

Reviewing Academic Books

Are There Ethical Issues?

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Faculty members affiliated with U.S. colleges and universities that aspire to eminence must "publish or perish." So they all write articles and many write books. Neither articles nor books, however, are always published, in part because of an institutional bias. In particular, the process of deciding which books should be published favors authors who are associated with the most prestigious universities and other research institutions. Some think this bias could be minimized if the pre-publication reviewing of academic books included commitments to objectivity like those built into reviewing academic articles for journals. This is not likely to happen any time soon, though, because both the academic and the publishing industries promote the hierarchy of perceived excellence that dominates the process of publishing academic books. So unless one can show that this institutional hierarchy is itself unethical, it is not easy to identify anything unethical about the bias that permeates academic book reviewing. Nor can any such showing be made by simply applying some standard-offering ethical system, because ethics has become too focused on individual decision making to address institutional arrangements appropriately. Rather one must look to the social approaches now emerging in business ethics to deal with complex corporate behavior. More space than is now available would be needed to develop this proposition.¹ So I will just assume it here

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and assert instead that anyone committed to such democratic values as fundamental fairness, equal opportunity, and equal respect should have ethical concerns about this process. In support of this assertion, I will consider first the process of reviewing academics' articles, then that for reviewing their book manuscripts. My focus will be on pre-publication reviewing of philosophical work in the United States, leaving it to others to say whether and to what extent my observations apply to other disciplines and locations.

Anonymity in Journal Peer Reviewing

Editors of journals and collections ordinarily send article manuscripts (which I will hereafter call papers) to reviewers without identifying either the author or her institutional affiliation. The intended reason for this attention to anonymity is, of course, to level the playing field among scholars regardless of who they are or what their institutional affiliation. So in principle at least academics' papers are reviewed on their merits and not on the basis of their authors' institutional affiliation. Clearly, though, the practice does not conform to the principle. How could it, given that the editor (or editors) of the journal or collection to which a paper is submitted knows the author's name and affiliation, so can and usually does take this into account in deciding whether to send it out for review at all and, if so, how expeditiously and to whom. Since the prestige of a journal is in part based on the percentage of papers that are rejected as initially submitted, there is a built-in incentive not to "waste time" on papers whose authors are at lower-echelon institutions. Then, too, even if an editor opts to send a paper out for review, he can influence its fate by a judicious choice of reviewer(s). Even if this were not a factor, a lower-echelon paper's chances of acceptance would also be heavily influenced by what those involved in the paper reviewing process consider to be an appropriate approach to the discipline, e.g., whether the paper demonstrates that the author "does philosophy" in a way the top-echelon departments deem proper and whether the author defends a position that is within the range of what they recognize as reasonable. In view of these common limiting factors, the semblance of anonymity that is practiced in paper reviewing does not result in a truly level playing field.² Instead, this process is dominated by a cadre of professorial elite whose institutional bias welcomes outsiders' submissions about as well as the gods helped Sisyphus roll that stone uphill. This screening by and in behalf of an in-group operates in a manner analogous to what historian of science T. S. Kuhn identified as a dominant paradigm.

A kind of top-down bias, then, permeates and orchestrates the paper reviewing process. This, however, is not the whole story. For some of the most prestigious journals in which academics publish are falling under the control

of extra-academic interests whose influence on research and publication is undermining objectivity and impartiality. This problem is especially acute if an extra-academic interest has paid a contract research organization (CRO) to do the research and claims the right to censor what gets published. This is increasingly the case with medical research (Editorial, 2001; "Publication Ethics," 2001). Other fields of scientific endeavor are also subject to extra-academic constraints due to publishers' ever more monopolistic control of discipline-specific journals. In response to this problem, some scientists plan to establish alternative journals and other publications that the contributors will be better able to control ("Journal Wars," 2000).

In the humanities, extra-academic control of publishing papers is for the most part not commercially attractive, so this remains in the hands of the respective specialties. Upper-echelon academics control the most prestigious journals, of course, so lower-echelon academics need and have developed alternative outlets. In particular, philosophers at lower-echelon institutions have found ways to circumvent longstanding institutional bias in their profession. Programs at meetings of the American Philosophical Association have over time been expanded to include numerous "shadow sessions" organized by sub-groups of philosophers with specialized interests. These sub-organizations put on conferences and sponsor journals and other publications that cater to their members. Few of these lower-echelon publications enjoy the prestige of top journals in the field; but they do help lower-status practitioners avoid perishing from their academic earth. There is, then, a kind of multi-tiered democracy among career philosophers that offers something for patricians and something, albeit less, for plebeians. This, however, is much less the case when it comes to getting books published.

Transparency in Academic Book Reviewing

In sharp contrast to the anonymity approach to paper reviewing, book reviewing in philosophy (as in other disciplines) is altogether transparent. The reviewer of a book manuscript, however chosen, knows from the outset the real name of the author. If that name is well known in the discipline, the manuscript obviously stands a good chance of being favorably reviewed with only non-fatal suggestions for improvement or clarification. If that name is not well known, several courses of action are common. The acquisitions editor, first of all, will often reject manuscripts submitted by unknown authors affiliated with less prestigious institutions. If the manuscript survives this initial screening and is sent to a reviewer, the reviewer, knowing the author's name, can quickly determine (in most cases) the author's institutional affiliation. This done, the reviewer will form an opinion, before reading a single word of the manuscript,

about how much it merits serious attention. If the author is affiliated with a lower echelon institution, the reviewer will be tempted to assume at the outset that it is of inferior quality. Nor is this prejudgment entirely unfounded considering how comparatively little time or assistance faculty at such institutions are likely to have for research and writing. For their administration is ordinarily short on funds for such purposes; and grants available from outside sources are predictably awarded to applicants at or trained by the more prestigious institutions, because most of the reviewers for these grants are themselves affiliated with these institutions. Such constraints notwithstanding, it is nevertheless possible for someone at a less prestigious institution to produce a quality manuscript. So for a book reviewer to believe otherwise without even having read a manuscript is a negative bias that might be contrary to fact. From start to finish, this bias will be consciously associated with the author by name but implicitly and preeminently with the author's institution.³

The institutionally biased reviewer will be on the alert for evidence of the mediocrity he or she already associates with the author's employing institution; and what is sought will be found. What is in fact found may seem superficial to an impartial observer, especially if the reviewer really has to stretch to find support for his or her negative bias. At no point, of course, will this institutional bias be honestly and overtly expressed. Instead it will take the form of petty criticisms, e.g., Smith says on page fifty-one that such-and-such is the case whereas in the better informed view (that of the reviewer) it is not. In this way flaws, which are never altogether absent, will be found, resulting in a list of negative observations ranging in severity from a factual error to an omitted reference in the bibliography — or, for that matter, to the expression of an opinion that the reviewer deems untenable. Having come up with a list of such counter-indications to publication, the reviewer might recommend rejecting the manuscript outright. This being perhaps too gauche, the reviewer is more likely to recommend substantial revisions. Then, when the revised manuscript is resubmitted the reviewer can without scruples declare that it still does not satisfy his or her lofty standard for publishability. This "rigor" might even lead the reviewer to recommend rejecting a manuscript that by his or her own admission is as well written and important as are manuscripts submitted by better known scholars at more respected institutions.

It seems, then, that the prepublication screening of academics' book manuscripts is more restrictive than is the screening of papers. This is so even though there is a hierarchy of academic book publishers as there is of publishers of papers. The process of determining which academic books should be published and by which press depends only secondarily on the comparative prestige of the publishers. The primary consideration in this regard is the market niche that each publisher occupies. From the perspective of a publisher, whether associated with a university or not, an academic book, like any other, must have

a targeted set of purchasers if it is to be at least marginally successful. In an earlier era, marginally successful did not necessarily mean profitable, especially not at university presses. But as commercial presses are bought out by corporations whose principal interest is in publishing blockbuster books, even well-known authors are driven to submit their less profitable work to academic publishers. These publishers, in turn, find themselves increasingly subject to the bottom-line expectations of ever more commerce-oriented umbrella institutions (Epstein, 2001). For these reasons the marketing process of identifying targeted readers is becoming less congenial to the authors of limited-interest academic books.

Readership targets for academic books have historically been divided between students who need texts and scholars who need "trade" books. A book intended as a text depends for its success on being adopted by classroom instructors. This involves a complex process, complete with planned obsolescence in the form of a series of ever new editions. Texts depend on low-margin mass marketing for success, so are typically reviewed pre-publication by randomly selected but preferably large-enrollment classroom instructors who choose the texts to be used in the courses they teach. Trade books, on the other hand, depend for their success on being added to the collections of libraries at institutions of higher learning. These in recent years have come to be less reliable as purchasers because they face both budgetary limitations and exploding prices that publishers seem unable to contain even by outsourcing their manufacture to developing countries. Some analysts of this industry think electronic books are the hope of the future; but the future is not yet a reality. So books with covers and pages still hold sway. Which of these, however, should be acquired? Different libraries have different policies; most, however, are influenced if not bound by recommendations of faculty members in each discipline. They, in turn, are inclined to request books by or about authors whose work is most renowned in their field or, failing this, most favorably and prestigiously reviewed — if not in literary supplements then at least in the publisher's marketing blurb.

Given this state of affairs, many academics, especially in philosophy, can probably tell at least one story about having a book manuscript rejected. And if sufficiently frustrated they may resort to some form of self-publishing, which unfortunately adds little to their academic status. This is especially true of vanity presses and, at least at this time in its evolution, the self-published electronic book which may be downloaded or made available in hard-copy form. Meanwhile, there are some moderately acceptable remedies for the narrowing of book publishing opportunities, in particular, the intervention of many sub-specialty organizations that arrange with a publisher for their own book series instead of or in addition to a journal.

These sub-specialty books are seldom monographs, but rather collections

of papers. Their target readership seldom includes anyone other than members of the sponsoring organization and among these perhaps only those who have actually contributed an article to the volume being published. These publications, accordingly, are inordinately expensive and seldom have any impact beyond the small circle of readers who are barely distinguishable from the authors and those of their fellow academics who are called upon to support their candidacy for promotion and/or tenure. Nonetheless, those responsible for getting such a work in print typically go through the motions of pre-publication "peer review," usually by having organization members review one another's submissions. The targeted readership, in short, is self-selected.

These remarks about academic book publishing practices will be received differently depending on where the reader is located in relationship to the hierarchy of academe. To the well-placed, they may be written off as sour grapes; to the less well placed, however, they may well call forth remembrances of personal experiences. An empirical study could perhaps show a correlation, however, between scholars' institutional status and their ability to get book manuscripts published.⁴ What no study could easily discern, however, is the quality of lower-echelon publications as compared to prestigious publications. Nor is it obvious how much that should matter, given the purpose of both, namely, professional career advancement.

In short, the process of pre-reviewing academic books is pragmatic to the core even though suffused with an aura of scholarship, intellectualism, and the advancement of learning. For, its purpose, for all but the very few elite in a given field, is to satisfy the publish-or-perish requirement for continued employment and perhaps meaningful professional esteem among one's peers. This being the reality of the matter, how does one go about identifying the ethical issues that are at play for participants in this process?

Is Transparent Book Reviewing Unethical?

As noted above, anyone partial to fundamental fairness, equal opportunity, and equal respect must find the transparency of academic book reviewing ethically troublesome. This, however, is not equivalent to saying that it is unethical. For, the latter claim surely must depend on more than allegiance to certain values defended by some social and political theorists (among whom I would include myself). And in fact there are numerous arguments against applying such values to the book publishing process. These can be divided into two types: (1) external to academe and (2) internal to academe.

The principal external type of argument is at bottom economic in orientation and as such can be called *commercial*. Its proponents focus on publishing as a commercial process and assume accordingly that only what will sell and,

in this age of conglomerate ownership, at a substantial profit, should be published. This narrow view of publishers' responsibilities is a direct challenge to the validity of the arts and humanities as cultural assets. As applied in practice, it may not be altogether destructive of academic publishing, at least for the few notable writers whose works are deemed fairly marketable. As already noted, however, it does push reputable but low-selling authors off the lists of major publishing houses and on to those of willing university presses, thereby diminishing the opportunities available to less marketable academic authors.

The principal internal argument focuses on the well-being of a discipline, which as practiced, constitutes a profession. This argument typically assumes that academic publishing should not be reduced to its commercial aspects because its principal function is to disseminate new learning in a particular field. Thus, on this view, its practitioners should collaborate with one another to make this new learning available. Those who take this *professional* stance are not homogeneous, however, in their approach to advancing the profession. They split into two separate and conflicting views. One stresses *competition* and for understandable reasons is more likely to be defended by a profession's elite. The other, more likely to be defended by less prestigious members of a profession, stresses *collegiality*.

With or without benefit of social Darwinism as a rationale, the elite take it for granted that the distribution of academic positions, perks, and privileges is determined on the whole by merit: the best inevitably rise to, represent, and help perpetuate the top. For them accordingly it is close to meaningless to introduce democratic values into any aspect of this system, including in particular the book reviewing process. Advocates of professional collegiality, by contrast, stress the responsibilities one has as a member of a profession to help others enter, master, and advance the profession. It goes without saying that anyone truly committed to this vision will review book manuscripts in a manner quite different from the profession's elite. And they will do so with an explicit awareness that their professional acts are subject to ethical norms and standards, including fundamental fairness and equal opportunity.

The competition model takes its inspiration, in large part, from the way scientists obtain and distribute perks, usually in the form of positions, research funding, and awards. Anonymity is a low priority value among scientists as they review one another's dossiers, grant applications, and award nominations. The stellar performers in a special field are favored without apology or regret, as are their protégés by association, and the burden of proof is decidedly on anyone without name recognition or sponsorship who wishes to enter the inner sanctum of a specialty. Flawed as this system may be, it is assumed to be best suited to the advancement of a scientific field. If ethics plays any role in this system it is to fault any proposal for an alternative approach as a likely hindrance to progress. Thus in the name of progress, women were long excluded

from scientific research, and even when admitted in the twentieth century they were often denied credit for their contributions (Harding, 1991; Keller, 1985). They now have achieved a substantial presence in the humanities, including philosophy, and more recently in academic administration as well. Considering how little the "old boys network" helped them along the way, one can readily appreciate why women who now hold positions in academe often espouse the collegiality model for reviewing colleagues' work.

The collegiality model is not based on communitarian values but in some respects draws upon these insofar as it stresses cooperation, mutual assistance, and participatory decision making. It is at work in the sub-group associations that exist precisely to create, encourage, and grow a set of interests that its members share in common. Funding is a factor in all this, but is subordinate to dissemination of knowledge via academically respectable publications. Based on my own experience in a handful of these organizations, I would say they differ primarily in the subject matter to which each is dedicated: philosophical views of technology, law, social and political issues, Americana, popular culture, and so on. Another characteristic of many of these organizations is their multi-disciplinary membership and eclectic methodologies.

In conclusion, for a long time (until about the 1970s) the process of reviewing academic books, in particular, those written by philosophers, was dominated by a professional elite who were associated with elite academic institutions. This domination still prevails to the advantage of the top-echelon universities with which those who make up this professional elite are affiliated as faculty and/or former doctoral students. But they no longer determine what gets published. For as special-interest sub-organizations have come into being and taken on publishing responsibilities for the benefit of their members, the number of outlets for philosophical work has expanded. Most alternative outlets lack the prestige of the paradigm publishers, and they are in their own way controlled by the leading members in each sub-organization. Moreover, they focus on collective publications rather than monographs. They are more committed, though, to the values of participatory democracy in the reviewing process than is the case with elitist outlets. Besides, the publishing service they provide contributes very substantially to their members' quest for affirmative personnel decisions at the lower-echelon colleges and universities with which they are affiliated. Because of these alternative outlets for articles, though seldom for books, several of the ethical issues that I noted at the outset of this paper — fundamental fairness and equal opportunity — are somewhat neutralized. Because these outlets are themselves only a fall-back arrangement that in no way disturbs the institutional bias I have described, however, at least one ethical issue in academic book reviewing remains unresolved and indeed barely even addressed. This relates to the third value I noted, namely, the right (much favored by highest echelon philosophers) to equal respect.⁵

Notes

1. See in this regard Byrne (forthcoming).
2. There is an ongoing debate about whether single or double blind reviewing is a better way to maintain anonymity and fairness of outcome (see Blank, 1991). What I am suggesting here is that institutional bias is so endemic in the reviewing process that these methodological devices, so helpful to assure objectivity when studying natural processes, cannot be relied on to render publication decisions objective and impartial.
3. If this institutional ranking is at work as I claim it is, it is at work even more bluntly if not brutally when applied to submissions from faculty who are affiliated with traditionally black colleges and universities. So for some individuals in academe there are extra layers of bias added on to the hierarchical bias to which most academic authors are subject.
4. This would not be easy to research. Even if limited to university presses and corporate publishers with large lists in philosophy, it should include not only U.S. but also U.K., Canadian, and perhaps Australian publishing houses over, say, a ten-year period. Moreover, the assessment of an author's institutional status would need to include not just his or her employer but also the university at which he or she did doctoral studies. Assuming this could be done with regard to one discipline, such as philosophy, it would become unwieldy if expanded to include multiple disciplines and, *a fortiori*, if the longitudinal parameters were set at, say, twenty-five years.
5. In his carefully wrought critique of liberal acceptance of nation states' bias in immigration policies, Phillip Cole (2000) provides us with an excellent example of how one might appeal to the principle of equal respect to argue, *mutatis mutandis*, against bias in academic publishing.

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