



PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

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Book Review

Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2008, ISBN13: 9780195369021

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There is something odd about this book. Engagingly written and carefully argued, it defends the thesis that the only task of higher education is to “academicize” topics, and declares the liberal arts—including philosophical knowledge and skill—to have no value beyond that which is “internal to the performance” of academic inquiry (57). To the extent that Fish’s argument succeeds, however, the book seems antithetical to both of those claims. For Fish does not just exhort academics to change the way they conceptualize their professional life. He insists that they ought to change much of their teaching, research and service activity too. Though written primarily for an academic audience, much of this book will be of interest to philosophical practitioners. Many are also academic philosophers, and Fish’s efforts to delineate the boundaries of academic activity may help them to clarify the relationship between these two roles. Similarly, all practitioners have an interest in distinguishing genuinely *philosophical* education and guidance (in which I include what Lou Marinoff has called “therapy for the sane”), from indoctrination and other forms of ideological control. And few would disagree with Fish’s insistence that “truth, and the seeking of truth, must always be defended” (38). On each of these points, Fish’s discussion is illuminating.

Yet philosophical practitioners are unlikely to be convinced that the distinction between ‘academicizing’ and ‘politicizing’ (or ‘moralizing’) is quite as sharp as Fish draws it. He develops this distinction in Chapter Two. “To academicize a topic is to detach it from the context of its real world urgency, where there is a vote to be taken or an agenda to be embraced, and insert it into a context of academic urgency, where there is an account to be offered or an analysis to be performed” (27). In one example, he demonstrates how the Terry Schiavo case could be taught as instantiating the tension between substantive and procedural justice. He claims this is a way of teaching “without taking sides,” but one wonders why the “detailed historical and philosophical account” he believes an academicized inquiry should produce wouldn’t lead to at least some practical insights about how that tension might be resolved today (28). Even more tellingly, when defending his own reading of Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*—“that religiously inspired violence is what’s going on...and that Milton does not encourage us to condemn it” (51)—Fish claims that neither he nor Milton is recommending any policies. That may be true of Fish (though one assumes he is at least recommending his interpretation). Yet if Milton’s poem is indeed as Fish reads it, then it exemplifies a degree of tolerance toward religious violence. This too falls short of a political recommendation. But the uncritical reader may endorse Milton’s attitude, and this, in turn, may subtly inform or even motivate various actions. Hence my own view is that in calling attention to Milton’s complacency, Fish is performing a useful service. At a minimum, he is enabling the reader to guard against the poem’s influence.

Fish anticipates this criticism, admitting that “somewhere down the line” the answer to an academic question may factor into a student’s practical response to an issue (59). But he is keen to emphasize that any practical effects will be “the unintended consequences of an enterprise which, if it is to remain true to itself, must be entirely self-referential, must be stuck on itself, must have no answer whatsoever to the question, “what good is it?” (55). This is related to the deeper motivations

behind the book. Fish's broader goal, introduced in Chapter One and further developed in Chapter Four, is to articulate a distinctive role for higher education, and his worry is that if that role must be defined in terms of some practical use, then higher education will inevitably be enslaved to some external agenda. (Chapter Three is an "interlude" where Fish distinguishes the role of administrators from that of the faculty.) And in Chapter Five, he shows how this admittedly "deflationary account" of academic inquiry can respond to attacks on the academy from both the right and the left. It is here, while arguing that "the pursuit of truth is . . . *the* central purpose of the university" that Fish is at his most convincing. "For the serious embrace of that purpose precludes deciding what the truth is in advance, or ruling out certain accounts of the truth before they have been given a hearing, or making evaluations of those accounts turn on the known or suspected political affiliations of those who present them" (119).

But in Chapter Six, Fish's account turns paradoxical. For here he recommends concrete policies for fighting back against governmental attempts to reduce funding while at the same time demanding greater accountability from higher education. To be sure, these policies are consistent with his overall view. "Instead of saying, 'Let me tell you what we do so that you'll love us,'" he recommends that academics say, "We do what we do, we've been doing it for a long time, it has its own history, and until you learn it or join it, your opinions are not worth listening to" (165-6). Still, he gives *reasons* to think this strategy might work (it will be surprising and hence disconcerting to legislators, and they might like being challenged and treated like intellectuals). And the motivational force of those reasons depends in no small measure on whether the reader shares Fish's *beliefs* about the purpose and value of higher education. So even though he admits that his strategy may not be successful, he seems to be using academic argument to further a practical goal.

Perhaps Fish's book is not to be taken as an academic exercise (perhaps it was written "on his own time" rather than as part of his scholarly activity for Florida International University). And perhaps Fish would not be entirely hostile to philosophical practice. Insofar as such practice sees therapeutic benefits as a "side effect" of truth, he might well appreciate it more than other counseling modalities. And he would presumably find it acceptable for practitioners to maintain a consulting or counseling practice that is kept entirely separate from any classrooms in which they might teach. On the other hand, philosophical practitioners are primarily trained as academics, and are often assisting their clients "to produce or assess an account of a vexed political [or personal] issue" (30), so Fish may side with those critics who charge us with "practicing without a license" (67). In any case, while Fish has not convinced me that rational inquiry has nothing to do with saving the world and solving concrete problems in people's daily lives, he does take steps to defend that form of inquiry from some of its enemies.

Reference

Marinoff, Lou. *Therapy for the Sane*. Bloomsbury, NY, 2003.

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Aims and Scope

Philosophical Practice is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the growing field of applied philosophy. The journal covers substantive issues in the areas of client counseling, group facilitation, and organizational consulting. It provides a forum for discussing professional, ethical, legal, sociological, and political aspects of philosophical practice, as well as juxtapositions of philosophical practice with other professions. Articles may address theories or methodologies of philosophical practice; present or critique case-studies; assess developmental frameworks or research programs; and offer commentary on previous publications. The journal also has an active book review and correspondence section.

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APPA Mission

The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a non-profit educational corporation that encourages philosophical awareness and advocates leading the examined life. Philosophy can be practiced through client counseling, group facilitation, organizational consulting or educational programs. APPA members apply philosophical systems, insights and methods to the management of human problems and the amelioration of human estates. The APPA is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization.

APPA Membership

The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a not-for-profit educational corporation. It admits Certified, Affiliate and Adjunct Members solely on the basis of their respective qualifications. It admits Auxiliary Members solely on the basis of their interest in and support of philosophical practice. The APPA does not discriminate with respect to members or clients on the basis of nationality, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, age, religious belief, political persuasion, or other professionally or philosophically irrelevant criteria.

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