A strong distinction between humans and non-humans is no longer required for research purposes: a debate between Bruno Latour and Steve Fuller

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ABSTRACT

The second International Knowledge and Discourse Conference, held at the University of Hong Kong in June 2002, was the forum for the long-awaited debate between Bruno Latour and Steve Fuller. Bruno Latour counts beyond two. He places the blame for the emphasis in academia on the subject-object distinction on Kant. Latour wants academics to acknowledge that things act, and suggests we look at other traditions, e.g. the Chinese, for alternatives to the subject-object dichotomy. Steve Fuller concentrated on the moral project of science, which is to draw a distinction between the human and the non-human and, to highlight the fact that, as the culmination of the sciences, social science has a particular responsibility to make this distinction. He accused Bruno Latour of evading the moral issue. The debate can be read as a reiteration of the positions of Bruno Latour and Steve Fuller on the question of heterogeneity at the theoretical level, but it did not address the topic at the practical or research level.

Key words heterogeneity, human, non-human, objectivity, subjectivity
The second International Knowledge and Discourse Conference, held at the University of Hong Kong in June 2002, was the venue for this debate between Bruno Latour from the École des Mines in Paris and Steve Fuller from the University of Warwick. The debate was the highlight of the conference, the aim of which, like the first Knowledge and Discourse Conference held in 1996 in Hong Kong, was to encourage interdisciplinarity by bringing together scholars from a wide range of disciplines and to offer critiques and challenges to existing practices and ideas.

Steve Fuller suggested the motion of the debate, that ‘A strong distinction between humans and non-humans is no longer required for research purposes’. Bruno Latour spoke for the motion and Steve Fuller spoke against it. The conference was the ideal venue for the debate because the topic offered challenges to academic research practices and theoretical positions that have been long established in the Western tradition since Plato and confirmed by Kant. We hoped that the critique of the Western tradition would encourage scholars from the Eastern tradition to participate.

A major problem for the organizers of the debate was its format. We wanted the debate to continue the interactive style that has become a trademark of the Knowledge and Discourse conferences. We did not want it to be just a pair of monologues. But, the importance of the debate and the positions of the speakers required that Bruno Latour and Steve Fuller should be given sufficient time to make their respective cases. Our solution was to ask Bruno Latour and Steve Fuller to reply after the initial speeches and to ask Laurence Goldstein, Professor of the Philosophy of Language and Mind at the University of Hong Kong, to summarize the debate before the questions from the audience. Then Bruno Latour and Steve Fuller were invited to summarize their positions briefly.

**Bruno Latour**

I’m not sure that it is a debate because I’m not sure that there are two sides. To have two sides we have to talk about the same thing, otherwise we will be debating at cross-purposes. Maybe at the end we might decide what would have been the debate if there had been a debate.

As a good pragmatist, what does a concept like human and non-human mean? What difference does it make in terms of research purposes, if we have it or if we don’t have it? For me, theory is like the plug-ins we have on computers or the internet. If you don’t have the right plug-in, you just don’t see things on the screen. If you download the plug-in, you see things and you can run the little gimmick that people have put into their web page. Theory for me is like that. A concept has to make a difference. If you download this
very specific plug-in of the human and non-human connection, you can see things and do things on the screen or in research that you couldn’t see or you couldn’t animate before. It’s not a moral point. I’m not advocating horrible things like mixing humans and non-humans. It’s not like zoophilia or that sort of thing. It’s a very precise question of research. That’s why I put ‘research purposes’ in the title.

What is the problem with this question which I have tried to solve by this little plug-in? It’s a very simple point: most of the social sciences and most of philosophy since Kant have been without a world. Things do nothing. What you learn at the beginning of sociology 101, especially if it’s continental theory 101, Bourdieu or Frankfurt 101, is precisely that things do not act. Are we so naïve as to think that things act? No, we know very well that it’s the projection of our own society and value onto things which do nothing. This is what we teach. What is taught in many departments, which is one of the interesting origins of the science wars, is that things do not count. Subjectivity counts, language counts, social structures count, and things are there as mere support for a society and language to be moulded or to be carved. The words vary, but the argument is always the same. It’s always Kant and the critical position. Things do not count. It’s the same old Copernican revolution, which is a very odd term to describe the social sciences.

For many years I have wrestled with the subject-and-object argument. Can we overcome the distinction between subject and object? Can we actually make better linkages and dialectics and so on? It hasn’t worked and many eminent people have tried. Bergson has tried. Hegel has tried. Husserl has tried. Marx has tried. Why would I succeed where every one of these big minds has failed? So my little discovery after all this debate in science studies has been: don’t try to overcome the subject–object distinction. It’s not made to be overcome. It’s not a defect of philosophy; it’s made to be un-overcomable. It’s made to make the distinction impossible. It’s made to do politics. It’s made to do science wars.

So, it’s a very different type of argument. It has nothing to do with description, as if this was a subject and this chair was an object and should we or should we not link them? It’s made to make things impossible. It’s made to make big disputes in campuses. One side of the campus has a gene and says, for example, aggression is genetically determined. You have a sociologist on the other side of campus who says it’s vastly more complicated. There are lots of cultural elements, values, etc. The word ‘gene’ has been created to make the sociologist angry. Of course, the sociologist, or the humanist, or the priest is going to produce very angry arguments about the social construction of genes. He or she says genes are socially constructed and all what you biologists say is just Mickey Mouse. There is absolutely no way out of this debate because it’s made to irritate the other side of campus. It’s a double frenzy, so to speak.
What I decided was to do away with this debate completely and to use instead the human and non-human distinction, taking a word other than the subject–object argument. Why? As a social scientist I should be able to register in my data things that people say when they practise. Three different examples: the first in science. One of my scientists says, ‘I am the co-ordinator of yeast chromosome eleven at the Institut Pasteur.’ What do I do with this? If I have the old plug-in, the object–subject distinction, I say this guy is a nut. He believes he is a chromosome. He makes the same mistake as the Bororo [of Brazil] who believe they are Arara, in Lévi-Strauss’s work. If I take my little plug-in on non-humans, I become very attentive to this sentence that mixes three completely different things: a subjectivity, ‘I’, a moral person, ‘co-ordinator’, and a piece of what was supposed to be formerly an object, ‘chromosome yeast’. What is this guy doing in the lab? He is mixing to an incredible degree elements of subjectivity, elements of what would be called the social, co-ordination, computers, organization and so on, and elements of the natural world. That is what he is paid for. Science, as we have discovered, is the place where subjectivity and objectivity are the closest in connection; where they are the most fused.

It’s not my fault. I didn’t invent the human–non-human issue to make fun, or to show off, or just to look intelligent, or au fait. This is a practical question. If I have the object–subject distinction, I have to cut my data and put the guy here and the chromosome there. I ignore what the guy is doing. Another example, this time in the field of religion. I was studying a convent in Brazil and one lady comes to the convent and says, ‘I come to this convent because they fabricate good gods.’ Now, if I have the traditional plug-in, people are not supposed to fabricate gods. They are supposed to naïvely believe in them and to be taken in – that’s the argument of fictitiousism – by the old production. Again, what do I do? Do I download the normal plug-in and say this is stupid and say, ‘Of course it’s ridiculous because we cannot make gods’? Or, do I download the plug-in I’m interested in and become attentive to what she’s saying? That is, divinity is precisely the object of fabrication, of a good fabrication. That is exactly the origin of the word fetish.

The third example: Julia Varady, who is a very good singer. She is the wife of Dietrich Fisher-Dieskau. She says, ‘I am a great singer. I polish my voice like shoes in the morning. My voices tell me what to do and when to stop.’ Again, normal plug-in, downloaded by Frankfurt 101, this is a typical case of false consciousness. She believes her voice talks, or sings. This is ridiculous and the duty of the social sciences is to repress this sort of talk and to show false consciousness at work in the world of the artist. You download the plug-in, human–non-human, which I have proposed on the web, and what do you see? Artists are not in command of their skills. They are made to sing. They are made to act. They are the very rich repertoire of non-humans which we never practise. Being an artist is like that. So, this doesn’t work in science. It
doesn’t work in religion. It doesn’t work in art. It doesn’t work in technology. I’ve no time for that, but many examples have been studied.

What I am saying is very simple: either we change the way we talk about the discourse of practice, or we ignore our data. Most of the social sciences, of course, ignore the data. We are paid to do that and we train students to do it. It takes a whole PhD, but we manage to do it. The social sciences maintain the order of the social structures, the classic argument that Bourdieu has developed. I disagree with that because as social scientists we have to try to find the concepts which make a difference, to listen to what people are saying.

The reason why people are afraid of a return to the non-humans, or things striking back, is, of course, all Immanuel – the guy from Koenigsberg – because it always comes back to Kant. Every bad thing in the social sciences and philosophy always comes back to Kant. It always comes back to the idea that things don’t count.

Why don’t things count? Why are social scientists afraid? Because they can’t imagine other roles for things other than the typical boring roles that they have in their social science journals. Firstly, things carry necessity and there is no discussion possible. Secondly, they are plastic and are just there to bear the human ingenuity and to feel a little resistance. This is what most of phenomenology is about. Thirdly, there is a simple white screen to support the differentiation of society. Things play no role. Or, they play three extremely different roles, none of which is interesting. You listen to the voice of Varady. You listen to divinity. You listen to people working with chromosomes. You will have 500 different types of activities for things. None of them will fit either the first model, or the second, or the third.

My argument, or motion – since it seems we have to propose a motion – is to say, as social scientists, our duty is not to put some order into the world. We are not rabbis. We are not priests. We are not policemen. We are not managers. We have to bring into our texts a little bit of the practice of the people we study. If we succeed in doing that, we deserve our meagre salaries.

If you download the plug-in which always obliges you to make the combinatory choice – is this on the object side or the subject side or any dialectical arrangement between the two? – you will bungle the data. That’s exactly what I say, nothing more. You bungle the data. You don’t hear what the guy working on the chromosomes says. You don’t understand what the technologist says. You don’t understand what the artist says. Why? Because you have shut up shop. The whole critique was made for that. You have shut up shop on the values of ontology and the many metaphysics that people have developed to talk and to engage with non-humans.

The human–non-human issue is not the thing. There is nowhere something which is non-human. It is a concept and it is a practical concept to do research, and it does vastly better research than the object–subject dichotomy.

Of course, if we were Chinese we might have a completely different
repertoire and the discussion may not even start. I would not be able to find someone to have this discussion with me, if I had inherited the very interesting tradition which François Jullien has developed around the notion of 'propensity'. If we are interested in the notion of 'the propensity of things', which is the English translation of a book he published in France, *La Propensité des choses*, we have, of course, a repertoire which is already there. It would be very difficult to argue for the subject and object distinction – not because Asiatic thought has overcome the subject–object dichotomy, but simply because it was never there. It was never a way of coding experience because things were never reduced to the sad situation of matters of fact. In other words, there are two different empiricisms. There might have been others, but I have found two very different empiricisms: one which was for political purposes, particularly in the 17th century around Locke, which I call 'matters of fact', and the other one, which used to be important before Locke, that is in the pre-modern period, which became really important in the non-modern period and which I call 'state of affairs'.

I thus support the motion that the human and non-human distinction is indispensable for doing good social science research.

*Steve Fuller*

As you can see I’m the bad guy wearing black. Let me start by thanking Bruno to agree to this debate. I can’t pretend to be able to do the number of jokes and so forth. In fact what I will say may seem a little heavy given what has just preceded. But I do think there's a very serious issue here about the distinction between the human and the non-human. What Bruno is talking about – and here I put on my hat as a sociologist of knowledge – is part of a larger trend that future historians will regard as characteristic of the post-modern era; namely the breakdown of the very distinction that we’re discussing here. We can start with *The Order of Things* by Michel Foucault, where 'the human' is portrayed as a blip on the screen of history that came and went within about 150 years. But also we can look at contemporary social theorists, such as Niklas Luhmann, who treat people as the environment through which social structures are reproduced. But in principle, this environment doesn’t have to be people. It could be animals. It could even be machines, since 'the social' lies in the structures that are endlessly reproduced. Now, of course, Bruno does not have a heavy structuralist ontology. But he shares its displacement of human agency. Indeed, actor-network theory is not a million miles away either from what Richard Dawkins calls 'the selfish gene'. The idea here is that the genes use humans and other organisms for purposes of reproduction. For Dawkins, breaking down the human–non-human distinction is important for understanding what evolution is about, namely, genes propagating themselves. *But perhaps the breakdown of this distinction*
has been strongest in moral theory with Peter Singer, to whom I shall later refer. He is very characteristic of our time.

In any case, Bruno’s equivocal appeal to ‘the social’ masks these shifts. You will notice that his talk has been pitched at a very abstract level, so that ‘non-humans’ include not only animals, but also things, so that ‘the social’ turns out to mean formal structural properties of combination and association that could just as easily apply to cells as [they] could to human beings. So it’s not really ‘the social’ in the way social scientists think of themselves as doing something different from natural scientists.

In that sense, ‘the social’ is a misnomer. For Bruno, what social scientists call ‘social’ is an anthropomorphization of the phenomena of combination or association, which one might find throughout all of nature. That’s very important to keep in mind, because when people wanted to establish something called ‘social science’, they actually thought there was something different – and this is the point of the debate. Social science was – and is – undeniably a moral project. I don’t think any of the founders of social science would have denied it either. And that’s a very important issue here, because if you look at people like Marx, or Weber, or Durkheim, all of them will grant at the empirical level that indeed human beings behave just like other natural things. None of those thinkers resisted a generalized, naturalistic, evolutionary perspective. But for all of them, what distinguishes human beings is the ability to organize resistance to – to establish collective identities in spite of – such natural forces. The whole point of social organization is specifically to combine in ways that go against the natural course of things. In that sense, resistance and conflict are what characterize the distinction between the human and the non-human: not going with the flow.

For example, Max Weber’s fundamental sociological categories were modelled on legal categories. Legal categories are not simply empirical generalizations of what is already happening in the world. Rather, they constitute a normative statement that is projected towards some kind of goal, or ideality, towards which organized human beings might aspire, whose vehicle is the State. What makes Weber’s sociological categories different from legal ones is that the categories are not invoked as a piece of legislation to coerce people. Rather, Weber does the reverse, testing his categories against empirical reality. My point is that the distinctive sociological concepts are shaped in opposition – in resistance – to what is already there.

This also applies to Durkheim. If we look at his so-called ‘social facts’, as in the famous study of suicide, we find that suicide rates are lowest among people who have close family ties and strong religious beliefs, especially Catholics. People usually read this exclusively in terms of Durkheim showing that there are social regularities that count as distinctive social facts ‘sui generis’. But Durkheim had an additional agenda that brings out the moral project of social science. He wrote in a period when the family and religion
were declining. Moreover, Durkheim was a republican and a secularist. He therefore saw a role for the State in normatively integrating the French people. The regularity in suicide patterns was thus seen as a problem – not merely a fact – that can be addressed in some fashion.

Finally, in the case of Marx, his categories are very obviously normative, especially ‘exploitation’. After all, the concept of exploitation basically declares that there is something wrong with what capitalists call ‘profit’.

Thus, from the very beginning, social science has been a moral project. Social scientists have not ignored the existence of empirical regularities, including ones in which humans and non-humans are governed by the same sorts of laws. Rather, the ‘human’ or ‘the social’ is demarcated for the normative purpose of creating the project of humanity. Social science’s founders were not deluded into thinking that there is a prior ‘human essence’, especially as that phrase is derided today. Rather humanity was a project in the making. It was a political project to which social science would contribute, not necessarily by social engineering, but more indirectly.

At this point, I want to return to Kant, since Bruno has decided to make Kant the bogeyman of this argument. I’m usually no big fan of Kant, but I want to take up Kant’s moral theory, because crucial to understanding what is going on here is Kant’s distinction between autonomy and heteronomy. The idea of autonomy is that if one is acting as a moral agent, one is self-directed. An implication of this idea for Kant is that one is resisting natural passions, animal instinct – in other words one is going against the flow. Now the idea of autonomy has been very important for organized knowledge production practices in the West. The idea of science, the idea of the university – are all tied to the idea of autonomy. And the relevant sense of autonomy is precisely Kant’s sense, because what one is resisting here are the taken-for-granted notions, are the ordinary ways of understanding things, are taking things at face value. In that respect inquirers qua inquirers have to engage in acts of resistance.

While Bruno may dismiss the idea of false consciousness for its making fun of people, in fact the capacity to make charges of false consciousness – that received views might be systematically wrong – epitomizes what organized inquiry is about. This is especially true if we keep in mind the larger – dare I say ‘modern’ – project of humanity. Admittedly this project has been conducted in a very high-handed fashion, but that doesn’t mean that it’s a project not worth pursuing. In fact, as we have democratized knowledge production practices and opened up our universities, the sphere of autonomy has increased. The alternative to autonomy is the way Bruno portrays researchers, which is as simply following the agents around. In other words, researchers become purely heteronomous. Go wherever your intellectual passions lead you; follow this, follow that, just look at everything that’s out there and treat it all the same, without any discrimination.
Bruno Latour

That’s science.

Steve Fuller

No, sorry, that’s not science. Science is the bringing of some sort of order to this diversity of phenomena. That is in fact what distinguishes science not only from animal cognition, but from what we normally take for granted. Science starts by asking what sorts of distinctions are worth making. The more we study animals – and I have nothing against studying animals – we find that distinctions that in the past distinguished humans from animals disappear. Bruno can testify to this, and I certainly agree with him on this point. We find evidence, for example, that animals have language. I always wince whenever I read Habermas because (again I agree with Bruno) he’s still living in the 18th century. Habermas says language is what distinguishes human beings. He might as well be talking Aristotle here. And even Noam Chomsky starts to look a bit dated. The decline of language as the mark of the human has occurred pretty much in my lifetime. Moreover, this is not because of what Bruno and his colleagues tend to do – namely, to anthropomorphize the non-humans when talking about them. Rather, the opposite move is taking place, namely, that qualities such as intelligence, language and communication more generally – have lost their rootedness in the human condition. These qualities are now redefined at a level of abstraction where you no longer need a human body to manifest them. Obviously, artificial intelligence and cognitive science have been very important as an interdisciplinary forum where this shift has occurred. You may know of Stephen Wolfram in the United Kingdom, whose new book, A New Kind of Science, promises to reduce all physical systems – including intelligent ones – to complex cellular automata (i.e. machines that produce binary codes, as in a Turing test). This is a serious proposal for doing science, and it completely eradicates the human–non-human distinction. Now, it seems to me that this is the shape of things to come: the more we look into things empirically, the more similarities we shall see between the human and non-human. But this tendency then calls forth science’s moral project, which requires that we draw a distinction somewhere. But where?

I have been arguing that this last question epitomizes the whole project of social science – and science more generally – because for me social science is the culmination of science. (In that respect, I also buy into the Comtean positivist project.) Drawing the line between the human and non-human is tantamount to saying No at some point to nature. A good way to focus this issue is in terms of the turns of phrase that Bruno likes to use: that we should be spending our time ‘counting things’, and we have got to ‘open the black
box of facts’ to see all the multifarious things that are really out there that have not yet been noticed. Well, this raises a very interesting question about exactly how we count things. For example, Peter Singer counts each species as one – all species are created equal, from a moral standpoint. On the other hand, we might want to say that one should be counting not species, but individuals, valuing each individual differently and drawing distinctions between individuals. Perhaps in a hierarchy, in ways that Bruno does not want to do. I believe that we will be increasingly forced into this kind of decision in the future, and unless social science wants to abdicate any responsibility for politics, we will somehow have to reinvent the human–non-human distinction. Otherwise this will be left to the people who pay our salaries to go around in a heteronomous fascination, recording whatever happens to attract our attention.

Bruno Latour

It’s hard to have a debate because it’s like the situation in hospital when they present the case after the professor has talked. So we have a case presented here. I present Steve Fuller as a case of cancer. I have put my case so I’ve not much to add. It was a very interesting talk, but the only way ‘non-human’ could be constructed was by ‘nature’, that is, the invasion of matters of fact. The only way to understand the argument is to say, ‘Oh, it’s just like Dawkins’. That means the whole repertoire is to understand the variety of ontologies which are manifested by things, by non-humans, and this is so narrow in the social sciences. Whenever we say, ‘Let’s look at non-humans’, people say, ‘Ah, it means we are just in nature.’ But, I have done some work on animals and it’s exactly the opposite. It has nothing to do with the naturalization of the human. On the contrary, primatology is an extraordinary complex field in which there are many ways of being a baboon, of being a chimpanzee, of being a gorilla. It has absolutely no unified nature. The whole argument that the danger of the human–non-human issue would be to go back to nature is exactly the proof of the argument, that you cannot count on Kant and his descendants.

What was also interesting in Steve’s presentation was the argument, which I agree with, and if it had been a debate it would have been interesting to discuss, namely, what it is to draw the line? Because drawing the line raises, of course, the very interesting question: Who is drawing the line? The answer is, and here I agree with Steve because this is what I am advocating in my motion, no one else should draw the line. There are many ways of drawing lines, and the best way to do it is certainly not to transform the social sciences into a moral project. If we talk about morality, then we have to do it very seriously. I’m all for heteronomy. Autonomy is not a project which is sustainable, and here I’m an Aristotelian or a Whiteheadian. I’m all for
attachment. That’s exactly my argument. The morality of autonomy is a complete failure. Either we talk about the social sciences, and my motion was about the social sciences, or rather about how to do research, or we talk about morality. If we talk about morality, what’s the moral project? We disagree on this. Autonomy doesn’t seem to be such a great thing. ‘Attachment’ would be the word I would use, if we were to think about morality. But my motion was about research, and I heard nothing from Steve about research. How do you do better research? That is my question. Steve confuses my argument about the human–non-human issue firstly with the subject–object distinction, and secondly with the description of what things are out there. I’m not saying that this table or this chair is non-human. Non-human is a concept to do with research. It has nothing to do with nature.

Steve Fuller

Well, actually I don’t draw your sharp line between the moral project of social science and the empirical project. I shall have to speak like a sociologist of knowledge because it is the most direct way I can make this point. We live in a time where your view of things is very attractive because people don’t know exactly what they will be studying next. It depends on the sorts of grants that are available – what’s popular. So one must be willing and able to study almost anything and say something about it. But if one is already committed to a disciplinary project or some larger autonomous, organized knowledge-producing movement, be it Marxism or positivism, then one is in danger of not finding a client. This fact reflects the dissolution of the university, its failure to resist forces in the larger society. But we would not have the amount of social and natural science knowledge we have today, if we did not have autonomous knowledge-producing institutions represented by the disciplinary framework of universities. Admittedly we are living in a time when this is declining, and so not surprisingly your picture appears very attractive. After all, one doesn’t have to come in with any heavy duty theory, or a priori notions, or any kind of norms. One just follows the actors around, trying to record as much of their action as possible. In fact, the more actors and actions one records that the client does not expect, the more likely one’s services will be called upon in the future. Indeed, actor-network theory is one of the great make-work schemes for researchers in a time when academia is imperilled and not able to set its own agenda.

So, again, from a sociology of knowledge standpoint: Why are we where we are today? You cannot distinguish the moral from the empirical as neatly as you have. Weber, Marx and Durkheim realized that there were many kinds of things in the world. But they deliberately narrowed the focus of social inquiry for reasons that had to do with what they took the ends of inquiry to be. In that sense, they were autonomous. In contrast, to be heteronomous
– as you recommend – is simply to open yourself to whomever happens to give you work and pay your salary. That’s what heteronomy boils down to in the end. You’re just driven wherever the projects are. As social scientists, we need to be self-conscious of this fact.

**SUMMARY BY LAURENCE GOLDSTEIN**

Laurence Goldstein is Professor of the Philosophy of Language and Mind, University of Hong Kong.

*Laurence Goldstein*

I can understand the laughter because no one envies me the job that I’ve got here. I think that Bruno was right at the outset when he said that there was a danger of talking at cross-purposes. I think that danger has been amply realized, but hopefully by the end of this session we will begin to converge on some disputation, some points of issue, that we can all recognize in a way that will bring the speakers’ views into genuine opposition.

In trying to find some thread that will connect the things that they’ve been saying, it occurred to me that the development of the thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein might serve as a useful model. In the First World War Wittgenstein wrote a lot of notebooks in the trenches with bullets flying around his ears. He was a very disturbed young man. He said things similar to what Steve attributes to Bruno, that humans are at one with snakes and at one with the rocks and there’s no real distinction. Of course, this was a guy who was extremely depressed and wanted to return to nature. This kind of Zen Buddhism was channelled via Schopenhauer. But thankfully none of this stuff appears in his first great book, the *Tractatus*. He must have realized it was childish drivelling. I don’t want to attribute this view exactly to Bruno for reasons that will become clear in a minute.

Moving on to Steve, I associate him in a certain way with the later Wittgenstein. Steve says that humans don’t go with the flow, and that’s a rather nice phrase to summarize the crucial distinction, as he sees it, between humans and non-humans and why sociologists have to take cognizance of essential differences. Wittgenstein said that what was characteristic of human beings was that they had what he called language games: that distinctive forms of life are made possible by the fact that they have a language and it’s in virtue of having language that we as humans can go against the flow. We can do all sorts of weird things that animals don’t do. We can say prayers, for example. We can tell jokes to each other. So from the point of view of the social scientist, humans, in Wittgenstein’s conception, are uniquely interesting. Wittgenstein goes so far as to say that if lions could speak, we couldn’t understand them.
His reason for saying that is that lions enjoy such a different way of life from human beings that even if their sounds sounded like English, we couldn’t invest those sounds with the meanings that we invest them with, because we are human beings that converse with one another and our meanings are shaped by our intercourse with each other. So it looks as if Steve is in the happy position of being in the same camp as the later Wittgenstein. Except that at some point in his talk he argues, and he seems to think that this is something that has been established by modern research, that non-humans have languages, something which of course Wittgenstein would vehemently deny. I don’t know what non-humans Steve has in mind, whether it’s African grey parrots, or dolphins, or bonobos, but it seems to me that all of those species – maybe they can say ‘good day’ to each other – but they can’t say things like, ‘Oh, I’ll meet you at the China Club afterwards’, or anything interesting, anything that we really produce language for. So, there seems to me something problematic in assimilating Steve Fuller and Ludwig Wittgenstein the later.

This brings me back to Bruno. He said something interesting that was resonant of the third Wittgenstein, Wittgenstein of the last six years of his life. Bruno used the example of someone who talked about polishing their voice, and he talked about the danger of social sciences ignoring the data. It’s a fact that we do talk about someone polishing their voice and you’d have to be very tight-arsed not to see that there was something interesting in this notion of polishing the voice. You can’t say, ‘Oh the voice is a certain thing that can’t be polished. You can only polish furniture or windows and so on.’ This is data that can’t be ignored. In his very late period Wittgenstein also indicated certain areas of data that would have seemed extremely recondite to both scientists and social scientists, but which can’t be ignored. For example, Wittgenstein asked the question, ‘Does Tuesday seem to you lean and Wednesday fat? Or vice versa?’ And he said it in German, and it comes out the same in German. Almost all people to whom he asked that question said Tuesday’s lean and Wednesday’s fat. But what on earth does that mean? Tuesday’s lean and Wednesday’s fat. How can it be lean? How can Wednesday be fat? It’s an interesting fact that scientists need to explain – maybe social scientists and psychologists as well – that there is almost complete intersubjective agreement in the answer to those questions.

I want, in a way, to condemn Bruno for some of his views which are resonant of the early Wittgenstein, when Wittgenstein was a philosopher who was extremely wet behind the ears and said a lot of stuff that even he repudiated two years later when he came to put it down on paper. But I would congratulate him on jumping ahead of Steve when it comes to language and the interest of the data discussed by the third Wittgenstein, the Wittgenstein of the last six years of his life, when to my mind he said the most interesting things that he said in his whole career.
QUESTIONS FROM THE AUDIENCE

Question 1

Both of you focus on Kant, in one way or another. The question that I put to both of you is this. If, Steve, you claim that science has in fact a moral project, you seem to reduce that moral project to the imposition of order. I raise the question, is there not a ‘good’ to be had somewhere in the morality of the project? Where is ‘the good’ in Kant? We all know that he argued that we should stop talking about ‘the good’.

The second question is: How do you, Bruno, use the word ‘good’? I’ve heard you use the word ‘good’ to describe the kind of project for the parliament of things that you suggest. The problem is ‘the good’.

Steve Fuller

I agree with the premiss of your question, namely the moral project of science is not just about imposing any old order. It is a ‘good’ order and that has to do with one’s conception of the aims of humanity. This is an enormously contested thing, especially since throughout most of history most people have been left out of it. And as more and more people have become incorporated, the aims of humanity have shifted. What worries me about our times is that, in a sense, the project of humanity has been, so to speak, ‘outsourced’ to various politically recognized social groups. So we have the good for X and the good for Y. Whatever the good of humanity as a whole might be, we seem to be in the process of losing it – if we don’t revive it as a research question. That research question has to do with where do we collectively want to go? That cannot be neatly separated from the empirical question. Part of my objection to Bruno’s presentation is its casualness. It’s as if he has been saying, ‘Here are these researchers just going out and finding out all this fascinating stuff that people haven’t looked at before. But they have no responsibility for getting involved in discussions about what one should do with this stuff.’ In other words, I hear nothing about science as a moral project. Now, the most that I think we as researchers can do to specify the moral project is to devise good institutional settings for the aims of humanity to be decided, including the sorts of people who ought to be involved. While I don’t disagree with Bruno’s invocation of a ‘parliamentary’ setting, I do think that before we have a ‘parliament of things’, we need to have a proper parliament of humans. At the moment, that is what we’re lacking.

Bruno Latour

I didn’t talk about ‘the good’ because I talked about that on Tuesday. ‘Good’ is a common word, but that’s a completely different question. My question
on the agenda today is different – it is for research purposes. Is it necessary
to make the distinction or not? The assembly of the parliament of things is
impossible if things are just the old matters of fact which were invented by
Locke. I’m not talking about Wittgenstein. If Kant is bad, Wittgenstein is
much worse. I’m perfectly willing to tackle the serious question of political
philosophy, but that was the theme of my talk on Tuesday. Today I have a
very specific question: When someone says, ‘My voice tells me when to stop’,
how do I maintain this very specific type of ontology? Of course, you could
ridicule this by saying it is an empirical question. But I’m a social scientist
and when I go out I need to change my categories to make and hear what
people say – this seems to me to be empirical.

I’m not impressed by the moral question because I have done much more
than Steve in science policy, public policy and the assembly of public interest.
The social sciences have never developed because they confuse what is their
job, as job per se, which is to produce the public, and the moral question of
putting things in order. What would be greatly amusing to Chinese thinkers
is ‘resisting the flow’, because the whole argument of ‘propensity of things’
is precisely ‘not resisting the flow’. ‘Resisting the flow’ is all Kantian, drawing
the line, creating order. ‘Resisting the flow’ is such a very specific historical
European, colonialist, imperialist, capitalist view of philosophy. There are
lots of other philosophies around, fortunately, and the last thing to do is to
use Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein is hopeless with things. It’s all language.

Steve Fuller

It is a little too glib to invoke the East here to say that the idea of resisting the
flow is just a Western thing. In fact, this admittedly ‘Western’ idea has had a
lot of positive impact globally. For example, modern medical science –
whatever else one wants to say about it – is premised on the idea that there
is something special about human life that requires that it somehow be main-
tained under extreme circumstances and not simply be allowed to die or debil-
itate as part of the natural course of things. That is not a trivial point. It has
enabled most of us to be in this room today to debate the motion before us.

Thomas Henry Huxley gave a very famous ‘Romanes Lecture’ on evolution
and ethics in 1893, which led to a big falling out with Herbert Spencer, who
was a die-hard evolutionary ethicist, a ‘go with the flow’ kind of guy. Huxley,
having been trained as a medical scientist, was very much against an ethics
based on Darwinian evolution by natural selection. He observed that the
Hindus, the Buddhists, as well as the Greek atomists, all had the metaphysical
requirements for evolutionary theory. The theory of karma can be easily
translated into the theory of inheritance presupposed by Darwinism. At a
theoretical level, there was no great difficulty in doing that. However, they
all lacked the additional view that there is something special about human
beings that might motivate them to systematically counteract those natural tendencies. For Huxley that is where monotheism made an historic difference. Now, monotheism may have outlasted its usefulness by the Victorian era. To be sure, this was part of Huxley’s message. But his main point was that without monotheism’s flattering view of humans (‘in the image and likeness of God’), the ontology that informs evolutionary theory, which eliminates any strong distinction between the human and the non-human and stresses the vicissitudes of inheritance, would have still been around – but without the socially salutary scientific consequences. The issue boils down to one’s attitude toward phenomena once they are recognized. Organized resistance has motivated some of the West’s most distinctive contributions to world knowledge, not least the biomedical sciences.

**Question 2**

I think the problem of this debate is related to ethics. If we consider all the experiments on human embryos, what would both of your positions be on that? Is it politically correct to carry out human embryo experiments, or not? In that case, there is probably a distinction between humans and things, or humans and animals, or humans and non-humans as in the motion. So I believe that’s certainly what is being argued in this debate.

*Bruno Latour*

I don’t think we disagree here. This is where the ‘good’ is the same. The researcher’s job is to imagine what a technical democracy could be like. I do not completely agree with you, but basically it’s the same argument. The question is how do you go back there and what is the role of the social sciences to get there? Steve is maintaining the tradition of saying the social sciences have a moral duty to maintain differences when the forces of evil abandon the differences. I’m more a John Dewey disciple and for me the social sciences don’t have that role. The social sciences don’t have to make the distinction, even to say there is a very strong distinction between cloned and uncloned, or between stem cells and clone, for example. For Dewey, the duty of the social sciences is to produce the public: to produce the multiplicity of versions of the public we are now. The people who do the cloning do not have the hegemony to limit the opening up of the alternatives. I think we agree on this. Steve can ridicule the argument of opening up and following the actors, but I wouldn’t know any other way than to multiply the numbers of voices and the numbers of versions there are of doing genetic research. It’s a Dawkins-type hegemony, and I agree here with Steve. It’s a catastrophe. Not because it’s nature. It’s because it’s a catastrophe for biology. There are dozens of other ways of having genes and of having conceptions
of genes and of having conceptions of cloning in biology. That is why we have to follow the actors around and multiply the types of agency. It’s not our job, and here I disagree with Steve, to maintain. We are not priests. We are not governing. We are carrying out a very helpful role as social scientists to make sure that there is no hegemony; to make sure that the multiplicity of voices in this parliament of things is heard. It’s hard to listen to. My position does not differ in terms of goals with that of Steve. It differs in terms of what roles the social sciences can take.

Steve Fuller

Bruno is right in general, but I would put it a little differently. First, I would make a distinction between my own personal views and the role of the social scientist. I personally tend to be quite liberal about the new biotechnology, so I would want to permit everything unless there is a clear reason to prohibit it.

But just because I hold a liberal view, it does not follow that I want my opinion to decide the matter for everyone. This raises the issue of what should be the social scientist’s business in all of this. I agree also that we need a multiplicity of voices, but not just any old multiplicity of voices will do. For example, in Britain it has become very popular under Tony Blair to sample public opinion by just about any means possible. One policy issue in which I have been involved recently had to do with nuclear waste disposal. There were no less than fifteen different means by which to sample public opinion, ranging from very organized things like consensus conferences – which I happen to like – to telephone polls, internet polls, focus groups, you name it. Not surprisingly, you found out fifteen different views. To be sure, these multiple forums provided a kind of representation of the public, and people in our field were getting the grants to conduct the various surveys, polls, etc. But in the end, the government was given a very wide berth to do whatever it wanted, because these different modes of expression basically covered the entire waterfront of possible opinion. The net effect was as if they had not done any sampling at all. The government had enough evidence to do whatever was most expedient on the day the vote had to be taken in Parliament.

While it is important to have multiple voices in public discussions, we need a clear sense of institutionalization – the forums in which these different voices interact with each other. That is why I have pushed for consensus conferences and citizen juries, which actually make some reasoned choices about the sort of people that count as representatives for a given policy issue, how can these representatives interact with the decision-makers, etc. It seems to me that this is where our intelligence as social scientists ought to be directed: not simply opening the doors and allowing opportunity to take its course, but rather to engage in more specific institutional designs.
I’d like to take up the question of Chinese philosophy because it seems that no one else will do that. I support Bruno Latour’s motion when it comes to Chinese philosophy and I see no reason at all why we shouldn’t incorporate ideas if they are useful. But I think that the problem with relying on an interpreter like François Jullien is that he’s actually been very reductionist and has simplified Chinese philosophies or Chinese thoughts into a kind of unitary Chinese philosophy, a syncretic Chinese philosophy, which perhaps existed after the great age of Chinese philosophy in the third and fourth centuries BC, but certainly didn’t at the time when there were dozens, if not hundreds, of different competing schools of philosophy. For example, to make a distinction which was raging at the time between Confucius and Zhuang Ze, the historical Confucius was for order, re-establishing order. Confucius was for naming things, establishing distinctions and getting order into society, which I view as somewhat of a totalitarian project. Zhuang Ze was a much more interesting thinker who never missed an opportunity to make fun of Confucius. He advocated not going against nature, not necessarily going ‘with the flow’, but not going against nature, and not just in an airy-fairy kind of way, but in a detailed physical scientific way when he spoke about carpenters and butchers and the way they did their job. He embraced the outcasts, the mutilated. He laughed at death and the distinction between life and death, and he advocated to all the other philosophers who were active at the time seeing reality from different perspectives, taking up different subject positions. So it’s quite a sophisticated kind of thought, but it’s not a thought that is to be confused with Confucius’s thought, which to me was highly sterile. Unfortunately, during the 20th century, that’s the thought that we’ve tended to recuperate as Chinese philosophy. Latterly, I know, Jullien has relied on what we call the Daoists, and one of those Daoists was Zhuang Ze, but I don’t think he’s necessarily done the justice to that philosophy that could be done to it.

Bruno Latour

It would have been silly not to talk about ‘going with the flow’ or ‘going against the flow’ here in Hong Kong. The anthropology of this sentence is very interesting, especially in the interchange that has just taken place in which ‘against the flow’ was translated as ‘the flow of genes’, apparently. This is very amusing because whenever non-humans are in question immediately they are retranslated and re-created into objects, into matters of fact. There is absolutely no way of thinking about what it is to be influenced by an object, by a thing, by a voice, or by a puppet. Puppeteers are very influenced by their puppets. There is no way to understand that sort of influence if you immediately say the flow is the determination of objectivity. We have such a narrow
repertoire to understand what it is to be taken in or taken up by an action. But these debates never go anywhere because when you say things play many roles, it is immediately translated as, ‘Ah, this is nature with a causal determination.’ It’s the fight against empiricism. Our whole energy is directed against empiricism. It’s very amusing.

Steve Fuller
I’m sorry, you’re the empiricist as far as I’m concerned.

Bruno Latour
I’m empirical but I’m not empiricist. By the way, Gabriel Tarde, who is my mentor in sociology, is for sociology of science.

Steve Fuller
Oh, I know, in fact I was alluding to your article [in the Patrick Joyce anthology].

Question 4
To go back to Steve’s point, when you talk about opinion and the proofs in the UK, you could mention what Ernest [. . .] said, ‘l’opinion pense mal elle ne pense pas’: ‘your opinion doesn’t think’, but it would translate better as ‘it doesn’t fit’. So, if you always consider proofs or opinion you will not really give the essence of the debate, which is the essence of what the human is. The human has a soul, or non-soul, and this was the topic of another debate last week. But this is maybe the major debate, as to know what is the essence of human and what makes the difference with the non-human? For example, in the case of a clone and the original, does the clone have a soul or not, or something which will make it different from the original?

Steve Fuller
Well, I can’t give you a straight answer as to what distinguishes the human from the non-human because, in a sense, the answer is self-referential. For me humanity is a project accomplished by an organization of people. It is not something common to each individual. The social sciences have always realized that, which is why they have always been fixated on the idea of norms: how are the fates of people bound up together? The answer will not come down to a specific genetic composition. There are very small genetic differences between us and most animals, so no essentializing difference will
be found at the level of individuals. Rather, it will be in terms of the ways people organize themselves to realize a certain kind of collective project. Socialism has been perhaps most explicit on this point.

*Question 5*

I don’t know whether you two debaters would agree on some sort of term like post-human organization or post-human project. I refer to some writings by Donna Haraway or Francis Fukuyama.

*Bruno Latour*

We are not talking about post-humanism.

*Questioner*

I think it’s a tradition.

*Bruno Latour*

Of course, humanism is a tradition. I’m willing to withdraw ‘non-human’ if it bothers you, because it has nothing to do with post-humanism. It’s not a question about post-humanism. It’s a practical question for doing research. Can we enlarge the repertoire of action of things, contrary to the repertoire of action which is offered by empiricism? That’s my question.

*Steve Fuller*

Well I do think it’s a little premature to talk about post-human when we haven’t really quite accomplished the human yet. I often think that the attempts to go ‘beyond the human’ to incorporate animals, by animal rights activists and environmentalists, is a kind of a reaction to humanity’s failure to solve ordinary problems of poverty, to enable people to participate actively as citizens in their society. These projects have not been accomplished. They are the standing failures of the Enlightenment. Consequently, a lot of so-called progressive thinkers just move on to something else. In effect, they say: ‘Well, we didn’t succeed with the humans, so we’re going to leave them behind now and work on the animals and make sure they don’t get screwed up.’ In this respect, I’m somewhat disappointed with Fukuyama’s *Our Posthuman Future* (2002) because he certainly asks some hard questions. Unfortunately, the normative repertoire at his disposal is very much of the traditional Christian sort, which will not quite appeal to the audience that is necessary for having an open discussion about where we’re going with biotechnology.
Fukuyama’s heart is in the right place, but his politics are much too conservative for me. Here we need some imagination to rescue the human project. I’m afraid that sometimes we jump on the post-human bandwagon because we want to forget about the human.

**SUMMARIES BY STEVE FULLER AND BRUNO LATOUR**

*Steve Fuller*

The most useful thing at this point would be for each of us to characterize how we see our disagreement. I think Bruno and I agree on one thing, a fundamental naturalism, namely that there is no ontologically sharp divide between humans and non-humans. I do not deny the theory of evolution – at least not in this context. However, I do believe that if we’re talking about the project of science, we are not merely talking about bringing in as much empirical phenomena as possible wherever it comes from. That may be a make-work scheme for researchers, but it’s not the project of science as a human project. Here the moral dimension becomes very important, and it cannot be as neatly separated as Bruno wishes. To be sure, we are living in a period where it’s become convenient to forget the moral aspect of science because researchers are not institutionally protected any more. Research is done in many different contexts, the terms of which we often cannot dictate. From that standpoint, we have to make the most of what we can out of the situation. That makes Bruno’s position very attractive. It’s a great ‘adaptation strategy’, in the evolutionary lingo. If you’re a researcher without much standing on your own, as many fixed-term contract researchers are today, then you’ve got to be able to satisfy your clients, and Bruno offers an excellent strategy because you don’t come in carrying unnecessary intellectual baggage.

*Bruno Latour*

That’s pretty mean.

*Steve Fuller*

I’m sorry, but if we’re pretending to be sociologists – and I guess neither you nor I are really trained as sociologists – for the purposes of this argument, sociology of knowledge is relevant to the issue at hand. Why are we having this debate, and why is it cast the way it is in this time and place? We are not having a timeless debate about how one does research that could have been
conducted in the 18th or 19th centuries. It is a debate that is happening now, at the start of the 21st century, under a specific set of institutional constraints.

Bruno Latour

There is no room to debate because every time I say ‘non-human’ it’s replaced by ‘nature’. ‘Nature’ is the unifying definition of ‘non-human’. But I’m not talking about nature. There’s not only the social world and nature. There are only two elements in this ontology – social, or human, and nature. I count beyond two. There are more things out there than two, social or natural kinds. It’s very hard to make the point with sociologists or philosophers, especially of science amusingly enough, because they don’t count further than two. What can I say? I’d like the argument to be true about grant money though. That one I like.

CONCLUSION

The aims of the debate – to open up the topic, to make people aware of the issues, to continue the argument – were achieved. The debate, of course, was never intended to offer solutions. It also succeeded in continuing the interactional ethos of the conference. It was least successful, perhaps, in making the issues clear to the audience, especially to those who were not familiar with the work of Bruno Latour and Steve Fuller. Bruno Latour did allude to the fact that the fundamental problem concerns Kant, but this was perhaps lost on an audience who, knowingly or unknowingly, assumed a Kantian position. This was perhaps the problem of the debate: that the speakers spoke at cross-purposes, reflected in their very different styles; Bruno Latour’s more intimate style peppered with jokes and Steve Fuller’s more formal lecture style. The implications that arise from this debate are: that this topic has no closure and that it needs to be explained in clear, simple terms. Otherwise, the issue becomes just another philosophical debate, which defeats the purpose of encouraging such debate and discussion between people from different disciplines and from different traditions.

NOTES

1 The conference was held 25–9 June 2002. The debate took place on Thursday 27 June in the Rayson Huang Theatre, University of Hong Kong.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

C O L I N  B A R R O N has a PhD in linguistics from Lancaster University in which he applied a Heideggerian notion of time to discourse analysis. The second Knowledge and Discourse Conference was his last major academic task. He retired from teaching shortly afterwards and now owns and runs an art and craft gallery in Perthshire, Scotland.

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