

i n t e r p r e t a t i o n

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Fall 1988

Volume 16 Number 1

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Subscription rates
for one volume individual \$15; institutional \$18; student (3-year limit)
\$7.50: by check in U.S. dollars and payable within the
U.S.A. There are three issues of INTERPRETATION
in a volume.

Authors submitting manuscripts are asked to follow
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INTERPRETATION, Queens College, Flushing, N. Y.
11367-0904, U.S.A.

Socratic Reason and Lockean Rights

The Place of the University in a Liberal Democracy

WILLIAM A. GALSTON

I

Like Rousseau after the publication of the *First Discourse*, Allan Bloom awoke to find himself famous. Like Rousseau, he challenged his age at the point of its greatest and most unexamined pride. He dared to suggest that “our virtue”—untrammelled tolerance—is in fact the most destructive of vices. And what an attack! By turns passionate, ruminative, scornful, sorrowful, Bloom took on his subject in a manner utterly contemptuous of current fashion, and virtually guaranteed to enrage.

Remarkably, his book did not enrage. Instead, with rare exceptions, it was reviewed in tones ranging from respectful to rapturous in the nation’s most respected newspapers and journals, and it quickly soared to the top of the best-seller lists. *The Closing of the American Mind* is more than a book, it is an event—one of those rare literary deeds that reveals the doubts, the fears, and the longings of its audience. The reception of this book deserves an inquiry of its own, as an indication of the deep foreboding just beneath the complacent surface of contemporary culture.

The Closing of the American Mind has three distinguishable, though intimately related, strands: a detailed description of modern American society, viewed through the prism of university students; an historical-analytical explanation of the ills revealed by that description; and finally, a proposed cure for those ills. These elements are linked because, as Bloom characteristically insists, “Concreteness, not abstractness, is the hallmark of philosophy. All interesting generalizations must proceed from the richest awareness of what is to be explained” (p. 255). In this respect, and in many others, *The Closing of the American Mind* is a defense of a distinctive conception of teaching, of learning, and of the modern institutional structure—the university—that shelters and sustains these activities. The book is concrete, not just objectively, so to speak, but also subjectively. It is an intensely personal and self-revealing account of one man’s way of life. It is not, as some have argued, a jeremiad; it is Bloom’s Apology.

II

On the level of description of contemporary society I will have relatively little to say in this essay, not because I am sure Bloom is right but because I do

not possess the requisite evidence to say he is wrong. (In one area, though, I do have some evidence, and I feel constrained to remark that his account of the alleged lack of natural connection between fathers and their children [p. 115] conforms neither to my own experience nor to my observation of the men of my generation.) If there is a difficulty, it lies in the scope rather than the accuracy of Bloom's description. He states that his "sample" consists in students at the twenty or thirty best universities—the future elite. But he sometimes speaks as though what he says about these students is true of American society as a whole. Based on my own experiences, which include lengthy and systematic discussions with "ordinary Americans" across the country, I have concluded that there is much less relativism, much more respect for traditional understandings of individual rights, moral virtues, and the family than might be inferred from a sample of young elite students.

Bloom is not unaware of this difficulty, and he appears to respond to it as follows: Influential changes of opinion begin at the top and gradually filter downward. First comes dangerous philosophy, then the corruption of the intellectuals, then the students, political leaders, and finally the general public.

Although this thesis is not wholly implausible, it is not the whole truth. American society today is the arena of a struggle between those who advance, and those who resist, the trends Bloom rightly deplures. During the past decade, in fact, there has been a popular revolt against the perceived moral relativism of the elites, and the gap between popular and elite beliefs is now very wide. Of course it is troubling that so many of those who are likely to be socially and politically influential do not have healthy opinions. But the public is capable of resisting what it does not like. In a democracy—for better as well as for worse—it is the people who ultimately rule.

III

Why has the elite American mind deserted its founding convictions—the rights of man, the Bible—in favor of an openness that cannot make moral distinctions and eventually undermines all convictions? Bloom's official answer, which provides the plot line for much of his book, is that relativistic German philosophy gradually imposed the yoke of alien thought on what had been a sturdy Enlightenment tradition.

But this can hardly be the full answer. To begin with, the enormous success of this popularized Nietzscheanism forces us to wonder what needs it gratified and whether the unsullied American mind was really so well-ordered—to ask, that is, *why* this Continental victory occurred. Bloom suggests two seemingly contradictory but ultimately reconcilable answers. First, Nietzsche as mediated through Freud interpreted the higher in light of the lower, an approach that proved especially popular in a democracy "where there is envy of what makes special claims, and the good is supposed to be accessible to all" (p. 232). But

second, an Americanized Nietzsche provided an essential corrective to early democratic theory, whose low but solid foundation failed to flatter democratic man sufficiently, by holding out the possibility that everyone could be creative, autonomous, a source of new values—the very definition of nobility in a trans-moral, postphilosophic age (p. 144). In short, Nietzsche as received in this country simultaneously undermined the grounds of aristocracy and offered us all the opportunity of being aristocrats.

These suggestions, in turn, make me doubt that the story can simply be the victory of foreign corruption over domestic health. It is more nearly adequate to say that vulgarized Nietzschean thought activated latent problems, and accelerated indigenous trends, already present in American life. Indeed, Bloom provides us with an impressive catalogue of such phenomena. Liberal tolerance fosters relativism when it seeks to widen its scope by placing more and more claims to superiority outside the realm of knowledge (pp. 30–31). Liberal freedom fosters relativism when it seeks to become absolute by denying all rational limits (p. 28). Democratic egalitarianism fosters relativism by denigrating heroism and delegitimizing rank-ordering among human beings (pp. 66, 90). Egoistic individualism fosters relativism by denying natural relatedness among, and duties toward, other human beings, a trend exacerbated by the liberal-contractarian view of the family (pp. 86, 112). In short, Bloom's own account suggests that modern liberal democracy is not stably well-ordered unless it is somehow mitigated by external forces (religion, traditional moral restraints, aristocracy) with which it is at war and which it tends to corrode (see especially pp. 251–252).

That this is in fact the deeper stratum of his argument is suggested as well by another set of considerations. Liberal democracies are the natural home of the bourgeoisie. Bourgeois existence, says Bloom, is defined by the effort to expunge dangerous passions—for aristocratic distinction, for political power, for religious truth—in the name of tranquil and commodious living: “Neither longing nor enthusiasm belong to the bourgeois” (p. 169). But of course these natural desires cannot be wholly eradicated, and they thus find stunted, distorted expression in democratic societies (pp. 183, 329ff.). The appeal of Nietzsche, like that of Rousseau, is to the part of the soul that bourgeois existence leaves fallow, or lays waste. The gateway to the mind of America did not have to be rammed open by alien philosophy, the Enemy Without, for it was swung open to the invader by our inchoate longing for the beyond, the Enemy Within.

IV

If relativism is the modern democratic disease, what is the cure? I can best approach this question through some personal history.

It was in the fall of 1963, during Bloom's unforgettable “Introduction to

Political Philosophy,” that I first encountered Leo Strauss’s *Natural Right and History*. From the powerful first pages on, I sensed immediately that I was in the presence of greatness. Strauss’s Introduction challenged Americans not to surrender their ancestral faith in the rights of man to German relativism, and it traced the impasse of modern thought to the seventeenth-century overthrow of classical—that is, teleological—natural science. I read on eagerly, hoping to find an account of the grounds on which the Declaration of Independence could be rationally reaffirmed and the problem posed by modern science surmounted.

But as I finished *Natural Right and History*, I was perplexed. Far from reaffirming the rights of man, Strauss argued that the philosophic ground of those rights—Hobbes’ and Locke’s account of the state of nature—had been decisively criticized by Rousseau, who carried the antiteleological premise of his predecessors to its logical conclusion. (My perplexity only deepened when I read, at the end of “What Is Political Philosophy?,” that Nietzschean nihilism is the culmination and highest self-consciousness of modern thought, the inevitable consequence of the break with classical rationalism.) As for the problem of natural science: Strauss had made it clear at the outset that he would confine his discussion to that aspect of natural right that could be clarified within the domain of the social sciences. But at each step in his narrative, Strauss showed that the political thinkers of modernity accepted the antiteleological implication of modern science and shaped their political teachings in its light. Evidently the problem posed by science could be deferred but not indefinitely evaded. Yet as I read more and more of Strauss’s writings, I could find no definitive account of this matter. In the preface to the seventh impression of *Natural Right and History* (1971), nearly two decades after its initial publication and only shortly before his death, Strauss explicitly reaffirmed his “inclination to prefer” the natural right teaching of classical antiquity. But to the best of my knowledge, he never cleared away what he himself had identified as the most fundamental intellectual obstacle to that reaffirmation. To summarize: while relativism is poison, neither modern nor classical natural right teachings are straightforwardly available as antidotes.

I find precisely these same difficulties at the heart of Bloom’s narrative. He suggests, for example, that there is an essential conflict between the humanities—including philosophy—and modern natural science (p. 372). At the same time, he notes that no influential modern thinker has tried to return to the pre-Enlightenment—teleological—understanding of nature (p. 181). More to the point, he never recommends, or suggests the possibility, of such a return. It would seem to follow that our account of man must now be situated within the context of modern science. Yet much of Bloom’s book consists in a critique of every postclassical effort to execute such a strategy (see especially pp. 193, 301–302). There is no third path. If the problem of natural science cannot be sidestepped, it must be addressed, else the return to classical rationalism is *ex hypothesi* impossible. But Bloom refuses to accept, or make, this choice: he

neither consigns natural science to irrelevance nor confronts head-on the human difficulties engendered by its antiteleological stance.

Bloom's recapitulation of Strauss's other conundrum—the status of modern natural right—is even more fundamental to his entire enterprise. Bloom states unequivocally that the modern natural rights teaching establishes the “framework and the atmosphere for the modern university” (p. 288), which institution it is his purpose to defend against its enemies. Modern natural right, in turn, is rooted in the state of nature (p. 162). In particular, the American understanding of the rights of man, which undergirds the American university, rests on the state of nature as depicted by Locke (pp. 165–66). Therein lies the difficulty. Like Strauss before him, Bloom argues that Locke's account was decisively criticized by Rousseau, who pointed out that “Locke, in his eagerness to find a simple or automatic solution to the political problem, made nature do much more than he had a right to expect a mechanical, nonteological nature to do” (p. 176). The modern university Bloom wishes to defend thus rests on a state of nature teaching that by his own account must be judged defective.

This chain of inference has profound implications for liberal democracy. If Rousseau is right, Locke is wrong. If Locke is wrong, then the university—indeed, America itself—is insecurely founded. Yet at this critical juncture, in a book hardly deficient in blunt speech, Bloom pulls back from the full rigor of his argument. Rousseau, he declares, “explodes the simplistic [Lockean] harmoniousness between nature and society that *seems to be* the American premise” (p. 177; emphasis mine). In this ambiguous “seems to be” lurks the deepest issue. Are the natural rights at the base of our regime, the rights to which most Americans still subscribe (p. 166), the rights that constitute “our only principle of justice,” the rights that sustain the institutions Bloom cherishes—are the rights of man, so conceived, worthy of our rational devotion? That is the question. I cannot see that it receives an adequate answer in this otherwise compelling book.

V

It may be argued that the immediately preceding argument is deeply unfair. After all, Bloom distinguishes between modern and Socratic rationalism. The impasse of modern rationalism, which Nietzsche both observed and exemplified, is not the impasse of reason *simpliciter* (p. 310). Indeed, that impasse provides the strongest motivation for returning to the classical understanding. It is Socratic rationalism that is the essence of the university, and it is the defense of Socratic rationalism that constitutes the highest calling of the university (pp. 253, 307). Locke's defeat at the heart of Rousseau is therefore irrelevant to Bloom's enterprise.

This argument is however exposed to serious objections. To begin with, the return to classical rationalism cannot—on Bloom's own account—occur with-

out first surmounting the obstacle posed by modern natural science, a task which, as I have indicated, Bloom does not even begin to undertake. In addition, it is by no means clear whether—or how—Socratic rationalism leads to the vindication of the rights of man, on which (again, on Bloom's own account) rest both liberal democracy and the modern university. Finally, as Bloom argues at length (pp. 256–68), there is a crucial disagreement between classical and modern rationalism concerning the relation between reason and civil society. Classical rationalism maintains that there is an inherent tension between philosophy and politics and that the trial and execution of Socrates was a dramatic manifestation of that tension. Modern rationalism, by contrast, sees this event as the outcome of a mistaken but corrigible understanding of the relation between philosophy and politics, and it argues that civil society can be improved by, and rendered hospitable to, the public exercise of philosophic reason. Bloom espouses both a Socratic conception of reason and a post-Socratic conception of the relation between reason and politics. The question necessarily arises whether this combination is tenable.

This tension comes to a head in Bloom's depiction of the university. It is in providing a public home for Socratic reason that the modern university finds its highest justification. The purpose of the university is to enable students to reach toward the perfection of their nature by fostering true openness, which is freedom of the mind (pp. 20, 40, 248–49). The essence of the university is the cultivation of the "noninstrumental use of reason for its own sake" (p. 249). Those who spend their lives in the exercise of noninstrumental reason "become the models for the use of the noblest human faculties and hence are benefactors to all of us, more for what they are than for what they do. Without their presence (and, one should add, without their being respectable), no society—no matter how rich or comfortable, no matter how technically adept or full of tender sentiments—can be called civilized" (p. 21). In and through the university, the classical tension between reason and the regime is diluted to such an extent that Socrates can become a respected—even useful—member of civil society: "The successful university is the proof that a society can be devoted to the well-being of all, without stunting human potential or imprisoning the mind to the goals of the regime" (p. 252). As Bloom summarizes his credo: "Never did I think that the university was properly ministerial to the society around it. Rather, I thought and think that society is ministerial to the university, and I bless a society that tolerates and supports an eternal childhood for some, a childhood whose playfulness can in turn be a blessing to society" (p. 245). If, as Bloom maintains, the highest task of ancient political philosophy was to make the political world safe for philosophy (p. 276), this task would appear to have reached its culmination in modern liberal democracy's artful dissolution of a conflict once considered inescapable.

Yet matters are not so simple. Early on, Bloom tells us that every educa-

tional system has a specific moral goal, the production of a certain kind of human being—citizens who are in accord with the fundamental principles of their political community. In particular, democratic education, “whether it admits it or not, wants and needs to produce men and women who have the tastes, knowledge, and character supportive of a democratic regime” (p. 26). If so, the university is—or inevitably comes under pressure to become—ministerial to democracy after all. To the extent that it is not ministerial, we may confidently predict that it will sooner or later encounter political opposition.

But Bloom’s university is far from wholeheartedly democratic, in at least three respects. First, modern democracies concentrate on the useful, while the university is directed toward the noninstrumental (p. 250). Second, modern democracies rest on settled principles—equality and the rights of man—which it is the purpose of philosophic reason, sheltered in universities, to call into question in the name of alternative principles of political right (pp. 248–49). Third, modern universities tend relentlessly toward the equalization and homogenization of human beings, which tendency the university resists in the name of high standards, superior gifts, and human inequality—in the name, in short, of natural aristocracy (pp. 251–54). The university, says Bloom, began in spirit from “Socrates’ contemptuous and insolent distancing of himself from the Athenian people” (p. 311), and it must maintain that spirit today: “[The university] must be contemptuous of public opinion” (p. 254). Bloom is shocked and dismayed when this spirit of contempt evokes public anger in return. But on his own account, this anger, which endangers the free public exercise of reason, is entirely natural and predictable. It is the triumph of politics, Socratically understood, over the public exercise of Socratic reason. From this standpoint, Bloom’s official account of the fall of the American university—the victory of a vulgarized Nietzsche over the vestiges of Socrates—must be revised. It would be at least as true to say that the fall of the university represents the revenge of the demos on the last embattled remnants of aristocracy in an increasingly democratic age (see pp. 319, 326, 353).

VI

I come, finally, to the question of students. Bloom maintains that, unlike the students of the 1960s, today’s students are nurtured neither in the Bible nor in the tradition of the Declaration of Independence. The loss of these traditions has made today’s students narrower and flatter, without the “felt need” for the kind of noble openness that only devotion to philosophic activities can gratify. There is thus less soil in which university teaching can take root, and that soil is too thin to “sustain the taller growths” (pp. 51, 61).

I have no competence to characterize today’s students. But I can speak of

the students of twenty years ago that Bloom evokes with such nostalgic affection, for I was one of them. It was indeed a marvelous time. But my memory of it does not fully square with Bloom's account.

I do not recall that many of us were particularly well versed in the Bible or in the doctrine of the rights of man—I know I was not. Most of us had however grown up in stable families where television was not yet a dominant force, families in which reading was encouraged and learning was respected. We reached university age in the midst of the biggest, longest economic boom in the history of the world, and we were willing to take intellectual risks because we never worried—or had to worry—about the effects of risk-taking on our future ability to earn a living. At that time, the United States was the undisputed leader of the Free World, with a virtually unblemished record of postwar diplomatic accomplishment. We trusted our government. We were not really cynical about anything. We were patriots. (We were also relativists, by the way, but Bloom cured us of that quickly enough.) The United States had the brash, open hubris of Athens before the Sicilian expedition, and we all somehow participated in it. Our willingness to learn was unqualified; our “felt need” was in large measure for a kind of aristocratic distinction that might be possible within a democratic society.

As I look across the gulf that separates today's students from those of my generation, I am struck by the importance of socioeconomic forces and political events, most of which Bloom hardly mentions: the Vietnam War, Watergate, stagflation, television, divorce, gasoline lines, American hostages in Iran. I suspect economic uncertainties have helped make today's students career-oriented, closed to speculation, afraid of taking risks; that two decades of foreign policy fiascoes have undermined confidence; that repeated breaches of public trust have bred cynicism; and that television has perceptibly eroded both the capacity to concentrate and the taste for reading. I also agree with Bloom that family instability and rising divorce rates have wounded children in ways that reduce healthy openness when they reach the university.

None of this is to deny Bloom's basic thesis that if true learning is to be possible, nature needs the assistance of convention. But I believe that he unduly denigrates the independent force of political and economic circumstances in affecting the conditions for openness, in the name of a conception of modern history as produced almost entirely by the dissemination of philosophic thought. I doubt that economic stagnation and military bungling—or, for that matter, the epidemic of broken families—can be laid at the feet of Nietzsche and Heidegger.

One last thought. Bloom takes as his baseline of comparison an all-too-brief Golden Age of American higher education. It *was* a Golden Age, no doubt about it. But I am forced to wonder whether those few years were not exceptional by the standards of American history itself. For the most part, as Tocqueville stresses, the American mind is not particularly hospitable to the

cultivation and exercise of noninstrumental reason. Philosophy in America will always be vulnerable to the practical disciplines: the MBA degree denounced by Bloom is but the latest link in a venerable American chain.

The problem goes deeper than the violence of the 1960s and the vacuity of the 1980s. I would suggest that Bloom has a quarrel—or at least an ambivalent relation—with bourgeois society as a whole. (Is it by chance that the emotional peak of his introductory course was the lecture on *Madame Bovary*?) Bloom cherishes the freedom that is only to be found in liberal democracy, but he despises the absence of longing in the soul of the bourgeois. He wishes to defend the university through an appeal to the principles of liberal democracy, but the thinkers to whom he appeals with the greatest frequency and effect throughout his book—Socrates, Plato, Rousseau, and Nietzsche—are all critics of liberal democracy. Locke, he suggests, is more politically salutary than Rousseau, but less psychologically profound. And besides, he insists, Rousseau was ultimately the more consistent thinker. Until the grounds for supporting liberal democracy are more firmly established than this, the status of reason—and therewith of the university—in the modern world will of necessity remain unsettled and insecure.