

***Social Epistemology Past, Present and Future: An Interview with Steve Fuller***  
**Adriana Murguía and Melissa Orozco, Universidad Autónoma de México**

Adriana Murguía and Melissa Orozco, of the Universidad Autónoma de México, conducted the following interview with Steve Fuller. The interview appeared originally, in Spanish, in *Acta Sociológica* (63 (2014): 143-153) as the concluding piece of a special issue devoted to ‘current debates in social epistemology’.

**Murguía and Orozco:** *It has been 20 years since Socializing Epistemology,<sup>1</sup> which, in a sense, inaugurated the field. Do you think it’s a consolidated area now? Which are in your opinion its main concerns/ results?*

**Fuller:** First, I don’t accept the premise of your question. It would be more accurate to say that social epistemology began with the special issue of *Synthese*, edited by Fred Schmitt, which appeared in 1987. That was also the year that the journal *Social Epistemology* published its first issue and the year before my book *Social Epistemology*, the first explicitly devoted to the topic, appeared. All of this was five years before *Socializing Epistemology*. That book simply marked the consolidation of ‘analytic social epistemology’, a field from which I am excluded — nowadays by mutual agreement. I do not believe that analytic social epistemology is an especially worthwhile enterprise, as shown by the relatively little interest shown in the field outside of analytic philosophy itself. This is very odd for a field that claims to be providing the normative structure of knowledge. In practice, however, analytic social epistemology simply re-invents and adapts bits of social scientific theories and findings to address conventional analytic-epistemological problems.

I believe that I was originally included in the special issue of *Synthese* because of a review essay I had published in *Erkenntnis* as a graduate student, called ‘The Cognitive Turn in Sociology’. It probed the epistemological and ontological assumptions of what was then the ‘new social studies of science’. I suppose that Schmitt thought that I was subjecting the sociology to philosophical analysis, perhaps in order to critique the sociologists or to enhance the conceptual toolkit of analytic philosophers. In fact, my aim all along has been to use the relative absence of the social from epistemology as symptomatic of a fatal blind spot in analytic philosophy itself. In this respect, my version of ‘social epistemology’ has always been ‘revisionist’ in the sense introduced by Peter Strawson to characterise the kind of metaphysics (e.g. Hegel’s) that doesn’t simply describe the world at a more abstract level (which is what I think analytic philosophy does at its best ) but rather tries to get us to see the world anew. I made this point in the inaugural issue of *Episteme*, a journal that was originally devoted to analytic social epistemology but nowadays is simply an ordinary epistemology journal — which suggests that analytic philosophers see social epistemology as a relatively minor part of their concerns.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Socializing Epistemology: The Social Dimensions of Knowledge* edited by Fred Schmitt published by Rowman & Littlefield in 1994.

Perhaps the most useful feature of *Socializing Epistemology* is the set of false dichotomies that it canonizes for the field known as ‘analytic social epistemology’: (1) individual versus social epistemology; (2) descriptive versus normative social epistemology; (3) direct versus indirect social epistemology (i.e. knowledge by one’s own social experience versus knowledge by deference to expert testimony). In this respect, everything that is currently wrong with analytic social epistemology is traceable to this book — and twenty years on, it is largely the same people (and their students) who are responsible for propagating the errors.

But why are these dichotomies false? One sentence answers will have to suffice for each of the above dichotomies: (1) The social character of knowledge does not emerge from some aggregation of the knowledge of individuals; on the contrary, individuals acquire their distinct epistemic identities in terms of already existing forms of social knowledge — say, as champions, opponents or revisers of generally recognized beliefs. (2) Social epistemology is a normative enterprise, yet analytic social epistemologists never seem to have learned Kant’s dictum ‘ought implies can’, which implies that normative theories are like scientific ones in that they should be constructed so as to be empirically testable (i.e. ‘realizable’). (3) My own social epistemology has been always sensitive to the sort of cognitive biases associated with one’s self-identity, including the tendency to overvalue personal experience while at the same time inferring that others would have had similar experiences to ourselves, were they are in our position, and hence are trustworthy as witnesses.

The overall effect of these three false dichotomies is that analytic social epistemologists tend to naturalise the distinction between the individual and the social, thereby ignoring the deeply constructed character of that distinction. By ‘constructed’ I mean that what we count as the responsibility of the individual and the responsibility of some larger collective entity is subject to political and legal negotiations, the resolution of which an economist might then criticize in terms of its ‘efficiency’. For example, it is only by social convention that we are personally responsible for actions clearly based on world-views and cognitive frameworks originally acquired from family and teachers when we were in no meaningful position to offer our consent. Curiously, analytic social epistemology does not seem to find this very obvious feature of our epistemic predicament problematic. On the contrary, it attaches normative epistemic significance to a forensic feature of human action — the simple fact that particular words and deeds come from the mouths and hands of particular individuals. But when that happens, philosophy, like Elvis, has left the building.

Finally, for a contrasting sense of social epistemology that is much more illuminating, without straying too far from the analytic tradition, consider Karl Popper, who was never concerned about the content of people’s beliefs or even whether they were true, let alone whether people knew of others more likely to hold true beliefs in a given domain. Rather, he was simply concerned with how the beliefs were tested and which actions were taken in the aftermath of those tests. Epistemology, in his sense, was public, social and objective. It was open to the idea that people may draw different conclusions from the same tests, given their other background beliefs. Nevertheless, the burden of proof would be distributed differently as they all moved forward in their respective inquiries. In short, Popper presented a vision of social epistemology that provided a strong role for the

testing of knowledge claims but without (*contra* Kuhn) requiring that everyone move forward together in light of such tests: People prepared to bare a greater burden of proof in light of refutation are free to carry on in that understanding.

**Murguía and Orozco:** *We think that social epistemology in important ways reproduces the divide between analytical and continental philosophy, and this is as counterproductive as it has been in other areas. What are your thoughts about this?*

**Fuller:** First, let me say that I believe that the analytic/continental distinction is largely a US-based construction that has spread globally along the paths of American academic hegemony. In this construction, ‘continental’ is a residual category that, at a descriptive level, simply means ‘non-English-speaking-in-origin’. But of course there are normative implications. The *telos* of ‘analytic philosophy’ is to turn philosophy into an autonomous discipline with its own unique, well-defined problems, methods of solving them, which then result in an agreed body of achievements. The words ‘paradigm’ and ‘professionalisation’ are used in this context. However, to anyone familiar with the history of philosophy, this looks like a perversion of philosophy’s *telos*. Philosophy is not simply another discipline alongside the rest. Rather, it is the secular heir of theology, which means that it can operate as either the ultimate ‘meta-discipline’ or the ultimate ‘infra-discipline’: In the former case, the philosopher lays the foundation for all discipline-based knowledge, in the latter the philosopher is the broker for all interdisciplinary transactions.

My vision of social epistemology has always aimed to restore this more exalted crypto-theological image, in both its ‘meta’ and ‘infra’ forms. On the one hand, I have consistently championed the full range of synthetic approaches on offer in modern philosophy – from idealism to positivism – that aim for the unification of inquiry; on the other, I have had a career-long interest in rhetoric that has been mostly centered on knowledge transactions across disciplinary boundaries. Both of these pursuits point to the centrality of the university as the site of social epistemology, which I pursue in response to your next question. But in terms of the current question, this more expansive understanding of philosophy comes instinctively to so-called ‘continental philosophers’.

But of course, as a trained analytic philosopher, I have spent my career unlearning my education. A defining moment in this regard came in a graduate seminar at the University of Pittsburgh, when the instructor said, ‘Scientists won’t take you seriously as a philosopher unless you know the science’. I found this profoundly misguided on at least two levels. First of all, scientists do not unilaterally determine scientific research agendas (e.g. policy makers are involved and they often have their own ideas). Moreover, scientists do not need philosophers to tell them how to do science, yet philosophers may still be relevant by offering direction to science. However, over the years, I have come to realize that many English-speaking academic philosophers suffer from a profound sense of existential insecurity and even self-loathing over the fact that they are philosophers — as if philosophy’s critics may be right after all that ‘It’s all just high-minded bullshit’. I can see why such people would be attracted to the image that analytic philosophy’s

modest but clear self-image. But these people are wimps who do not deserve to be in the field. Philosophers have nothing to be ashamed about in their history, not even Heidegger.

**Murguía and Orozco:** *Your work in the last few years has diversified from discussions of history and philosophy of science and Science and Technology Studies [STS] orientation, to the university in the 21st century, posthumanism and transhumanism, religion ... Is there a line that unifies these different topics? What is strange is why the analytic social epistemologists have not themselves moved more in these directions...*

**Fuller:** In the case of the university, my interest began as an outgrowth of the work I did on Kuhn and his critics and followers — including those in STS. None of these people — not only Kuhn and Popper but also Bloor and Latour — ever talked seriously about the university as a site for knowledge production. A university is much more than a bunch of laboratories: It also has classrooms — and, more to the point, the belief that the two sorts of places are jointly necessary for regular knowledge production. This is what Wilhelm von Humboldt meant by ‘the unity of teaching and research’. There is very little, if any, formal recognition of this ethos in either HPS or STS. Nevertheless, the university remains the institution that is singular in its dedication to the production of knowledge both for its own sake and as a public good. To me, it is impossible to call oneself a ‘social epistemologist’ and not have the nature of the university at the heart of one’s concerns.

However, once the university’s distinctiveness is taken seriously, it becomes equally clear that its knowledge production is ultimately in the service of constructing a certain kind of human identity. Thus, the humanities are rightly seen as housing the soul of the university. But what it means to be human has always been contested — basically between those who see us as one with nature and those who see us as one with God. (I belong to the latter category, though my reasons for doing so involve major concessions to naturalism.) One of the few common features of these different conceptions of ‘being human’ is that its full realization requires some sort of ‘quest’ or ‘project’. In other words, to be human is to be progressing toward a state of being significantly different from a starting point in some sort of ‘fallen’, ‘alienated’ or ‘incomplete’ state of being.

In terms of this background assumption, the rest of my work can be read as an elaborate defense of the following thesis: The path from Abrahamic theology to transhumanism is a fairly straight one, namely, as the secular translation of our divinely privileged status as a form of life into something that can be fully realized with the right kind of scientific knowledge. In short: science does not refute theology but delivers on its promises. This is the deep meaning of ‘modernity’ — and ‘Enlightenment’ — that allowed its champions to be resolutely optimistic despite the amount of destruction of the past that they licensed on the way to some projected glorious future. (And I mean to include *both* the liberal and the socialist champions of the Enlightenment among the ‘creative destroyers’ of the past.)

What has prevented this progressive ambition from dissolving into pure arrogance — though the temptation remains ever present — is a vestige of the original Biblical

sensibility that, in some sense, we are trying to recover from Adam's original fall from divine grace. Indeed, the English word 'research', like the French *recherche*, suggests an activity of finding something that has been lost or forgotten. (Of course, I am aware of the Platonic roots of this idea in *anamnesis*, but the Christians were the first to take the idea literally.) I invoke this etymology because to the disinterested observer, science — very much like the capitalist economy that has underwritten its modern development — is capable of doing both enormous good and enormous harm. Moreover, the two seem to go hand-in-hand. The division of labor between ethics and epistemology as normative disciplines in analytic philosophy has occluded the fact that over the past 200 years the very scientists who did so much to extend our epistemic horizons also encouraged the most destructive projects known to humanity. Of course, as long as history is written by the winners, this point is bound to remain hidden.

For example, we praise Einstein for advising FDR to start the US atomic bomb project, but only because we count ourselves among the beneficiaries of Einstein's intervention. However, a more world-historically rounded judgment — one that Hegel would recognize — would say that Einstein's ability and desire to influence FDR was the short-term *cost* that the world has had to pay for the overriding good that has come from the promotion of nuclear energy as a solution to not merely important theoretical problems but also important practical ones. Notwithstanding Einstein's belief in Heisenberg's ability to develop a Nazi atomic bomb, there was little intrinsic Nazi enthusiasm for such a project for largely the same reasons that Greens have historically rejected nuclear energy, namely, the risks outweigh the benefits as a general-purpose technology. This lack of enthusiasm, combined with the Allies' wartime embargo on scientific exchanges, doomed Heisenberg's efforts. If all that mattered was achieving a morally acceptable end to the Second World War, the atomic bomb project would have to count as a paranoid overreaction that opened up the Pandora's box of global security issues that characterized the Cold War. But now, on the other side of the Cold War, we find that even the Greens support nuclear power as part of a long-term, globally sustainable energy strategy. Hegel would be pleased.

**Murguía and Orozco:** *From our perspective, your work so far could be divided in three moments: 1) Reflections related to the origin of social epistemology as an interdisciplinary field, close to the interests of Science and Technology Studies [STS]; 2) Reflections related to the identity of social epistemologists and the place of philosophy within academia and beyond it; 3) More traditional philosophical themes related to the influence and consequences of science and technology for humanity. Which audiences are you trying to reach?*

**Fuller:** I see these three things less as 'moments' (which suggest distinct periods in my thinking) than as aspects that have been always present, albeit in different proportions. For example, I believe that STS as an autonomous field is in decline, largely because most of the younger people who identify with the field are on short-term contracts or otherwise not especially committed to discipline-building in a university context. (They're interested in moving from one 'fascinating' — aka fundable — research project to the next.) However, STS-based ideas are filtering through the rest of academia, the

policy world and society at large, which is a generally positive development. In any case, talking about ‘the future of STS’ is no longer necessary to address the interesting normative questions about the future of science and technology in society. *That* moment has passed.

In case what I have just said is not obvious, consider what three STS luminaries — Bruno Latour, Harry Collins and Sheila Jasanoff — are doing these days. Latour treats STS as an empirical launch pad for an ontologically pluralistic metaphysics that was always implicit in his empirical work but now can be promoted without it. Collins has basically taken a core STS insight to which he was a major contributor — namely, the context-specificity of expertise — and has turned it into a Kuhn-like paradigm that can be pursued without reference to any other traditional STS concerns. Finally, and perhaps most tellingly, Jasanoff still actively foregrounds the significance of STS in her pronouncements. But in practice this amounts to an elaborate branding exercise, in which she attaches terms like ‘co-production’ and ‘boundary work’ to situations that make perfect sense without them. One is thus left with the question: Epistemologically speaking, what is the ‘value-added’ of STS in her accounts beyond lofty verbiage?

But now speaking more directly to your question: I am trying to reach audiences for ‘philosophy’ in its broadest sense, which is to say, all those concerned with the normative disposition of humanity. This includes both academics and non-academics, but clearly I mean a reasonably well-educated public. For me, ‘What is the meaning of life?’ remains the primary philosophical question. But there is also the question of how this question itself can be most effectively addressed within the academic discipline of philosophy. ‘Social epistemology’ has been my own base, which no doubt reflects my own starting point in the history, philosophy and sociology of science. (I deliberately chose the name of ‘Auguste Comte’ for the first chair in social epistemology for that reason.) Others may come to pursue the same path by other means.

Unfortunately, analytic philosophy does not offer easy passage. It operates with a ‘vulgar sociological’ conception of philosophy. It is as if people who know nothing much about the history of philosophy — but who nevertheless think that philosophy is important — have decided to invent a discipline, also called ‘philosophy’, with a clearly set agenda and *modus operandi* that do not violate the epistemological imperatives of other disciplines, so that it can be recognized as one among equals in the academic universe. I call this vision — which Quine openly endorsed — as ‘vulgar sociological’ because it prescribes for philosophy by following a recipe for discipline-construction, one focused on identifying soluble problems that are unique to its domain.

Here it is worth remarking that there has been always an ambiguity in thinking about philosophy as a ‘problem-solving enterprise’, which is the calling card of analytic philosophy’s disciplinary self-understanding. On the one hand, one may think of ‘problems’ primarily in terms of their focused and bounded character: i.e. a solution is readily recognizable. A philosopher may only begin work once a ‘problem’ in this sense has been identified or constructed. Before that point, one is in intellectual freefall. This captures the sensibility of logical positivism *à la* A.J. Ayer, though not the positivist sensibility when the movement was still based in Vienna. On the other hand, one may think of the ‘problem’ as simply a rational sub-division of a larger philosophical task that

cannot itself be reduced to a single problem. Two people influential in my thinking, Karl Popper and Herbert Simon, who otherwise shared much of the intellectual heritage and cognitive dispositions of analytic philosophy, concurred on the second understanding of philosophy as a ‘problem-solving enterprise’. Neither dismissed the large questions of metaphysics as meaningless, yet neither thought that their answers lay in an analysis of ordinary language. Rather, philosophy’s role was to manufacture new schemes for understanding reality that render the large metaphysical questions tractable as problems. This led Popper to ontological pluralism (i.e. his three worlds) and Simon to artificial intelligence.

**Murguía and Orozco:** *How can the contributions of social epistemology reach audiences beyond experts, specifically decision makers?*

**Fuller:** First of all, one actually needs to *want* to reach beyond experts. Despite the lip service that academics occasionally pay to the idea of reaching wider publics, as a matter of fact relatively few are willing to make a good faith effort to do so. For example, academics still fail to appreciate that the mass media place largely non-negotiable constraints — number of words, amount of time, rival sources of attention, etc. — on the conveyance of ideas. The sort of authority that allows academics to address ‘captive audiences’ of students and colleagues simply does not exist when one moves to newspapers, television or even the internet. In various ways, from consultants to comedians, academic authority is easily challenged in those forums. Indeed, encounters with the media provide academics with the severest test of their ‘democratic’ credentials. That academics tend to be quick in dismissing media interventions — including representations of their own work — as mere ‘vulgarisations’ suggests that their ideas are too closely tied to specific media, such as the 45-minute lecture or the peer-reviewed journal article.

I would put the point more strongly. Academics cannot really be counted as ‘intellectuals’ unless they are capable of translating their ideas across various media, including ‘soundbites’. Whatever one wishes to say about the substantive views of, say, Richard Dawkins or Noam Chomsky, they are clearly capable of doing that. Moreover, they have established a regular presence across several intellectual media, and so if one of their articles or soundbites causes problems, there are other complementary means by which one can access and otherwise engage with their views. Sometimes academics, even ones capable of communicating beyond experts, fail to understand that media engagement must be sustained in order to count as a serious contribution to public discourse. In addition, academics must be able to apply their expertise to situations in which they may need to improvise significantly, as they are taken outside their epistemic comfort zones. The standard professorial dodge of a difficult student query — ‘You are asking the wrong question!’ — does not work in this setting. On the contrary, it is easily interpreted as evasion, arrogance or even incompetence. (And the interpreters may have a point!)

At the moment, the main institutional obstacles to academics reaching beyond their expertise are twofold: (1) There is little incentive in the academic reward system itself

to do more than teach students and write technical works. (2) The professional training of academics rarely involves mass media or public address training — in a word, ‘rhetoric’. As long as these two obstacles remain, only the more adventurous and committed of academics will risk acquiring a serious media presence. However, an equally adventurous and committed university could easily remove those obstacles, and thereby provide the conditions for *Homo Academicus 2.0* to flourish.

**Contact details: [meg\\_orozco@hotmail.com](mailto:meg_orozco@hotmail.com)**