



## Epistemic Convenience: An Interview with Steve Fuller<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Basbøll and Steve Fuller

**Thomas Basbøll (henceforth TB)** In your 1993 book, *Philosophy, Rhetoric and the End of Knowledge*, you say that your work is situated within “the profound ambivalence that Western philosophers have had toward the equation of knowledge and power” and you explain this ambivalence through the disciplinary specialization of philosophy into, on the one hand, epistemology, i.e., the study of knowledge, and, on the other, ethics, or what we might call the study of power.

We might also speak of the study of truth and the study of justice and then recall the words of John Rawls: “Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, just as truth is of systems of thought.” That is, justice is to ethics what truth is to epistemology.

In *The Knowledge Book*,<sup>2</sup> there is a chapter called ‘Epistemic Justice’, which cuts across the disciplinary distinction between ethics and epistemology, between social institutions and systems of thought, power and knowledge. The University is a fitting site to engage with this source the “profound ambivalence of Western philosophy”, as you describe it. After all, the university is both a producer and distributor of knowledge; it has both epistemological and ethical responsibilities, it manifests both systems of thought and social institutions. Indeed, it might be said to be both a system of thought and a social institution. Its first virtue is of course most often said to be “truth”; you seem to be suggesting that its first virtue might also be “justice”. Are truth and justice separable virtues? Can they be prioritized, i.e., is there a first and second virtue of the University?

**Steve Fuller (henceforth SF)** No, truth and justice are not separable virtues. Here I take my cue from the German idealist tradition’s dynamic sense of truth as something that comes to be gradually realized as more and more people are formally recognized as knowers. In other words, truth is simply knowledge universalised. As fewer people are

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1 These questions were submitted to Steve Fuller by email, who answered them in writing.

2 Steve Fuller, *The Knowledge Book: Key Concepts in Philosophy, Science, and Culture* (Acumen and McGill-Queens University Press, 2007). See the web-links below for more details: <http://www.acumenpublishing.co.uk/display.asp?isbn=9781844650989&TAG=andCID> and <http://mqup.mcgill.ca/book.php?bookid=2138>.

excluded from the pursuit of knowledge, the power that the ‘knows’ can exert over the ‘know-nots’ diminishes. I associate this conception with a largely theological way of looking at the problem of justice as a general version of the problem of dirty hands: In other words, the cost of doing anything in the world, even the most good, is that some harm will result. The question then is whether this harm can ever be adequately redressed without causing still more harm.

Put another way: Does the redistribution of advantage simply create new disadvantages? The idealist picture presupposes that our dirty hands can indeed become clean once knowledge can no longer be used as an instrument of power over others. I would have this function as a Kant-style regulative ideal of collective inquiry. In practical terms, this means that the sources of knowledge are transparent to all knowers. Knowledge-based injustices typically boil down to appeals to expertise to restrict access to knowledge by demanding that things be known in one or very few ways (e.g. by mastering jargon, acquiring degrees, etc.).

**TB** What, specifically, does a university produce and distribute?

**SF** I believe that the university is a social technology for manufacturing knowledge as a public good. This goal is most clearly realized the more that research – which is always in the first instance novel and hence esoteric – is translated into teaching, and hence made available to people who had nothing to do with its original production and are likely to take that knowledge in directions other than those intended, or even desired, by the original researchers. This feat of epistemic justice is most obviously performed in the construction of curricular materials like course outlines, textbooks and other pedagogical devices.

**TB** How is the production and distribution of these things related to their consumption and concentration?

**SF** A real problem with contemporary universities is that there is little incentive to complete the Humboldtian cycle of translating research into teaching, which means that research often remains concentrated in the researchers, their clients and perhaps graduate students specifically undergoing training to research in the same area. For knowledge to be produced as a public good, it needs to be regularly distributed at the undergraduate level, preferably to students for whom such knowledge would form part of their general education rather than a moment in the credentialing process.

**TB** Academic freedom has traditionally been practiced as an elevated form of irresponsibility, grounded in the idea that knowledge has no immediate effects on power. Recent university reforms and changes in academic culture, however, seem predicated on the idea that knowledge really is power. Academics are being held accountable, both by their own institutions and by society more generally, and both for how they spend their time and what they find themselves endorsing. Academics themselves also seem to feel increasingly responsible for the consequences of their work, even guilty about them. Do you think academic inquiry really has become more important for how power is exercised?

**SF** It's true that academic inquiry is increasingly insinuated in the various modes of legitimation in society, such that sometimes it seems that an expert or expertise needs to be mobilised to license any socially significant act. At the same time, there is of course also the opposing tendency forcing academics to be more publicly accountable. And this usually means that academics need to justify their existence in some traditionally non-academic terms. I believe these countervailing tendencies simply reflect the fact that academics no longer have guild possession over the production of knowledge in society.

The proliferation of terms like 'knowledge management', 'knowledge society' and 'knowledge economy' underscore the point: Knowledge seems to be everywhere nowadays, which means that academics must scramble to retain their share in a market over which they once had a monopoly. I should quickly add that Lyotard was right in *The Postmodern Condition* when he observed most innovations have always come from outside the academy. Nevertheless, the academy was needed to ensure that those innovations were converted into public goods rather than intellectual property. As universities themselves are now encouraged to become intellectual property holders, their distinctiveness as producers of knowledge as a public good is itself under threat.

**TB** Do you think academic freedom is threatened by this newfound sense of responsibility?

**SF** Yes, in two senses: one obvious, one not so obvious. The obvious one is tied to the decline in tenurable posts, which was traditionally the institutional safeguard for academic freedom: You may hate what I say, or find it irrelevant, but I still keep my job once I've passed a probationary period where I've demonstrated my competence in the tools of the academic trade – i.e. the marshalling of reason and evidence in argument. As universities become more 'adaptive' and 'flexible', the number of tenurable posts decline, and hence the glut of short-term contract teachers and researchers more directly sensitive to market pressures. Typically this does not produce outright censorship but rather subtler disincentives against pursuing certain lines of inquiry unlikely to be rewarded by large grants or student enrolments. This doesn't mean that people can't do interesting things. Indeed, in this time of rapidly shifting consumption patterns, adaptation requires a willingness to be open to new trends. But that sort of much-touted 'vibrancy' should not be confused with intellectual autonomy, which is directed by a self-legislated agenda that one believes has relevance beyond immediate market conditions.

The less obvious threat to academic freedom is related to my earlier point about the flattening of the conception of knowledge. It is now common to defend academic freedom as a species of freedom of speech, which I think is a big mistake because rarely can people exercise free speech unconditionally. One is always confronted with US Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes famous challenge of the prankster who cries 'Fire!' in a crowded theatre. In this and other problematic cases, 'free speech' is clearly treated as a form of action involving the use of the mouth, and not surprisingly there is a tendency towards some legal restriction.

However, it is worth recalling that the sorts of freedom that we normally associate with ‘free speech’ were originally protected on rather specific and separate grounds: I mean here freedom of press, freedom of worship and freedom of assembly – as well as academic freedom (i.e. the reciprocal freedoms to teach and to learn). All of these freedoms can be justified on their own without introducing a problematically inflated notion of free speech, which then provides an excuse for its restriction. People listening to this argument often think I am being elitist but I am simply saying that the sort of legal protection required of academic freedom pertains primarily to the modes of reasoning that we publicly use which marks us as academics – not to any old mode of reasoning or speech.<sup>3</sup>

**TB** Until now, social epistemology has served largely as a meta-theory for some members of the STS community. Such theorizing is of course important; indeed, you characterize theorizing as “a politically significant practice”. But there are also suggestions in your work that social epistemology might take a much more practical turn, serving as disciplinary background (training) of knowledge policy analysts and academic writing instructors, i.e., as social epistemologists enter professional life rather than traditional academic positions. The distinct sensibility that your brand of social epistemology fosters seems well-suited for the members of university administrations and the science policy apparatus. What do you think of the prospects for social epistemology as a vocation in this non-academic sense?

**SF** This question has increasingly interested me, as I have more fruitful exchanges with policymakers, lawyers, publishers, editors, journalists and other media types. Even my best students who have stayed in academia have generally gravitated away from the research mainstream to fields broadly concerned with ‘science communication’ and perhaps even ‘public relations of science’ (if that phrase doesn’t sound too loaded). These areas are likely to grow in the future as ‘science’ (i.e. organized knowledge, or *Wissenschaft*) is more explicitly entangled with the various modes of social legitimation. I tend to regard this as the sort of public enlightenment as, generally speaking, an *intended* consequence of Humboldt’s 19<sup>th</sup> century reinvention of the university. In other words, his idea was that academically trained cohorts would make their way into the larger society, leading to its gradual rationalisation, as academic modes of reasoning permeate public life. There are at least two differences from his original idea, though. One is that much of the migration out of the university has been – and increasingly is – forced – as people with hopes of pursuing an academic career are forced into, say, journalism or the mass media because of an oversubscribed labour market.

The second difference is that though Humboldt probably thought that an ‘academicised’ society would be a stable one, academicisation has arguably raised the incidence of – and tolerance for – social disruption. Here one need only think of the impact of those academic outcasts Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, the bane of Allan Bloom’s notorious 1987 best seller, *The Closing of the American Mind*. For Bloom, the Unholy Trinity’s

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3 The increasing importance of academic freedom in the UK has recently led to the formation of Academics for Academic Freedom, which Fuller, a prominent member, has defended in debate: <http://www.philosophersnet.com/magazine/article.php?id=1032>

influence demonstrated the failure of universities as vehicles for public enlightenment. Of course, he was wrong in his verdict but he was right to recognise the potentially explosive consequences once academics, by choice or by force, descend from the Ivory Tower.

**TB** What would be a fitting disciplinary background (degree) for such a practicing social epistemologist?

**SF** In principle, someone trained in any academic discipline could be a social epistemologist if they have a relatively good grasp of the history, philosophy and sociology of their discipline, and regard themselves as contributing to the discipline's future in some fashion. Ideally, such a person should have a sense of how their discipline compares with others along these dimensions – and it is here where dedicated courses would be needed. I also think that, on the practical side, to be a genuine social epistemologist, one must be committed to knowledge as a public good, which requires an ability to translate knowledge into more public media. So, in that respect, a fully rounded social epistemologist would have the skills of a public intellectual who can communicate ideas to a variety of audiences, in a variety of contexts, through a variety of media.

**TB** How would such a “professionalization” of social epistemology fit in with your recent experiences as a public intellectual? I'm thinking in particular of the intelligent design debates. Is that also a way of practicing social epistemology? Or is it as separate from your ‘discipline’ as such ‘political’ work is from the disciplinary backgrounds of biologists and mathematicians? That is, are you a public intellectual as a citizen or as a social epistemologist?

**SF** I am a public intellectual as an academic. Why don't I say ‘as a citizen’? Two reasons: 1) My status as a citizen (and I am still a citizen of the US not the UK) has *not* provided me the opportunities to intervene, for better or worse, in public affairs. It has been my status as an academic of a certain sort, which I have identified as ‘social epistemologist’; 2) Ordinary citizens cannot be regarded as proper public intellectuals unless they have ‘the right to be wrong’. This presupposes the luxury of making your mistakes in public, a feat that is difficult to manage for very long without something like the institutional protection offered by academic tenure. Cyberspace provides a good sense of the de facto limitations on the right to be wrong. Most internet debates occur via aliases. It would be nice to think that this is out of deference to a Habermasian ‘ideal speech situation’ (i.e. I don't want my identity to interfere with how my arguments are judged) but more likely it is out of fear of the consequences from the revelation of one's true identity.

As I get older, I learn more from Max Weber, someone whose career needs to be understood in the round. Here was someone who repeatedly spoke truth to power by appealing to truth as a source of power. Put another way: He saw clearly that the political strength of academia comes from academics speaking as academics, rather than as surrogates for various class, race, ethnic, gender, etc. groups. Thus, I decided to participate in the US intelligent design (ID) trial (*Kitzmiller vs. Dover Area School District*) after concluding that the plaintiffs' experts, whose written testimony I was

asked to rebut, had compromised their academic integrity by presenting a false picture of the history and philosophy of science in order to justify the exclusion of ID from high school science courses. In particular, the idea that science has been uniformly, or even primarily, informed by ‘methodological naturalism’ is a fit-for-purpose fiction. This concept, which has no clear philosophical meaning, basically conflates the idea of testability (which is fine as far as it goes) with a principled denial of the supernatural (which is based on a metaphysically prejudicial reading of the history of science).

In effect, the plaintiffs’ experts would require science teachers to take a metaphysical loyalty oath. Unlike them, I do not believe that ID poses so great a threat to science that I feel I must shroud what I believe to be the truth in a ‘double truth’ doctrine like methodological naturalism. Science will continue perfectly fine, and probably improve, with ID in the classroom, given its historic contributions to science via the likes of Newton, Mendel, etc. I think more people don’t see the situation this way because the plaintiffs’ experts – an array of scientists, philosophers and theologians – managed to support the scientific establishment and receive the judge’s blessing in the course of compromising their academic integrity.

This raises the more general issue, in these neo-liberal times, of academics running the risk of becoming captive to their ‘clients’, a term that should be understood in not only economic terms but also political ones. For example, a recent President of the American Sociological Association, Michael Burawoy, has been campaigning across the globe for ‘public sociology’, which in practice would reduce the discipline to a forum where every interest group can expect a fair hearing and perhaps even some advocacy but no clear voice of its own. (Where would such academic consciences of American society as C. Wright Mills or Alvin Gouldner figure in this conception of ‘public sociology’?) I see Burawoy’s vision as very much of a piece with the recent ‘spatialisation’ of social concepts, a euphemistic way of emptying institutions of their historical content, so as to make their infrastructure available to the highest bidder. Thus, when the Euro-gurus of science policy speak of universities in ‘mode 2 knowledge production’ in Greco-Latin terms as *agora* or *fora*, I reach for my wallet because these ancient terms originally referred to nothing more than multipurpose spaces in their respective societies, where, say, *both* politics and business could be conducted in equanimity. The first step ‘back to the future’ is to provide financial incentives for academics to share their offices and classrooms with conference-goers, with an option but not a requirement that the academics themselves attend the conference. More generally, the day when municipalities sell their civic buildings and start to rent time and space in generic conference centres, we will be back to the architectural consciousness of our ancient forebears.

**TB** Al Gore has recently given currency to the phrase ‘an inconvenient truth’ in his case for the proposition that ecological disaster awaits us if we don’t do something about climate change. People like Bjørn Lomborg, of course, argue that the environment isn’t doing as badly as we might think, or as badly as a particular constellation of scientists and politicians would have us think. They are often accused of serving as useful idiots to corporate interests and neo-liberal agendas, in short, of offering rather “convenient” interpretations of the climate data. Interestingly, Lomborg has himself argued that contemporary environmentalism, and especially the doomsday vision that motivates it,

is itself a convenient way to avoid much more important, and less convenient, 'leftist' causes such as the redistribution of wealth. Now, from the point of view of social epistemology, it almost ought to be possible to settle this question of whose truth is most convenient. More generally, we should be able to imagine an intellectual environment, constituted by the arrangement of political and scientific interests, in which the truth – i.e., the epistemic consensus on a given topic – is likely to be more or less convenient to the interests of what, perhaps imprecisely, is sometimes called power. More specifically, do you think that current trends in university administration are likely to make the truth more convenient?

**SF** Two sides to the binary of convenient/inconvenient truth come out from your question, which are really two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, when Gore speaks of 'inconvenient truth', he means a truth that he thinks is difficult for people to deny because its empirical basis is so strong. This sense comports very well with the idea that 'knowledge = power', indeed, in a way that Bruno Latour could appreciate, since it suggests an enormous effort (commissioning new research, new PR campaigns, etc.) would be needed to overturn it. On the other hand, when Lomborg speaks of Gore's super-environmentalism as itself a 'convenient truth', he means that it serves the interests of those (on the left) who found their original assignment too difficult – i.e. alleviating poverty and specifically human misery – and so have turned to something more tractable, or at least something where they feel they're more in control of the game. In effect, Gore and Lomborg are providing, respectively, a synchronic and a diachronic reading of the left's geopolitical strategy: Gore stresses immediate political advantage, Lomborg long-term accommodation to changing political fortunes. This is my rather Hegelian 'cunning of reason' take on the situation, which I have developed in *The New Sociological Imagination* (Sage, 2006: chapter 13).

To many this will seem like a perverse reading, since Gore is usually cast as the visionary and Lomborg the opportunist. However, we shouldn't forget that, notwithstanding Lomborg's influential friends in government and industry, Gore is the one about to pick up the Nobel Peace Prize. Gore is clearly the man of the moment – though quite possibly only of that moment. The trick for the social epistemologist is to do something creative with the hidden lesson in all this – namely, that in order to get to the point in history when we'll be able to say, "Lomborg was right after all, and Gore was over the top with his ecological alarmism," we may first have to go through a period in which we take Gore somewhat seriously. I don't mean we do everything he says, but we do enough of it that the alarmism dies down, and more traditionally left interests can find it convenient to migrate somewhere closer to Lomborg's position.

The problem with Lomborg's views as it stands is not that they're wrong (they're not) but that the wrong people – certainly an inadequate range of people – are positioned to benefit from them. Many scientific advances have this Lomborg-like quality when they first burst on the scene because of their elite character, which I already mentioned is likely to increase as intellectual property regimes are added to the cognitive difficulties already inherent in genuinely new knowledge. Here universities have a vital role to play in mainstreaming awkward voices like Lomborg by integrating them into a curricular narrative, so they are not seen as merely slaughtering the sacred cows but as replacing them with a more durable species. In this respect, academic administrators might think

of their task as one of *intergenerational epistemic management*, getting humanity across the timescale required for the cunning of reason to work its magic: So, yes, teach Gore's view as the dominant one but also teach Lomborg's as a critique that might itself attract developers in the long term that will overturn Gore. My attitude toward ID vis-à-vis Darwinism is very much along those lines: Academia as society's dialectical engine.

**TB** At the beginning of this interview you said that truth and justice are not separable virtues. But this seems to imply that truth will always be more or less convenient to the various, and often competing, visions of justice that are available. Is there absolutely no hope for a 'radically inconvenient' notion of truth? That is, can science ever put us into a position to know something that is of no ideological use to anyone? Can we only ever 'know' something that someone else, often more powerful than ourselves, has an interest in having us believe? Is there no conceivable organizational blueprint for a scientific institution that could achieve such knowledge?

**SF** I actually don't think the situation is as desperate as your question suggests. My idea of a 'radically inconvenient truth' is one that cannot be used to exert power over another. In other words, all parties have equal access to such a truth, and so they can judge it for themselves: It can't be rigged to benefit one party. All that I am saying here is just a politically sexed up way of talking about the project of classical epistemology, to which 'rationalism' and 'empiricism' were meant as alternative general solutions. On the one hand, I must be able to follow the steps in the reasoning; on the other, I must be able to see it with my own eyes. Both sides of this argument took refuge in the prospect of methodological transparency, a kind of procedural justice for inquiry. This is 'inconvenient' because all parties are supposed to be signed up to it before they know its outcomes in particular cases. The mistake made by those old epistemologists is to think that the solution lay in something pre-social about human nature, be it defined biologically or, more likely, theologically. The only one who got matters right was Hobbes, who insisted that the only way to ensure that people can't dominate each other, socially or epistemically, is by binding them all to the terms of the same contract.

From this perspective, the autonomy of philosophy came to be seriously compromised when it began to take seriously – and this has really happened only in my lifetime – the idea that our knowledge claims should always be in accordance with our best scientific theories. That is to render our social epistemology much too convenient to the status quo, ignoring the (meta)fact that all theories, *especially* scientific ones, are superseded in the long term. It is easy to see, under the circumstances, why Richard Rorty regarded philosophical assertions of 'truth' as 'honorifics'. Nowadays philosophers – and Daniel Dennett would be a paradigm case here – give added weight to knowledge claims that already carry quite a lot of weight because of the privileged status of science in society. Rorty thought the practice relatively harmless, showing if anything how parasitic philosophy was on science for any sort of credibility. I see the matter more sinisterly, namely, as a subversion of philosophy's critical spirit. In a recent article, I have written that science will not be democratized unless expertise is 'decommissioned'.<sup>4</sup> By that I mean that esoteric knowledge be rendered publicly available, enabling the broadest

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4 Steve Fuller, 'Science Democratized = Expertise Decommissioned', *Spontaneous Generations*, 1(1), <http://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/SpontaneousGenerations/article/viewFile/2969/1087>.

range of people to do what they will with it. Again this returns us to the main mission of the university, where a properly Humboldtian sense of philosophy should be at its centre.

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