

*Response to Steve Fuller, “‘China’ as the West’s Other in World Philosophy”**

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Fuller’s critique of my work is based on the anthropological distinction between “functional” and “substantive” interpretations. However, he has used these terms in non-standard ways that may lead to confusion. Furthermore, in either the standard or Fuller’s senses of these terms, he has misdescribed my position.

Key words: functionalism; anthropology; comparative philosophy; Chinese philosophy; multiculturalism

In his review of my book, *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* (Columbia University Press, 2017), Professor Steve Fuller organizes his discussion around the distinction in anthropology and sociology between “functional” and “substantive” conceptions of culture. According to Fuller, a substantive conception of culture “is defined exclusively in terms of matters happening inside a given geographical region [...]”. In contrast, the ‘functional’ conception defines ‘culture’ in purely relational terms, perhaps even with primary reference to what is presumed to lie *outside* a given culture” (Fuller 2018: 158-59, emphasis in original).¹ Unfortunately, that is not what the terms “functional” and “substantive” actually mean in anthropology and related fields. A functional approach explains social practices (especially religion) in terms of what *goals or purposes* the practice achieves for either individuals or institutions *within the culture* (whether the individuals in the culture are aware of these functions or not).² Bronislaw Malinowski and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown founded competing schools of functionalism in the early twentieth century. Interestingly, Radcliffe-Brown noted that the functionalist approach was anticipated by the ancient Confucian philosopher Xunzi.³

When contrasted with functionalism, a “substantive” approach explains cultural practices (again, particularly religion) in terms of the beliefs and meanings seen “from within” by the practitioners.⁴ In fact, “substantivism” is a rarely used term in contemporary anthropology, and when it is used, it is generally confined to economic anthropology, where it contrasts with “formalism.”⁵ The term “emic” is closer to what Fuller is perhaps trying to get at. Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade are representatives of this approach. So, for example, a substantive or emic approach to understanding the Egyptian practice of burying a pharaoh with tomb gifts might say that it is done so that the ruler will have the wealth, household implements, servants, and weapons he needs in the afterlife. A functionalist might say that this conspicuous use of resources impresses upon the living the importance of venerating the pharaohs, which helps induce obedience and social conformity.

Fuller suggests that “Van Norden is operating with a *functional* rather than *substantive* conception of ‘China’ as a philosophical culture” (Fuller 2018: 158, emphasis in original). I do occasionally use what is properly described as a functional approach. For example, I argue that Xi Jinping is encouraging the study and veneration of the classical Chinese tradition (especially Confucianism) in order to “give the Chinese people something to believe in that can unify them as a race” (Van Norden 2017: 94). In other words, the *function* of these doctrines as used by Xi is to

“inspire racial identity and nationalism” (Van Norden 2017: 95). However, most of my book takes something closer to an emic approach, because I try to explain (for example) what the doctrine of no-self means for Buddhists, how they argue for it, and how different sects interpret it in divergent ways (Van Norden 2017: 43-51). A functional approach to this topic would be concerned not with meanings or beliefs, but with what ulterior psychological needs or social functions are met by the practices related to these concepts.

Perhaps Fuller’s characterizations of “functionalist” and “substantive” (cited above) are not erroneous, because he has decided to use these terms in new, idiosyncratic senses. I think this is inadvisable, since using technical terms in new ways encourages misunderstanding. However, let us tentatively adopt Fuller’s own characterization of “functionalists” as those who “defend and elaborate China as a philosophical culture in purely relational terms, based on its ‘non-western’ character” (Fuller 2018: 163). Fuller thinks that this explains why I do “not seem to want to include the twentieth-century encounters between Confucianism and, say, European liberalism and American pragmatism in the Republican period or Marxism in the Communist period” (Fuller 2018: 158). In fact, in my book, I do explicitly invite the reader to consider the philosophical value of “Mou Zongsan’s critique of Kant, or Liu Shaoqi’s argument that Marxism is incoherent unless supplemented with a theory of individual ethical transformation” (Van Norden 2017: 14), as well as the “Chinese modernizers of the May Fourth Movement [who] claimed that Confucianism was authoritarian and dogmatic at its core [...]” (Van Norden 2017: 4).

Admittedly, I do not spend nearly as much time on these thinkers as the Buddhist and Confucian philosophers I discuss at length in Chapter 2. However, this has nothing to do with any general methodological claims about the nature of culture, but is simply due to the goals of the book. The book does not claim to be a comprehensive history of Chinese philosophy. One of the chief goals of the books is to persuade those who are dubious about the philosophical value of thinkers outside the Anglo-European tradition. Although the New Confucians Mou Zongsan and Tang Junyi, the neo-Marxists Liu Shaoqi and Li Zehou, Confucian political theorist Joseph Chan, and many other thinkers who consciously engage in a Sino-Occidental dialogue are fascinating (and are as much a part of “Chinese culture” as anything), discussing them will not help persuade those unconvinced of the value of the Chinese philosophical tradition. Those skeptics will crow, “See?! It’s only philosophy when it engages with Anglo-European philosophy, not on its own!”

Finally, Fuller wonders whether I am “fully aware of [the] conceptual implications” of my methodology. Specifically, he worries that I “may think that [my] understanding of Chinese philosophical culture is ‘purer’ than [one] which focuses on a period with significant western influence” (Fuller 2018: 163). Although it is interesting to hear what Fuller thinks I “may think,” I in fact think nothing of the kind. My choice of philosophers was not based on considerations of “purity.” As I stated very explicitly in the book, “I have only talked about a few philosophers from outside the Anglo-European mainstream,” and my selection was based largely on “limitations of space and of my own abilities” (Van Norden 2017: 82).

Since Fuller was writing what is described as a book review, I do wish he had said more about the actual content of my book. Readers of Fuller’s review will not know that Chapter 1 is an overview of arguments in favor of teaching philosophy outside the Anglo-European tradition; that Chapter 2 illustrates the richness of Chinese philosophy by discussing how issues of personal identity, altruism, and weakness of will are discussed in part of that tradition; that Chapter 3 argues that there is a connection between Trumpian xenophobia and the philosophers who want to “build walls” between intellectual traditions; that Chapter 4 is a detailed defense of the value of studying

philosophy for both its practical and political benefits; and that Chapter 5 is a call for philosophy to return to its calling as a guide to life that speaks to everyone and not just specialists.

Nonetheless, it is valuable to find out what others make of what one has written. Even if you feel that they have misunderstood, at least you know this is a misunderstanding that must be addressed.

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 - ¹ Steve Fuller, “‘China’ as the West’s Other in World Philosophy,” *Journal of World Philosophies* 3, no. 1, (2018): 157-64.
 - ² John Monaghan and Peter Just. *Social and Cultural Anthropology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 59-61.
 - ³ A. R. Radcliffe-Brown. “Religion and Society,” in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1952), 153-77.
 - ⁴ Peter Berger. “Second Thoughts on Substantive versus Functional Definitions of Religion,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 13, no. 2, (June 1974): 125-33.
 - ⁵ For the distinction, see Karl Polanyi. *The Great Transformation*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 44-9.