

On Stanley Fish: The Case for Appreciating the Opposition

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To many of us Stanley Fish is familiar as one of the Myrmidons of political correctness, perhaps even their swift-footed leader, touring the country, dragging the corpse of free speech behind his sports car. This cartoon of Stanley Fish, culture warrior, is partly a self-drawn portrait. With his airily unsupported attacks upon the National Association of Scholars as racist, sexist, etc. he invites the label demagogue. All the more so as his defense of rhetoric appears to evaluate speech exclusively as a manipulative tool. How appropriate, one thinks, from such a political academic, this theory to enshrine credibility in the place of honesty. But to take this caricature seriously is to be bamboozled by Fish's own intent to outrage. It is to miss an engaging thinker worthy of serious disagreement rather than mere dismissal.

It will be easy to test my claims for Fish because he writes in English. This peculiarity is not universal among his colleagues. I am not alone in looking forward each year to reports of the meeting of the English profession's Modern Language Association: the garish titles, the clotted prose, the pretentious solemnity. With barely suppressed glee we quote some hairball of jargon coughed up at the meeting and lament the death of good writing. But none of these are Fish's leavings. Reading through his two recent books, Is There a Text in This Class? and Doing What Comes Naturally, I was frequently infuriated but never bored and I never regarded his use of language with other than envy. He writes in the stylistic tradition of Edmund Wilson, Lionel Trilling, and his fellow Miltonist, C.S. Lewis: a clear, vigorous prose accessible to the educated public.

It is, however, for the substance of his arguments and not just the pleasure of his style that I recommend him. With his anti-foundationalism, Fish is saying something both true and important. He argues that we get our sense of what is true from the "interpretive community" within which we live rather than by direct apprehension of reality. It is easy to misinterpret this as a kind of extreme skepticism. He is indeed saying that our beliefs about reality are socially constructed which sounds like Berkeleyian Idealism disintegrated into anarchy by the death of the good bishop's God. But

it is important to understand that Fish is analyzing how we look at the world and not how the world is. He is concerned with what we believe to be true, what we regard as certain, and not with what is true in the sense of corresponding to reality. Richard Rorty, who shares many of Fish's views, explicitly rejects the correspondence theory of truth but for the pragmatic reason that it leads us to confuse these two issues.

Let me illustrate with a little story. A pair of twins, John and Francis, are separated at birth and adopted by different families. John's family consists of deeply religious Christians. As he grows up he learns to see God made manifest in the world around him, to experience the sinful appeals that evil has for our fallen nature and, perhaps, to apprehend at a few precious moments the direct experience of God's grace. Meanwhile, Francis has been raised by a secular family of scientists. He learns to see the natural history of the world in the stream beds and rocky outcrops near his home and to connect these observations with the precious inheritance from generations of naturalists that is current science. Now imagine that the two are reunited in college and begin to argue. "How can you believe that the earth is so old?" asks John. Francis does not say "My parents told me so." Instead, he cites chapter and verse from reference books he knows and, pointing to a fossil in a nearby rock, begins to discourse upon Carbon-14 dating. But when Francis asks John to defend his belief in God, John does not refer to his parents either. He describes his own immediate experience of God and refers Francis to G. K. Chesterton's *Orthodoxy* where materialists are described as a species of madman, myopically logical but blind to phenomena which are obvious to every farmer in his field.

I don't intend to suggest that the twins' beliefs are deterministically fixed by the initial family decision. John could grow up to find his childhood faith intolerably restrictive and, enlightened by a larger world, come to store his earlier belief in God in the attic of memory next to the Tooth Fairy and Santa Claus. On the other hand, Francis may come to regard his secular worldview as sterile and absurd and to find meaning in a religious conversion which adopts his brother's abandoned faith. Neither brother is the passive outcome of impressions from social training or observational stimuli. Each of us can reflect upon and criticize our own beliefs, just not all our beliefs at once. But while standing firm on some views and using them to analyze others, all come from our own experiences. We choose, but from an inheritance partly given to us and partly the product of our own past choices.

This view is not relativism. John, Francis and Stanley all agree that they share a common universe: not that God exists for John but not for Francis nor that evolution is true for Francis but not for John.

God exists or he doesn't. The earth is a billion years old or it is not. Consider a student questioning Fish:

Student: "I want to know what is really true,"

Fish: "You have but to ask. I'll be happy to tell you."

Student: "But won't your answers just be what you believe to be true? Doesn't your theory apply to you as well?"

Fish: "Of course it does. I will tell you things I know to be true, including some remarks about anti-foundationalism which I regard as so patently obvious that I tire of repeating them. Do these views result from my experience? Yes, they do. Could they change? Yes, they could. Driving home tonight, I could have a revelation like Saul on the road to Tarsus and thus see that absolute truth can be directly apprehended. I, that is Fish(now), would point out that that view, too, is the result of interpretations of my experiences using all of my history. Fish(then) might agree but regard the fact as irrelevant to his new understanding of the nature of truth. Which of us is right? If you ask me now, I'll say 'I am'. If you ask me then, I'll say 'I am', but we will be disagreeing."

Properly understood, Fish's point is similar to that of Cardinal Newman in *A Grammar of Assent*. Newman remarks that while everyone knows that Britain consists of islands, few of us base that knowledge on firsthand observation, by a long, careful sail around them, for example. The rest of us simply accept on faith received opinion having no good reason to doubt it. What this example illustrates is how dependent each of us is on the common opinion of the community in which we live. Reason is the box of tools we use to keep our house in repair, not the house itself.

I used to think that if you argued with a madman you could reveal the logical flaws in his worldview, at which point he would just get angry and walk away. But I discovered that Chesterton was right about madness. When an acquaintance of mine fell prey to recurrent paranoid delusions (the Nazis had won the war and ruled the world through a conspiracy of front organizations) I found that his worldview was as logically consistent as mine. The symmetry of our positions included for each of us an explanation for our argument: I thought him mad, while he thought I was duped.

It is exactly group versions of such insanity which demonstrate why all this is important as well as true. In her new book Denying the Holocaust.

Deborah Lipstadt mentions Fish and trends like deconstructionism as in part responsible for an intellectual climate in which it has become harder to conclusively refute the manifestly false, as well as socially poisonous, doctrines of the movements she analyzes. Unlike Lipstadt many others are not so judicious and tentative about identifying Fish's anti-foundationalism as the disease for which it in fact provides the diagnosis. Fish and Newman reveal why it is hard to use argument to defend the obviously true. I think of my cousin with the number on her arm. But she saw only a bit of the horror and, after all, she lived through it. There are those who like Lipstadt who have done studies of first hand documents and who can refute the lies in detail, but I am not one of them. I accept her and her fellow scholars as authorities. I believe I could repeat her work, but that merely restates my initial belief in her. As a matter of logic how do I reply to someone who uses the Protocols of the Elders of Zion as a competing authority? The answer is that certain gulfs are too broad to be spanned by logic. I nonetheless act upon beliefs of which I am sure. My inability to refute my insane acquaintance did not prevent me from helping his family to commit him temporarily sharing with them as I did the belief that commitment was in his best interest.

It is, however, exactly such patterns of group paranoia which motivate the search for foundations. We yearn for solid ground from which to smite such monstrous errors with the sword of reason. Fish's response is a melancholy warning. We are all in a similar swamp and are called upon to act nonetheless. Firmness is a property of our commitments not our grounds. Our strength is in our own hands, hearts and minds and not under our feet, though we do draw support from the community which shares our convictions.

The religious believer stands upon the rock of revelation and the sword he holds was made by the Creator of that same rock. But years of debate in a largely secular world have made the religious thinker sensitive that to argue from faith is to beg the very question at issue against those who do not share the faith. He has grown accustomed to the preliminary search for a common ground before the duel is to proceed. The Catholic and the atheist in Chesterton's novel *The Ball and the Cross* spend most of the story looking for a place to fight. In the process they discover that their shared sense of honor and decency leave them at the end confronting together a common enemy.

The common enemy of the religious believer and the anti-foundationalist is scientistic hubris. The positivist has absolute confidence in the world he has built from pebbles of sense-data, With his mind purified of bias, he proceeds according to Baconian principles using methods of careful experiment, analysis and test. Gradually he approaches his goal of answering all meaningful questions and resolving all real disputes. He invites us to join him in

freeing ourselves from traditional prejudices, like religion, which have cluttered up our minds and history with so much dangerous nonsense.

While this picture is a caricature of contemporary scientific attitudes, it is a reasonable sketch of a scientific dream which remains only as a ghost today. But the spectre haunts us still in the complacency with which scientists dismiss competing worldviews. Stephen Jay Gould, for example, has drawn in his essays a subtle and exciting picture of science which displaces the positivist image. But the ghost reappears in the smug contempt with which he treats religious critics of Darwinism. We have all been raised to laugh at the quote attributed to Bryan "I am more concerned with the Rock of Ages than with the age of rocks," not noticing that this is a very sensible attitude if you are not a geologist.

Fish and Rorty, like William James before them, take a position much more sympathetic to faiths they do not share. Yet this picture of Fish as an apostle of sweet reasonableness is as incomplete as the cartoon which I originally described. "Somehow," you say, "When I am reading Fish on the subject of the university, I never think I have dipped into Newman by accident. Where's the rest of him?" The rest is politics. With their commitments to multicultural reevaluation and MacKinnonesque feminism it is fair to place them in the radical camp. However, Fish's politics, while consistent with his theory of knowledge, is not a consequence of it. His anti-foundationalism is equally consistent with the robust conservatism of Michael Oakeshott, for example. Fish does use his philosophy to undermine what he regards as the foundationalist pretensions of his political opponents, like the liberal Ronald Dworkin, but he devotes almost as many pages to criticizing his natural allies like the Critical Legal Studies star, Duncan Kennedy.

The two-faced quality of Fish's arguments is well-known to his compadres of the cultural left. It is difficult from within the citadel to interpret the squabbles among the barbarians encamped without, but in the yurts of Duke both Fish and Rorty are regarded with some suspicion. I have heard them attacked for "bourgeois complacency" which I take to be an insufficiency of zeal. This is a rather unjust sneer but it is true that the reflective quality of their writings undermines the self-righteousness necessary to sustain the rage and sense of permanent grievance which is so much a part of radical politics these days.

I don't want to understate how bizarre I find some of Fish's political positions. I sometimes imagine an ad for his lectures: "For a hundred dollars I will stand up in public and defend any proposition whatever. If it is sufficiently outrageous, I will drop my price." But we should not allow his delight in extreme statement to distract us from the thoughtfulness of his arguments. We hear these days too much damning and too

little debate between proponents of conflicting views. College hate-speech codes are a misguided attempt to solve a real problem. We need to recover a sense of civility and decency toward those with whom we disagree. Dinesh D'Souza would have to double in size to don Gilbert Chesterton's cape, but Fish bears comparison with George Bernard Shaw, and the D'Souza - Fish road show of college debates is a healthy echo of the many public wrangles between GKC and GBS. So let us toast those old friends with wine and carrot juice. Following their example, we should try to revive the tradition of debate between opponents who seriously disagree but exhibit mutual respect and even affection across the political divide. We can begin by regarding Stanley Fish not as a foe to be reviled but as an opponent to be appreciated.