

Fishbowl Blues Revisited

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To find oneself in agreement with the obviously very intellectual and entertaining Stanley Fish, as tempting as it may be at times, is to succumb to a kind of cranky, old guard cynicism—one that says “no, no, no,” far more often than it ever says “yes.” Aside from being stubbornly black and white, it is jaded, if not downright reactionary, to say that any attempts to “fashion an informed citizenry,” “advance the cause of justice,” or to “advance anything” at all, are unjustified higher education goals (Fish, 2008, p.51). For Fish, an advocate of “academicizing” in the classroom, that is to say avoiding any issues of politics whenever possible, “the only proper ends of the university are those that involve the mastery of intellectual and scholarly skills” and nothing more (Fish, 2008, p.14). In Fish’s orthodox world, a professor should only engage in recondite classroom discussions regarding the rational merits of an argument, not make any effort to affirm or dismiss any idea as better or worse than the next. In other words, the most vile sentiments could be placed on equal footing with the most noble ones, as long as both are well reasoned. The professor’s job should only be to solicit purely neutral academic views rather than veer towards anything moral or personal in nature. “Doing more would be to take on tasks that belong properly to other agents—to preachers, political leaders, therapists, and gurus” (Fish, 2008, p.169). For these reasons, in *Save The World On Your Own Time*, Stanley Fish (2008) makes the case that the university can not and should not work towards fashioning students’ moral character, nor should it attempt in any way to

fashion good citizens. Any attempts to “save the world” should be done on a faculty member’s own time.

If that is the case, then many people’s response might well be, “What’s the point of it all then?” Is there no reason for learning anything other than for learning’s sake? Academia does not exist in a fishbowl. Admittedly, professors’ main responsibility should perhaps be to delve into the specialized complexities of their chosen fields of study rather than abandon them in some attempt to proselytize, indoctrinate, or otherwise brainwash students into adopting a particular point of view. But are those the only choices? Is it all or nothing? Does it have to be as black and white as Fish attempts to paint it? Should there not also be a role for academics who want to engage with the hot topics of the day, or who would dare to stray away from focusing merely on the arcane issues of their particular field?

Many other prominent academicians, regardless of their liberal or conservative leanings, think the answer to that is “yes.” Provocative Princeton scholar Cornell West (2004) does not believe that the life of all professors should be narrowly contained within the university walls or made to serve only narrow technocratic goals. “This technocratic view of the academy fences professors off from the larger democratic culture and has made university life too remote from that of the larger society that supports it” (West, 2004, p.189). Indeed, in an age when many in society increasingly see the university as its own elite and very expensive universe—somewhat detached from the concerns of the real world—it would seem wise to promote more engagement with the larger culture and society, not less.

Fish’s views have also drawn the ire of absolute-minded conservative academicians as well, who often perceive him to be a kind of sophistic, postmodern proponent of nothing in particular. R.V. Young (2003) writes:

Because his general understanding of human nature and of the human condition is false, Fish fails in the specific task of a university scholar, which requires that learning be placed in the service of truth. And this, finally, is the critical issue in the contemporary university of which Stanley Fish is a typical representative: sophistry renders truth itself equivocal and deprives scholarly learning of its reason for being. His brash disdain of principle and his embrace of sophistry reveal the hollowness hidden at the heart of the current academic enterprise (p.244).

Funny then that Fish (2008) himself also believes the only thing academia should advocate for is the “cardinal academic virtue of being conscientious in the pursuit of the truth” (p. 20). Additionally, “If you are not in the pursuit of truth business, you should not be in the university”

(Fish, p. 20). The question then becomes “Who’s truth?” which again speaks to the difficulty of maintaining any sort of complete objectivity in the classroom.

Fish concedes that one of the most common, but misguided, accusations often thrown his way is that, since everything is ultimately political, it is impossible to remove politics from the classroom. Fish (2008) counters, however, that “the ‘everything is political’ mantra is ritually invoked by those who do not respect (or believe in) the distinction between academic work and political work” (p. 172). But many would call into question the possibility of anyone ever being fully able to achieve this distinction. As Anthony Dimatteo, professor of English at New York Institute of Technology, explains:

Fish’s case falls apart as soon as we begin to write a syllabus, for we select some texts for our students to read and not others and we choose some topics to discuss and present some opposing views, but not just any topic and not just any view. (Fish, 2006)

Any call to political neutrality is bound to leave out or offend somebody since it is virtually impossible to be without a viewpoint or present a fact without interpretation. “Behind every fact presented to the world—by a teacher, a writer, anyone—is a judgment. The judgment that has been made is that this fact is important, and that other facts, omitted, are not important” (Zinn, 2003, p. 684). Fish (2008) states that “you shouldn’t respect the voices of others simply because they are others (that’s the mistake of doctrinaire multiculturalism); you should respect the voices of those others whose arguments and recommendations you find coherent and persuasive” (p. 54). But is that not, at least in part, a matter of opinion in the end? What one finds coherent and persuasive might not be at all so to another.

Nonetheless, it is hard to find fault with *Save The World On Your Own Time*’s chapter expounding upon how higher education is under attack due to lack of funding, the corporate mindset, academy bashing, and a distinctly American strain of anti-intellectualism. While state spending for universities continues to decline, tuitions and fees continue to rise in order to make up for the revenue shortfalls. However, the perception being foisted upon a gullible public by too many of today’s profit worshipping politicians is one that portrays universities as being far too expensive due to their wasteful spending habits, rather than because of a decline in state funding. These same forces are also attempting to discredit higher education’s purpose with portrayals of ivory towers being run by pointy headed intellectuals hell bent on undermining traditional American mainstream values. According to Fish (2008), their true con-

servative agenda is to “strip colleges and universities of both federal and state support” and to run academe like a business with businessmen in control (p. 161). But of course colleges are not businesses, and Fish (2008) believes that any attempts to apply bottom line criteria to the world of academia could ultimately lead to its demise (p. 165).

Fish has a bit of the martyr about him. It is interesting to note that he somewhat proudly admits his own vision of academicizing universities is ultimately not a good recipe for the future financial health of colleges and universities. “An academy unconcerned with the public yield of its activities, an academy that puts at the center of its operations the asking of questions for their own sake” will not easily convince donors to give to what will be so increasingly badly needed (Fish, p. 154).

It is clear throughout *Save The World On Your Own Time* that Fish has identified the surrender of academic enterprise to political considerations, by faculty and administrators alike, as being one of the biggest threats to the future of healthy higher education in America. While there may be individual cases of this actually happening, ultimately his charge is wildly overblown and overly traditionalistic. Through his dreams of attempting to sidestep many of the difficult issues that make thoughtful discourse possible, it would seem that Fish is actually condoning a form of the political correctness that he so vehemently abhors. Fish famously has asserted that for a professor to draw conclusions or to advocate for any position is somehow a betrayal of professional standards. But according to Christopher Newfield (2008), this has had

the disastrous effect of rendering invisible the professional standards within which faculty must take positions in the classroom, which leads not to neutrality and equal time for all possibilities but to expertly researched and argued advocacy of the truth (defined as everything that one’s profession agrees that we know). (p. 262)

Moreover, academe in this country *should* be involved in engaging in the democratic doings of society. Why not? In order to maintain its relevance it needs to shed its dry, flaking shell and reach out more to the surrounding society—especially the youth culture. Since America was founded upon liberal traditions of openness, free speech, and social justice, we should make no apologies for continuing to promote those ideals in the university setting, especially when they are being attacked every day from within our own country by the very people Fish himself identifies as the biggest threat to the existence of higher education (again the martyr complex?).

In the middle of the book, Fish (2008) cuts to the chase when he writes: “And here we come to the heart of the matter, the justification of

liberal education. You know the questions: Will it benefit the economy? Will it fashion an informed citizenry? Will it advance the cause of justice? Will it advance anything?" (p. 55). To these queries, I say, yes (maybe), yes, yes, and yes! For a professor to jadedly say "no" to these questions, as Fish of course does, is completely uninspiring, un-transformational, and lacking in vision. But, then again, I am sure he would have little use for those qualities in the university either.

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