Philosophy as Entertainment

Jack Russell Weinstein asks: Why?

Associate Professor Jack Weinstein hosts a radio show on philosophical discussions of everyday life.
If comedian Jerry Seinfeld can do a TV show about nothing, why shouldn’t philosopher Jack Russell Weinstein do a radio show about something? 

 Why? is the name of Weinstein’s program on Prairie Public Radio, which airs the second Sunday of every month at 5 p.m. 

 Weinstein, an associate professor of philosophy at the UND, hosts a live call-in radio show on philosophical discussions of everyday life. The show’s title provides the context for what it’s about. “It’s the basic question of philosophy,” Weinstein explains. “It’s an open-ended question, a question that people have to ask together.”

 Why? is produced by the Institute for Philosophy and Public Life, a partnership of Prairie Public, the North Dakota Humanities Council and the UND College of Arts & Sciences. Its goal, according to Weinstein, is to get people to think about the role philosophy plays in their daily lives. “People engage in discussions about their values and beliefs, and how they’re integrated into their lives,” he says. “It’s one way of saying their ideas and thoughts matter.”

 Guests on the show explore such topics as forgiveness, hunting, athletic competition, whether America is in decline, and the export of democracy. “We can talk about anything; everything’s on the table,” Weinstein relates. “I’m not afraid of controversy. I’m just afraid of not doing a good job.”

 His guests have included humanist and columnist Clay Jenkinson of Bismarck, who portrays Thomas Jefferson on public radio show The Thomas Jefferson Hour; Lawrence E. Cahoone, associate professor at Holy Cross College in Worcester, Mass., and author of Cultural Revolutions: Reason versus Culture in Contemporary Philosophy, Politics and Jihad; Eva Feder Kittay, professor of philosophy at State University of New York Stony Brook and author of Love’s Labor: On Women, Equality and Dependency, and Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, who won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1998 for his work on social economics.

 In addition, UND faculty have appeared on the show, covering topics from digital literature to political science to history. In an era in which talk radio is dominated by politics and sports, Weinstein admits the notion of a show devoted to philosophy might seem a bit of a stretch.

 “Philosophy is something that seems distant to people,” he notes. “The idea to do a radio show on it probably seems bizarre, but once people listen, they become converted.”

 And, people are listening, both on the radio and through live streaming broadcasts and podcasts from www.whyradioshow.org (where each program is also archived). The show has 300 podcast subscribers and has received unsolicited e-mails from across the country. People from 27 different countries have visited the show’s Web site.

 Some of the appeal comes from what the show is not. “Nobody wants to listen to two people talk philosophy,” Weinstein says. “I wanted it to be a call-in show because people needed to feel like they’re participating. I like the intensity of doing a live show. I learn a tremendous amount from every guest, every phone call and every interaction.”

 Listeners can take part by calling a toll-free number (888.755.6377) or submitting questions by e-mail to whyradioshow@und.edu. “I am genuinely interested in what the people of North Dakota think,” Weinstein remarks. “In New York, you hear from all different nationalities. Living in North Dakota is my diversity experience because I’d never experienced rural life. You have to live with people in order to see them.”

 “The plan is to take it on the road because people have this sense that the University is for the Red River Valley,” he says. “UND is the state’s university, and thatmeans that we have to engage the whole state in the conversation. They don’t have to come to us. We can go to them.”

 If all goes well, Weinstein hopes eventually to go nationwide with his radio show. “We’re going to get better slowly and steadily because that wins the race. I want to get to the point where the show is high quality and well produced. I want people to think of philosophy when they think of North Dakota.”

 As Seinfeld demonstrated, a show about nothing can be funny and entertaining. Weinstein believes a show about something as important as philosophy can be rewarding and useful to society. “I want people to celebrate the intellectual aspects of their lives, whether they live on a butte or live in downtown Fargo,” he says. “Any community that embraces philosophy will eventually be happy it does.”

PATRICK C. MILLER