

# BOOK REVIEW

---

## Teaching as a Calling— Not a Chore

**Saints and Scamps: Ethics in  
Academia**, by Steven M. Cahn.  
Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Littlefield,  
1986, 112 pp., \$15.95.

*Sidney Hook*

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 ana-

lytical 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 institutionalization 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 prin-

ciples 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 recommendation 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 democraticization 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 for himself 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-

sion 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, par-

ticularly presidents and deans. The sad state 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.

*Sidney Hook is a Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford, CA 94305-6010.*

U.S. Postal Service STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION Required by 39 U.S.C. 3685		
1A Title of Publication <b>ACADEMIC QUESTIONS</b>	1B PUBLICATION NO. <b>P E R I O D I C S</b>	1C Date of Filing <b>9/30/88</b>
2 Frequency of Issue <b>QUARTERLY</b>	3A No. of Issues Published Annually <b>FOUR</b>	3B Annual Subscription Price <b>\$30-INDIVIDUAL \$50-INSTITUTIONAL</b>
4 Location of Office of Publication (Street, City, County, State and ZIP+4 Code) (Not printer) <b>TRANSACTION PUBLISHERS, RUTGERS UNIVERSITY, NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ 08903</b>		
5 Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters or General Business Office of the Publisher (Not printer) <b>NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOLARS, SUITE 244, 20 NASSAU STREET, PRINCETON, NJ 08542</b>		
6 Full Name and Complete Mailing Address of Publisher, Editor, and Managing Editor (This box must NOT be blank) <b>Publisher: MARY E. CURTIS, TRANSACTION PUBLISHERS, RUTGERS UNIVERSITY, NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ 08903</b> <b>Editor: HERBERT I. LONDON, DEAN GALLATIN DIVISION, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY, NEW YORK, NY 10003</b> <b>Managing Editor: CAROL IARNONE, 210 RIVERSIDE DRIVE, APT 1510, NEW YORK, NY 10025</b>		
7 Owner (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a partnership or other unincorporated firm, its name and address, as well as that of each individual must be given. If the publication is published by a corporation or other organization, its name and address must be stated.) (Do not check this box unless required to do so.)		
8 Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages or Other Securities. If none, so state.	9 For Completion by Nonprofit Organizations Authorized to Mail at Special Rate (39 U.S.C. 3686) (Check one) The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for Federal income tax purposes (Check one): <input type="checkbox"/> (1) Has Changed During Preceding 12 Months <input type="checkbox"/> (2) Has Not Changed During Preceding 12 Months <input type="checkbox"/> (3) Has Changed During Preceding 12 Months (If changed, publisher must submit explanation of change with this statement.)	
10 Extent and Nature of Circulation Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months		
A Total No. Copies (Net Press Run)	2,165	1,689
B Paid and Unpaid Circulation 1. Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors and Counter Sales	-	18
2. Mail Subscriptions	1,093	1,050
C Total Paid and Unpaid Circulation (Sum of 10B and 10C)	1,093	1,068
D Free Distribution by Mail, Carrier, or Other Means (Samples, Complimentary, and Other Free Copies)	26	26
E Total Distribution (Sum of 10C and 10D)	1,119	1,094
F Copies Not Distributed 1. Office use, left overs, unsent, spoiled after printing	1,046	595
2. Return from News Agents	-	-
G TOTAL (Sum of 10E and 10F) (Should equal net press run shown in 10A)	2,165	1,689
11 I certify that this statement is true and correct and complete. Signature and Title of Editor, Publisher, Business Manager, or Owner <i>Mary E. Curtis</i> Signature and Title of Editor, Publisher, Business Manager, or Owner <i>Herbert I. London</i>		

# Free Catalog

of  
Government  
books

Take advantage of the wealth of knowledge available from your Government. The Superintendent of Documents produces a catalog that tells you about new and popular books sold by the Government. Hundreds of books on agriculture, business, children, energy, health, history, space, and much, much more. For a free copy of this catalog, write—

## Free Catalog

P.O. Box 37000  
Washington, DC 20013-7000

