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The Academy: From Divinity to Bovinity

Steve Fuller, University of Warwick, S.W.Fuller@warwick.ac.uk

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What follows is the Salutatory Address delivered by Steve Fuller to the 1979 graduating class of Columbia College, Columbia University, New York. US college graduating ceremonies are traditionally opened by the person who graduated no. 2 in his or her class (all students are ranked together, regardless of major). This person is the ‘Salutatorian’. In contrast, the person ranked no. 1 closes the graduation ceremony. S/he is the ‘Valedictorian’ and is meant to deliver a farewell address to classmates. This address will appear in an appendix of Fuller’s next book (with Springer), entitled: *Back to the University’s Future: The Second Coming of Humboldt*. It should be published by the end of 2022.

The text is reproduced from the original typescript of the speech with no editorial changes. It was delivered two months before the author turned twenty.



The Academy: From Divinity to Bovinity
(a fabula rasa)
Steve Fuller, 15 May 1979, Columbia College, NYC

Once upon a time...

... Back in the days when teaching was still a marketable profession, its bargaining power derived from being the sole distributor of a certain indispensable commodity, which we shall call Divinity. Divinity secured this power in several ways, each of which capitalized on the structure of the academic establishment. First, Divinity was attributed a constant presence in everyday life. This very nicely made up for the potential weakness of education lasting too short a period of time to make any difference in the student’s life. However, in order to bolster this divine ever-presence, a second trait—that of limited access—was necessary. On an obvious level, Divinity appears to be a fabrication since students do not know of its intricacies until they are educated. Yet, if the academicians argue that its presence is a secret one which requires privileged knowledge, then the possibility of fabrication gets turned around to emphasize the fundamental stupidity of the students. But there is one more element that was needed to seal this power, and that was the explicit superiority of Divinity in relation to other possible realities. Making the unseen esoteric is not nearly as difficult as making it indispensable.

A student may be quite willing to accept his ignorance of Divinity in order to capitalize on other virtues, such as his sexuality. But the academicians, clever as usual, equated the unseen with the initial determining force of the divine agency. They then attributed their own esoteric grasp of the matter to the tapping of a natural resource that recreates this initial occurrence of Divinity in every action, namely, the soul. If the student became content with his ignorance, say by luxuriating in the splendor of sexual awareness, his soul was subsequently doomed, which was said to be a rather unpleasant state-of-affairs—so unpleasant that it was unimaginable. Admitting this much ignorance on the part of the academicians was important so as to guarantee a certain verisimilitude in their teachings, which were those of mortals feebly contemplating the truth. In order to be effective, the

Divinity had to be separated from the diviners; the product from the producers. Producers come and go, but the product always remains. We have all heard *that* somewhere before.

For all these slanderous comments about divine academicians, there is one overriding positive note, namely, that Divinity encouraged a consistently critical attitude toward anything that exists. There was talk about the illusion of the senses that might make us think the usual, undivine route was the correct one. In short, the facts never got in the way of the truth. One responded not with examples from real life but with possible situations, and it was the logic of the argument rather than a majority of consenting adults that carried the day. As keepers of the Ivory Tower, the divine academicians found the much-flaunted empirical world to be only one of many. Thus, the authoritarian myth of Divinity became a license for all types of unearthly thinking and pooh-poohing of current affairs. These ideas then were said to have divine powers because they divested one of the baggage that inexorably drags down the person committed to following the course of the oh-so-mundane facts. A revolutionary transcendence could always be discussed in the Ivory Tower, and with the power of Divinity the diviners could actually scare enough people into its practice.

But such affective measures could not be expected to last forever. The bottom of the market eventually fell out of Divinity, and the diviners were brought down to earth—so far down that they were reduced to facing, of all things, the facts. Their subsequent ruminations compensated for the prior disregard of the facts by raising them to the level of sacred cows, which gives the name to this new academic order, Bovinity. Like their mammalian namesakes, the boviners always exhibit a profound look of impotence, which is said to be the result of ponderous deliberation that looks at both sides before crossing the issue. And crossing the issue is indeed a lot of hard work for these timid creatures. Consequently, the work-value of ideas became very significant: Do they work? Which can be translated as whether they take into account the ‘hard facts’. Students nowadays consigned to a temporary brush with Bovinity have broken up into two classes: the pre-professional and the pre-nothing. These two types of boviners can be distinguished by their relation to the facts.

The pre-professional is very clever because he knows what a fact is. As we have seen, facts are indeed curious little things. ‘Fact’, as you may know, derives from the past participle of the Latin verb ‘to make’, a completed state of making—something that has already happened. To say, with the believers in Bovinity, that the facts determine the future is therefore quite an endorsement of the way things have been. Pre-professionals capitalize on *this* fact by entry into fields that aim at maintaining a social equilibrium or—if I may venture a political word—the status quo. Of course, I am referring to law and medicine. Both of these are founded on the fundamental weakness of the individual, who is always trying to recoup his losses in order to break even. The technical term, I believe, is ‘a standard of living’. The law works its wonders by being a constant reminder that the natural condition of the state is a war of all against all. Nobody minds their own business because they’re trying to take over yours. Medicine is even nobler since it prolongs the amount of time you have to break even, which is to say, the amount of time you have to engage in legal services. But naturally you never break even—not even in death—for it is at that point that the friendly giants of professionalism come to blows. Medicine won’t let you transcend your factual existence so that the law cannot execute what facts remain. Pre-professionals see the academic establishment quite rightly as the bovine transmission of these facts. And they find such things as a classical education very useful in that direction, for it neatly maps out the

royal road from Solon and Hippocrates to Perry Mason and Marcus Welby in such a way as to capture even the imagination of the pre-nothings who employ Bovinity as their own standard-bearer. (And, as we all know, among comrades the pre-professional will quite openly admit the instrumentality of these bovine features in accomplishing the grand mission, which goes under the heading of Bull.)

As for the pre-nothings, such as myself, nothing much can be said. Sometimes I think a pre-nothing doesn't have the attachment to Bovinity that the pre-professional does, but I fear that this is not the case at all. Demonstrations are generally convenient media for making one's existence felt, and if you're pre-nothing the transcendence of nothingness is indeed a pretty tall order. Unfortunately, pre-nothings never demonstrate their existence but only some disturbing fact—such as the impending nuclear holocaust, covert slave trades in forbidden continents, and the like. However, Bovinity as it is can quite readily ruminate a response that restores the balance of facts and returns the pre-nothings to a state of nothingness—until the next disturbing fact comes along. Again, we break even. If we lived in a divine age, the pre-nothing might feel it quite natural to demonstrate about nothing have the keepers of the Ivory Tower divine some reasons for the discontent. Surely, a survey of all the *possible* problems in an academic establishment could turn up some rather interesting arguments. But then again, that might be a little too divine.