

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

**Edited by  
William K. Buckley  
and  
James Seaton**

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

Mark W. Roche

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 truly marginal and speak out on behalf of norms 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 sophistic ploys. 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 so too 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 wanted to overcome the Western view, one would not be open to other cultures (openness, after all, is a Western trait, and there is

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nothing more Western than the view that West and East are each individually 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; to cite a simple example, the very tenets of dialogue are embraced: fairness, consistency, communicability. And not only by Bloom, these values would be embraced even by the thinker wanting 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 " '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,<sup>3</sup> 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).<sup>4</sup> 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 supporters. Global problems demand universal solutions. Instead of focusing on universals (as does a great political leader such as Gorbachev),<sup>5</sup> 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,<sup>6</sup> but fascism is perhaps best understood—at least on its metalevel—in the context of antinormative thinking.<sup>7</sup> Though national Socialism is often viewed as an absolute, we must recognize that it is an *arbitrary* 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

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 or hunting 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).<sup>8</sup> 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 (285); 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,"<sup>9</sup> 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 for us truth does not mean a *logical* right or wrong, but rather that an *organic* answer be demanded of the question: fruitful or unfruitful, autonomous or constrained?" (690). In another passage he asserts: "That is the other—'truer'—current of genuine (organic) truth-seeking as opposed to the scholastic-logical-mechanical struggle for 'absolute knowledge' " (691). Humanity, dissolved of racial origins and considerations, is a meaningless fiction (22), yet humanity must be countered insofar as the concept dissolves racial identities and leads to valuelessness: "raceless valuelessness" (120). Rosenberg's fear of this raceless universality is softened by his claim that no real communication occurs among races. Rosenberg likens race to Leibniz's monads: "the monad opposite a personality of entirely alien blood again becomes 'windowless' " (694). Having abandoned universal, coherent, and positive categories, Rosenberg absolutizes the negative figures of difference and otherness.

Within academic circles Rosenberg's critique of reason and of universals found great resonance.<sup>10</sup> Ernst Krieck, for example, includes as a recurring theme in his three volume *Racial-political Anthropology* an attack on logic as artificial, abstract, and opposed to intuition. (See esp. 1:38-39; 2:7-10; and 3:11-12.) He speaks disparagingly of the "dogma of reason," which teaches that all human beings—independently of race, nation, and history—have in principle a common

faculty that enables them to reach universally valid insights and norms (2:8; cf. 3:14 and 3:123). Truth derives from character as well as social and historical factors, not the so-called laws of reason (3:125). For Krieck, as for Rosenberg, truth is always culturally relative; "natural" right exists only insofar as we are willing to reinterpret "natural" as racial, rather than rational (2:42).

Franz Böhm's *Anti-Cartesianism* is a thoroughgoing polemic against universals and logic that, much like Rosenberg's own critique, sees Hegel as a traitor to the Germanic spirit: "Not because we can refute Hegel do we come across the reality he deprived us of; on the contrary, because the racial-political reality of our German life is once again present do we everywhere encounter the artificial restraints through which Hegel's universalism separated us from our own origins" (35). In contrast to Hegel, Böhm elevates positions that are "anti-rational, because anti-universal" (43).

The early twentieth-century failure to recognize and ground absolute truths was not restricted to academic philosophy. A judicial corollary to perspectival morality and power positivism is the positive law theory of justice, a theory dominant in the Weimar era. Moreover, the Weimar Constitution, as has been noted by thinkers as diverse as Carl Schmitt and Hermann Broch,<sup>11</sup> lacked any absolute foundation. It was a document dependent on legal positivism and a relativistic, consensus theory of truth. A two-thirds majority in parliament could change not just ordinary legislation but the most fundamental elements of the Constitution; thus minorities were susceptible to majority rule. Still worse, a two-thirds majority could make arbitrary changes, and then conclude that the Constitution could never again be changed.<sup>12</sup> It was not merely Article 48, which allowed for the emergency suspension of civil rights, that gave Hitler a legal map to power; the Enabling Act of 24 March 1933, based on Article 76, the clause that allowed for the Constitution's self-cancellation, guaranteed the lawful passage from Weimar to the Third Reich. Either there are normative values that transcend democratic consensus, or it is illegitimate to protect, constitutionally, any position from possible shifts in consensus. In the face of such a dilemma it should be clear that only a political and constitutional structure based on logically coherent transcendent norms can guarantee individual rights when majority opinion opposes this or when historical changes occur.<sup>13</sup>

We must distinguish between absolutists who make their claims blindly and irrationally and refuse to acknowledge the validity of immanent critique and those who arrive at their stances by exhibiting the self-cancellation of alternative positions.<sup>14</sup> Through the figure of self-cancellation we can apply *a priori* principles to shed light on complex political and judicial issues. In conjunction with the project of German Idealism could be seen increased reflection on the philosophy of right, the creation of a coherent university system, the abolition of torture, arguments against the death penalty, and the development of new freedoms.<sup>15</sup> Within a postmodernist framework, on the other hand, we cannot ground our arguments against injustice; particular interests are no longer subordinate to *a priori* truths, and justice is reduced to historical convention (or law) and personal preference (or power).

It is important to recognize what is normative and what is not,<sup>16</sup> so that truth can be both eternal and dynamic, rigid and flexible.<sup>17</sup> Contingency and flux do exist, but if these categories themselves become absolute, then, by a simple

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 universal, and not just particular, issues strikes me as a need, a need 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.<sup>18</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Hovey 45 and Schlesinger.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Moglen 62.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Schultz 66.

<sup>4</sup>"Natural" right, a term Bloom inherited from his predecessors, is a misnomer. Cf. Hegel 10:311-12.

<sup>5</sup>Among other sources, see Gorbachev's elevation of universal interests over even class interests in his *Perestroika*, esp. 144-49.

<sup>6</sup>According to Dannhauser, the book has been compared to *Mein Kampf* (24).

<sup>7</sup>Schlesinger associates normative thinking, rather than relativism, 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 intimate philosophical and historical connection between relativism and National Socialism.

<sup>8</sup>The translations of Rosenberg stem from Ann Blackler and Mark Roche. Vivian Bird's recent translation of Rosenberg's *Myth* is unreliable; moreover, it omits selected passages. The remaining translations are my own.

<sup>9</sup>See Hegel 5:44. For why the assertion is well-grounded see Wandschneider's insightful essay.

<sup>10</sup>If Rauschnig is to be believed, not only other philosophers, but Hitler himself shared Rosenberg's relativism. Rauschnig 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).

<sup>11</sup>For further analysis see Höhle and Vitzthum.

<sup>12</sup>The Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany avoids this self-canceling structure with its declaration that the elimination of articles 1 and 20 is inadmissible. See Art. 79, par. 3. The one weakness in the German Constitution's guarantee of rights is that it is nowhere stated, even if it is perhaps implied, that Art. 79, par. 3 may not be changed.

<sup>13</sup>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.

<sup>14</sup>Bloom uses the figure of self-cancellation himself on occasion (see, for example, 36, 204, and 214), but most of his norms are asserted, rather than grounded.

<sup>15</sup>The resistance movement against Hitler was in part informed by the categories of transcendental idealism. One thinks, for example, of Adam von Trott zu Solz, a member of the Stauffenberg circle, whose dissertation of 1932 explored international justice from

the perspective of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, or Hans Scholl and Kurt Huber, central figures in the resistance group known as "The White Rose." The former was a careful reader of Plato, the latter a consequent Kantian. See Scholl 16 and Gollwitzer 159-61.

<sup>16</sup>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 water be introduced in a society that has a restricted supply of usable water. Third, some norms cannot be deduced from reason or historical conditions; the norms are decisionistic. It does not matter what the norm is, merely that there be 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 7:34-46.

<sup>17</sup>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 Höhle's *Wahrheit und Geschichte*.

<sup>18</sup>Short passages from this essay will also appear in my book *Gottfried Benn's Static Poetry: Aesthetic and Intellectual-Historical Interpretations* (Chapel Hill, N.C. and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991). This material is used here with the gracious permission of the University of North Carolina Press.

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