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The Closing of the Philosophic Mind

A Review of Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind*

HARRY NEUMANN

Error is not blindness,
error is cowardice.—Nietzsche

Professor Bloom shares the error informing this book with most liberals. That error is their unwillingness to realize the nihilism or atheism responsible for their subordination of politics to individual freedom or self-interest. By liberal I mean anyone who believes that the individual is more important than the state; individual liberation takes precedence over political obligation—however that liberation is interpreted. Bloom's brand of liberalism gives rise to his unqualified preference for philosophers over nonphilosophers, for philosophy over politics, for Socrates over Achilles, for peace over war.

The anger or moral indignation of Achilles, the chief political passion, is, for Bloom, "of all the experiences of the soul the most inimical to reason and hence to the university" (pp. 327, 71). He sees it as the passion most hostile to philosophy. To be sure, moral indignation lacks the aesthetic charms and daintiness of Mozart to whom Bloom's good students are eagerly introduced (p. 69).

Moral indignation is more akin to "McCarthy and those like him" whom Bloom castigates as "clearly nonacademic and antiacademic, the barbarians at the gates" (p. 324). This liberal taste does not place Bloom in the academic minority: "Most professors were against McCarthy." He is outraged that many liberals (for example, the AAUP) opposed to McCarthy were not opposed to student threats to academic freedom in the late sixties. Against these threats, Bloom, the opponent of moral indignation (politics) in academics, is most indignant. For those faculty-student disrupters were hostile to Bloom's philosophers: "The tiny band of men who participate fully in (philosophy) are the soul of the university. However bad universities may have been there was always a divination that an Aristotle or a Newton was what they were all about" (pp. 271–72). If moral indignation is antiphilosophical and philosophy is the soul of the university, Bloom's indignation (at threats to "philosophy" and its university) reveals his hostility to the university's very soul.

I believe that Bloom, however unwillingly, is opposed both to philosophy

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and the university. I do not fault him for this opposition, only for the lack of courage to acknowledge it. In reality, Bloom shares my atheism or nihilism, however much our agreement is obfuscated by his need for academically acceptable (liberal) fig leaves to hide his nihilist nakedness—for example, his championing of “great books,” anti-McCarthyism, and Mozart.

I found the chapter informed by Bloom’s indignation, his very political condemnation of his colleagues of the late sixties, to be the most lively and alive part of the book (pp. 313–35, 347–56). It indicated that, unlike the “last men,” he still has some chaos (politics) in him, perhaps enough to give birth to a dancing star (pp. 194–207)? It showed how deeply political, as opposed to “philosophic” (in his sense), Bloom is!

I agree with Bloom’s prejudice that politics and its indignation obfuscates the truth about oneself and one’s world: “It is essential not to make the pursuit of truth dependent on what is politically relevant” (p. 283). I also agree with his Thrasymachean contention that “ultimately the only authority in America” is “the enormous majority” (pp. 246–56, 319). Opposing nihilists such as Thrasymachus, Bloom and myself, Lincoln (p. 29) insisted that the “principle of equality” and not “the enormous majority” was “ultimately the only authority in America.” Lincoln and his best contemporary student, Harry Jaffa, have far more in common with Socrates than Thrasymachus, Bloom, or I do. We neither are nor—if we dare to know ourselves accurately—want to be philosophic. Bloom lacks this self-knowledge. Instead he deplores philosophy’s dethroning “by political and theoretical democracy . . . democracy took away philosophy’s privileges . . . In America anyhow, everybody has a philosophy” (pp. 377–78).

Bloom wants to turn this around, making politics subservient to philosophy and its university. “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” (p. 245). This ambition is inherently political and springs from a misunderstanding of what philosophy is, and what a school—an institution informed by philosophy—is.

Nietzsche knew better. His opposition to Socrates was directed against both philosophy and schools shaped by it. Bloom sees that, for Nietzsche, the problem of Socrates is *the* problem. He wrongly interprets Nietzsche’s opposition to Socrates as “a classic philosophic disputation” (p. 308), part of an eternal dialogue among a few cosmopolitan intellectuals of all ages who, for Bloom, constitute “the real community of man, in the midst of all the self-contradictory simulacra of community . . .” (p. 381). These cosmopolitans are united by “their common concern for the good . . . the only real common good . . . this is the meaning of the riddle of the improbable philosopher-kings. They have a true community that is exemplary for all other communities” (pp. 275–76, 381–82). This community is the heart of Bloom’s university and its education. Not Nietzsche’s!

Nietzsche's nihilism precluded Socratic dialogues. In that nihilism, there is nothing common—and nothing individual! To be something rather than nothing required Nietzsche's rejection of reason and science (knowledge of reality) in favor of his desperate faith in the redemptive virtue of a Dionysian unconscious and its willing. The real horror of Nietzsche's Dionysius, its essential destructiveness and Wagnerian love of death, is clearer in Mann's *Death in Venice* and its "cries of the damned plunging into nothingness" (p. 234).

Far from sharing Bloom's reverence for his true community of philosopher-kings and their ageless dialogues, Nietzsche wanted to purge his state of anyone with a university education: "I would drive out of my ideal state the so-called 'educated' just as Plato drove out the poets; this is my terrorism."¹

Nietzsche's terrorism against Bloom's revered university springs from rejection of the heart of Socrates and of philosophy, the faith in a nonarbitrary, eternal good somehow knowable, or at least divivable, by a pure mind. From a philosophic or Socratic point of view, rejection of this faith—which philosophers experience as more than mere faith or opinion—is nihilism's core.

Nietzsche criticizes the philosophers, "the famous wise men" responsible for Bloom's university, for their enslavement to politics. However much they pretend to transpolitical vistas unsullied by indignation or anger (a powerful political pretence!), they really are victims of the "tarantula," the spirit of revenge, that is, of politics. They are enslaved by common sense, the herd instinct, and its essentially moral-political bias.

Common sense, the herd instinct, is never egalitarian. It always inculcates one chief care in all herd members, that care is to get what is good for oneself, to live a good life. This care is informed by the moral-political orthodoxies of one's "cave" or herd. Unlike unphilosophic herd members, philosophic herd members turn this care into a question whose adequate answer forever eludes them. Philosophers, that is, philosophic herd members, spend their lives striving to answer their herd's chief question. Consequently philosophers always are radically political. There are no apolitical philosophers, only philosophic herd members.

The philosophic primacy of *the* moral-political question is not revealed by rational inquiry since it sets the goal of all rational inquiry. Faith in its primacy is forced upon both philosophic and unphilosophic herd members by what Nietzsche in his *Joyful Science* (I, 354) calls the strongest instinct of any herd. In his *Zarathustra* (II:8) he rightly discerns enslavement to the herd instinct as the hallmark of "the famous wise men" comprising Bloom's "true community that is exemplary for all other communities" (p. 382).

What Bloom (p. 285) calls "the uncompromising difference that separates the philosophers" from nonphilosophers is not about death and dying, as he believes, but about whether the true common good—without which both

1. (Nietzsche) *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, edited by Colli and Montinari, Berlin, 1967ff., III 3, p. 172.

philosophy and politics is meaningless—exists. Like all good herd members, the philosophers claim to know—know, not merely believe!—that it exists, although they, unlike unphilosophic herd members, believe that they lack an adequate grasp of it (cf. *Republic*, 505a–511d). Like good citizens, they see acquisition of this knowledge both as their most pressing practical need and the main object of their theoretical inquiry. Unlike Aristotle, Rousseau or Bloom, philosophers do not distinguish between theory and practice, between theoretical (philosophic) and practical (moral-political) virtue. Their main practical concern is also their main theoretical concern. Their thought never transcends the original moral-political orientation of the cave in which their birth (nature) roots them.

Scientists or sophists, not philosophers (p. 256), consider themselves liberal, liberated from their “cave,” beyond good and evil. Like all unphilosophic herd members, they believe they know what truly is good for themselves; philosophers are permeated by the sting of the awareness that they do not. Thus the main question for philosophers is whether the good life is philosophy (questioning the notion of goodness dominant in one’s cave) or unquestioning loyalty: philosophy or politics? This is the never settled question for philosophers. Philosophers are in an untenable psychological tension between their need for unquestioning loyalty (which their ignorance does not permit them to really discredit) and their need to seriously question that loyalty. However misguided, Heidegger’s *Rektorsrede* reflects the only serious attempt in our century to recover awareness of philosophy’s necessarily political rootedness. If Bloom really were interested in being philosophic, he would have taken the *Rektorsrede* much more seriously (p. 311).

Like Socrates, Lincoln, or Jaffa, philosophers must experience that depth of loyalty to their people. They cannot, like Bloom, Machiavelli, or Aristotle consider “it essential not to make the pursuit of truth dependent on what is politically relevant” (p. 283). For what is most relevant politically is precisely what is most relevant philosophically—the need to know “the only real common good” (p. 381). It is therefore not sufficient philosophically to declare “I hold there is no sin but ignorance” (p. 292), unless the man asserting it also has, like Lincoln or Jaffa, an unquestioning (and therefore “ignorant”) rootedness in what his herd holds to be good and right. Bloom is not alive to this, the necessary, if not sufficient, condition for philosophy. Consequently his philosophy really is Laputan science, floating on empty air (pp. 293–97). Philosophic ignorance of the true common good precludes Laputan confidence in the superiority of Bloom’s philosopher-kings to ordinary herd members. (Indeed it precludes my characterization of political men as mere herd members!)

Weber’s distinction between facts and values is philosophic insofar as it implies that *the* decisive alternative is philosophy or politics, reason or revelation; not insofar as it legitimates a meaningless science of “facts” (pp. 194–98). But Weber, like Bloom or myself, was basically a scientist, not a philosopher. Still he realized that the choice between ultimate values (philosophy or

politics) is far more crucial morally than science, a trivial nihilist business. He did not, like Bloom, hurl philosophy into this emptiness (by elevating it above politics).

Genuine philosophy is a risky business, a two-edged sword directed against politics in the name of philosophy ("I hold there is no sin but ignorance.") but also against philosophy in the name of politics ("McCarthyism—my country, right or wrong!"). Philosophers remain true to their political roots while seriously questioning their worth, a difficult, necessarily esoteric enterprise.

Bloom wrongly believes that Thrasymachus "sees the truth about Socrates" (p. 283) when he "sees that Socrates does not respect the city." Insofar as he is philosophic, Socrates both respects and does not respect the city—but the respect, the faith in the primacy of the main moral-political concern, is primary for philosophy. Only scientists such as Bloom or Thrasymachus can simply not respect the city. The consistent elaboration of this subordination of politics to "philosophy" is clearest not in Bloom's book or Aristotle's *Metaphysics* but in Nietzsche's *Joyful Science* or *Beyond Good and Evil*. Without daring to realize it, Bloom is closer to Nietzsche or Aschenbach than to Socrates.

There is in Bloom's pedagogy much of that scientific tyranny satirized by Aristophanes and Swift which liberates men from the actual politics of their herd and, therefore, from philosophy, in favor of the apolitical "community" of philosopher-kings, the only real community for Bloom (cf. Hippias in Plato's *Protagoras* 337c–d).

I doubt that there is anything like an "American Mind" except in college catalogues and other propaganda. The notion that it is closing or closed springs from Bloom's unphilosophic prejudice that "society is ministerial to the university." Thus America's refusal to enslave itself to Bloom's university is said to close its mind. Bloom's book should be called *The Closing of the Philosophic Mind* or *Beyond Good and Evil* or more accurately, *Heart of Darkness* or, paraphrasing Bloom on Swift: *How Scientists Exploit The Nonscientists So As To Live Their Version Of The Contemplative Life* (pp. 295–96).

Following Nietzsche, Weber realized that science, knowledge of reality, means nihilism. Unlike Nietzsche, but true to Schopenhauer, Nietzsche's teacher, Weber despaired of overpowering reality's nihilism: the heart of existence, including all willing, is nothing. Nietzsche saw that the herd instinct inspiring the faith that moral-political cares, the concern with the good, are primary also inspires the illusion of living in a coherent, intelligible world in which those cares are at home (*Joyful Science*, I, 354). Deprived of this comforting myth, men (and beasts) would realize that life is a chaos of empty experiences, impressions as Hume called them. As "Europe's first perfect nihilist" Nietzsche knew that science was nihilist, revealing a world consisting of nothing but interpretations, hypotheses, points of view, methods of experimenting, or to speak bluntly as recommended by Bloom (p. 238), nothing but prejudices, bigotries, superstitions (p. 253).

No man can avoid nihilism or be less nihilist than another. Everything,

particularly all moral-political passions ("values"). is nothing but empty impressions. Thus Céline is not, as Bloom (p. 239) supposes, more authentically nihilist than Mann or Camus. Céline's futile effort to be something, to transcend nihilism, is no more realistic than Aschenbach's—or, for that matter, than Socrates' or Lincoln's or anyone else's. Dostoyevski's underground man rightly observes that nobody knowledgeable about himself and his world can be or become anything—not even an insect: even to be lazy would require an impossible creation *ex nihilo*! To be sure, Bloom (or the victory of Russia over America) might disrupt the dreams of liberal democratic students whose bigotries tend to be soft and permissive with the murderous (nazi-communist) nightmares of a Céline or of Nietzsche's pale criminal (p. 151).

When attacked for despising those who experience nihilism as joyous liberation, I said that I rejected this prejudice, but I despised only men who believe their views of anything are more than bigotry or superstition. This seems to me the scientific attitude, the experience that all knowledge is bigotry or prejudice including of course, the assertion that all knowledge is bigotry.

This scientific and therefore essentially bigoted awareness made Nietzsche and Weber see that "the single fundamental issue is the relation between reason or science and the human good" (p. 195). It is why in Nietzsche "the joy of liberation" that one finds in "big babies" like Marx (p. 218) "has turned into terror" — Nietzsche replaces easygoing or self-satisfied atheism with agonized atheism, suffering its human consequences." Rather than suffer those consequences he would have preferred to be a university professor but, as he wrote Burckhardt (January 6, 1889), he could not push his private egoism that far. His courage compelled him to realize that he, like all life, was a god whose creation was in reality nothing created out of nothing! He would have been far happier as a university professor cowardly clinging to the illusion of membership in the "true community that is exemplary for all other communities."

Instead his courage doomed him to confront life's only serious struggle: the war between reason or science and passion. Reason (insight into reality's nihilism) is repellent to passion unless passion is destroyed or emasculated by science (no more chaos to give birth to dancing stars). All passions not so emasculated (depoliticized) remain teleological, striving to obtain some good or avoid some evil. Consequently all passions are irrational, subsisting on faith in common sense's teleological world of goods to pursue and selves to pursue them.

When genuine science, liberal education, forces abandonment of this faith, the wrath and frustration of the passions is directed against reality itself. Like liberalism (their external political reflection) the rabid, because enlightened, passions now demand their "rights." This demand becomes more strident, more communist or nazi, the more its inanity is realized. No powerful desire can tolerate science or genuinely liberal, liberating education, unless it is domesticated, that is, degraded into uplifting propaganda. Aschenbach's refusal to

domesticate science leaves him powerless against the insane, destructive fury of "Dionysius." The same courage is responsible for Nietzsche's resolve to embrace an insane apotheosis rather than become a university professor "whose career has been an unusually happy one" and who therefore experiences "no need to prove the importance of education" (p. 22).

Bloom's celebration of the university and science (of science, and not, as he supposes, of philosophy!) is accurately evaluated in his quotation from Weber's *Science as a Vocation*: "Finally, although a naive optimism may have celebrated science . . . as the path to happiness, I believe I can leave this entire question aside in light of the annihilating critique which Nietzsche has made of 'the last men' who 'have discovered happiness'. Who, then, still believes in this with the exception of a few big babies in university chairs or in editorial offices?" (p. 194)

As I remarked earlier, Bloom seems most alive and lively at his most political, indignantly censuring democratic-egalitarian threats to the university inspired by his philosopher-kings. This indignation shows that he took Plato's *Republic* too seriously because he did not take its ignorance of the good seriously enough. Thus he transformed its philosophy, its wavering between political repression and philosophic freedom, into the unmitigated terror responsible for Aschenbach's "cries of the damned plunging into nothingness."

In agreement with Bloom, the present editors of the Strauss-Cropsey *History of Political Philosophy* rejected Jaffa's request that Heidegger and Burke be balanced by Churchill and Lincoln. Prevented by their scientific orientation from being as philosophic as Jaffa, they did not want to sully a history of "philosophy" with mere statesmen. Had they had the courage of their real convictions, their editorial policy would be that demanded at the end of Hume's *Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*: eliminate (actually Hume advocates burning) all nonscientific (that is philosophic-political) books. Begin with Hobbes and Nietzsche with perhaps a bow to Aristotle for his opposition to Socrates' universal good. Strauss too would be purged (as he is from Bloom's book with one minor exception) since he obviously sided with philosophy and the ancients insofar as they were philosophic (p. 289).

The result of these purges would be scientific progress over philosophic superstition or, more accurately "progress" to the realization that scientific enlightenment means substituting one bigotry for another; there is no nonarbitrary reason for anything. Bloom disagrees, but his disagreement is vitiated by his confusion of scientists with philosophers as in the following statement: "We have to have reasons for what we do. It is a sign of our humanity and our possibility of community . . . There may be some people who don't feel they have to make a case for themselves, but they must be either tramps or philosophers" (p. 238). The philosopher's essentially moral-political rootedness compels him to seek knowledge of the true good which alone could justify his enterprise.

A similar error makes Bloom overemphasize Plato's opposition to Homer,

the creator of Achilles, that personification of the spirit of vengeance, moral indignation, which Nietzsche rightly finds at the heart of all politics and, therefore, of all philosophy (*Will to Power*, 765; *Zarathustra*, II:7–8). Anger or indignation, the spirit of revenge, like philosophy, arise from the herd-instinct faith that one has or needs goods without which life becomes unlivable (consider Psalm 137). Hatred (Bloom's reaction to those apostate intellectuals of the late sixties) is the natural reaction to whoever threatens those goods. Nietzsche's superman is characterized by redemption from this spirit of revenge or hatred. Nietzsche and Rousseau, not Socrates and Plato, want this redemption from the heart of politics. Without the courage to see it, Bloom has written a more Nietzschean than Platonic Book. *The book on education for Bloom* is not the *Republic*, as he insists (p. 381), but *Beyond Good and Evil* or *Death in Venice!*

Reflecting on these problems, I was reminded of Conrad's reply (December 14, 1897) to Cunninghame-Graham's suggestion that Singleton, the simple, upright seaman of the *Nigger of the Narcissus*, be better educated: "You say 'Singleton with an education' Everything is possible. However I think Singleton with an education is impossible. Would you seriously, of malice prepense, cultivate in that unconscious man the power to think? Then he would become conscious—and much smaller—and very unhappy. Now he is simple and great . . . Would you seriously wish to tell such a man 'Know thyself! Understand that you are nothing, less than a shadow, more insignificant than a drop of water in the ocean, more fleeting than the illusion of a dream?' Would you?"