbrook and Cameron 1996) took shape as digital networking technologies developed in Silicon Valley spread throughout the country and the world. Put baldly, the Californian ideology held that digital technologies would be our political liberators; thus, individuals would control their destinies. The emphasis on romantic individualism, and the quest for unifying knowledge, shares great affinity with the tenor of agent-oriented epistemology.

The Californian ideology fuses together numerous elements—entrepreneurialism, libertarianism, individualism, techno-utopianism, technological determinism—into a more or less coherent belief system. The eclecticism of the ideology—the dynamic, dialectical blend of left and right politics, well-heeled supporters, triumphalism, and cultishness—conjures a siren’s call for philosophical relevance hunting, intervention, and mimicry.

I find an interesting parallel in the impulse toward disembodiment by Kurzweil and Fuller, and expressed in John Perry Barlow’s “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace” (1996). Barlow waxes lyrically: “Our identities have no bodies, so, unlike you, we cannot obtain order by physical coercion. We believe that from ethics, enlightened self-interest, and the commonweal, our governance will emerge.”

The demigod Prometheus makes appearances throughout *Knowing Humanity in the Social World*. Remedios and Dusek have Fuller play the rebel trickster and creator. Fuller’s own transhumanist project creates arguments, policies, and philosophical succor that advocate humanity’s desire to ascend to godhood (7, 67). In addition, Fuller’s Promethean task possesses affinities with Russian cosmism (97-99), a project exploring human enhancement, Singularity—a theoretical point in the future when computational power will absorb all life, energy, and matter into a single, all-powerful universal consciousness—is the closest thing Silicon Valley has to an official religion, and it is embraced wholeheartedly by many leaders of the tech industry.”
longevity (cryonics), and space travel. Fuller’s efforts result in more or less direct, and grandiose, charges of Gnosticism. Gnosticism, a tangled doctrine, can refer to the Christian heresy of seeking secret knowledge that, in direct association with the divine, allows one to escape the fetters of our lesser material world.

Gnostic Minds

Befitting a trickster, Fuller both accepts and rejects the charge of Gnosticism (102), the adjudication of which seems particularly irrelevant in the determinist framework of transhumanism. A related and distressing sense of pretense pervades Remedios and Dusek’s summary of Gnosticism, and scholastic presentation of such charges against Fuller. Remedios and Dusek do more than hint that such disputation involving Fuller have world historic consequences.

Imitating many futurists, Fuller repeats that “we are entering a new historical phase” (xi) in which our understanding of being human, of being an embodied human particularly, shifts how we perceive protections, benefits, and harms to our existence. This common futurist refrain, wedded to a commonsense observation, becomes transmogrified by the mention of gnosis (and the use of scare quotes):

The more we relativize the material conditions under which a “human” existence can occur, the more we shall also have to relativize our sense of what counts as benefits and harms to that existence. In this respect, Gnosticism is gradually being incorporated into our natural attitude toward the secular world. (xi)

Maybe. More likely, and less heroically, humans regularly reconsider who they are and determine what helps or hurts them absent mystical knowledge in consultation with the divine. As with many of Fuller’s broader claims, and iterations of such claims presented by Remedios and Dusek, I am uncertain how to judge the contention about the rise of Gnosticism as part of being in the world. Such a claim comes across as unsupported, certainly, and self-serving given the argument at hand.

The discussion of Gnosticism raises broader issues of how to understand the place, scope and meaningfulness of the contestations and provocations in which Fuller participates. Remedios and Dusek relay a sense that Fuller’s activities shape important social debates—Kitzmiller being a central example. Still, one might have difficulty locating the playing field

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26 Remedios and Dusek claim: “Cosmist ideas, advocates, and projects have continued in contemporary Russia” (98), but do little to allay the reader’s skepticism that Cosmism has little current standing and influence.

27 In December 2006, Michael Lynch offered this post-mortem on Fuller’s participation in Kitzmiller: “It remains to be seen how much controversy Fuller’s testimony will generate among his academic colleagues. The defendants lost their case, and gathering from the judge’s ruling, they lost resoundingly ... Fuller’s testimony apparently left the plaintiff’s arguments unscathed; indeed, Judge John E. Jones III almost turned Fuller into a witness for the plaintiffs by repeatedly quoting statements from his testimony that seemed to support the adversary case ... Some of the more notable press accounts of the trial also treated Fuller’s testimony as a farcical sideshow to the main event [Lynch references Talbot, see above footnote 20] ... Though some of us in
where Gnosticism influences general attitudes to matters either profane or sacred. How, too, ought we entertain Fuller’s statements that “Darwinism erodes the motivations of science itself” or “Darwin may not be a true scientist” (71)?

At best, these statements seem merely provocative; at worst, alarmingly incoherent. At first, Remedios and Dusek adjudicate these claims by reminding the reader of Fuller’s “sweeping historical and philosophical account” and “more sophisticated and historically informed version” (71) of creationism. Even when Fuller’s wrong, he’s right.

In this case, we need only accept the ever-widening parameters of Fuller’s historical and philosophical learning, and suspend judgment given the unresolved lessons of his ceaseless dialectic. Remedios and Dusek repeatedly make an appeal to authority (*argumentum ad verecundiam*) and, in turn, set social epistemology on a decidedly anti-intellectual footing. In part, such footing and uncritical attitude seems necessary to entertain Fuller’s “own promethean project of transhumanism” (99).

**Transhuman Dialectic**

Fuller’s Promethean efforts aside, transhumanism strives to maintain the social order in the service of power and money. A guiding assumption in the desire to transcend human evolution and embodiment involves who wins, come some form of end time (or “event”), and gets to take their profits with them. Douglas Rushkoff (2018) puts the matter this way:

> It’s a reduction of human evolution to a video game that someone wins by finding the escape hatch and then letting a few of his BFFs come along for the ride. Will it be Musk, Bezos, Thiel...Zuckerberg? These billionaires are the presumptive winners of the digital economy — the same survival-of-the-fittest business landscape that’s fueling most of this speculation to begin with.28 (https://bit.ly/2MRgeIw)

Fuller’s staging of endless dialectic—his ceaseless provocations (and attendant insincerity), his flamboyant exercises in rehabilitating distasteful and dangerous ideas—drives him to distraction. We need look no further than his misjudgment of transhumanism’s sociality. The contemporary origins of the desire to transcend humanity do not reside with longing to know the mind of god. Those origins reside with Silicon Valley neoliberalism and the rather more profane wish to keep power in heaven as it is on earth.

Fuller’s transhumanism resides with the same type of technological determinism as other transhumanist dialects and Kuzweil’s Singularity. A convergence, in some form, of computers, genetics, nanotechnology, robotics and artificial intelligence leads inevitably to artificial superintelligence. Transhumanism depends on this convergence. Moore’s Law, and

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28 Fuller’s bet appears to be Peter Thiel.
Kurzweil’s Law of Accelerating Returns, will out.

This hard determinism renders practically meaningless—aside from fussiness, a slavish devotion to academic productivity, or perverse curiosity—the need for proactionary principles, preparations for human enhancement or alternative forms of existence, or the vindication of divine goodness. Since superintelligence lies on the horizon, what purpose can relitigating the history of eugenics, or enabling human experimentation, serve? Epistemic agents can put aside their agency. Kurzweil asserts that skepticism and caution now threaten “society’s interests” (Pein 2017, 246). Remedios and Dusek portray Fuller as having the same disturbing attitude.

At the end of Knowing Humanity in the Social World, comes a flicker of challenge:

Fuller is totally uncritical about the similarly of utopian technologists’ and corporate leaders’ positions on artificial intelligence, synthetic biology, and space travel. He assumes computers can replace human investigators and allow the uploading of human thought and personality. However, he never discusses and replies to the technical and philosophical literature that claims there are limits to what is claimed can be achieved toward strong artificial intelligence, or with genetic engineering. (124)

A more well-drawn, critical epistemic agent would begin with normative ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions regarding Fuller’s blind spot and our present understanding of social epistemology. Inattention to technological utopianism and determinism does not strike me as a sufficient explanation—although the gravity of fashioning such grand futurism remains strong—for Fuller’s approach. Of course, the “blind spot” to which I point may be nothing of the sort. We should, then, move out of the way and pacify ourselves by constructing neo-Kantian worlds, while our technological and corporate betters make space for the select to occupy.

The idea of unification, of the ability of the epistemic agent to unify knowledge in terms of their “worldview and purposes,” threads throughout Remedios and Dusek’s book. Based on the book, I cannot resolve social epistemology pre- and post- the year 2000. Agent-oriented epistemology assumes yet another form of determinism. Remedios and Dusek look more than two centuries into our past to locate a philosophical language to speak to our future. Additionally, Remedios and Dusek render social epistemology passive and reliant on the Californian political order. If epistemic unification appears only at the dawn of a technologically determined future, we are automatons—no longer human.

Remedios and Dusek explain: “The provocative Fuller defends eugenics and thinks it should not be rejected though stigmatized because of its application by the Nazis” (emphasis mine, 116-117). While adding later in the paragraph “… if the [Nazi] experiments really do contribute to scientific knowledge, the ethical and utilitarian issues remain” (117), Remedios and Dusek ignore the ethical issues to which they gesture. Tellingly, Remedios and Dusek toggle back to a mitigating stance in describing “Cruel experiments that did have eventual medical payoff were those concerning the testing of artificial blood plasmas on prisoners of war during WWII…” (117).
Conclusion

Allow me to return to the question that Remedios and Dusek propose as central to Fuller’s metaphysically-oriented, post-2000, work: “What type of being should the knower be” (2)? Another direct (and undoubtedly simplistic) answer—enhanced. Knowers should be technologically enhanced types of beings. The kinds of enhancements on which Remedios and Dusek focus come with the convergence of biotechnology, nanotechnology, and computer technology and, so, humanity 2.0.

Humanity 2.0’s sustaining premise begins with yet another verse in the well-worn siren song of the new change, of accelerating change, of inevitable change. It is the call of Silicon Valley hucksters like Ray Kurzweil.30 One cannot deny that technological change occurs. Still, a more sophisticated theory of technological change, and the reciprocal relation between technology and agency, seems in order. Remedios and Dusek and Fuller’s hard technological determinism cries out for reductionism. If a technological convergence occurs and super-intelligent computers arise what purpose, then, in preparing by using humanity 1.0 tools and concepts?

Why would this convergence, and our subsequent disembodied state, not also dictate, or anticipate, even revised ethical categories (ethics 2.0, 109), government programs (welfare state 2.0, 110), and academic institutions (university 2.0, 122)? Such “2.0 thinking,” captive to determinism, would be quaint if not for very real horrors of endorsing eugenics and human experimentation. The unshakeable assuredness of the technological determinism at the heart Fuller’s work denies the consequences, if not the risk itself, for the risks epistemic agents “must” take.

In 1988, Steve Fuller asked a different question: How should we organize and pursue knowledge collectively? 31 This question assumes that human beings have cognitive limitations, limitations that might be ameliorated by humans acting in helpful concert to change society and ourselves. As a starting point, befitting the 1980’s, Fuller sought answers in “knowledge bearing texts” and an expansive notion of textual technologies and processes. This line of inquiry remains vital. But neither the question, nor social epistemology, belongs solely to Steve Fuller.

Let me return to an additional question. “Is Fuller the super-agent?” (131). In the opening of this essay, I took Remedios’s question as calling back to hyperbole about Fuller in the book’s opening. Fuller does not answer the question directly, but Knowing Humanity in the Social World does—yes, Steve Fuller is the super-agent. While Remedios and Dusek do not yet attribute

30 “Ray Kurzweil is a genius. One of the greatest hucksters of the age …” (PZ Myers as quoted in Pein 2017, 245). From Kurzweil (1993): “One of the advantages of being in the futurism business is that by the time your readers are able to find fault with your forecasts, it is too late for them to ask for their money back.”
31 I abridged Fuller’s (1988, 3) fundamental question: “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?”
godlike qualities to Fuller, agent-oriented epistemology is surely created in his image—an image formed, if not anticipated, by academic charisma and bureaucratic rationality.

As the dominant voice and vita in the branch of social epistemology of Remedios and Dusek's concern, Fuller will likely continue to set the agenda. Still, we might harken back to the more grounded perspective of Jesse Shera (1970) who helped coin the term social epistemology. Shera defines social epistemology as:

The study of knowledge in society. It should provide a framework for the investigation of the entire complex problem of the nature of the intellectual process in society; the study of the ways in which society as a whole achieves a perceptive relation to its total environment. It should lift the study of the intellectual life from that of scrutiny of the individual to an enquiry into the means by which a society, nation, of culture achieve an understanding of stimuli which act upon it … a new synthesis of the interaction between knowledge and social activity, or, if you prefer, social dynamics. (86)

Shera asks a great deal of social epistemology. It is good work for us now. We need not await future gods.

An Editorial Note

Palgrave Macmillian do the text no favors. We too easily live with our complicity—publishing houses, editors, universities, and scholars alike—to think of scholarship only as output—the more, the faster, the better. This material and social environment influences our notions of social epistemology and epistemic agency in significant ways addressed indirectly in this essay. For Remedios and Dusek, the rush to press means that infelicitous phrasing and cosmetic errors run throughout the text. The interview between Remedios and Fuller needs another editorial pass. Finally, the book did not integrate the voices of its co-authors.

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References


