Public instruction that ignores both our classical patrimony and our religious patrimony may fail to rear up just men and women. Positivist jurisprudence that denies any moral order and any religious sanction for justice may end in a general flouting of all law. We prate of "peace and justice" in a dissolving culture, without apprehending tolerably the words we employ. "Shrieking voices / Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering / Always assail them." These are the voices of the ideologue, the neurotic, and the nihilist, pulling down the old understanding of Justice, "to each his own."

"Justice is a certain rectitude of mind, whereby a man does what he ought to do in the circumstances confronting him." So Thomas Aquinas instructs us. At every college and university, the doctors of the schools ought to inquire of themselves, "Do we impart such rectitude of mind? And if we do not, will there be tolerable private or public order in the twenty-first century?"

The Bloom Phenomenon

Joseph Baldacchino

This may not be the age of fusion—the jury is still out—but it is certainly an age of monumental intellectual confusion. Consider, for example, the uncritical praise for Allan Bloom's book *The Closing of the American Mind* that filled the air a year or so ago. Not atypical were statements to the effect that Bloom's book was a profound contribution to conservative thought, that it was the conservative book of the decade or even the century. With over 750,000 copies in print, there can be no question that the book has been, as a blurb on the paperback edition proclaims, a publishing phenomenon. The book's commercial success has been hailed ecstatically by many on the political and intellectual right. Hardly a day passes even now when a favorable allusion to the book doesn't find its way into the public prints, courtesy of some columnist or commentator usually identified as a conservative. The Bloom book seems to have gone over especially well among those who consider themselves neoconservatives.

Yet if the question is put whether Bloom is himself a conservative in any traditional sense, the answer, based on a careful reading of *The Closing of the American Mind* and other of his writings, would seem to be no. How to explain, then, the euphoric embrace of Bloom's latest book by many conservatives and the popular impression that he is one of their number? I think two explanations are salient. First, the book is rife with material that could not have been intended otherwise than to appeal to those of a traditionalist outlook. Conservatives would be hard-pressed to read Bloom's criticism of rock music, militant feminism, and the '60s counterculture without, if not wholehearted agreement on every particular, at least a high degree of sympathy. The same holds true for his denunciation of the indiscriminate compassion that is all too prevalent in contemporary America and his lamenting the absence of academic rigor or comprehensiveness in our institutions of higher learning. But there is a haphazardness about much that Bloom writes in these areas. When viewed in the light of his insistence elsewhere that the main concern of true philosophy is how the parts fit into "the order of the whole of things," the randomness of his comments raises questions about his seriousness on these matters.

At times Bloom is blatantly contradictory. Conservatives cannot help but nod approvingly at passages such as this one from page 85: "Country, religion, family, 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. America is experienced not as a common project but as a frame within which people are only individuals, where they are left alone." But what Bloom appears to endorse, he in fact disavows, though in ways that may not register with the casual reader.

When one cuts through the book's dense rhetorical fog, the burden of Bloom's position is that love of country is beneath serious philosophers since what differentiates countries is "convention," not "nature" or true reality; that religion is mere "superstition" and wholly inimical to any genuine search for truth; and that aristocratic institutions or customs, which traditionally accorded considerable significance to a person's family and related duties and station, have been exposed by Enlightenment thinkers as inherently "unjust" and, thanks to those thinkers' salutary influence, play little role in contemporary society. As for "ideas of civilization" and "sentimental and historical forces," Bloom dismisses them as largely mythical (i.e., untrue) or arbitrary, hence undeserving of influence on discerning individuals. "The essence of philosophy," he asserts on page

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is the abandonment of all authority in favor of individual human reason.”

There is a second reason for the widespread misinterpretation of Bloom. Like his mentor, Leo Strauss, and other “Straussians,” Bloom dwells heavily on the classical Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle and makes frequent reference in his work to terms and concepts that were central to their thought. The insights of the classical philosophers, Aristotle especially, were incorporated into the body of Christian thought and—it is only in recent centuries by competition from rationalistic Enlightenment notions—exerted a primary influence on Western civilization generally. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that those who still perceive great value in Western tradition, even if the majority no longer does, would tend to view Bloom and like-minded Straussians as intellectual brethren. “Any friend of Plato and Aristotle is a friend of ours,” so to speak.

The trouble is that Bloom, despite superficial appearances, is no friend of classical thought. Granted, he devotes much attention to Plato and Aristotle, but the result of his work is to turn the central thrust of their philosophy on its head. Bloom uses many terms and phrases reminiscent of the Greek thinkers. Like them, for example, he says that man’s highest part is his reason and that the purpose of philosophy is to seek the Good. But the terms take on a new meaning, at Bloom’s hands, that is not faithful to the original.

Thus, for Plato and Aristotle, reason meant reflection on or contemplation of the universal good. To be able to contemplate the good was the highest activity, the crowning achievement, of man. But before man could be ready to philosophize, he first had to embody in his character the virtues of “aristocracy,” by which was meant not titled nobility but the qualitatively best life. To be a philosopher was higher than being an aristocrat, but one could not be the former without simultaneously being the latter as well. It was this preoccupation of the Greek philosophers with the ethical and their sense that the ethical for man has its source in the transcendent that became assimilated to Christianity and helped in large measure to shape the development of Western civilization and culture.

Bloom also describes the life devoted to reason as the highest for man. But the connection between reason and ethical virtue that permeates the thought of Plato and Aristotle is hardly evident, if at all, in Bloom’s. Indeed, Bloom sharply separates intellectual virtue (reason) from moral virtue (ethics) on page 279 of the book, saying: “The philosopher wants to know things as they are. He loves the truth. That is an intellectual virtue. He does not love to tell the truth. That is a moral virtue.” According to Bloom, Plato’s and Aristotle’s espousal of the aristocratic virtues, which have helped shape the ideals of Western man for centuries, is not to be taken seriously. Rather, he says, this view of the good life was put forward for an ulterior motive: to deceive the members of the nobility and upper classes, who cared about noble deeds and what was morally virtuous, into believing falsely that the philosophers were their allies. In this way the philosophers would obtain necessary support and protection.

It was the genius of the Enlightenment thinkers, Bloom writes, to devise a way to flatter the democratic masses into believing that science is their ally because it can cater to the people’s passions. As a consequence, modern philosophers no longer find it necessary to feign support for aristocratic values, with their premium on self-restraint, or to pretend to see any truth in religion, which, he says sweepingly, is mere “superstition.”

Bloom makes it pretty clear that the kind of political regime he prefers is egalitarian democracy as derived from the assumptions of the Enlightenment and the social-contract theorists. The only significant exception to Bloom’s egalitarian preference, it appears, is that professors in the elite universities—i.e., people like himself—should be looked up to as “the repository of the regime’s highest faculty and principle.” That principle, for Bloom, is “reason”; but the term, as Bloom understands it, looks much less like the reason of a Plato or Aristotle with its ethical dimension (Sophia) than the mere ability to calculate, which Aristotle termed “cleverness” (deinotes). What kind of regime Bloom abhors is even clearer than the kind he favors. Not for him a society that pays respects to old families, old traditions, old beliefs, or old ways—what Burke called the “unbought grace of life.” That kind of talk Bloom dismisses as the “special pleading of the reactionaries.”

Bloom seizes upon an epistemological weakness in Plato and Aristotle that is essentially peripheral—their tendency to abstract the universal from the particular, hence reason from action—and magnifies its importance out of all proportion. At the same time he misses or distorts the heart and soul of their teaching, which, as it concerns how men should live, is ethical. Whether this is intentional or not, it is hard to say—the more so since he and other Straussians admit to using deception when it suits their needs. At best, The Closing of the American Mind is a confused book. At worst, it is deliberately subversive, intended to undermine some of the strongest pillars of Western civilization.

In either case, the fact that the Bloom book has been widely praised by people who are popularly regarded as the conservative intellectual elite in this country suggests that something passing strange has occurred over the past decade or two. Has anyone checked the wherabouts of the “Stepford Wives” lately? A recovery of intellectual and cultural substance is sorely needed.