BOOK REVIEW

Teaching as a Calling—
Not a Chore

Saints and Scamps: Ethics in Academia, by Steven M. Cahn.

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When I read this book in manuscript, I wrote that it could serve as a handbook for every administrator and every member of the governing boards of our institutions of higher learning. Having reread it, I would broaden my recommendation. It should be read by every dean and departmental chairman, indeed, by every teacher in our colleges and universities aware of his role as an educator, who has developed a sense of responsibility in the exercise of his calling. This high praise reflects not merely the quality of Prof. Cahn’s book but the striking absence of similar works in the field. We are not dealing with a study in the philosophy of education that discusses abstractions of a high order from which nothing specific can be deduced to guide teachers in the classroom. What we have here is something like a vade mecum, a guide that every beginning teacher, and even some experienced ones, should find extremely helpful.

The title Saints and Scamps is justifiable as a way of catching the attention of readers who, once they dip into its pages, are likely to continue reading to the end. Taken literally, however, the title is somewhat misleading. For it really distinguishes between fit and unfit teaching, acceptable and unacceptable classroom behavior, defined not arbitrarily but in the light of reasonable procedures that result in improving the students’ mastery of the subjects taught and in enhancing their analytical abilities and appreciation for what they are studying. Those teachers who are fit are not saintly—they are competent—a sufficient virtue on the tertiary level of education and in much scarcer supply than on the level of elementary and secondary education. Those who are unfit are not scamps, but something far worse. At the very least, if it is merely a matter of incompetence, they should be in another profession. When it is not merely a matter of incompetence, their behavior as described by Prof. Cahn is downright immoral.

The need for a book like Prof. Cahn’s follows from the fact that teaching at the college level has until recently never received the attention it deserves, either by college administrators or by teachers themselves. The reason is simple. Reputations, awards, Nobel and lesser prizes are earned by publications and research discoveries, not by distinguished teaching. Often, what is called “distinguished” teaching is only the bizarre, crotchety behavior and pronouncements of a gifted scholar or researcher. Even more so than an actor, a teacher is a sculptor in snow who leaves no perceptible “body of work” behind him, though he may have inspired or crippled the careers of many students. The assumption behind the assignment of a teaching post in most colleges is that anyone who is certified as having knowledge of a subject is capable of teaching it effectively, which is obviously untrue. There are individuals who are entrusted with the instruction of students who actually take pride in their contemptuous disregard of the canons of good teaching. Usually, they are very poor teachers. Aware of their ineptitude as teachers, they seek to make a virtue of their failings. Those who suffer most, of course, are the students who, ironically enough, are more often aware of being badly taught than of being well taught. Despite the vogue of student evaluations—which should go
primarily to teachers themselves—only good teachers are the judge of what is good teaching.

The scope of Prof. Cahn's book is quite comprehensive. It covers teaching, scholarship and service, personnel decisions and graduate education. Under these rubrics, different topics are considered in detail. For example, under "Teaching," there are subchapters on "The Art of Instruction," "A Teacher's Concerns," "Examinations," "Grades," "A Teacher's Role," and "Evaluating Teaching." Prof. Cahn has something instructive to say on all these themes and many more. The writing is direct, simple, often witty, and illustrated with relevant, sometimes hilarious, anecdotes that tell more than their own story. It is blessedly free from any tincture of pedagogy. And on every topic Prof. Cahn has some illuminating observations.

To someone like myself whose teaching career spans the period from the days when deans were kings and departmental chairmen feudal lords, to the present when the choice of deans and chairmen usually reflects the influence of faculties, Prof. Cahn's book is a significant mark of profound change. It is testimony to the institutionaization of democratic practices in university life, all the more welcome because they have been so long delayed. Despite his commitment to the democratic way of life as a philosopher in the tradition of John Dewey, Prof. Cahn still insists on the authority of scholarship, seniority and achievement in the life of the mind. Democracy in education is desirable but a university is not a political democracy in which each one, teacher and student, tenured professor and graduate student, counts for one and no more than one. The counterculture of the sixties sought to dispute this, and whenever it succeeded the educational consequences were disastrous.

The great danger of trying to apply principles of political democracy to the university is that it makes for mediocrity. Where decisions are made merely by majority vote, not every scholar judges his colleagues by strict standards of scholarship or teaching, especially in disciplines rent by ideological differences. In the years of the quick rush to democratic procedures, in some departments, the practice was guided by the maxim: "You scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours." I still recall being approached by a committee of a department that had lost its only member of national reputation for scholarship and critical acumen, with a request for a recommendations for his successor, "We want someone good, of course, but not too good!" they said.

Nonetheless, there are occasions when sheer scholarship is not enough and the principle of collegiality must be considered, too. By a fluke I have discussed elsewhere, I became chairman of the undergraduate philosophy department at New York University in the early thirties, and shortly afterwards chairman of the graduate department as well. Some twenty years later, before the move to democratization of personnel decisions became general, I decided to turn over the powers of appointment, or recommendation for appointment, to the members of the department as a whole. I began by putting before my colleagues the name of a midwestern scholar who had made something of a reputation in a field in which our department needed to be strengthened. He was rather belligerent, sometimes rude in argument, a mannerism I found troublesome but relatively unimportant in the light of his promise as a scholar and teacher. The department discussion showed that no one shared my enthusiasm for the candidate though no one else was in the running. No adequate reasons were advanced to challenge his appointment. The deci-
tion was made by secret ballot. To my surprise, mine was the only vote in his favor.

I accepted the result with good cheer as the price one must occasionally pay for entrusting decisions to the collective judgment of one's colleagues. But I could not resist pointing out that if I had followed the same procedure with respect to the appointment of everyone who had participated in the decision, not a single one of them would have been in the department. Why this was so is another story reflecting the changes in philosophical interest.

Nonetheless, I was soon to learn that there was a greater wisdom in the opinions of my colleagues than in my own fancied seasoned and experienced judgment. When I informed the candidate of the department's decision, he not only denounced each and every member by name as a charlatan or worse—without knowing how the individual voted—but later presented me with a bill for his expenses that showed him to be downright dishonest. He not only demanded reimbursement for meals we had paid for, but for the airfare of his mistress, who had accompanied him. Had I overruled the department, he would have soon wrecked it.

One can always think of special circumstances that would require a modification of the rigorous enforcement of the rules of good practice that Prof. Cahn develops. But this is no objection to them. They hold for more cases. Despite the tone of Kantian austerity with which he presents these rules, Prof. Cahn is well aware of the need for discretion and good sense that must be exercised in their application.

The author offers his readers so much that it seems unreasonable to ask for more. But if and when he ever amplifies this book in a second edition, I hope he will discuss two additional themes. The first is the necessity and nature of educational leadership on the part of administrations, particularly presidents and deans. The sad state of some of our universities find themselves in, particularly in the humanities and the social sciences, and occasionally in the teaching of law, can be traced to the failure of administrators to uphold standards of academic integrity abandoned by faculties confronted by militant activist students. Now that boards of trustees have in effect become anachronistic, the role of presidents as educators, rather than fundraisers with edifice complexes, becomes central. At the very least, they should become aware that the quality of education takes priority over the size of enrollment or the number of buildings. Such concern can be counted upon to resist the tendency towards politicization. Indeed, it is the sine qua non whenever the mission of the university is defined to be more than the voluntary pursuit, publication and transmission of truths warranted by evidence.

Another topic that requires analysis and reform of current practices is the use and abuse of the lecture method. When students are literate (and if they are not, they should be enrolled in educational institutions other than universities) they can absorb a greater amount of information, and absorb it more quickly, through reading than they can when attending a lecture. No lecturer can judge what his auditors understand of his ideas unless they react to what he says. Genuine teaching begins at this point in most disciplines. This makes lectures as a rule unnecessary, although an occasional lecture tying points together that have been established in intellectual exchange between teacher and students may be illuminating. Every discipline has its own pedagogical constraints—a course in elementary language cannot be well taught by the lecture method or by the Socratic method. Nor can courses in mathematics and experimental science, although there may be some subordinate use of these in such areas. What passes for "discussion"
in too many courses in the humanities and social sciences is little better than a bull session unless firmly guided by a teacher who knows how to focus on a problem, develop arguments cumulatively, and recognizes that not all problems have to be solved to make progress in clarifying some of them.

I am confident that Prof. Cahn will treat these themes in the same masterly way as he has treated the others.

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