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## On Allan Bloom

Michael Zuckert

It is now 20 years since Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* burst on the scene and for a brief moment opened a debate on higher education in America. I say brief for it did not take long for the academic establishment to realize that Bloom's book was dangerous—that he was exposing various pathologies of the modern elite university to the outside world—the one exercise of free speech that the custodians of the university really frowned upon.

In the bad old days, people who wanted to say particularly unwelcome things were legally suppressed in one way or another. In the good new days, they are dealt with in other ways—death by denunciation. So, by my informal and no doubt incomplete count, Bloom was denounced by over 2,476 college presidents and by many other guardians of liberal correctness.

The sound and fury set off by this book was in part a result of the moment at which it appeared, more or less at the height of the culture wars. That led to many mis-readings and misunderstandings of it. So it is a very good thing to look back at it now—20 years later—without the sound and fury that surrounded it back in 1987.

I am personally happy to be part of an effort to reassess *Closing*, for I was a student of Bloom's and he changed my life. He was the most charismatic human being I ever knew. He was the most amazing and effective figure in a classroom, although he lacked most of the standard traits one would think would be needed for this—he stuttered, he chain smoked, he had a nervous energy that did not bespeak that kind of self-possession so admirable in a teacher—so present, for example, in Bloom's teacher, Leo Strauss.

Most importantly, Bloom had a gift for transferring his energy and passion to a room full of students and getting them to feel—somehow—that the books, the thinkers, the ideas he was talking about were simply the most important things—that one could not go on as one would have otherwise been inclined to do.

### Revisiting *Closing*—Again

We have been asked to consider Bloom's *Closing* in the context of our concern with the challenges and supports of a free society. That is, in some sense fitting and proper, for Bloom was, to some extent, concerned with how modern education is dis-serving free society. The problem, as he saw it, was the quality

he called “our virtue,” openness. Openness is, indeed, one of the most highly promoted aims of higher education today.

But to paraphrase William Faulkner, according to Bloom, openness isn't a virtue, it isn't even openness. The real openness is open-mindedness, i.e., openness to considering the truth of new or unfamiliar things. The openness Bloom ironically called a virtue is really a closedness to the truth, for it rests in a dogmatic relativism. It is dogmatic because it is committed in principle and in advance to relativism, that is, to the view that all value claims are equally true—or equally false. This is understood to be not only or not mainly an epistemological claim as much as a moral claim and it is the one moral demand that is not relative.

Bloom thought this kind of closed-minded openness to be a vice

and a threat to free society, because it relativised and weakened the intellectual and moral commitments on which free societies must rest. Thus the Declaration of Independence is denied to be self-evidently true—but not affirmed to be self-evidently false

either. It is somebody's value judgment and it may as well be true that men have no rights as that they have unalienable rights. Bloom's point was that the citizens of a free society must adhere to opinions suited to a free society. Openness robs citizens of those beliefs and thus puts free society in danger.

And yet it is only partially correct to say that Bloom's *Closing* is concerned with the way higher education is dis-serving free society by undermining belief in opinions like those expressed in the Declaration of Independence. In point of fact, Bloom himself goes a goodly way toward undermining belief in the virtues expressed in the Declaration of Independence. Bloom is not much concerned with the requisites for a free society in *Closing of the American Mind*. Rather, he is concerned with the requisites of a proper education, which he understands to be essentially and above all an education to philosophy. Education which is vocational or civic does not qualify as true education. Thus his book is divided into three parts. Part I: Students (i.e., who is being educated), Part II: Nihilism, American Style (i.e., what is being imparted within education), and Part III: The University (i.e., where education is allegedly taking place). Instead of talking about Bloom's *Closing* and the free society, I am going to speak about what he was really concerned with—students.

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This part was very personally Bloom's as opposed to other parts, which were very dependent on Leo Strauss. Strauss would never have gone around asking students about their sex lives, nor would he write about it if he somehow happened to overhear everything that Bloom came to know. This is the part of the book that had the largest impact and more than anything was responsible for its amazing sales.

Bloom's intentions in writing about students are very carefully focused. He tells us that he writes on the topics he does—"the young and their education, from the perspective of a teacher," (19)—not a comprehensive account of

American life but an account of American life as it bears on education. He concludes that the formative experiences students undergo at home, in school, and elsewhere in American society, are not conducive to learning.

Much of his treatment of students was precipitated by a lesson he claims to have learned in the years *before* writing the book: he had believed "that nature is the only thing that counts in education, that the human desire to know is permanent, that all it really needs is the proper nourishment, and that education is merely putting the feast on the table." He learned instead that something more than nature is involved—convention, training of a certain sort, experiences of a certain sort, habituations, cultivations. And he doesn't mean the obvious things like possessing a large vocabulary or foreign language skills.

A case in point of what he really means is his observation that books are much less a part of the lives of students in their growing up years than they used to be. He notices that instead of books, our students have music—rock music. His observation that music takes the place of books is certainly striking. And to the extent that it is true, this kind of music surely provides less of the kinds of nourishment that later readily transfers to the pursuit of the higher learning.

Bloom's treatment of rock music—and of student life more broadly—has been seen by some as motivated either by old-fashioned moralism, or by an odd sort of salaciousness. Neither is quite correct. Bloom is concerned with things like rock music and the sex lives of students because he, unlike other writers on education one usually reads, puts eros at the center of education. His concern about students above all is that their eros, or as he better puts it, their yearnings and longings, are no longer or not so much capturable in the educational enterprise, but instead are finding other, and he believes, lower outlets. Thus his summary judgment on rock music: "it provides premature ecstasy." The true or higher ecstasy, which is to be found in a higher education introduction to philosophy and art, is foreclosed by the premature ecstasy of the sexually charged rock music. Desire, he

argues, is too readily satisfied, does not reach for the heights, does not lend its energy to pursuits like education and therefore settles for much less.

Any education, which is not just training, is a going-up, a passion-driven ascent from what Martin Heidegger calls the sphere of "average-every-dayness" in which one lives on the opinions and beliefs of the society around one. Such an ascent must be driven by discontent and restlessness, and by a positive desire for "completeness," as Bloom puts it. But our students' formative experiences flatten their desires, make their restlessness hori-

zontal rather than vertical, and do not push them from behind or pull them from above towards the spheres open through genuine education.

### On the Transformations of Student Life: Causes

As Bloom sees it, students, and their education, are victims of the spread of liberal Enlightenment ideas, which have come to undermine the structure of relationships that under-girded and are needed to under-gird a healthy society capable of producing educable students. The key note of Bloom's treatment of the *causes* of the changes he is talking about occurs at the head of his discussion of sex. America, he says, is the land shaped by philosophers and philosophies—everything merely natural or given has given way to human action inspired by theory. The ideas that have shaped us are freedom and equality—these are *philosophic* ideas—not ideas that erupt spontaneously in social or political life, and they are ideas that have *remade* our common life.

At the time of his writing, Bloom thought we were facing a culminating moment in the drive of the philosophers' ideas to reshape human life. Now, he thinks, we are entering the "ultimate act" of our drama. Because now freedom and equality invade areas heretofore more or less off limits and more or less unreformed by modern philosophy—the spheres of intimacy, privacy, sex, love, marriage, and family—they are now being reshaped. This is, of course, a significant social phenomenon in its own right. But it is particularly important for Bloom's theme of educability, for these most intimate spheres are where students are made—and not just in the biological sense. This is where our deepest selves are formed. The continued march of the modern philosophic project of remaking all in the name of freedom and equality is about to remake us all in such a way as to make us very unfit for educating, i.e., for achieving the highest human satisfactions of art and philosophy.

These radicalized versions of freedom and equality lead to a situation Bloom ironically concludes is a return to the state of

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nature—a breaking apart of inherited institutions and practices, especially the family. The family has suffered from the dual buffeting of the drive for liberation of sexuality (freedom), which has distorted a drive hitherto supportive of family, and then by the drive for equality, as in the feminist demand that all “patriarchal” structures be overcome.

These facts about their lives—the unleashed eroticism, the withering of relationships, the failure of eros to grow into love—all these and many other things lead Bloom to despair of the future of education and to find students no longer truly educable.

### Assessing Bloom

We must now raise this question: 20 years later, how does this diagnosis look?

First, I wonder if there is such a decline in the quality and educability of students as he says. He sets up as the standard of comparison the students he taught in the 1960’s. Well, I was one of those and I know lots of the others, too, and we were no doubt a sharp, smart, terrific group of people. But I do not think we qualified as “America’s greatest generation,” nor as substantially better or different from other generations of students. In a word, I think he romanticizes the base line group and underestimates those later cohorts of students. We have graduate students at Notre Dame who certainly know more than I knew at that age, who are dedicated and sensitive and skilled and open to all the higher things at least as much as we were.

Second, Bloom is no doubt correct that the sex lives of students are now substantially different from what they were in the ‘50s and early ‘60s, and I do think there is much to decry about this. Nonetheless, I also think Bloom overestimates sublimated eroticism as the core of education. If Bloom were correct, then all the great philosophers and artists would come from the class of the sexually unsatisfied, and I just do not see the evidence for this. What of Aristotle and Hegel, to take two examples of married philosophers of the very highest level.

Third, Bloom also passes over too hastily some of the other threats to education of the sort he is promoting. I would mention just one of these—the lure of technique, of technical and scientific knowledge. Bloom seeks an education that aims for what we might call wisdom. But there are many lures to forms of knowledge less wise, but more potent in the world. These

are important forces pushing away from the kind of education Bloom is promoting, quite independently of the forces of which he explicitly speaks.

Finally, I want to question Bloom’s broader analysis/complaints about the way social institutions like the family are developing. He is certainly correct—there is cause for concern. Institutions which had survived for long periods of human history are under pressure, and the results spill over into public life and onto our educational efforts. Bloom tends to see all the changes as purely negative—as a dissolving which leaves nothing in its place—as a dissolving in which eros, love, all yearning, all connectedness between people are destroyed or at least very severely attenuated.

Yet perhaps we need to see all this in a more positive light—or at least in the light of more positive possibilities. Bloom is surely correct that the twin forces of freedom and equality are pressing hard on these institutions, but might not it be better to say that this generation of young people are not just victims of these forces, but that they have a positive task to reconstitute love and marriage and the rest on the basis of more free and more equal principles. There have been and no doubt will continue to be false starts and false steps, but I do not see young people—my children’s generation—forgetting how to love, no longer caring for children, disinterested in the life of the mind, indifferent to beauty.

Bloom began his section on students by admitting he had been wrong about nature and convention. I am suggesting that he remained wrong—perhaps became more wrong—for I think he has too little faith in nature, is too quick to confuse changes in convention with a loss of nature. We would be foolish to be naïve optimists about family and education—and many other things in our time—but we must also remember that nature is nature. Bloom may be surprised to hear it, but in my opinion, America, its young people, its families, can survive even Bloom’s greatest nemesis—feminism.

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