Beyond Cheering and Bashing:
New Perspectives on
The Closing of the American Mind

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In Defense of Universal Norms:
Reflections on Allan Bloom's Critics

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My disagreements with Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind are many, ranging from his critique of affirmative action to his misinterpretation of Woody Allen's masterpiece Zelig. Though Bloom's book bothers me, I am bothered even more by the academic community's widespread dismissal of the book, evident, for example, in Profession 88. A major organ of the Modern Language Association, Profession contains in its 1988 edition evaluations of Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind and E. D. Hirsch's Cultural Literacy, not a single contribution defends Bloom. If we are to take seriously the postmodern elevation of the marginal and if programs at recent conventions such as those of the Modern Language Association or the International Association for Philosophy and Literature reflect the regnant position of historicist and poststructuralist theorizing, then the only consequential stance would seem to be to become marginal and speak out on behalf of normal and with that on behalf of Bloom's book.

In doing so, one runs the risk of being perceived as immodest—projecting one's own positions or those of Bloom as universally valid. But first, I'm not convinced that the refrain 'one hears against Bloom—He believes in transcendent truths. I am modest and recognize my finitude—is cogent.1 Modesty is the fact of not drawing attention to one's virtues; so as soon as one points to one's modesty, one is no longer modest. One is allowed to draw attention to one's modesty only when one refrains from doing so. There is, moreover, a hidden arrogance in an age that discards the argumentative figures of thinkers from Plato to Hegel as naive miscalculations or sophists played. In addition, our current inability to solve certain problems need not imply that these problems are in principle unsolvable. Finally, if finitude is our most privileged category, I don't quite understand why finitude is viewed as absolute and not as finite. If everything is finite, then to the statement that everything is finite. If the finitude of the finite is recognized, such that finitude passes over into another, but not, however, another form of the finite (for that would mean a self-contradictory absolutization of the finite), but rather that which is not finite, we are again in the realm of absolutes or of norms.

As soon as one speaks of norms, one also apparently runs the risk of being no longer open. It is said that one should not embrace Western values over others. But if one really wants to overcome the Western view, one would not be open to other cultures (openness, after all, is a Western trait, and there is nothing more Western than the view that West and East are each validly valid). Instead, one would take seriously the predominant Eastern view that East and West cannot both be right. Cultural relativism is a Western view and as such its expansion into other cultures is a form of Western imperialism. To be truly non-Western, one would have to be normative, albeit at times arbitrarily normative, but certainly not relativistic.

Viewing marginality, modesty, and openness somewhat irreligiously, if I believe, consistently, I am suggesting that these categories, when made absolute, suffer dialectical contradictions and cancel themselves. Critics frequently attack Bloom for believing in normative values per se and not a particular set of normative values; yet these same critics measure Bloom's text with normative values of their own, demanding logical coherence and consistency, the fairness of listening to other models, the equality of viewpoints. Though one will want to disagree with many of Bloom's norms, other norms are shared—necessarily—by anyone who enters into dialogue with him; the very terms of dialogue are embedded: fairness, consistency, communicability. And not only by Bloom, these values would be embraced even by the thinker wishing to argue against the validity of rational norms.

These shared values did indeed arise from a variety of contingent historical factors, but their origins in history do not undermine their normative validity. The historical and psychological conditions under which a theory is discovered are to be separated from the logical conditions under which a theory is valid or invalid. The argument that every position is historically conditioned and therefore illusory must itself be historically conditioned and illusory: it is self-canceling.3 If it can be shown that a proposition cannot be refuted without self-contradiction and without also necessarily presupposing the proposition to be refuted, then that proposition is necessarily true. If the statement "All truth is in flux" is true, then this insight into the passage of truth must itself be in flux, such that non-Truth is in flux is in flux" or "At least some truth is not in flux." If all our truths are to be revised, as critics of Bloom suggest, it is only consistent that one revise the theory that all our truths are to be revised. Not only do I think that some truths are not in flux and not in need of revision (they can be deduced a priori by way of the self-cancellation of their negation, that is, they are deduced rationally, they do not derive from nature).4 And not only do I think that Bloom's critics adhere to some truths that are more than mere conventions, I also think that this is a good thing, and that Bloom's insight into the need for recognizing universal norms needs more support. Global problems demand universal solutions. Instead of focusing on universals (as does a great political leader such as Gorbachev),5 many contemporary philosophers and literary theorists are overly busy stressing their particularities and differences.

Critics of Bloom do not hesitate to call him reactionary, even fascist, but fascism is perhaps best understood—at least on its most metaphysical—against the context of antinomadic thinking.6 Though national Socialism is often viewed as an abstract absolute and therefore arises not from an absolute philosophy (there are universal truths) but from a relativistic position that has passed over into power positivism (because there are no universal truths, one subject or group of subjects has the right to assert its irrational truths
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over others). If one relativizes the absolute, one is free to absolutize the relative—and that, not absolute philosophy, is what National Socialism was, an absolutization of the relative, namely power and race, as a result of the undermining of the absolute. This is clearly demonstrated in the major work of National Socialist philosophy, Alfred Rosenberg’s Myth of the Twentieth Century. In this book, which sold over a million copies by 1943, Rosenberg rebukes those systematic thinkers who assert the viability of a priori or absolute truths and base values on logic and the law of noncontradiction. Much like the contemporary postmodernist, Rosenberg mocks the philosophical search for absolute truth: “Like the hopeful thinkers of antiquity, all of today’s practicing philosophers are seriously and eagerly searching for the so-called one, eternal truth. They seek this truth in a purely logical manner by continually making inferences from axioms of the intellect” (681-82). 8 According to Rosenberg, any philosophy that teaches logically deduced transcendent values errs (127). Values are to be created by the individual race or will; they cannot be discovered, nor can they be refuted, by logical analysis. Socrates, who spoke of “the Good” in itself and claimed that virtue was universal, destroyed Greek culture (286); in recognizing only individuals and universals, he failed to understand the significance of race (286). Even German philosophers have been prone to this mistake; Hegel’s well-grounded assertion, “logic is the science of God,” is for Rosenberg “a blow in the face of every genuine Nordic religion, every genuine Germanic...science” (287).

Any claim to universal truth is for Rosenberg by its very nature untenable (125). The philosopher of National Socialism opposes knowledge of race to all universal philosophies: “This knowledge...places us...in the sharpest opposition to all ‘absolute’ and ‘universal’ systems, which, from the standpoint of an alleged humanity, once again desire a unification of all souls in the future” (136). Rosenberg contrasts empty, universal, logical truth with the organic truths of blood and race: “Thereby, however, an entirely different conception of the ‘truth’ is alluded to that is universal, destroyed Greek culture (286); in recognizing only individuals and universals, he failed to understand the significance of race (286). Even German philosophers have been prone to this mistake; Hegel’s well-grounded assertion, “logic is the science of God,” is for Rosenberg “a blow in the face of every genuine Nordic religion, every genuine Germanic...science” (287).

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process of self-reflection, they, too, should be viewed as contingent, as not absolute. That we have moved too far away from what is universal and noncontingent is one of Bloom’s claims, a claim that I am willing to take seriously, especially as the need for universal action on behalf of international peace and on behalf of the environment becomes ever more severe. More reflection on our universal, and not just particular, issues strikes me as a need, not only that, if we wait too long, will no longer exist. Not all normative thinkers ground their norms, and not all thoughts need be normative; neither of the above statements, however, is an argument against the need for coherent norms where norms are necessary."

Notes

4. "Natural" right, a term Bloom inherited from his predecessors, is a misnomer. Cf. Hegel 10311-12.
5. Among other sources, see Goethe’s collection of universal interests over even class interests in his Pschichi, esp. 164-49.
6. According to Danto, the book has been compared to Mein Kampf (36).
7. Schlesinger associates normative thinking, rather than reflection, with the violation of human rights. Even philosophers who argue against relativism, such as Jacobs, often suggest that "the historical record is with the relativist" (76) and thus are unaware of an immense philosophical and historical connection between relativism and National Socialism.
8. The translations of Rosenberg from Ann Blackler and Mark Roche. Vivian Bird’s recent translation of Rosenberg’s Myth is unsatisfactory; moreover, it omits selected passages. The remaining translations are my own.
9. See Hegel 134. For the assertion is well-grounded see Wundt/Brecht’s insightful essay.
10. "Hauchung" is to be believed, not only by other physicians, but Hitler himself shared Rosenberg’s relativism. Hauchung reports Hitler as saying: "There is no truth, neither in a moral nor a scientific sense. The thought of a free and presuppositionless science could only have surfaced in the age of liberalism. It is absurd" (210).
11. For further analysis see Hoth and Vitulano.
12. The Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany avoids his self-canceling structure with its declaration that "the elimination of articles 1 and 20 is inadmissible. See Art. 79, par. 5. The one weakness in the German Constitution’s guarantees of rights is that it nowhere states, even if it is perhaps implied, that Art. 79, par. 3 may not be changed.
13. It is a widespread view in contemporary society that "the notion of democracy cannot be grounded in some ahistorical, transcendent notion of truth." (Giroux 28). My argument—an argument I share with Martin Luther King, Jr., among others—is that without any transcendent or stable concept of truth, democracy cannot guarantee minority rights and so runs the risk of passing over into totalitarianism.
14. Bloom sees the figure of self-cancellation himself on occasion (see, for example, 36, 201, and 214), but most of his norms are asserted, rather than grounded.
15. The resistance movement against Hitler was in part informed by the categories of transcendental idealism. One thinks, for example, of Adam von Trott zu Soli, a member of the Stabstativ circle, whose dissertation of 1932 explored international justice from

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the perspective of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, or Hans Scholl and Kurt Hesse, central figures in the resistance group known as “The White Rose.” The latter was a careful reader of Plato, the latter a consequent Kantian. See Scholl 16 and Goldbrite 50-54.
16. I would recognize three levels of norms. First, some positions, such as the arbitrary advantage of the more powerful, evidenced, for example, in slavery, are categorically wrong; they are self-contradictory (see Roche). The establishment of norms against injustice follows from reason. Second, some norms, though not absolutely valid, are compatible with reason and can be viewed as necessary under specific historical conditions. For example, it is necessary that laws limiting the consumption of wine be introduced in a society that has a restricted supply of usable wine. Third, some norms cannot be deduced from reason or historical conditions; the norms are deontic. It does not matter what the norm is, merely that there is a norm, for example, whether one drives on the right or the left. Either is appropriate, but in a particular culture it must be one or the other. Cf. Hegel 7-54-55.
17. One must distinguish between systematic and material truth, between those positions that are valid a priori and those that change through time. On this distinction see Hesse’s Weltanschauung and Geschichte.
18. Short passages from this essay will also appear in my book Great Books of the Western Poets. Aesthetics and Intellectual Historical Interpretations (Chapel Hill, N.C. and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1993). This material is used here with the gracious permission of the University of North Carolina Press.

Works Cited
