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John R. Shook

BLOOM, Allan David (1930-92)

Allan Bloom was born on 14 September 1930 in Indianapolis, Indiana. At the age of sixteen he began attending the University of Chicago, where he earned his BA in 1949, his MA in 1953, and his PhD from the Committee of Social Thought in 1954, with a thesis on the political philosophy of Isocrates. Bloom joined the Chicago liberal arts faculty as a lecturer in 1955, and then moved on to Yale University as a professor of political science (1962-3); to

Cornell University as a professor of government (1963-70); and to the University of Toronto as a professor of political science (1970-79). He returned to the University of Chicago in 1979 to become a professor of political philosophy and to teach political philosophy and social theory as a member of the Committee of Social Thought, and remained there until his death. Bloom died on 7 October 1992 in Chicago.

Philosopher, political and social theorist, subject of a novel, guest of presidents and prime ministers, Bloom spent most of his sixty-two years as a relatively obscure academic, known mainly for his translations, most notably those of Rousseau's *Emile* (1979) and Plato's *Republic* (1968), the latter being a literal translation and considered, like Bloom himself, to be somewhat eccentric. But obscurity was not in Bloom's destiny.

Late in life, virtually overnight, he found himself famous. He skyrocketed to international attention, becoming, as he himself bemusedly observed, the academic equivalent of a rock star. He was "picked up by the great hydraulic forces of the country," as his friend Saul Bellow describes it in *Ravelstein*, his *roman à clef* on Bloom, a source of valuable insights into both the man himself and his philosophy.

The vehicle that propelled Bloom from obscurity to the television talk-show circuit was a book, *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), which he wrote at Bellow's urging and hurriedly, apparently in a matter of months, motivated in no small part by his desperate need to pay off the large debts he had accumulated trying to live like an aristocrat on a University of Chicago professor's salary, a lifestyle described in sometimes comic detail in *Ravelstein* (Bellow 2000). Bloom's book, which topped the bestseller lists in both the US and France, generated so much controversy that in the end academics were writing articles about "How Bloom did it" — that is to say, how did he achieve such notoriety with a single work?

"Difficult but popular — a spirited, intelligent, warlike book," to use Bellow's description (Bellow 2000, p. 4), *The Closing of the American Mind* develops most fully ideas that Bloom had sketched out in his lectures and earlier essays, notably the introductions to his translations. *Love and Friendship*, published posthumously, does not supersede but rather complements it. Whereas *The Closing of the American Mind* is about reason (the Enlightenment) and the consequences for Western culture of reason's rise to dominance, particularly in the form of science, *Love and Friendship* is, as the title says, about two of reason's opposites, namely, love and friendship. Accordingly, this last published work of Bloom's can be read as the other half of his general thesis about happiness and the human condition in modern advanced capitalist democracies in general and the United States in particular.

Bloom's main objective in *The Closing of the American Mind* is "to capture modernity in its full complexity and to assess its human costs" (Bellow 2000, p. 14). He pursues this goal by way of analysis of modernity's exemplar, the United States, and views the problematic of modernity through the American window. From this perspective he must perforce discuss America and the American condition. Of particular interest is the condition of democracy in America, especially as he saw it reflected in the beliefs of his undergraduate students (part 1 of the book), in the new language and concepts he felt Americans had adopted to describe themselves and their relationships (part 2), and, finally, in the state of affairs of the contemporary American university (part 3). That the book takes democracy in general and democracy in America in particular as its focus is not always appreciated by its critics, who are quick to seize upon Bloom's critique of higher education, especially its relativism and historicism, intellectual phenomena which — perhaps with the exception of Martha Nussbaum — they rarely if ever link to democracy itself (a connection which Bloom believed

to be of the utmost importance). Perhaps the book's subtitle, *How Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*, is partly to blame for this. The title is at once revealing and deceptively simple. The book is about much more than higher education, though higher education is centrally important to the larger problem it articulates, a problem many of his critics, focused as they are on only the university, fail to see.

Bloom introduces this problem by way of a practical question, a question characteristically his in scope and tone, and one that has preoccupied philosophers both ancient and modern: how can we achieve real happiness and become autonomous? Autonomy, for Bloom, is a necessary and perhaps even a sufficient condition for our being happy. How do you create, especially in the context of modernity, an autonomous human being, morally and intellectually independent, the only kind of human being that can be truly happy? Bloom's work, then, can be viewed as "a plea for authentic liberation" (1987, p. 48), and this central point can be used to help make sense out of the structure of the *Closing of the American Mind*.

The first of the three major parts of the book is "Students." This section can be read as Bloom's attempt to address the question of what an autonomous and happy human being looks like by describing contemporary 1980s young Americans, whom he considered to be neither autonomous nor particularly happy. They are, says Bloom, "homogenized persons" (1987, p. 319) as opposed to persons with truly different goals and motives of action that can be taken seriously, "flat" and "maimed souls" (p. 83) who manifest the individualism and atomism predicted by Tocqueville in his *Democracy in America*. Young Americans, Bloom says, "can be anything they want to be but have no particular reason to be anything in particular" (p. 87).

In the second part of the book, "Nihilism American Style," Bloom tries to show how

Americans have unwittingly adopted a vocabulary (and with it a *Zeitgeist*) from German philosophy, a language which ill suits them, given their empiricist-scientific background and principles. America and Americans, says Bloom, are products of a self-conscious and philosophical project, the Enlightenment. Its general principle is that what is true and good can be discovered through the use of reason, and this general principle informs all modern political regimes founded on freedom and equality, hence on the consent of the governed (1987, p. 158). But through their German connection, brought to them during and after World War II, principally by German émigrés to the faculties and classrooms of America's universities, Americans have unawares adopted a relativist and historicist language. "The new language is that of value relativism and it constitutes a change in our view of things moral and political as great as the one that took place when Christianity replaced Greek and Roman paganism" (p. 141). The "self," "creativity," "culture," "values" – these are terms central in this language, part not of our original Enlightenment vocabulary but of the language of value relativism. The question that has never been raised, says Bloom, is whether this value relativism is harmonious with democracy. He believes it is not.

In the third part of *The Closing of the American Mind*, Bloom addresses the proper role of the university in a democratic society. The university's most important obligation, he argues, is to give students what they need to become autonomous. For Bloom, this means giving them the ability to reflect seriously on the various alternative answers to the most important questions in life. This is an obligation which he feels the American university, suffering from the value relativism which it purveys, is shirking. In so doing, it is putting democracy in America at risk and, given America's superpower status, is possibly putting the world at risk as well.

In the course of his analysis Bloom touches on a great many themes, some of which

deserve particular mention. For Bloom, as for Rousseau, politics is decisive for individual development, setting limits on or creating possibilities for what we can be and do as human beings. In *Shakespeare's Politics* (1981) he writes: "Human virtues and vices can be said to be defined primarily in political terms. Civil society and its laws define what is good and bad, and its education forms the citizens. The character of life is decisively influenced by the character of the regime under which a man lives, and it is the regime that encourages or discourages the growth within it of the various human types. Any change in a way of life presupposes a change in the political, and it is by means of the political that the change must be effected. It is in their living together that men develop their human potential, and it is the political regime which determines the goals and the arrangement of the life in common. (pp. 8-9) ... various nations encourage various virtues in men; one cannot find every kind of man in any particular time and place. Just the difference between paganism and Christianity has an important effect on the kinds of occupations men have." (p. 11)

Concerning virtue and virtue theory, the passage just cited – as well as many others that could also be cited – suggests that Bloom subscribes to some kind of virtue theory. Again, in *Shakespeare's Politics* he writes: "A man is most what he is as a result of what he does; a man is known, not simply by his existence, but by the character of his actions – liberal or greedy, courageous or cowardly, frank or sly, moderate or profligate. Since these qualities produce happiness or misery, they are of enduring interest to human beings ... Passions, feelings, and the whole realm of the psychological are secondary. This is because feelings are properly related to certain kinds of action and to the virtues which control such action." (p. 8)

Bloom, who greatly admires Rousseau, does not appear to subscribe to his view that we are by nature moderate and only go to extremes because our experience in society has upset

the equilibrium upon which our moderation depends. Bloom rather seems to take the older view, going back to Aristotle, which holds that our desires are by nature infinite and that they must be checked by our faculty of will, which, guided by reason, can be used to control our desires for the sake of the good. "Virtue was in this older view understood to be natural and the control exercised by it to be productive of at least one part of happiness," Bloom writes (1993, p. 44). "Throughout the whole tradition, religious and philosophic, man had two concerns, the care of the body and the care of his soul, expressed in the opposition between desire and virtue. In principle he was supposed to long to be all virtue, to break free from the chains of bodily desire." (p. 174)

The moderns, says Bloom, broke with the tradition of thought which held that desire was to be tamed and perfected by virtue. The goal, rather, became to discover one's desires and live by them, an objective reflected in our present-day emphasis on *authenticity*. Our unity and wholeness were not to be found, as the ancients believed, in our overcoming of desire but in our recognizing and acknowledging it. Most importantly, for Hobbes and Locke, we were to recognize our most powerful desire of all – our desire for self-preservation or, alternatively, our fear of death. Upon this basic desire nations could be built and maintained. Thus the moderns cut off the higher aspirations of man and our modern nation-states came to be built, as Leo STRAUSS put it, on low but solid ground. For Bloom, however, the modern grounds of the nation-state are not so solid. From this grounding, selves have grown that live according to the opinions of others.

Closely related to Bloom's virtue theory are his ideas about the soul and human nature. Bloom's use of the term "soul" seems to date him and leads one to expect a more religious and spiritual discussion than he actually provides. But on reading him, it becomes clear that he chooses this term quite carefully. Bloom is trying to understand modernity in all

of its complexity and assess its consequences, and one of the consequences of modernity is our reluctance to talk about the existence of a "soul," using instead the term "self," which, as he points out in the second part of *The Closing*, is the modern substitute for the soul (1987, p. 173).

Bloom's theory of human nature is scattered throughout his works. We all have common needs, both high and low, which must be satisfied if we are to be happy. We are beings who must take our orientation from visions of our possible perfection. We must play with the "fires of utopia" to know what we can be at our highest as opposed to our lowest. We have our souls. Our souls are constituted in part by our reason and our desires, which must be properly balanced if we are to be happy. Our natural disposition or tendency is to go to extremes and we must work to keep ourselves in balance. We are composed of not just one duality but several dualities. We are opposites held together in a tension.

For Bloom, the point of liberal education is to teach us how to be autonomous. Becoming autonomous means, in the first place, recognizing and acknowledging the distinction between nature and convention. "No real teacher," says Bloom, "can doubt that his task is to assist his pupil to fulfill human nature against all the deforming forces of convention and prejudice." (1987, p. 21) Our happiness depends upon our being able to properly balance the conflicting demands of our nature and to reconcile these, in turn, with the obligations with which convention, our society, confronts us. We all want and need to be happy, and freedom or autonomy is one of the major conditions of our really being so. In trying to be free, however, we are faced with a twofold problem, one part having to do with ourselves and the other with the particular society, the set of conventions, culture and political regime into which we are born and that present themselves to us as *the* best ways of thinking and of feeling and of living life. But we can never know whether in fact they are the

best ways (for us) unless we can gain enough distance to examine them critically and then choose for ourselves, perhaps reaffirming them, perhaps not, but nonetheless in the process rendering ourselves autonomous from their original hold over us. The main task of education, particularly a liberal education, the only kind of education that matters for Bloom, is to enable us to achieve autonomy. Education can do this by helping us learn and reflect on the various alternative answers that one can give to the most important questions of life, questions which, as we become more autonomous, we can answer for ourselves or which, if we do not, others will answer for us. American higher education, concerned as it is with specialization, disregards what is in a democracy its most important obligation – to expose students to the major alternatives.

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Robert O. Slater

BLOOMFIELD, Leonard (1887–1949)

Leonard Bloomfield is perhaps the most important figure in American linguistics in the first half of the twentieth century. In one form or another, 'structural linguistics' as it came to be identified with Bloomfield's name, was the dominant view in linguistics as well as anthropology and a number of other fields. Further, the rise of behaviorism in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s in the study of language and mind owe no small debt to Bloomfield's legacy. It was against the backdrop of Bloomfield's influence and that of his students and disciples that some of the characteristic themes of cognitive science and computational models of the mind were developed, even if many of these later ways of studying language and mind owe Bloomfield a debt by way of his explicit defense of the autonomy of the study of language from other disciplines such as anthropology under which it was often subsumed.

Leonard Bloomfield was born on 1 April 1887 in Chicago, Illinois. He was educated at Harvard (BA in 1906), University of Wisconsin, and the University of Chicago (PhD in linguistics in 1909). He was instructor in German at the University of Cincinnati (1909–10) and the University of Illinois (1910–13), and then studied with leading German linguists at the universities of Leipzig and Göttingen (1913–14). He went back to Illinois to be assistant professor of comparative philology and German (1914–21), and then was professor of German and linguistics at Ohio State University (1921–7). He established himself as the pre-

eminent linguist of his day while he was professor of Germanic philology at the University of Chicago from 1927 to 1940. From 1940 until his death, he was Sterling Professor of Linguistics at Yale University, although his work was disrupted by World War II and health problems. Bloomfield died on 13 April 1949 in New Haven, Connecticut.

Bloomfield made contributions to every branch of linguistics, including grammar, morphology, phonology, and phonetics, as well as semantics and descriptive grammar. He also made significant contributions to the study of Native American languages, compiling detailed descriptions of a number of languages that had not received attention from American and European linguists, including a number of languages from Northern Canada. He also inspired a number of other linguists to do the same. His most important work is his 1933 book *Language*, which represented the received view in linguistics for more than thirty years. His other works include a variety of influential articles on the nature of linguistic entities as well as the scientific status and methodology of psychology and linguistics.

Structuralism, in one form or another, had been around for some time in linguistics and elsewhere before Bloomfield. The idea that one should look at the structure of language as a system of differences and similarities was present in Ferdinand de Saussure's famous work at the turn of the century and the same basic idea can be found in a number of other linguists and anthropologists in the opening decades of the twentieth century, such as Franz BOAS and Edward SAPIR. But it was Bloomfield's detailed defense and articulation of the structuralist theory in his most famous book that made the view into the received view about the nature of language and played no small role in its dominance in American academic life. It is not hard to see why Bloomfield's book came to play this role. Not only does Bloomfield give a detailed defense of the structuralist position, he also shows how to apply the method in detail to linguistic phe-

nomena of almost every variety, from the composition of the basic units of a language's sound pattern to the meanings of its sentences and discourses. The work had the effect of synthesizing a good deal of knowledge about particular aspects of language under one, very general view about the nature of language.

Structural linguistics as practiced by Bloomfield and others can be characterized as the study of language via the description of "distinctive classes." The overriding interests of structural linguists was in the classification of the various ways in which the sounds and structures of a language can be combined and form up different classes of pairings. The goal was to capture the distribution of various linguistic forms. Much of the time, this amounted to saying when two forms were the same or different, depending upon which class the expression belonged to.

Bloomfield's announced goal in *Language* was to construct a fully general theory of language, one that applied to all aspects of the phoneme and applying the same techniques to more and more complex structures within language. The nature of the phoneme was much debated by linguists at this time and earlier. Bloomfield took the phoneme to be the smallest element of a language to be analyzed by the linguist. Below that level we find acoustic data that, while of interest for some areas of psychology and physics, does not form a linguistically significant group of phenomena. The theory of distinctive classes, applied to the case of phonemes, resulted in a description of the basic classes of the phonemes of a language together with a list of how these basic elements can be combined with one another. Bloomfield's view was that one could study the other aspects of linguistic structure in much the same way that one studied the sound pattern of language. Therefore, a description of the formation of morphologically complex verbs would take the form of a distributional analysis of which patterns of affixation and suffixation were attested with which verbs,