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The Socratic Philosopher and the American Individual

Today, Allan Bloom's unlikely 1987 best-seller *The Closing of the American Mind* is in some ways truer and more moving than ever. I have just taught the book in a class (one that began by reading Tocqueville) filled mostly with very smart yet still over-achieving Evangelical students. They eagerly embraced the book as evidence of the challenge of our time—and of their own superiority. They were convinced, even before they had read a word of Bloom, that *the* pernicious intellectual dogma in our country is *relativism*. Many of them had been exposed to various Evangelical writers who oppose the absolutism of the biblical worldview to the relativism of the secular worldview. For my students, Bloom's book was above all an eloquent and insightful reminder of what's wrong with relativism.

Relativism dissolves the distinctions between true and false, right and wrong, and good and evil; it drains our opinions of moral significance and life itself of moral drama. By denying the reality of duties human beings share in common as friends, lovers, spouses, parents, children, citizens, and creatures, it isolates us from one another, turning friendship into "networking" and erotic or romantic love into little more than mechanical rutting with strangers. My well-raised students are especially

concerned, of course, with the decline of the family. They readily agreed with Bloom that therapeutic platitudes and the almost hopelessly underdetermined use of words like "commitment" and "relationship" to describe loving bonds with particular persons barely mask the disorienting loneliness of our increasingly individualistic time.

Moral relativism, my students also agreed, causes young people to obsess over the image of "a perfect body...and pursue it incessantly," because it deprives them of "literary guidance" from ideal images of perfect souls.¹ Among the most pernicious features of relativism is that it turns students away from seeking guidance from any book that takes the soul seriously. What relativism does to the Bible it also does to Plato and Shakespeare and Tocqueville; all are reduced to illustrative episodes in the world's cruel, murderous, repressive, racist, chauvinistic, and altogether irrational past (26). Largely because of their Christian faith (as Tocqueville predicted), my students have no difficulty seeing the truth in Plato's and Tocqueville's friendly criticisms of the materialistic and narcissistic excesses that characterize their democratic

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country. They believe, in fact, that their religious beliefs—and their families, and their books—have made them *better* than most Americans. *My* mind is not closed; *my* soul remains full of longing. Their proud intellectual openness, they understand from Tocqueville, depends upon their dogmatic deference to an intellectual and moral authority.

Not one of my students criticized Tocqueville's view that some dogma is required to think and act well, and so they were predisposed to agree with Bloom that they need great books in order to be free. But they did not notice that Bloom is only appalled by the dogmatism of relativism, not its immorality (239). Nor did they notice that his objection to "dogmatic atheism" is that it ends in the conclusion "that religion is at the source of everything" (213–14), whereas Bloom's own allegedly undogmatic atheism produces the conclusion that religion is the source of nothing essential or true. Every religious thinker is wrong or superficial on "what the deepest human experience is." On this point, Bloom opposes himself with "antitheological ire" not only to Max Weber and Friedrich Nietzsche, but also to those like the medieval Scholastics, Jacques Maritain, and T. S. Eliot, who produced seductive but repressive phantoms of philosophy through false reconciliations of faith and reason (264, 292). Bloom's anger is directed against those who would use religion to relativize the superiority of the way of life devoted to reason, to deny either reason's charm or reason's power.

Because the best of my students, justly awed by minds and hearts greater than their own, have trouble believing that Plato and Tocqueville aren't always right, they too readily reached the same conclusion about Bloom. Any author who quotes Plato and Tocqueville and many other great authors with such authority—and who rein-

forces their social conservatism with such radical criticisms of American individualism mixed with praise for the moral depth that comes with genuine belief in the truth of the biblical drama (60)—*must* be right. So my students had trouble noticing that Bloom appears to deny the very existence, today, of the human soul as they—or as anyone with both a mind and a human heart—understand it. They didn't see, to say the least, Bloom's philosophical challenge to their own freedom and dignity.

My students had to be reminded to look for differences between Bloom and Tocqueville and between Bloom and the Bible. Nobody complained that Bloom says nothing good about Christianity, including the Christian view of the equality of all human beings under a personal God. So my job in class was—and for the rest of this article is—to highlight both the sources of Bloom's seductive charm and the brakes Bloom himself placed on that charm. His presentations of the isolated American individual and the liberated Socratic philosopher are instructive exaggerations or distortions. The perfect individual and the perfect philosopher are both fascinating and repulsive, but in truth, neither corresponds completely to any real human being.

Let me begin by showing how extreme are Bloom's claims about the emergence of the perfectly isolated or amoral individual in our time. He writes that "the spirit of...[individual] choice must *inevitably* penetrate into all the details of life" (113, emphasis added). That is because "country, religion, ideas of civilization, *all* the sentimental and historical forces that stood between cosmic infinity and the individual, providing some notion of a *place* within the whole, have been *rationalized* and have lost their compelling force" (85, emphasis added). The family, for example, "has proved unable to maintain *any* content of

its own” (57, emphasis added). Political life has also disappeared. We no longer experience ourselves as citizens and statesmen; the political community has been replaced by “the administrative state” (85). As far as Bloom can see, there are no longer any real religious Americans worth mentioning, and “the most striking thing” about our sophisticated young people is “that sexual passion no longer includes the illusion of eternity” (106). Unable to draw upon imaginative illusions connected with love, country, family, God, or any sense of place, their music “has *one appeal only*, a barbaric appeal, to sexual desire—not love, not *eros*, but sexual desire undeveloped and untutored” (73, emphasis added). (It is worth noting that none of my students agreed with Bloom’s reductionistic account of rock music, even those who were convinced by the rest of his social and cultural analysis.)

Because our best or at least our brightest young people experience themselves as nothing but unerotic and even genderless (but not desexed) free individuals, they are “spiritually unclad, unconnected, isolated, with *no* inherited or unconditional connection to anything or anyone” (87, emphasis added). They have been completely uprooted and dropped off no place in particular, and they don’t care. They are alone, but they aren’t particularly lonely.

How have all human attachments and ideals been “rationalized” or emptied of imaginative or erotic content? Bloom claims that “America is actually *nothing* but a great stage on which theories have been played” (92, emphasis added). Where did those theories come from? Ours is “a regime founded by philosophers and their students” (97). Our philosophic founding was part of the Enlightenment’s “daring enterprise...to reconstitute political and intellectual life *totally* under the supervision of philosophy and science.” And our regime—“liberal democracy”—is “*entirely*

[the] product” of that project, which means American life has become completely supervised by philosophy and science (259, emphasis added). Because the philosophers have so thoroughly reconstituted us, it has proven impossible for us to recover personal or particular human attachments, any sense of social place or purpose (109). God, country, family, and friendship: all seem gone for good.

That means that “[o]ur story *is* the majestic and triumphant march of the principles of freedom and equality,” and only those theoretical principles—which our founders successfully imposed upon our lives—are capable of “giving meaning to all we have done and are doing.” Anything else that might happen is a meaningless accident, but “there are *almost no* [American] accidents” (97, emphasis added). The American people have been reduced over time to nothing but the principled products of the philosophers. From a moral or social or erotic or imaginative perspective, the philosophers have reduced us to nothing at all.

Bloom seems to agree with the anti-Enlightenment philosopher Nietzsche, at least on the facts: egalitarian rationalism—which employs relativism, or “nihilism American style” (139) to discredit the “creative” efforts of its opponents—has produced for Americans a “daily life” that is “the civilized reanimalization of man” (143). It turns out that “the great liberation” of American theoretical Lockeanism has produced Nietzsche’s “Last Men,” whose “lack of passion, of hope, of despair, of the twinning of love and death is incomprehensible” to a real man—a lover learning to die, like Bloom (123). For the Americans, God—meaning any kind of idealism or openness to eternity, or longing to transcend or overcome oneself—is dead. Our world is “unadorned by imagination and devoid of ideals” (134). We have solved the problems of

God, love, and death by surrendering the words that would enable us to speak about such things—and by surrendering the longings that made them problems to begin with. We are “on the way to putting death to death” (230) by learning how not to be made uncomfortable by it.

The philosophers have, in a way, *made* us rational animals by depriving us of everything—such as love, or anger—that would stand in the way of our being ruled by reason alone. The philosophers turn out to be the source of the relativism that deprives us of the moral certainty which might sustain the anger required to fend off the final stages of rationalization (327). What is left of our anger is directed against the unreasonableness of relativism’s opponents—of those who would privilege some human activities over others according to some discredited standard. Our anger is directed against anyone who would criticize the flatness of our souls (130); it is anger in the service of a world without either anger or love.

The world of Bloom’s sophisticated American individuals is perhaps the last stage in the Enlightenment project of producing a world characterized by “easygoing or self-satisfied atheism” (196). The last formidable opponent of that project was Nietzsche who, in the name of “intellectual honesty,” opposed “agonized atheism” to the atheism of indifference. We have, Nietzsche hoped, an ineradicable “[l]onging to believe,” and the deepest or most truthful and profound human experience is the “intransigent refusal to satisfy that longing” (196). Surely, Nietzsche hoped, we cannot live happily or complacently with what we really know about our

momentary existence between two abysses, and so we have within us the power to will a noble world into being in spite of that truth. Nietzsche’s teaching that we must make war both in light of and against what we really know had many horrible consequences—from the fascism of the 1930s to the cultural revolutions of the 1960s. But every indignant outburst against Enlightenment rationalism failed to produce an enduring alternative to it. The anger of the 1960s was, in fact, merely destructive, as was the anger of fascism. Left without any

credible alternative to Enlightenment rationalism, what remains today of “anti-bourgeois ire” is nothing but “the opiate of the Last Man” (78).

For Bloom, the historical project of the philosophers seems to have either altered human nature or revealed that what we once knew as

the human soul wasn’t natural at all. We live in a world without anguish—with no sense of the abyss, or even of tragedy—and so, to repeat, without love and death. We also live in a world where human dignity has no content. It is still the case that “[i]n general, everyone wants to be scientific and at the same time to respect the dignity of man” (193), but we have no evidence either from science or what we can see with our own eyes in daily life that we deserve such respect. The claim by people who are, at best, competent specialists for the dignity of their petty and conformist but allegedly self-created “lifeplans” is yet another pathetic opiate for the Last Man. “The most outrageous pretension of the students [of the 1960s],” Bloom observes, “was that their commitments were their autonomous creations” (334).



Bloom at podium with trademark cigar.

So Bloom makes it very clear why people have directed their anger against philosophy. Its “rational account of the whole, or of nature” (264) denies all significance to what people most love—themselves, their children, and their country. It denies what individuals most demand, significance for their particular lives (275). “The enmity between science and mankind at large,” Bloom explains, “is therefore not an accident” (278). It is love and anger, more than “stupidity,” that closes people to scientific or philosophic truth. Nature, in fact, is equally indifferent to the fate of each particular individual (273); there is even no natural distinction between particular leaves on a tree and particular human beings (277). With their rational insight into the truth about nature, the philosophers have always “seen through” all the hopes of individual human beings (290). According to Bloom, philosophy is “learning how to die,” the “intransigent facing of death,” the full encounter with “the truth about death” (275, 285). The philosopher “alone mixes the reality of death...into every thought and deed” (282). The philosopher alone never forgets that the particular individual with his hopes and cares is a meaningless, ephemeral accident, inessential to a rational or true account of nature.

For Bloom, the authentic experience of the philosopher is somehow a combination of the deepest self-knowledge and the deepest self-forgetting. The truth is that “man is the particular being that can know the eternal, the temporal being that is aware of eternity.” What the philosopher, the rational man, knows above all is that he—the particular being—is not eternal. Yet he is also “the end for which all irrational things exist” (292). Eternity exists, apparently, so that the temporal being can compare himself with it and so know it, and himself, for what it, and he, is. Knowing the distinction between eternal necessity and temporal

contingency is “what is uniquely human, the very definition of man” (280). Philosophy so understood is what gives man his true “dignity” (273). But that dignity comes only to philosophers, and only through “participating in essential being” and “forgetting their accidental lives” (380). The philosopher both never forgets his own death and lives so playfully or self-forgetfully that Bloom also describes the philosophical life as “eternal childhood” (245).

From this view, philosophers have dignity only insofar as they can understand themselves wholly as minds, but if they were only minds they would not be, essentially, beings who die. “The philosopher,” Bloom claims at one point, “always thinks and acts as though he were immortal, while always being fully aware that he is mortal” (290). But how is that possible? The philosopher certainly knows that his mind without his body is nothing, and he is never foolish about that fact. He does what he can “to stay alive as long as possible”; the risk of his life for immortal glory or anything else immortal almost always seems stupid to him (290). Unlike Achilles or Saint Thomas More, he does not really act as if he were immortal, because he never forgets that all that is worthwhile to him comes to an end when his body dies. Dead men don’t philosophize. To his credit, Bloom does *not* portray Socrates as a martyr for the truth.

The philosopher manages both to assert radically and to deny radically the cosmic significance of his particular existence. Bloom, somewhat inconsistently, presents for our admiration the dignified “*individual example*” of Socrates (382, emphasis in text). All other gods and heroes have fallen before his example. Our world is evidence that the anger of Achilles and his successors has been defeated by the calculation of Socrates and his successors (285). The victory of the philosophers—real, particular, yet rational beings, not some impersonal historical pro-

cess—over human anger and love, over human dignity and community, and over God himself, is meant to be the most astonishing feature of *The Closing of the American Mind*.

According to Bloom, the authentic philosopher devalues or relativizes every way of life but his own. His purposes are not his family's or his country's purposes; they are, in fact, "entirely different" (290). The truthful, rational account of the whole shared only by philosophers is the foundation of the only real human community, the only real friendship, the only true common good. The existence of the community of the philosophers should be "exemplary for all other communities" (382). Bloom presents this "radical teaching" as the "one appropriate for our radical time." The only thing that has turned out to be irreducible, incapable of being "seen through" by reason, is the "intense pleasure" (275) that accompanies theoretical insight (245). The truth is that, without this pleasure, living in light of the truth "would be intolerable" (275).

Without the continuing possibility of the *pleasure* of insight, philosophy would ironically have succeeded in relativizing even itself; *all* human lives, in light of the truth, would then become equally intolerable. That is why Nietzsche's identification of insight with miserable anguish is the source of today's relativism run amok. Eros, it turns out, has been devalued or one-dimensionalized through reason's complete separation of the temporal or biological being from all illusions or hopes about eternity. For Bloom, the philosopher Rousseau seems to have been right that the erotic imagination has always depended on "life-creating and -enhancing illusions" (305). Eros necessarily fades when people in general become aware—with the philosophers—that their illusions about eternity are merely illusions. From this point of view, our rock music as described by Bloom

is both the least erotic and the most rational music of all time.

In spite of all this, according to Bloom, we can still have the genuine hope that our pursuit of *self-knowledge* can lead us to an encounter with eternity that is both life-sustaining and not illusory. Bloom's message to our students is not to be patriotic or to have a family or even to cultivate moral virtue or character. It is instead something like this: Make your eros less lame by recognizing that, contrary to Freud's teaching, you are not merely pursuing sexual satisfaction but instead pursuing knowledge of yourselves (137). The university, through the use of the great books, should aim to be less about easygoing sex and more about the erotic ascent from sex to the truth about all things described by Plato. "Plato was indeed the philosopher for lovers," because he thought that sex and love pointed to something real (305), while at the same time attributing very little significance to ordinary marriage and family life.

But it is not clear to me that Bloom's final word is that philosophy is more erotic—because it is more genuinely social and self-conscious—than, say, the love between husband and wife. Philosophic friendship is surely based on a shared perception of the truth, but that shared truth seems less erotic or *personal* than the shared knowledge that accompanies intensely intimate sexual or romantic or conjugal love. The truth philosophers share in common is through conversation, and the truth shared, as the conversation goes on, becomes increasingly impersonal. It is less and less about knowing the other person, and more about the insignificance of persons. So the relationship seems to become less and less personal, less erotic, and less about self-consciousness than a kind of self-negation or "learning how to die."

"Socrates," Bloom claims, "may have had an ordinary erotic life...but his larger

awareness forbade him the exciting illusions of a couple.”²² And as Thomas Pangle explains, Bloom’s analysis culminates, in Socrates’ case, in a “trans-erotic solitariness that rises above any and all friendship.”²³ The “perhaps most important” dimension of Socrates’ being, Bloom writes, “is that lonely speculator who cuts himself off from all others in order to speculate” (*LF*, 524). Socrates’ “lonely contemplation...proves...he is essentially a solitary who can derive satisfaction from himself” (*LF*, 537).

In the final analysis, the philosopher transcends the social and personal illusions that make eros possible. Knowledge of eternity—timeless, impersonal necessity—doesn’t seem erotic at all. The opinion that philosophy is above all erotic seems itself to be a life-enhancing illusion, owing as much, for Bloom, to Rousseau as to Plato. The trans-erotic philosophic combination of intense pleasure and personal isolation is incomprehensible to those who have not experienced it. It is not about the “twinship” of love and death, but about how death or learning how to die gradually triumphs over love. Thanatos in the end vanquishes eros. That is why Bloom says that philosophy properly understood cannot and does not claim to benefit human beings, insofar as they are not philosophers (274).

The most authentic claim of the philosophers—the claim of Socrates—doesn’t necessarily merit our anger. Socrates cannot help knowing what he thinks he knows, and he never claimed to educate human beings; the goal of his quite peculiar way of life was never the transformation of ordinary lives in light of the truth. His view that ordinary or unexamined lives are not worth living necessarily remains “idiosyncratic” (*LF*, 312). The Enlightenment’s naïve effort to make that view the foundation of “liberal democracy” and of the modern, liberated

university, Bloom claims, would have been regarded by Socrates as an error. The Enlightenment is the mistaken attempt to universalize Socrates’ ultimately solitary and quite questionable personal experience.

Bloom shows us the perverse result of that error. The philosopher as he describes him is in many respects eerily similar to the flat-souled American individual that he also describes. That is because, in Bloom’s eyes, today’s individual was the creation of the philosophers. Both experience themselves as “essentially a solitary,” and neither is social enough in the sociobiological sense to do even what is required to keep their species or their country going. Bloom contradicts himself when he says that our bourgeois society understands eros to be both for reproduction and for animalistic satisfaction. The sex of the solitary, as Bloom admits, is better described as a “masturbational fantasy” (75), not oriented toward reproduction at all. Bloom did not see what we now easily can: sophisticated individuals, not only in America but throughout the West, have become so unerotic and self-centered that they have pretty much chosen to stop having children. Even the philosophers had always assumed that most human beings would keep having children, and so there would always be new youth to “corrupt.”

So if we open our minds as Bloom would have us do—or perhaps, open our eyes—we can see that it is *not true* that contemporary American individuals are merely civilized animals. They are refusing to do what nature intends them to do, and no other animal is self-conscious enough to do that. And it is *not true* that they are unmoved by death. They want to avoid death so badly that they have refused to generate their natural replacements. Our individuals seem to know as well as the philosophers that existence is basically biological and that

one's death ends all, so they work hard to stay alive as long as possible. But that self-centered work has been very hard on their friends, families, nations, and even their species. Our extreme individualism would raise the specter of our species' disappearance if it were not for the fact that so many non-individualistic peoples remain on our planet, peoples who have not been remade by the philosophers. Individualistic Europe's likely future is not depopulation but Islamization, which probably won't be good either for philosophy or for Enlightenment.

Bloom's analysis of both our individuals and the philosophers achieves its clarity and power only through extreme exaggeration. Being a solitary speculator, he says, was just one aspect of Socrates' complex being, albeit the most important one. Bloom in fact is sometimes ambiguous about whether the philosopher is most essentially oriented toward selfish satisfaction or toward the common good (*LF*, 522). And Bloom clearly doesn't really believe that contemporary individuals have been so rationalized by philosophic supervision that they just don't care that they experience themselves as alone and nowhere in particular. He says that the individual most characteristic of our time is the child of divorced parents. That child may mouth therapeutic platitudes, but these are "a thin veneer over boundless seas of rage, doubt, and fear" (120). The child of divorce may be so angry about his radical isolation that he is not open to philosophical speculation, but clearly his is a soul full of powerful longings that he has not the words to articulate. Perhaps he is incapable of speaking of love, but he can still be moved by it.

The biggest contradiction within *The Closing of the American Mind* is even more obvious. If American young people really are as flat-souled as Bloom sometimes describes, the book would have no point and

no audience. Bloom's writing *presupposes* the existence among his readers of souls with longing. Even if we conclude that he was writing mainly for philosophers or for the potential philosophers of the future, he has shown us clearly enough that philosophers could not emerge from a world too rationalized or too flat. Because Bloom writes, we can know that what he writes is a deliberate distortion.

The irony of the Enlightenment, in Bloom's eyes, is that it has produced a world in which philosophers can live freely and respectably but in which young people are deprived of the erotic imagination that might point in the direction of becoming particular individuals open to the rational or natural truth about the whole. The complete victory of philosophic Enlightenment would be the complete defeat of the possibility of the philosopher. The American individual is similar—but in the decisive sense, of course, not identical—to the Socratic philosopher. He does not orient his life around the truth or the pleasure of insight. But, thank God, we still have no evidence that there really is such a being as either a perfectly isolated individual or a perfectly trans-erotic or solitary philosopher.

Bloom must have known that the main audience for his book would be educated Americans somewhat devoted to their families, their country, and their God—in other words, my students. He also must have known that it is with these Americans that the future of our freedom rests. Relatively unsupervised by the philosophers, these Americans are the ones who resist most resolutely our relativism, and Bloom inspires them both by exaggerating the danger Enlightenment rationalization poses to their souls and by saying nothing particularly attractive about Socrates that would undermine their experiences of faith and dignified personal responsibility.

Bloom has certainly impressed them with the power of the philosophers. But my students, at least, were not moved by Socrates' beauty or goodness. Not one of them is about to drop everything and follow his example; they did not close the book thinking that Socrates was the best of men. Bloom, quite deliberately I think, did not make Socrates look as good as Plato did.

Throughout *The Closing of the American Mind*, Bloom repeatedly mentions the case for revelation without actually making the case. In doing so, he implicitly admits that his own inability to be moved by faith was a limit to his own open-mindedness. What he does show is just how questionable his (and Socrates') lives—lives without God, country, and family—really are. Such lives are childishly disconnected from the animating personal experience of moral responsibility; they may in fact be distorted by the denial not only of personal existence in general, but of one's own existence as a

particular human person; "learning how to die" may finally become a denial of what it means for a human being really to *be*. The versions of atheism we actually see in this book seem either too easygoing and dogmatic or too anguished and dogmatic, and the mean between those extremes might not be atheistic at all. Between the lines—whether or not it was Bloom's intention to put it there—the argument for belief in a personal God Who sees us as we truly are is everywhere.

1. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 67. Further references to this book will be given parenthetically in the text.
2. Allan Bloom, *Love and Friendship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 536. Further references to this book will be given parenthetically in the text with the designation *LF*.
3. Thomas Pangle, "On *Ravelstein*," unpublished manuscript.