

*Stanley Fish, Think Again: Contrarian Reflections on
Life, Culture, Politics, Religion, Law, and Education*

Paolo Pitari



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11968>

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Paolo Pitari, « Stanley Fish, *Think Again: Contrarian Reflections on Life, Culture, Politics, Religion, Law, and Education* », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2017-1, document 7, Online since 14 March 2017, connection on 03 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11968>

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- 1 Stanley Fish, *Think Again: Contrarian Reflections on Life, Culture, Politics, Religion, Law, and Education*
- 2 Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. Pp. 427. ISBN: 9780691167718.
- 3 Paolo Pitari
- 4 Ca' Foscari University of Venice

⁵ Stanley Fish's *Think Again* collects almost one hundred of its author's *New York Times* columns, written between 1995 and 2013, and selected and thematically arranged for this volume by Fish himself. As soon as you open the book you're given a warning. These "are not, for the most part, opinion pieces" (xi), Fish states, "that is, they are less likely to declare a position on a disputed matter than to anatomize, and perhaps critique, the arguments deployed by opposing constituencies" (xi). This, in itself, is already a contrarian reflection on life (the book's subtitle is: "contrarian reflections on life, culture, politics, religion, law, and education") and it constitutes a stance so powerful that I regard it as potentially revolutionary in a world – the Western world of 2016–so constructed on rhetoric and spin

that the value of an argument doesn't stand anymore on its logical premises (= its content) but on the set of assets displayed by the argument's deliverer (tone, conviction, emotion, *surface* logic etc.).

⁶ In short, the book implies, we've come to confuse the inside with the outside, the argument with the argument's *appearance*. This, in combination with the ideals of free speech and the sense of entitlement-or rather the sense of duty-ingrained in Western individuals who feel they must (and are in fact continually called to) always utter their own, always stand by some side ("I don't know" is now the capital sin. If you're in Academia you know what we're talking about), creates the environment Fish is trying to fight with his peculiar, merely-dissecting, un-opinionated stance; a stance that, we're told, he also brings into the classroom.

⁷ In "Devoid of Content," a column from May 31, 2005, Fish discusses the problem of college students "utterly unable to write a clear and coherent English sentence" (311). With this in mind, he advocates courses (like his own) strictly concerned with the study of form: "a sentence is a structure of logical relationships" (311), and "without a knowledge of how language works [students] will be unable either to spot the formal breakdown of someone else's language or to prevent the formal breakdown of their own" (313). So, for Fish, the problems of the classroom and the problems of society, in this sense, coincide. The reason Fish doesn't bring content to the classroom is that as soon as content "is allowed in, the focus is shifted from the forms that make the organization of content possible to this or that piece of content, *usually some recycled set of pros and cons* about abortion, assisted suicide, affirmative action, welfare reform, the death penalty, free speech, and so forth" (313, my emphasis). And by extension, the reason he writes un-opinionated pieces merely preoccupied with dissecting arguments is because social discourse is ever-moving towards that *recycled set of pros and cons*-meaning it is, in fact, emptying itself-and Fish's method highlights and fights the tendency.

⁸ Except, in fact, you actually find an outstanding number of strongly stated opinions for a book that's self-presented as self-consciously and directly concerned with not giving opinions. But, brace yourself, this book is contradictory in nature, and this isn't necessarily pejorative, nor does it imply that Fish doesn't live by his word; after all, as the

great Walt Whitman would have it: “Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes.” It’s just that— as I see it—it is an undeniable fact about the book that its content is contradictory. You will find some columns concerned with dissecting arguments and others containing direct substantive judgments, some stating that “the arid world of philosophical puzzles” (154) has nothing to do with life lived outside the four walls of the library/classroom and others launching on political debates by starting off from philosophical presuppositions, some stating that the Ivory Tower is where the humanities belong and others stating that politics is by definition unavoidable.

⁹ Fish would contend that all these contradictions are “only apparent” (xix). I’m not so sure. What’s for sure is that, firstly, in tackling the book, you will be strongly invited to make up your own mind about the nature, value, and coherence of the arguments presented, and that, secondly, you will be taken for a ride through a vast variety of subjects (the book is divided into eight main areas: personal reflections, aesthetic reflections, cultural reflections, reflections on politics, reflections on the law, reflections on religion, reflections on the liberal arts education, reflections on academic freedom), including, at the farthest end of the spectrum, the transcendence of playing sports (in Fish’s case basketball), Dad, the philosophical and sociological undercurrents of country music, conspiracy theorists, the digital humanities etc. and also through some ever-recurring fixations of the author’s, e.g.: cinema, the inner contradictions of liberalism, the meaning of (untrustworthy) terms like “objectivity” and “impartiality,” free speech (which, I’d say, doesn’t even come close to surviving Fish’s critique), and the (obnoxious) arguments of the so-called “New Atheists,” Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens.

¹⁰ On our part, since *Think Again* is so wide in scope (plus it’s 400+ pages), and since this is a book review (with all its inherent limitations, mainly in length), and you’re reading an academic journal, we’re going to look at some of Fish’s main academic concerns. These are both deeply interesting in their own right and exemplify Fish’s way of reasoning—they give you that (contradictory) picture of the brain I, after reading the book, have projected inside Stanley Fish the actual human being. In “Does Philosophy Matter?” a column from August 1, 2011, Fish defends his thesis that it is possible both to declare “the unavailability of ‘independent standards’ for deciding between rival accounts of a matter” (109) and to offer “counsel that is

‘perfectly consistent with the endorsement of moral absolutes’” (109). This, to Fish, is not a contradiction, and if you think of it as a contradiction it is because you “fail to distinguish between relativism as a philosophical position—respectable, if controversial—and relativism as a way of life, something no one recommends and no one practices” (109). Not that any of this is of any importance though. After discussing exactly what absolutism and relativism, as philosophical terms, mean, Fish shuts off the whole discussion by stating that “when you are engaged in trying to decide what is the right thing to do in a particular situation, none of the answers you might give to these deep questions will have any bearing on your decision, [...] neither ‘I believe in moral absolutes’ nor ‘I don’t’ will be a reason in the course of ordinary, nonphilosophical deliberation” (110). In other words, whether you agree with Kant or Nietzsche will make no difference in your daily life. And whether you think there are absolutes or not will make no difference too. “Absolute” and “correct,” in daily life, are for all effects and purposes synonyms, and whether your conviction “is underwritten by the structure of Truth and by the universe [...] is a demand you can safely, and without contradiction, ignore” (111). This, of course, implies that a person who thinks his actions follow a Universal Truth and one who thinks she’s Just Doing Her Best, in the end, act exactly the same way. It also implies not only that whether you agree with Kant or Nietzsche makes no difference, but that Kant and Nietzsche themselves lived through their daily, *real* lives, and performed their mundane, *actual* actions unaffected by their own philosophies because philosophy, in the end, is nothing more than “a special, insular form of thought and its propositions have weight and value only in the precincts of its game” (110), meaning the classroom or the conference hall. Outside of that, nothing.

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This is totally coherent with Fish’s statement, further down the book, that “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” (322) which, having met my fare share of teachers and fellow students, I can guarantee as an absolute truth. And yet, though, even by just looking at the volume of philosophical citations this book contains, you start wondering what we’re up to, exactly. Here’s a list of

philosophers discussed or at least cited, in alphabetical order: Aristotle, Francis Bacon, Isaiah Berlin, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Hubert Dreyfus, Martin Heidegger, Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, Williams James, Immanuel Kant, John Locke, Karl Marx, J.S. Mill, C.S. Peirce, John Rawls, Michael Sandel.

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But since a mere list of names can mean next to nothing, we ought to look at some content. Both in “When Principles Get in the Way” (1996) and in “Revisiting Affirmative Action, with Help from Kant” (2007), Fish juxtaposes the arid world of philosophical absolutist principles to the urgent need for policies that would help “persons and groups on the basis of race, gender, color, ethnicity, or national origin” (157). The latter cannot be achieved because of a structure—a libertarian one—of abstract philosophical rights: the universal freedom and equality of all men that has to be guaranteed and respected by a state which, therefore, can not confer preferential treatment to anyone, including minorities. Yet one must wonder whether this example confirms the insurmountable detachment between philosophy and actual down-here-on-this-earth life or whether it proves exactly the opposite: that philosophical absolutes affect a whole lot of what goes on down here. Also, one must wonder what would have happened if the “philosophical absolute” chosen were different: would Affirmative Action pass easily under Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarian principle of the most happiness for the most people? Is it then a battle between abstract principles and concrete policies? Or is it not actually a battle between opposite abstract principles? Aren’t then maybe abstract principles and concrete policies irredeemably mingled? These questions never give you easy answers, and you will have to face them time and again when confronting Fish.

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As, for another example, when confronting the 9/11 attacks in “Condemnation without Absolutes,” a column from October 15, 2001: the country, on the aftermath of 9/11, has accused postmodern relativists of having weakened the country by denying “the possibility of describing matters of fact objectively” (135).

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“Not so,” says Stanley Fish, “postmodernism maintains only that there can be no independent standard for determining which of many rival interpretations of an event is the true one, [...] instead, we can and should invoke the particular lived values that unite us and inform the institutions we cherish and wish to defend, [...] our

collective understanding of what we live for. That understanding is sufficient, and far from undermining its sufficiency, postmodern though tells us that we have grounds enough for action and justified condemnation in the democratic ideals we embrace, without grasping for the empty rhetoric of universal absolutes to which all subscribe but which all define differently” (135).

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And so he goes on: “that is why what Edward Said has called ‘false universals’ should be rejected: they stand in the way of useful thinking, [...] each is at once inaccurate and unhelpful” (136). It is both incorrect and unhelpful to regard terrorists as evil or irrational, “the better course is to think of these men as bearers of a rationality we reject because its goal is our destruction, [...] terrorism is the name of a style of warfare in service of a cause. It is the cause, and the passions informing it, that confront us” (136).

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This sounds, to me, as the most sound argument of all, one that is not only correct but that needs to be voiced over and over again since the rhetoric of the irrational and evil enemy is still, by far and large, the dominating discourse of our public sphere. And it is that rhetoric that’s killing people. What do you think? And what do you think about the argument as a whole, isn’t “postmodern thought” a synonym of “postmodern philosophy”? Isn’t the thought of Edward Said retraceable to a kind of philosophy? Don’t the premises of Fish’s argument have something to do with Derrida or Foucault?

¹⁷On Derrida, Foucault and more, the book provides another interesting column: “French Theory in America,” from April 6, 2008. It treats—starting off by citing *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* by François Cusset—U.S. reception of French postmodern philosophy as the “‘rejection of the rationalist tradition of enlightenment’ even to the point of regarding ‘science as nothing more than ‘a narration’ or a ‘myth’ or a social construction among many others” (99). This, Fish explains, was a misunderstanding. French theory wasn’t about rejecting the rationalist tradition, it was “an interrogation of its key components” (99): the “I”, the freestanding individual, the world outside that individual etc. The main problem, as always, was the total separation of “I” and “world,” the question “how do we bridge the gap?”

¹⁸The rationalist answer was “to expand man’s reasoning powers” (99) to cover the whole of existence; a project started by Francis Bacon, who also immediately understood that the problem for the project of Enlightenment stands in descriptions, words, language: “words have a fatal tendency to substitute themselves for the facts they are supposed merely to report or reflect. While men ‘believe that their reason governs words,’ in fact ‘words react on the understanding’; that is, they shape rather than serve rationality” (99). Bacon, though, thought this danger could be overcome by strict, slow, experimental reasoning. “To this hope, French theory (*and much thought that precedes it* [like Hobbes]) says ‘forget about it’” (100, my emphasis). There is no essence even in words like “I” or “world,” there’s no pure origin to go back to. All is mediated. There are no strict absolutes. “What we think *with* thinks us” (100). This, though, again, doesn’t mean much according to Fish. Its consequence is merely the fact that we must realize there is no final truth to be discovered, no “final word [...] that takes accurate measure of everything” (102). But “we can still say that some things are true and others false, and believe it” (102), all that will have changed will be our epistemology, “the world, and you, will go on pretty much in the same old way” (102).

¹⁹

At this point you’re probably wondering of what uses are the humanities, then? Well, “the only honest answer is none whatsoever. And it is an answer that brings honor to its subject” (323), says Fish in “Will the Humanities Save Us?” from January 6, 2008. The humanities “don’t do anything, if by ‘do’ is meant to bring effects in the world. And if they don’t bring about effects in the world, they cannot be justified except in relation to the pleasure they give to those who enjoy them” (323), and once you try and justify them by sustaining their worldly effects, you are actually condemning the humanities to a slow but inevitable death; Fish repeats this constantly. All the humanities can offer is satisfaction, both “self-satisfaction” and a “greater satisfaction”: “the opportunity to marvel at what a few people are able to do with the language we all use” (325). In fact, again, “the truth is that a mastery of literary and philosophical texts and the acquisition of wisdom (in whatever form) are independent values” (326). And again, with this statement I couldn’t agree more, but does it really mean what Fish takes it to mean about the humanities? Even when he defines “the true task of academic work [as]

the search for truth and the dissemination of it through teaching” (303)? Even when he greets the humanities the dissemination of critical thinking, one that consists in “the analytic probing of formulas, precepts, and pieces of received wisdom that too often go unexamined and unchallenged” (328-329)? Even when he states the following:

- 20 When I declare that the humanities are of no use whatsoever, I am talking about humanities departments (“the humanities” is an academic, not a cultural category), not about poets and philosophers and the effects they do or do not have in the world and on those who read them.
- 21 The funding of the humanities in colleges and universities cannot be justified by pointing to the fact that poems and philosophical arguments have changed lives and started movements (325)?
- 22 Can’t it? Is there not even a minuscule connection between the two? Wouldn’t that microscopic connection maybe be enough to grant the existence of the whole apparatus? Fish is right, after all, in stating that critical thinking “can be, and is, acquired elsewhere” (329), but I’m reluctant to accept the conclusion that since “it cannot be claimed for the humanities as a special benefit only they can supply” (329) then the humanities are indefensible because “justification [...] requires a demonstration that you have the exclusive franchise” (329). Does it? How many subjects outside of the humanities would you say you could learn at home, studying by yourself? Are there any? If yes, would this mean the entire teaching system behind those subjects is useless? Read *Think Again* and you will be challenged, you will come out of that challenge stronger, more thoughtful. You clash, you decide. In the meanwhile, you will be forced to face a large bulk of interesting and wide material.

AUTHOR

PAOLO PITARI

Ca' Foscari University of Venice