

“a traditional view of journalism as detached, independent, and unaffiliated (or at least less affiliated) with a particular political party,” while the conservative papers practice “a more ac-

tivist-oriented journalism,” closely aligned with a cause and a party. For the liberal papers, in his view, the question now becomes whether to follow the conservative example.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

## *The Limits of Philosophy*

“Truth but No Consequences: Why Philosophy Doesn’t Matter” by Stanley Fish, in *Critical Inquiry* (Spring 2003), The University of Chicago Press, Journals Division, P.O. Box 37005, Chicago, Ill. 60637.

Philosophy *can* matter. It can clarify ambiguity or encourage altruism or help people understand why they might like a particular painting. And it can be used to create and criticize wide-reaching theories about truth and reality and human nature. But, Fish argues, one’s most “philosophical,” or abstract, beliefs about Being, say, or Time do not influence, *and indeed have nothing to do with*, one’s behavior and choices in life: “Whatever theory of truth you might espouse will be irrelevant to your position on the truth of a particular matter.” Your position will depend, rather, on “your sense of where the evidence lies . . . the authorities you trust, the archives you trust.” That is to say, when trying to prove a point about something real, you can refer to mundane facts, such as experimental data or ethnographies, but not (or at least not successfully) to philosophical maxims, such as “observations are subjective” or “love conquers all.” Maxims—that is, generalities—are notoriously impossible to disprove, for they can always be reinterpreted. And even when they’re correct, they still don’t explain anything; they merely gloss what’s already true. But regardless of your metaphysical view of historical agency, the Civil War ended in 1865.

The point made by Fish, dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago and a prominent Milton scholar and cultural critic, is much more than methodological. He shows the impossibility of what he calls the “normative project of the Enlightenment,” the attempt to use philosophy’s supposedly unique powers, first, to abstract from everyday life to a universal, impartial perspective; then, free from cultural or historical distraction, to decide from that perspective how best to go about things;

and, finally, to apply those lessons to everyday life. But if you can’t derive universal ethical truths from day-to-day human interactions, and if you can’t influence day-to-day human interactions with universal ethical truths, the “special” capacities of philosophy are moot. Counsel on how to live is better sought in theology or literature.

This “normative project,” still pursued by individuals such as the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, is at the heart of contemporary cultural debate. Most people agree that a society’s values are contingent—based, for example, on “historical accident,” or “the apparently pressing priority of a political goal (to defeat an enemy, to stabilize the economy, to maintain the purity of the collective).” But because some find these chance, relativistic norms deficient or unsatisfactory, they propose “transcontextual” standards—global and eternal—to transcend or ground them. Are there deep guidelines for living, and if so, can we get at them?

Fish’s decoupling of mundane philosophy and lofty philosophy drops from the docket the “‘Everything is relative’ vs. ‘Values are universal’” case. It remands such questions to the court of the “merely academic.” Everything may be relative, or there may be universal values. But neither possibility matters when it comes to how people live their lives. The *philosophical* position you favor makes no difference to how judgmental you are or how moral you are.

Are philosopher-kings, then, destined to be lame ducks? Should philosophy majors resign themselves to flipping burgers? Not necessarily. Philosophy’s methods of analysis and tradition of criticism are as important as ever. It’s just that philosophy, Fish says, isn’t the über-discipline some practitioners want it to be, the arbiter of truth about everything else.