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NEOPRAGMATISM AND THE QUESTION OF INTERDISCIPLINARITY: THE CASE OF STANLEY FISH

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Abstract: The aim of the paper is to criticize Stanley Fish's views on interdisciplinarity (particularly as far as his account of interdisciplinarity in literary studies is concerned). The first part of the article consists of: (a) a summary of his critique of the so-called religion of interdisciplinarity; (b) a description of Fish's theory of disciplinarity that underlies this critique. In the second part of the article, I provide a criticism of Fish's theory. I begin by presenting some counterexamples to it. Then I attempt to demonstrate that Fish's views are self-refuting. Finally, I argue that besides these theoretical reasons, there is also a practical reason why Fish's position needs to be questioned.

Keywords: Stanley Fish; neopragmatism; literary studies; interdisciplinarity.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to provide a critical analysis of the controversial views on interdisciplinarity presented in the works of Stanley Fish—one of the most famous contemporary thinkers associated with neo-pragmatism. Since in addition to his being a legal scholar Fish is primarily a literary critic and theorist, his reflections on interdisciplinarity naturally revolve around literary studies, and henceforth I, too, will focus on this field in my argumentation.

The "Religion of Interdisciplinarity" and its Discontents

But why are Fish's views on those matters controversial? The answer to that question lies mainly in the fact that Fish, as he himself has put it, is "against interdisciplinarity," thereby opposing the widespread academic belief that an interdisciplinary approach is something inherently valuable and desirable. It is worth noting here, however, that he claims not to be rejecting ordinary "interdisciplinary work" (i.e. the common practice of employing resources of one discipline within the confines of another), but rather what he calls the "religion" of interdisciplinarity (Fish 1999 134, 73), which has been preached in the humanities for several decades. According to Fish's account, proponents of this "religion" argue that all disciplines are not, as we might suppose, monolithic, ideologically neutral entities, each of which is defined by the sphere of reality which it is allegedly in the business of explaining; instead, they

are contingent "grab-bag[s] of disparate elements held together by the conceptual equivalent of chicken-wire, or by shifting political and economic alliances"[1] (*ibid.*, 74). Furthermore, it is claimed that the boundaries between each of them are artificially drawn, and need to be abolished, and that by performing this revolutionary gesture, we can achieve a truly inter- or even counter-disciplinary perspective, something which will bring many benefits not only to the academy itself, but to the whole of society as well (unconstrained knowledge being one of them—see Fish 1994, 231-242).[2] However promising it might look, thus conceived interdisciplinarity is openly rejected by Fish, who attacks it in two general ways. First of all, by indicating various self-contradictions that supposedly plague it, and, secondly, by undermining its main premises with arguments that stem from his general theory of disciplinarity; and it is the latter of these strategies that I will concentrate on in what follows.

For Fish, then, every discipline, in order to be a discipline at all, must be distinctive. This requirement boils down to the claim that a discipline should constitute a coherent unity that (1) serves a particular purpose (say, determining meanings of literary works) which is (2) specific to it, and to which all elements of the discipline are subordinated. For if the first condition were not met, whatever the resulting something would be, it certainly would not be a 'discipline' in any relevant sense since one could not practice it: one has to have a particular goal in order to practice something, and discipline is something that by definition is practiced. If a discipline failed to meet the second condition, there would be no reason to practice it instead of some other discipline which would serve the same purpose.[3]

This emphasis on distinctiveness might smack of some old-fashioned essentialism, but Fish is quick to forestall such accusations by stipulating that he conceives of any given discipline not as some absolute floating freely in a realm beyond time and space, but as being always (a) "socially constructed," and, moreover, as (b) defined exclusively by its relations to all other entities which it is not, i.e., as relational, or, as he puts it "diacritical." But can (a) and (b) be made compatible with the thesis that disciplines are distinctive unities serving specific goals? In fact, as Fish himself recognizes, there are advocates of interdisciplinarity who use (a) and (b) to undermine that very thesis. For instance, it is claimed that since disciplines are unities that are socially constructed from a seething mass of conflicting ideological forces, they are not real unities; or that since the identity of each discipline, on the strength of dialectical logic, depends on this discipline's relations (of similarity or difference) to all other disciplines, it has no immanent identity at all, despite how it might appear at first glance (Fish 1999, 74-78). But, says Fish, these are all wrong conclusions drawn from right premises, and they lead to "a strange kind of deconstructive Platonism—strange because Platonism is what deconstructionism pushes against—in which the surface features of life are declared illusory in relation to a deep underlying truth or non-truth" (Fish 1999, 74-5). Given that the proponents of interdisciplinarity are Fish's fellow anti-essentialists, however, they simply cannot indulge in dismissing any entities as being unreal on the grounds of discovering some metaphysical truth about them. It

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[1] The main aim of these alliances being to exercise domination over everybody, especially the na ve academics who participate in this ideological game, but nevertheless think they are serving the truth and nothing but the truth.

[2] Note that in the present article I shall not be concerned with Fish's criticism of the idea that interdisciplinarity can have important political consequences.

[3] In fact, Fish conceives 'trying to do someone else's job' and 'letting someone else do your job' to be some of the gravest sins of today's academic life, see Fish 2008, esp. chaps. 4 and 5.

follows, then, that the former's claims cannot be more adequate to the reality as it in itself (and in this sense less partial) than those of the naïfs who believe disciplines to be natural kinds. *Ceteris paribus*, these claims are simply partial in a different way, namely in that they assume a different, yet equally confined and biased, perspective (and let me add that according to Fish perspectives are not like floodlights which shed light on something, revealing its true features, but rather are like moulds, shaping, as opposed to disclosing, their objects—see *ibid.,* 80).

This conclusion has important ramifications for his interpretation of interdisciplinarity, and these can be seen in Fish's analysis of the so-called cultural studies. In a nutshell, the latter field emerged a few decades ago, when some literary scholars came to believe that literature cannot be conceived of as an autonomous domain separated from the rest of culture, since it is in fact constituted by the constant interplay of the structural elements of the latter. Thus, they thought, in order to give justice to its subject, the study of literature must free itself from the dominant, ossified model, that was bequeathed to it by the dusty philology of 19th century Europe (as well as from all the other traditional academic constraints for that matter), and become interdisciplinary. The upshot of their attempts at realizing this ideal, however, has not, as Fish claims, been a deeper, or truer, understanding of literature. This is because the scholars who wanted to "do" cultural studies instead of practicing literary studies adopted a perspective that was not universal but inevitably partial—one that rather than adding to, or extending, the previous perspective, simply took its place. As a result, given that perspectives mould objects, what the latter scholars actually did, should be described as substituting the "cultural text" for the literary one. This means that they lost sight of some features of literature (say, metrical structures, traditions of literary genres), and focused on some others, previously unattended to (its gender background, for instance), something which is not so surprising given that the main purpose cultural studies wants to serve (showing how literature functions in culture) is different from the one that is written on the banner of literary studies (explaining the meaning of a literary work).

The question of purpose should make it clear that, to Fish's mind, cultural studies, despite its ambitions to be "truly interdisciplinary" (i.e. to be an enterprise that avoids disciplinary narrowings), in fact collapsed into a discipline that was itself no less parochial and biased than others. As Fish does not hesitate to add, however, it is so much the better for it, because were cultural studies to adopt a universal, non-partial perspective, no human being could ever practice that discipline, and this is because the "view from nowhere" (to use Thomas Nagel's expression) is forever unachievable by human beings, who are necessarily local and finite (see *ibid.*, 81). This situatedness, moreover, not only prevents humans from adopting all perspectives—that is no perspective—at the same moment: it makes them unable to adopt simultaneously more than one perspective, a point which Fish tries to demonstrate by borrowing an example from Cleanth Brooks, and arguing that no-one can be at the same time a literary critic and a literary historian, because these are simply two different kinds of disciplines which serve different purposes:

> The composite historian-critic Brooks imagines would not be a single man but two men, or one (physically defined) man who took on alternate tasks and was, as he moved from one to another, alternate persons. As one person he would see the centrality of X and the appeal of Y; as another X and Y would never come into view, or if they come into view, they would be beside his present point (*ibid.*, 138).

The conclusion that Fish draws from the above arguments is quite simple. One can never be interdisciplinary either in the sense of falling between many different methodological stools and serving no disciplinary master, save the general, unconstrained pursuit of knowledge as such,

or as serving two, or more, disciplinary masters at the same time. In fact, when we think we are doing either of these what we really do is one of the following:

a) we are creating a wholly new discipline (say, cultural studies);
b) we are participating in the "annexation" of one discipline (or a few disciplines) by another;
c) we are incorporating some elements of one discipline (or many disciplines) into another (an example given by Fish is the recent appropriation of Freud and Nietzsche by literary studies—Fish 1994, 242; Fish 1999, 83).

But whichever of these paths we are following, we always, necessarily, self-consciously or not, remain within the confines of one particular discipline, and we must take it as it comes, along with all disciplinary restrictions, rules, goals, blind spots, parochialisms etc.[4]—otherwise we would not be able to practice anything at all. Moreover, even though Fish, as I have said above, claims not to be arguing against the possibility of ordinary disciplinary work, his arguments suggest something different. According to Fish, the distinctiveness of disciplines implies also that the terms, distinctions, and all "materials" used in each of them are given sense only by virtue of their being elements of the discursive web specific to a given discipline. This means that when a piece of "material" is transplanted from one discipline into another, its meaning is bound to change, as it will come to function in a different discursive web. As a consequence,

> Those who complain, as many frequently do, that the materials of their discipline have been 'distorted' or 'trivialized' or 'made into a metaphor' by workers in some other discipline are both right and wrong… (Fish 1999, 138).

They are right because the meaning of the borrowed material does change, but they are wrong because this meaning cannot not change: were it to retain its original meaning it would have to be transplanted along with the whole discursive web from which it originates, something which would entail the complete transformation of the borrowing discipline into the one from which it borrows. Here we can see that in the light of Fish's theory, even the supposedly uncontroversial and modest cases of interdisciplinary work, are not inter-, but rather mono-disciplinary, and so they must remain.

Some Counterexamples to Fish's Theory of Disciplinarity

However much I agree with Fish's overall anti-essentialism and his critique of the overly ambitious claims and demands of the prophets of the religion of interdisciplinarity, I believe that in his polemical zeal, he is throwing out the baby with the bathwater, something which I am going to prove below.[5] First of all, let me say that I (and, it seems to me, a large part of the academic community too) am convinced that useful interdisciplinary work does take place in literary studies and in the academy as such. Of course, Fish would immediately respond that he

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[4] Of course, Fish stipulates that all of these are social constructs, and therefore are susceptible to transformation.

[5] I am, of course, not the first to criticize Fish's account of interdisciplinarity, but due to the lack of space I cannot refer, in the present article, to the criticisms made by other authors (see, e.g. Connor 1998). Let me also add that in some of my previous articles I generally endorsed Fish's stance on that issue, see Małecki 2007.

does not in any way question this "obvious fact" (see, e.g. Fish 1999, x) but only presents some theoretical description thereof, which, he thinks, is more accurate than others. Yet I would like to claim that, at least as far as my perception of things is concerned, the facts seem to question Fish's theory. Within literary studies, for instance, there are books and articles, such as those by Stephen Greenblatt, in which the employment of the apparatus of cultural anthropology or history does not result in removing from sight the literary features of a given work (i.e. turning it into historical, or cultural, text) but rather in a more comprehensive understanding of the work, or—to put it differently—in which historical, or anthropological, insights shed light on, rather than obscure, aesthetic qualities of literature (see Greenblatt 2005). *Ditto* for certain scholarship on literature which utilizes the resources from evolutionary psychology or philosophy.

I also believe that not only do such approaches, *pace* Fish, provide a broader perspective on the subject than the one maintained by the "old-fashioned" literary studies, but they also cannot be indiscriminately accused of distorting the notions, distinctions, and all other "materials" they borrow from other disciplines. Of course, I agree with Fish that Paul de Man, for instance, used Austin's speech-acts theory in a very idiosyncratic way (see *ibid.*, 138), but I should hasten to add that the same cannot be said, e.g., of J. Hillis Miller's *Speech Acts in Literature* (Miller 2001), which, at least to my knowledge, is fairly faithful to Austin. Leaving philosophy aside, let me mention Joseph Carroll, a literary critic whose application of sociobiology to the study of literature surely cannot be accused of distortions as it has been praised by none other than the godfather of sociobiology, Edward O. Wilson himself (see one of the blurbs on the back cover of Carroll 2004).

So much for Fish's claim that one cannot widen one's disciplinary perspective through interdisciplinary work. Now let us examine his related thesis that no composition of disciplines, or no genre-blurring (to use Clifford Geertz's expression) is possible, by considering texts such as Derrida's *Glas*, for instance. *Glas*, *Specters of Marx*, as well as some other examples of Derrida's later writing, certainly function in the academic context and are recognized as something specific, or distinctive, yet one cannot say whether they should be classified as literary criticism, philosophy, or even literature. It is hard to tell what definite purpose they serve, what are the rules of "immanent intelligibility" of this kind of writing, and moreover, it seems rather odd to try to pose any such questions.[6]

I am sure, however, that Fish would respond to these examples in the same way that he has responded to similar examples given by others before me, namely by saying that even though they *seem* to be examples of interdisciplinarity, they in fact are not, and cannot be so, because his theory of disciplines proves that that would be impossible ('It *seems* that X is doing both philosophy and literary studies at the same time, but he really is not doing so, because it is simply impossible to be a philosopher and a literary scholar at the same time, isn't it?'). But wouldn't that be an instance of the Platonism he himself has criticized in other authors? Namely, the claim that one's theoretical perspective, by virtue of its ability to penetrate to the core of reality, has a superior grasp of the matter even if someone else's, in fact almost everybody else's, practical experience, says otherwise? Criticizing the metaphysical bent of the acolytes of interdisciplinarity Fish indulges in the following rhetorical shrug:

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[6] In my interpretation of Derrida, I am of course following Richard Rorty, see, e.g. chap 6. of Rorty 1989. Note also the following confession made by Derrida himself: "Although I am professionally a philosopher, everything I do is *something else* than philosophy. No doubt it is *about* philosophy, but it is not simply "philosophical" through and through" (Dancy et al. 2000, 281).

> To all of [this] *I* say 'So what?' The fact that a self-advertised unity is really a grab-bag of disparate elements held together by the conceptual equivalent of chicken-wire, or by shifting political and economic alliances… does not make the unity disappear… Just because the unity is underwritten by rhetoric rather than by nature or logic in no way lessens the force of its operation in the moments of its existence (Fish 1999, 74).

If this is so, then why couldn't I react to Fish's theory of disciplinarity by saying: "So what? The fact that a self-advertised combination, or blurring, of disciplines is really a creation of a new discipline, or oscillation between different disciplines, or annexation of one discipline (or its elements) by another, does not make the combination or blurring disappear… Just because the plurality is underwritten by rhetoric rather than by nature or logic in no way lessens the force… etc. etc."? I believe that I am entirely entitled to do so, and if Fish does not agree with that, then *onus probandi* rests solely on his back.

This of course is not to say that there are no cases where concepts formed in one discipline acquire a totally different meaning when transplanted to another; or where scholars who want to use some piece of philosophy, or history, psychology etc., to read literature, end up writing books about philosophy, history or psychology, thus neglecting their supposedly primary subject; or where it is believed that by being interdisciplinary one ascends to the heights of the ultimate Platonic knowledge. Such things happen indeed, but there are also cases I have described above (as well as a large number of others I did not have the space to mention), which Fish's theoretical machinery is too rigid to account for, and this is because the workings of this machinery are, as we have already seen, strictly regulated by binary oppositions ('you can either practice x, or y, *tertium non datur'*). To be sure, there is nothing inherently wrong with binary oppositions: they are very useful for talking about computer programming for example, but at the same time become rather clumsy when applied to some other subjects, such as disciplinarity.

Consider, for instance, Fish's criticism of the claim that one can escape the traps of one's disciplinary constraints by keeping "at least one eye open ["while performing within a discipline"] … on the larger conditions that make the performance possible" (Fish 1994, 239). Quite predictably, from Fish's perspective the case looks rather hopeless: one cannot at the same time practice a discipline and think about its interdisciplinary/methodological/ideological entanglements because these are two different jobs, each of which has its own specific purpose and method, and each of which requires a different mode of attention (*ibid.*, 239-240). Again, even though at first one almost cannot resist the power of this reasoning, its lure evaporates as soon as it is confronted with concrete examples, such as that of metaphilosophy. For isn't practicing metaphilosophy a perfect case of a situation where doing a job (philosophy that is) does not in any way preclude simultaneously thinking about the generally conceived status of that job (its place in the humanities/science divide, e.g.)? Or what about all those postmodern novelists whose job (writing a novel) converges with reflecting on what their job is and on how it relates to other jobs (if not to the whole of society or even reality itself), which fact is then reflected in their books? One does not need, however, to evoke specific examples of metadiscourse here. In fact, suffice it to recall how Fish himself describes the practice of John Milton, which supposedly epitomizes how all writers proceed:

> when Milton puts pen to paper he no less than those in his intended audience is a reader of his own action. That is, as he begins, he thinks of himself, or, to be more precise, conceives of himself, as a worker in a long established field; and as such a worker he knows what gestures are available to him and the extent to which he is obliged to perform them, and the meaning they will have for those who are situated as he is, in the same field (Fish 1999, 14).

Apparently, all those complicated considerations can "fill the consciousness" of the writer (*ibid.*), without somehow interfering with what he does within his professional capacities, namely putting pen to paper. But now an important question emerges: is there any formal difference between keeping in mind, while performing something, the meaning that one's action will have for the members of one's own discipline, and keeping in mind that it may have a different meaning for colleagues from other disciplines (and this is what the aforementioned solution to the problem of disciplinary constraints is roughly about)? The answer is of course no. In both cases one is a "reader" of one's own action, and if Fish wants to keep his account of disciplinary practice intact, he has no alternative but to accept the fact that interdisciplinary consciousness is possible.

The Self-refutation of Fish's Theory

Fish's merciless binary logic, however, poses a threat to his theoretical enterprise that is far more serious than the inability to explain certain facts. Namely, it forces Fish to see incompatible, distinctive practices everywhere, thus leading to an inevitable self-refutation of his theory. This can be shown by the following *reductio ad absurdum*, which was inspired by Fish's own argument, namely the aforementioned one which claims that nobody can be a literary critic and a literary historian at the same time, because literary history and literary criticism are two different disciplines each of which "has its own job, a job that is literally inconceivable apart from its vocabulary" (Fish 1999, 83). Without denying that this account might work for the literary criticism as it was conceived by some New Critics, one should add that it certainly is not adequate to other forms of literary criticism, such as that practiced by Harold Bloom for instance (see Bloom 1973). As I have already said, however, the argument I want to put forward here is not about counterexamples. What it is about is the fact that in the very same book in which Fish insists that literary criticism and literary history are two different, distinctive disciplines, he also talks about the disciplinary distinctiveness of "literary studies" (*Literary studies and political change* is in fact the subtitle of this book) to which, as is implied by some of Fish's own remarks, both former fields should belong. Now, if distinctiveness means serving a particular purpose, then how could literary history and literary criticism, each serving a different purpose, serve the same purpose under the auspices of literary studies? An obvious response is that the specific purposes they serve might together contribute to a more general purpose of literary studies. Yet this is a possibility which Fish *explicitly* denies, conceiving it as an example of the wishful thinking "impelled by a desire for 'a unified science, general knowledge, synthesis and the integration of knowledge'" (Fish 1999, 83).

In the light of Fish's theory, then, what is normally understood as literary studies disintegrates into two different disciplines: literary history and literary criticism, which is a consequence he does not seem to be aware of (or at least he does not express that awareness in the works I am referring to). What is far more important here, however, is that this process of disintegration goes much deeper and further, in fact *ad infinitum*, something which completely invalidates Fish's theory. What I mean here is that even Fish's supposedly unified disciplinary practice of literary criticism, consists of various specific enterprises (e.g. analyzing the tropes used in the poem, studying its metrical structure, and discerning its intertextual relations) all of which, at least on the grounds of Fish's theory, can—indeed must —be deemed separate "disciplinary actions" (here: stylistics, prosody, comparative analysis) issuing from "narrowly defined disciplinary intentions" (*ibid.*, 87). And can't each of these enterprises be divided, in turn, into a set of even smaller separate enterprises (say, discussing phraseology, discussing

implicatures) each of which (by Fish's principle of perspectives-as-moulds) constructs its subject in a wholly different way than all other disciplines do? I believe that now I can bring back to Fish one of his own arguments quoted above, and say:

> The composite [literary critic that Fish] imagines would not be a single man but [several] men, or one (physically defined) man who took on alternate tasks and was, as he moved from one to another, alternate persons. As one person he would see the centrality of X and the appeal of Y; as another X and Y would never come into view, or if they come into view, they would be beside his present point (*ibid.*, 138).

Moreover, since Fish's theory of disciplinarity has very high ambitions (as we have seen, by making claims as to the situatedness of the human condition it ascribes to itself the competence of philosophical anthropology) its explanatory power naturally embraces not only disciplinary actions, but all human actions. And since one can always distinguish different elements of each action, such that they can be conceived as distinctive actions themselves (just consider how many actions having a conversation consists of) then Fish's theory inevitably leads to a conclusion that no action is possible since each action consists of other actions, and one cannot perform more than one action at the same time.

Conclusion

This is, then, my "deconstruction" of Fish's theory. But, myself a pragmatist, I need to respond, in the conclusion of my paper, to the question whether such a refutation is anything more than another tempest in a theoretical teapot, as the late Richard Rorty liked it put it. In other words, does it have any practical value at all? To properly approach this question one needs to consider the fact that Fish's theory, despite what he himself might think about it, brings some potential dangers to academic practice. Namely, it can discourage those scholars who take it seriously from undertaking any interdisciplinary enterprise, by inducing in them doubts such as this one: "Why be interdisciplinary, if this will certainly not result in the broadening of my perspective on the subject, but rather in my distorting of the categories I will borrow from other disciplines, or, in the worst case, in the annexation of my discipline by some other discipline?" And given that such a fear of transgressing the boundaries of the field we currently inhabit would certainly be detrimental to academic practice, I believe that this alone is a sufficient reason, and a practical one, why Fish's critique of interdisciplinarity needs itself to be criticized.

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