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Revisions 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.

Part of the beauty of Remedios & Dusek's book is that the authors masterfully distributed Fuller's somewhat eclectic intellectual pursuits in various chapters, so that, *qua* textbook, one can focus on those aspects that one finds relevant to our particular interests. I believe that Remedios & Dusek had precisely this intention: doing a service to the readers via facilitating access to Fuller's thought in a selective manner.

The Bildung of a Person and Its 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

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.

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 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.

This chapter also articulates Fuller’s views on the neo-Kantian transformation of the unity of “philosophy *and* science” to a disentangled “philosophy *of* science”, triggering the role – disliked by him – of the philosopher as “underlabourer” of science. Linked to this chain of events is the critical view of STS’ subsequent degeneration into a merely descriptive pursuit (abandoning its primogenital normative calling).

Finally, the chapter also addresses Fuller’s famous criticism of Thomas Kuhn and support of Karl Popper; his (for some surprising) friendliness with logical positivism; and the perhaps equally famous comparison of the various rings of power within science with the religious disputes of Post-Reformation Christianity.

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

² Remedios & Dusek 2018, p. 34

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

As a proposed solution, and espousing a risk-taking (proactionary) approach, Fuller would assign “Academic Caesars”⁴ as heads of universities – namely, people who get into academic management not out of being “failed academicians”, nor because they are poked from corporative realms with zero knowledge about the educational system, but because they successfully merge both outstanding management skills with deep knowledge of universities’ academic structures (likely holding advanced degrees in the two areas).

The Academic Caesar would be in charge of breaking down the barriers built up between disciplines. This task would be primordial, since the current uncommunication between disciplines in fact represent an existential threat against the educational institutions themselves, given that hiring corporations gradually find less value added in this hyper-specialized knowledge – tinkering instead with the possibility of cutting the middle man, recruiting people with high IQ’s and “forming” them themselves.

An integrated knowledge constituted by both humanities and technology (which Fuller differentiates from “digital humanities” – the passive translation of humanities into accessible electronic means) would bring an added value in terms of creativity and critical thinking that not only would be deemed attractive to demanding employers of the future,

³ Remedios & Dusek 2018, p. 40

⁴ Fuller 2016

but it would immunize the citizen against a Draconian forthcoming competition against Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the workplace.

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.⁵

It would perhaps be best to start pointing out that the infamous ID controversy within Fuller’s work⁶ might have been blown out of proportion. Fuller has expressed, both orally and in writing, that the notion of ID he is sympathetic to is one that refers to the “intelligibility” of phenomena in the universe – the possibility of us *understanding* a certain finding, discovery or natural mechanism.

The acknowledgment that a particular portion of reality was parsed in such way that it can sync with our cognitive capacities, raises the question regarding whether or not there is some sort of intelligence behind it. The very mark of this intelligence would be our intelligibility of the phenomenon.

This way of presenting the ID position is closer to what some call the “teleological argument” – to which Isaac Newton subscribed: “This most beautiful system of the sun, planets, and comets, could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful Being.”⁷ This is a far cry from, if not the opposite of, the infamous quasi-scientific, right-wing, *Sola Scriptura*-inspired, Protestant creationism to which ID is unfortunately often associated.

Newton, the natural philosopher who embodied the Scientific Revolution (and thus, by extension, the beginning of Modern Science) shared this view. Three hundred years later, we find ID as underpinning a theoretical framework friendly with deep alterations of nature.

What Intelligent or Intelligible Design Does or Doesn’t Do

Remedios & Dusek, however, maintain that ID has no positive scientific agenda, that all its claims about life and its origins are negations (instead of putting forward testable hypotheses).⁸ Perhaps that is to be expected – and a brief consideration of its ID’s character could provide a hint as to why such is the case. On the one hand, ID does not attribute

⁵ Fuller 2007 and Fuller 2008

⁶ Fuller 2007 and Fuller 2008

⁷ Newton 1687, Book III, General Scholium

⁸ Remedios & Dusek 2018, p. 79

“intelligence” to any entity in particular. It can refer to a divine being, an extra-terrestrial creature or a human being.

They just have to possess, to use Cartesian nomenclature, a sort of *res cogitans* – which for Descartes included angels. On the other hand, “design” belongs more to the realm of technology (i.e. engineering) than to that of science. Recreating the object of study has been a mark of epistemic success from Giambattista Vico on. It is no coincidence that some nanotechnologists see him as a sort of patron saint.⁹

And this is why ID is found as part of a core “metaphysical research program” behind the so-called Emerging Technologies (or the NBIC Convergence: Nanotechnology, Biotechnology, Information technology and Cognitive science),¹⁰ the innovative culture of Silicon Valley and the views of several tech billionaire gurus.

In fact, this operating framework behind innovation may constitute one of the best arguments against those who claim that ID’s illustrious heritage does not justify its recognition as an epistemic meta-force in science.¹¹ If “Intelligent Design”, now at the hands of humans, aiming at the modification of nature towards our betterment, is what is behind technology innovators who actually make things work, how much does the complaints of older philosophers really matter?

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.

Fuller 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

⁹ Malapi-Nelson 2017, p. 248; Jung 2005

¹⁰ Malapi-Nelson 2017, ch. 10

¹¹ Lynch 2016a, p.2

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.

Engaging Proactionary Thinking

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. Fuller further articulates the proactionary principle, having written a whole book on the subject¹² – while More wrote an article.

Steve Fuller’s general endorsement of transhumanism is not uncritical. A representative issue that does not sit easy in Fuller’s mind is the question of those humans that choose to remain “unimproved” in a future where individual amelioration becomes normalized – perhaps even “reasonably” imposed (not unlike today’s children’s vaccination).

Indeed, Fuller forcefully brought up this issue during his 2016 Budapest debate with Zoltan Istvan.¹³ The future situation of those persons who choose staying unenhanced, in a “human 1.0” state, brings me to my last point. A framework of “reasonable accommodation” to these minorities (which might actually constitute high numbers, just as some conceptions qualify women as a minority) will have to be worked out. After all, some hardcore luddites, such as the Amish, are still around.

In this context, Remedios & Dusek bring up Fuller’s involvement in the StarArk project: an attempt to construct a future self-sustaining mega spaceship that will make of humans an interplanetary species and which may justify the said enhancements for interstellar travel.¹⁴ Remedios & Dusek characterize Fuller’s endorsement of this project as an elitist attempt to pick and choose only (or mostly) those “enhanced”, for perpetuating the species:

¹² Fuller 2014

¹³ BrainBar 2016

¹⁴ This idea was, in fact, at the core of the first transhumanist proposals as such, during the first half of the 20th century. Cf. Malapi-Nelson 2017, pp. 227-237.

Perhaps the StarArk would only be able to accommodate a Strangelovian elite of proactionary *Uebermenschen* adventurers, leaving the ecologists, precautionaries, and most other benighted humans to perish.¹⁵

This occurs in the penultimate paragraph, where the authors probably could not resist finally coming out as precautionaries. It is a good point. However, Fuller also advocates for the defense of minorities in a transhuman world, even giving them opportunities for contributing to the betterment of the whole species. For instance, he supports the idea of sending the elderly to space.¹⁶

Of course, on the one hand, there is not much they could lose. But on the other, they could live their last years of a human 1.0 lifestyle in space peace, just as we now regard with admiration the well polished and carefully refurbished American cars of the 60's still circulating in La Havana. In that regard, indeed the opposite of the alleged neo-Nietzschean supermen would be sent to the stars.

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,¹⁷ 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 files¹⁸)

¹⁵ Remedios & Dusek 2018, p. 119

¹⁶ Fuller 2015, Horgan 2015

¹⁷ Malapi-Nelson 2013

¹⁸ warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/staff/sfuller/media/audio

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 arguably returning to the Humboldtian ideal of merged research and teaching. Ideally, if one adds to these his daily tweets,¹⁹ 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 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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¹⁹ Some of which are reproduced by Remedios & Dusek 2018 (e.g. p. 102).

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