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The Game and How to Play It: A Review of Fuller's *A Player's Guide to the Post-Truth Condition*

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*A Player's Guide to the Post-Truth Condition: The Name of the Game*

Steve Fuller

Anthem Press, 2020

140 pp.

What is striking as you turn the final page of Steve Fuller's (2020) *A Player's Guide to the Post-Truth Condition: The Name of the Game*, is the enormous 'weight' of the text despite its slim one-hundred and forty pages. Without being hyperbolic, this is a book that could have easily extended itself insurmountably. This is due to the complex tapestry of interpolated philosophical concepts Fuller weaves while formulating an understanding of the post-truth condition that goes beyond the standard complaints and lamentations commonly found in 'post-truth' discourse since 2016. For a text that deploys such a staggering number of ideas and theories, leaping across disciplines, ignoring established academic borders in epistemic cosmopolitan fashion, the brevity here is 'literally' literary wizardry. This is all evident from the outset.

Within the five pages which form the first chapter, Fuller draws on the idea of *taboo cognition* (artificial limits placed on our own reasoning), highlights the historical limits and taboos that, until recently, prohibited discussion of Christ's psychological condition; works in the Sceptic attack on certain authoritative knowledge claims known as the *sorites paradox* which reveal the *vague* nature of many normative terms; blends this with Renaissance questions which dissolve distinctions between "humanity" and "divinity" while demonstrating the futility of attempting to differentiate "real" from "fake" news (given that all news is partially true and partially false); all to make the point that our frames of reference for identifying facts are not as robust as we are conditioned to believe they are. (Given the limitations of a review, I'm unable to describe how Fuller manages to accomplish this so convincingly—you'll have to purchase, borrow, or illegally download the book to see how he pulls this off for yourself). Yet, this serves, in my opinion, as a gentle opening chapter to the rest of the text.

### Chapters in *A Player's Guide*

Chapter Two introduces Fuller's gamified understanding of the post-truth condition which disassembles the basic true-false dichotomy which we been pinned down by since Plato. This makes a new and perhaps more penetrating understanding of post-truth, than is presently available, possible. On Fuller's account, claims to truth are not justified by God or some metaphysical, political, or social higher power, but are attempts to reframe epistemic rules to allow groups and individuals to win the 'truth-game'.

Chapter Three lays the foundation for what could later lead to a taxonomy of types of players within the game. At this stage, the basic categories consist of players stuck in the truth-condition and post-truth players. These correspond respectively to *conformists* and *non-conformists*. The former seeks to 'win' by playing according to established rules regardless of how fair or unfair the rules are, while the later seeks to win the game by changing the rules.

Chapter Four then highlights the shared trajectory of capitalism and scientism as successful participants in the game whose success has been contingent on their ability to nominate what is valuable within the game while delegitimising the values of other participants. This point is illustrated by medical science's success in preventing homeopathic medicines from being counted as 'legitimate' practices through the deployment of a strategy which insists that only empirical observations have value within the medicine game while simultaneously ignoring more holistic measures of wellbeing and health.

Chapters Five and Six examine public relations and the media in a way that differs significantly from standard scholastic commentary, the latter of which typically ranges from thinly veiled to outright targeted attempts to cast blame for societal 'problems' related to post-truth on the press.

Chapters Seven through Eleven call into question the role of science, expertise, universities, and research in the post-truth condition, offering some convincing predictions of how these titans of epistemic authority might fare under new conditions of epistemic justice should knowledge be given the same egalitarian treatment as Rawls did for social economic justice and fairness. Spoiler alert, the present status of western society's historical epistemic authority, the Catholic Church, hints at a possible fate for our current gatekeepers of knowledge.

Finally, in one of the closing chapters, Fuller cashes out his particular model and understanding of the post-truth condition to consider what the final impact of the present pandemic on the structure of our reality might be. This is not a question that should be taken lightly. After all, the last time a major crisis caused an epistemic shift, according to Fuller, is the Lisbon 1755 earthquake in which a quarter of its population perished. This seismic event shook people's faith in God and served as a major platform from which at least several Enlightenment thinkers, most notably Voltaire, launched their philosophical attacks on the Church, which would lead to "reason" usurping "faith" as lord of the epistemic throne.

### **An Atypical Guide**

Fuller does guide the reader through his arguments well, but in a refreshingly atypical way. The balance between breadth, brevity, and accessibility is maintained by its awareness of one counter-normative thought: "we live in a time of unprecedented levels of literacy, schooling and access of information" (2). This is counter-normative because it defies the usual image of a misinformed and poorly educated populace painted by the "opponents of post-truth". This optimistic shift in attitude allows Fuller to simultaneously create something for the academic and non-academic alike.

Doubtless, those already familiar with the theories and philosophies referenced will have an easier time following Fuller, but the novice is not left behind. Enough historical information and theoretical explanation is provided for each relevant argument to be made with precision. In other words, Fuller accomplishes this tripartite balance of breadth, brevity, and accessibility by refusing to patronise his readers or pander to mediocrity. With that said, he does expect as much from his readers as he gives. Be prepared to engage with this book with an online search engine nearby—I did.

It is not difficult to anticipate how some of the objections to what Fuller has presented here might play out. I imagine this being read, by some, as nothing more than a ‘post-modern’ and superficially rebellious attack on science and the epistemic authority of our knowledge-institutions; I can even see this book being mistaken for a manifesto by a radical sceptic. Such readings would rely on one fundamental interpretive flaw: that Fuller himself is actually playing the post-truth game. If I’m reading him correctly, he’s not. Fuller takes no sides, awards no points, and keeps no score. Not only is he not a player in the game, he refuses to even referee the game—referees, *in a sense*, are after-all, players.

For those who take themselves to be the long-standing champions, Fuller, by taking no sides, appears to be favouring the other. This helps explain why Fuller, at least in this book, never seems to address or take seriously any of the societal problems which the unwritten rules of writing post-truth literature seem to prescribe: vaccine denial, conspiracy theories, the crises and decline of expertise, social media, the alt-right etc. To see these as problems, one must situate themselves on one side in the post-truth game: on the-truth side and see everyone else as either cheaters or losers. For those looking for a text that will affirm their anger and hostility towards such apostasies, Fuller’s book will be understandably frustrating.

### **The University and the Church**

This points to the most challenging task Fuller sets for his reader. It is not to come to his book with a burgeoning fount of knowledge about historical events, figures and philosophical theory. It is, rather, to approach the text with a sense of ignorance. To suspend decades of hegemonic education which privileges science as the universal epistemic authority in the same way the Enlightenment writers required the readers of their day to suspend their own decades of education which valorised faith and the Church’s epistemic authority. If taken seriously, Fuller’s text sets us on a path that could very well, for better or for worse, lead to a new Enlightenment. Or, it describes our journey as one that is already headed that way.

The tethering of the University to the fate of the Church and its fall from (epistemic) grace, early on in the book, will be especially provocative to some—especially those who see the modern University as a beneficiary of Enlightenment victory over religion, superstition and aristocratic monarchism. Yet, the resemblance between the two is uncanny. After becoming aware of the post-truth game through this book, the epistemic strategy of the expert now appears to me as something similar to that of St. Paul whose instruction to the Corinthian converts was to “Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1 KJV). The exhortation is, roughly, that one needn’t know much about Christ to be a good follower of Him, they just needed to imitate St. Paul, who had positioned himself as someone who knew Christ as intimately as any person could—though they probably had never met. A more accessible translation, and one more suitable to illustrate our point here is: “follow me as I follow Christ” (1 Cor 11:1 Modern English Version). Transposing this into academic parlance is rather straightforward: “follow me as I follow the facts”. In circular fashion, the facts are whatever the expert claims they are as Christ is whoever St. Paul claims

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He is. In this way, traditional facts hold power from behind a temple veil, the post-truth condition is one where the veil has been torn.

For those who have been frustrated and left unsatisfied by the usual, often politicised, post-truth refrain by intellectuals complaining that their scholarship is being ignored, and authority defied, by the public, Fuller's text is required reading.