

OVERHEARD IN THE ACADEMY

Stanley Fish on the Humanities

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“How does one justify funding the arts and humanities?” This is the question put by Stanley Fish toward the beginning of a characteristically provocative column of his published in January 2008 on the *New York Times*’ online “Op Extra” page. From this bread and butter question, Fish quickly derives the much more speculative question that serves as the column’s title, namely, “Will the Humanities Save Us?” His answer is no. For the study of the humanities does not make us “good and wise.” Moreover, it is not “the business of the humanities” to save us anyway. In his words, “The humanities are their own good. There is nothing more to say, and anything that is said...diminishes the object of its supposed praise.” (See <http://fish.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/06/will-the-humanities-save-us/>.)

This line of argument is not new from Fish, and it will no doubt reach many more readers once Fish’s new book on higher education, *Save the World on Your Own Time*, due in 2008, is published and widely reviewed. Despite Fish’s claim, there does, however, seem to be “more to say” on the value and justification of the humanities; and so *Expositions* has asked several teachers and scholars of the humanities to reply to Fish’s argument.

Fish makes his case through criticism of Anthony Kronman’s book *Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (Yale University Press, 2007). Kronman advocates, in Fish’s summary, “[e]ntering into a conversation with the great authors of the western tradition”—Western or Eastern is irrelevant for what interests Fish—in order “to recover the urgency of ‘the question of what living is for’” and to escape from “the corrupting powers of time.” To which Fish says: “It is a stirring vision that promises the highest reward to those who respond to it,” but “there is no evidence

to support it and a lot of evidence against it.” Fish’s evidence against it consists of “the members of literature and philosophy departments” whom he has come to know over his forty-five years in academia. In his experience, “Teachers and students of literature and philosophy don’t learn how to be good and wise; they learn how to analyze literary effects and to distinguish between different accounts of the foundations of knowledge.” They have “disciplinary knowledge,” not the virtues, or for that matter competence in what Fish calls “ministry.”

The conclusion that Fish draws is that “[i]t is not the business of the humanities to save us”—for they can’t, or in any event in his experience haven’t—“no more than it is their business to bring revenue to a state or a university,” recalling the question with which his column began, “How does one justify funding the arts and humanities?” According to Fish, the humanities “don’t bring about effects in the world,” other than “the pleasure they give to those who enjoy them.” Can they then be justified? (Should they then be funded?) Fish is confusing on this critical point. On the one hand, he claims that “[t]he humanities are their own good,” suggesting that they can be justified internally, in terms of the good of pleasure that people devoted to them discover within them. But, on the other hand, Fish also claims that “the only honest answer” to the question, “[O]f what use are the humanities?” is “none whatsoever.” He goes on: “And it is an answer that brings honor to its subject. Justification, after all, confers value on an activity from a perspective outside its performance. An activity that cannot be justified is an activity that refuses to regard itself as instrumental to some larger good.” To which it might be countered: Surely justification is not only for “outsiders”! Surely there is room, as well as reason, to reflect from within a practice on its value! Further, let it be granted that the humanities are not instrumental “to some larger good”; but can they not be justified in terms of intrinsic goods other and perhaps larger than pleasure? Just to begin with, can they not teach sensitivity to and appreciation of nuances, complexity, and ambiguity? Or perhaps what needs attention is that pleasure is always the pleasure of this or that activity, and that the activity of engaging in the humanities yields pleasures of diverse kinds that human life would be diminished without. One way or the other, it seems clear, to reiterate, that there is “more to say” here.