

**Save the World on Your Own Time**, by Stanley Fish. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, 208 pp., \$19.95 hardbound.

### Advice from the Kingfish

**Stephen H. Balch**

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Stanley Fish is something of a Beau Brummell in American academe, hyper-conspicuous and always leading fashion. He bid for this celebrity by challenging received wisdom at every turn, and being bright, showy, and very, very clever, his success has been immense. An early champion of the reader-response school of criticism, Fish argued that “interpretative communities of readers,” not authors, were the true arbiters of textual meaning, a move of tremendous appeal to professors eager to set themselves over and above their subject matters. As chairman of Duke’s English department he operationalized this “insight,” replacing the bright lights of literature with a cavalcade of faculty stars, each

a doyen of his or her theoretical fellowship. After briefly flaring to supernova, the department duly collapsed upon itself, with Fish and his vainglorious recruits chasing off after even bigger perches elsewhere—in Fish’s case to a prestigious deanship at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Not content with generating merely scholarly thrills, Fish also sought provocateur fame among broader publics, most extravagantly in a book-length defense of speech codes characteristically entitled *There’s No Such Thing as Free Speech: And It’s a Good Thing Too* (Oxford University Press, 1994). Now a regular contributor and blogger for the Grey Lady, his irresistible rise can be fairly said to be complete.

Problem is, what to do next? The rent’s always due for fame’s rooms at the top, and only payable in continued newsworthiness. Perhaps it’s not surprising then that Fish’s most recent book seeks headlines by deconstructing nothing less than his own reputation as an academic radical. Having spent his career aiding and abetting professors convinced of the universal significance of their every intellectual trope, Fish now reads them the riot act. In *Save the World on Your Own Time*, he orders dispersal to office and study to

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pursue the unworldly pastime of “academization” (his term)—a kind of arts for art’s sake philosophy applied to scholarship.

It would be easy to dismiss this book as one more round of sensation-seeking. Yet since Fish has consistently been at the head of the scholarly crowd, the possibility can’t be ignored that his unexpected move *against* politicization is a symptom of some deepening academic unease. Even if this is not the case, and I confess to being skeptical, *Save the World on Your Own Time* superficially rehearses—often in a stark and arresting form—many of the arguments made on behalf of academic autonomy by distinguished intellectuals with less impeachable pasts. Rather than spurning Fish’s theses in ad hominem impulse, there may thus be reason for giving the book’s more central contentions a serious look.

Fish opens with the plausible observation that each type of activity has “its own proper shape” and must present itself “as a this and not a that.” In the case of university teaching, the activities involve introducing “students to bodies of knowledge and traditions of inquiry that they didn’t know much about before” and equipping them “with the analytical skills that will enable them to move confidently within those traditions and to engage in independent

research should they chose to do so.” Consequently, university teaching is to be distinguished from a variety of other communicative enterprises such as the ministry, the bar, and political leadership, where the objective is to “advocate personal, political [and] moral” views. “If an idea or a policy is presented as a candidate for allegiance” the academic lectern is being misused. By contrast, if it is being “subjected to a certain kind of interrogation—what is its history? how has it changed over time? who are its prominent proponents? what are the arguments for and against it? with what other policies is it usually packaged?”—it has been “academized” and thereby transformed into wholesome classroom fodder.

I’ll concede that this definition of instructional propriety would, if uniformly observed, improve the tone of innumerable zealously taught courses. But as the sum total of what is academically permissible, let alone necessary, it would also leave our universities vastly diminished providers of a vital dimension of higher learning that Fish ignores—and would snicker at—the transmission of wisdom.

Nowadays, commending the transmission of wisdom probably does risk ridicule, not only from Fish but almost everyone else with an advanced degree. One might as well be urging the practice of magic.

What I mean by wisdom, however, is nothing inherently mysterious or particularly grand, but quotidian—it's what a parent does every day for a child or, further along in life, what a mentor might do for a protégé. It involves the compressed communication of complex judgments about the value and efficacy of possible actions and competing goals, whose multiple components could potentially be teased apart, but only at inexpedient cost in time and mental energy. Put more simply, it involves economically conveying broad assessments of the goodness and badness of things.

For Fish this would be as much a violation of the academic charge as would be the classroom endorsement of a presidential candidate, which, in fact, constitutes his lead example of what a professor should never do. A journalist or talk show host, he tells us, might well express views on whether George W. Bush was the worst president in American history, but if the same question arose in a political science or history classroom it would have to be “academized” by stripping it of critical opinion. The instructor, Fish advises, should “turn the question itself into an object of study.” For example, he might investigate America's fascination with keeping score, discuss the history of presidential rankings

and the ups and downs of various chief executives, or examine what presidents said about their own positions in the ratings. The more these lines of inquiry are followed the more the urgency of the original question—“which is political—will have been replaced by the urgency to understand a phenomenon. The question will have been academized.” Fish is not averse to professors rendering judgment on the truth or falsity of factual matters within their areas of competence. Transmitting bodies of knowledge is part of their job. What he believes is unprofessional—though quite within the purview of reverends, editorialists, and lawmakers—is for academics to deliver verdicts about right and wrong.

As a student moves through his academic career the pedagogy to which he's exposed evolves, mainly transmitting predigested conclusions at the outset, but making ever greater provision for independent analysis as time passes. Nonetheless, at any point in the process the total replacement—or anything close—of the former by the latter would be ruinous. Even in purely factual domains, such as the natural sciences, advanced students (as well as veteran researchers) must accept a great deal outside their own specialties on faith.

The same is true for humane learning, but with a further consideration, for here bodies of knowledge are necessarily shaped by norms. Facts and values can be distinguished, but the factual questions that the humanities and social sciences seek to address have interest only because of preexistent judgments of worth. Be it the nature of love and friendship as explored by the classical poets or civil society's relation to political authority as theorized by Enlightenment philosophes or the growth of the gross national product as projected by modern econometricians, inquiry *begins* with what is, and what is not, thought well or ill. Perhaps the study of matter and energy can follow a course dictated solely by nature, but it is impossible to imagine a program of instruction concerning mankind not founded on human desires and ideals. The kind of academization that Fish is recommending would dissolve the fabric of humane inquiry by removing its *raison d'être* and organizing principles. A thoroughly academized academy would simply evaporate.

Normative judgment is not only the alpha of humane learning, but the omega as well—plus all the letters in between. Students want (and need) to know what those they look to as intellectual authorities actually think,

not just about the quantity of things, but about their qualities too. Take, for instance, the U.S. Constitution, which William Ewart Gladstone credited with being “the most wonderful work ever struck off at a given time by the brain and purpose of man.” To be aware that a great liberal and erudite statesman accorded our Constitution a unique stature above the welter of national charters is a valuable datum for any learner, not because that learner needs an instant orthodoxy, but because he needs clues about where to pick up the threads in his own process of assessment. If Gladstone said what he said, then at least a *prima facie* case has been established for serious inquiry into the Constitution's claim to be a well-ordered framework for liberty. The learner doesn't have to share in the mass of experience and complexity of reasoning that underlay Gladstone's utterance in order to gain by it; nor does he even have to end up accepting the prime minister's conclusions. Without doing either he can still employ Gladstone's evaluation to introduce a useful economy of thought into his own analysis of the relative merits of different regimes. Most professors are far from being Gladstones, but if they are at all worth their hires their judgments should prove similarly helpful.

Fish, of course, is entirely correct in saying that professors have no business seeking converts, and that this is never the spirit in which gathered wisdom should be offered to students. Nor is its provision an enterprise that all faculty members will need, wish, or be able to undertake. But exposure to seasoned judgment on great questions is an educational experience that students should not be denied, and for which academization, however useful as a sometimes exercise, can never substitute.

By flushing higher education of any claim to moral meaning, Fish leaves it publicly bereft, without an adequate answer as to how it can justify its existence to fiduciaries or forestall meddling in its affairs. When asked by legislators why they should continue forking over the public's money, Fish essentially advises a reply of *none of your business*. Trying to explain the inherent worth of academization won't fly, we're told, because to appreciate that you need to be an academic yourself. Attempting to show that the university provides marketable value is equally futile, because fundamentally it is a sham. Universities aren't public utilities, though they may from time to time throw off something useful. For Fish they are simply places

where academics do what academics do. If academics only had the brass to say so, he opines, legislators might be impressed enough to abandon their grousing and write larger checks—wafted to campus, no doubt, on the backs of flying pigs.

Fish's political inanity is, ultimately, a comment on the inanity of his entire intellectual position. On the surface, his call for a university whose crusading spirit has been extinguished is appealing in its resemblance to an earlier and more solid ideal—the university as a disinterested scientific enterprise.

It was on this ideal that the American university originally rose to greatness, and on which its claims to academic freedom were first laid. But it hardly constitutes a denial of utility. The university's request for an extraordinary indulgence, the right of professors to be exempt from virtually all "lay" intellectual oversight, was predicated precisely on the bounty society had come to expect from scientific expertise freely employed. As the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) put it in its founding document, the 1915 Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure:

The third function of the modern university is to develop

experts for the use of the community. If there is one thing that distinguishes the more recent developments of democracy, it is the recognition by legislators of the inherent complexities of economic, social, and political life, and the difficulty of solving problems of technical adjustment without technical knowledge. The recognition of this fact has led to a continually greater demand for the aid of experts in these subjects, to advise both legislators and administrators. The training of such experts has, accordingly, in recent years, become an important part of the work of the universities; and in almost every one of our higher institutions of learning the professors of the economic, social, and political sciences have been drafted to an increasing extent into more or less unofficial participation in the public service. It is obvious that here again the scholar must be absolutely free not only to pursue his investigations but to declare the results of his researches, no matter where they may lead him or to what extent they may come into conflict with accepted opinion. To be of use to the legislator or the administrator, he must enjoy

their complete confidence in the disinterestedness of his conclusions. (<http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/policydocs/contents/1915.htm>)

Why doesn't Fish make this argument his own? It would certainly have more traction than his preferred *bug-off* response. The answer probably lies in his equivocal position on the nature of scholarly inquiry. Fish doesn't really accept "the university as temple of science" ideal. In particular, he doesn't want to admit that's there a single standard of objectivity to which all researchers must ultimately repair, one that would place the academic inquirer in the same world of reality testing—albeit at a more rigorous level—as the tinker, tailor, soldier, and sailor. Doing so would suggest a common denominator of intellectual worth and hence a standard of accountability pertaining between academe and the public. To avoid this, he indulges in an epistemological fudge, asserting that *science is as science does* according to the varying conventions of varying academic fields. While giving lip service to the existence of truth and objective reality, Fish informs us that

objectivity is just another name for trying to get something right in a particular area of inquiry...

the researcher begins in some context of practice, with its received authorities, sacred texts, exemplary achievements, and generally accepted benchmarks, and from within the perspective (and not within the perspective of a general theory) of that context.

No one would gainsay the fact that the research practices of the economist are likely to differ substantially from those of the physicist, but Fish's notions of objectivity erect a tent of capacious permissibility. Women's studies could certainly squeeze under its billowing flap, having, in its own view, many exemplary achievements as well as texts, authorities, and benchmarks—even if along with these it also insists on a doctrinal commitment (accepted by most practitioners) to feminist theory. And so too, presumably, would schools of social work, with their presuppositions about social justice; or critical legal studies, critical pedagogy, critical white studies, and queer studies, with their baseline views about oppression; or, for that matter, astrology, rich in texts, benchmarks, and authorities going back to Nostradamus and beyond, and boasting the exemplary achievement of being a billion-dollar business.

In adopting this “to each his own” concept of objectivity our

Beau Brummell is travelling with academe's other fashion leaders. The AAUP itself, in its recent statement, *Freedom in the Classroom*, made an intellectual position's acceptance “as true within a discipline” the gold standard for acquitting instructors of charges of indoctrination. The academy as a whole, or at least the portion of it that largely lives by words, appears to be settling into a strangely defensive crouch whose contours are increasingly defined by self-protection instead of the quest for truth. Fashion often takes mannered shapes, in this case grotesquely so.

Fashion is also competitive, its devotees in stylish scramble to show they're more attuned to it than the next guy—if possible, that the tune itself is of their own composition. In the intellectual world fashion's coin is quick-wittedness, needed to most rapidly discern its direction and most imaginatively rearrange its articles of dress. Here Fish has always excelled. Serious science and serious scholarship are also competitive, but in a vastly different way. Their practitioners can be rivals in seeking advancement, even glory, but its products are lasting because they express a reality beyond one-upmanship: they better man's estate.

Such betterment is not Stanley Fish's cause. Rather, he touts for high cleverness at public expense.

He also repudiates overtly politicized education. But the fact that his prescriptions represent an improvement over the sorry status quo offers meager consolation. They are at best a license for empty intellectual frolics, and at worst, a back door return for politics in more ingenious disguise. Fish's concept of scholarly good practice, after all, is so encompassing, so elastic, that

it precludes almost nothing once it has been appropriately redefined. Yet I suspect no hypocrisy here. Fish's love of cleverness, of sophistry many might say, is honest enough.<sup>1</sup> Where he fails his calling is in his indifference to wisdom and the project of civilization at the university's heart. He goes and others usually follow, but if they follow him down this road they'll only find the void.

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<sup>1</sup>Readers might take another look at David Rothman's "An American Sophist: The Surprising Career of Stanley Fish," in our Fall 2008 issue.