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Philosophy, Science, and the Opening of the American Mind

ROGER D. MASTERS

It is exceptionally rare for a philosophic book to find its way to the *New York Times*' Best Seller list. It is also unusual for a work condemning America's culture and university system to generate widespread praise from the targets of its criticism. But it is above all extraordinary to see such a response to a book focused on the *souls* of our students.

My own assessment of *The Closing of the American Mind* can be summarized under three headings, corresponding to the book's organization. *First*, the account of our current situation in Part I is brilliant and accurate—and only limited in that Bloom's reader is spared a description of the *consequences* flowing from the cultural emptiness of America's educated class. One might, after all, remember that the character of the "best and brightest" has the effect of shaping the cultural horizon of everyone else, with results including the cult of ugliness in the arts and crafts (often in the name of originality, but sometimes blatantly for its own sake), the loss of morals in business and public life ("inside trading" or "guns for hostages"), and the decline of industrial "competitiveness" (as American technology is sold to foreigners and American businessmen only find profits from buying and selling each other's jobs and corporate names).

Second, Bloom's analysis of the impact of philosophic themes—and especially of the German tradition—on American opinion is simply awesome. Part II of *The Closing of the American Mind* makes connections of which most of us have never dreamed and makes them convincingly. The only thing to be added is that Bloom doesn't elaborate clearly the historical reasons (that is, what Aristotle might call the "material and efficient causes") for the spread of nihilism. Isn't the lack of spiritual goals linked to the democratic character of the university? And isn't that phenomenon itself explicable on philosophic grounds?

Democratization of higher education is, after all, in part related to the spread of high technology. On the one hand, the need for productive workers goes down with mechanization (Rousseau had reason to express his opposition to labor-saving devices in his constitutional proposals for Corsica); on the other, the remaining jobs do require different patterns of work. Putting most of the youth through college at least keeps them off the streets and the unemployment rolls, and a few learn how to run computers or read complicated sets of instructions (even if poorly).

The effects of technology on our universities are, in turn, related to its massive impact on the character of our youth. Not just (or primarily) televi-

sion—though its effect on the ability to read and think should not be underestimated now that the average high school graduate is said to have spent more time in front of a television set than in a classroom. Rather, I mean telephones, refrigerators, cars, ski lifts, and running hot water. A generation of spoiled brats has been spoiled by modern “conveniences”—the consumer durables that fuel our economy.

This is not a materialist alternative to Bloom’s critique: the machines that have corrupted our youth are the essence of the Baconian project fulfilled in a Lockean mode. Rather, it is a suggestion that the philosophic argument in Part II of *The Closing of the American Mind* could easily be reinforced by a precise account (anthropological in the old sense) of what Aristotle would have called our “way of life.”

Finally, the third part of Bloom’s book says much that greatly needs saying about the way scholars and universities have abandoned serious matters. Some might object that it’s not that much different in some European universities—I know some young French people who think their system much worse than ours because much more preprofessional. But to see the disarray of the entire academic world portrayed at one time is indeed disconcerting.

For this reviewer, there are only two key points worth adding to the dialogue. First, Bloom understates the negative role that can be played by administrative decisions. In general, university administrators think they can fill the void of our curriculum with something trendy (for example, interdisciplinary causes called “Theme” courses, with the “Theme” being something like “Ideas that formed the Twentieth Century”). Not all of the baneful effects of contemporary higher education can be laid to the door of the professors.

A second question gets to my only major disagreement with *The Closing of the American Mind*. Bloom’s image of “Science” is no longer entirely accurate. Among other things, his treatment of the natural sciences seems to miss the profound possibilities of something new, especially in contemporary biology. This is especially worth noting since it contradicts some minor points in his argument.

I can start with a small but significant detail. One of the very few factual errors that occurs in *The Closing of the American Mind* concerns the relation between humans and other animals. On p. 133, Bloom says, “In all species other than man, when an animal reaches puberty, it is all that it will ever be. This stage is the clear end toward which all of its growth and learning is directed. The animal’s activity is reproduction. It lives on this plateau until it starts downhill. Only in man is puberty just the beginning.” It’s perhaps justifiable to ignore the insects (despite Aristotle’s interest in them), though Bloom does say “all species” and the social insects clearly contradict his statement in some interesting ways. But let us focus on the kind of “animals” Bloom clearly had in mind: mammals (dogs, horses, birds, wolves, etc.). Even here, the assertion is contradicted by the importance of activities other than

reproduction associated with play, with sociability, and with learning about the environment.

The actions not narrowly related to reproduction are clearly very important in most of the other primates. Aside from verbal speech, moreover, there is virtually no activity or capacity that formerly was attributed uniquely to “man” that has not now also been observed in chimpanzees if not in other monkeys and apes: identification of the self and of others as individuals, deceit, laughter, “culture,” altruistic self-sacrifice to save others, murder, even war. The Nietzschean assertion that the “brute” (a term Bloom uses often) has no “meaning” is a continuation of the Hobbesian devaluation of nature.

One cannot watch two eagles *playing*—yes, playing—for hours, and still think of all nonhuman animals as “brutes” solely concerned with reproduction. A chimpanzee or gorilla is emphatically *not* all he or she will be on reaching puberty. This is important insofar as Bloom *appears* to have accepted Nietzsche’s view that “Man is pure becoming” (p. 203). It is simply incorrect to say that “the actuality of plants and other animals is contained in their potentialities, but this is not true of man as is indicated by the many cultural flowers *essentially* unlike . . .”

On the one hand, all living forms have a range of potentialities, so that actuality depends on the environments and life histories of organisms; on the other, to say that all cultures are “*essentially* unlike” flies in the face of philosophy, experience, common sense, and Nietzsche’s own project. If all cultures serve the same function—say to give mythic meanings of good and bad—then all cultures are essentially alike and only differ on superficial matters. Bowerbirds attract mates by making gaudy nests, it is said, and each bird builds of different materials—but all the nests serve the same function.

Bloom’s view of human nature can thus be questioned as outdated and contradicted by contemporary biology, and especially by ethology (based as it is on the observation of other animals). This point is linked to a deeper issue. Bloom refers to modern science as “materialistic, hence reductionist, and deterministic” (p. 195). That might have been so in the nineteenth century—but no longer. Contemporary natural science seems to be *none* of these. *Scientists* themselves may not recognize the change (the last person to ask about the philosophic implications of scientific discovery may, alas, often be the scientist who made it). Nonetheless, the change is real and overwhelmingly evident.

It was Nietzsche himself who first noted that physics wasn’t what the eighteenth-century Newtonians thought it was (see Kenneth Deutsch & Walter Soffer, eds., *The Crisis of Liberal Democracy*,¹ pp. 48–66). Now, things have gone much further. Physics is—and has been since Bohr and Heisenberg—radically probabilistic rather than deterministic; emergent properties (novelties) are everywhere *more* important than “reductionism”; the formal or “ideal”

1. Albany: SUNY Press, 1987.

properties are clearly prior to and more elemental than the perceived material itself. Heisenberg may not be representative when he sees modern physics forcing us to return to ancient Greek philosophy—and notably to Heraclitus and Plato (see his *Physics and Philosophy*); Capra may exaggerate in the *The Tao of Physics* in seeing Eastern religion imminent in contemporary theories. Even so, with such radical departures from the high school physics of Newton and Galileo, it is really important to question the adequacy of the old catch phrases.

Philosophers *must* do this, for physicists won't do it for us. Much the same could be added with regard to biology. One distinguished biologist, George Gaylord Simpson, put it flatly: reductionism in biology is "absurd" Nor does it follow that science cannot address conscious phenomena. That is another of the comfortable myths that would have shocked Aristotle—and won't withstand scrutiny. To cite but two recent examples: (1) mental phenomena like manic-depressive and schizophrenic illness are in the process of being traced to biological causes (in the case of manic-depression, to a specific gene whose expression depends to some extent on experience); (2) dyslexias involve deficits in reading and writing (and now we are discovering exactly how the brain handles linguistic information by learning the ways that these processes can be disturbed).

In general, the progress in these areas is so great as to be truly dangerous; far from being impossible, we are only too capable of learning about the neurological and behavioral concomitants of thought. To say nothing is achieved in studying the soul with contemporary scientific methods is to say that the *Characters* of Theophrastus was not a philosophic work. Such assertions can only be maintained if the word "soul" is defined in a theological rather than a philosophic sense—and, even then, only in some religious traditions would it follow that belief in a nonmaterial soul endowed with a free will is requisite for serious discussion of human ends or purposes.

It may be true that modern science has simply devastating effects for the concept of "soul" in some Christian texts. It is not true that modern science has the same implications for a *philosophic* or rational understanding of the soul as Plato or Aristotle used that term. Quite to the contrary, for it is now possible to conclude that the *tabula rasa* psychology of Hobbes, Locke, and the behaviorist tradition is simply wrong on scientific grounds.

This presents us, paradoxically, with a theological danger of the highest order. The war of reason and revelation—put to sleep by our Founding Fathers among others—seems to be waking up in time for the Bicentennial of the American Constitution. Whether internally (a judge ruling that "secular humanism" is a religion in the sense of the first Amendment) or externally (the Ayatollah Khomeini describing the American regime as "Satan"), the comfortable assertions of modernity are disappearing. Nietzsche seems to have been wrong: God is not dead—He (like Rip Van Winkle) was just asleep.

Continued scholarly research, particularly linking the scientific understanding of nature with the philosophic issues dear to Bloom, remains as necessary today as it was for Aristotle, Rousseau, or Kant. Although the *Closing* says relatively little about research, perhaps because its author is at the University of Chicago, it is worth remembering the dangers of limiting one's dialogue to undergraduates and perhaps a few friends. Anyone with experience in an institution of higher learning will recall individuals who demonstrate how the end of scholarly inquiry can produce bitter, closed minds.

These reflections only reinforce the argument of Bloom's book. At least some of our youth need desperately to learn of these issues. If philosophy were to die now, it might really disappear forever. But perhaps it too has just been sleeping. Certainly what Bloom himself writes in *The Closing of the American Mind* has a striking way of contradicting his title.