Rethinking Relativism

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In a recent survey of reactions to Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, Bloom's friend and former colleague at Cornell University, Werner Dannhauser, provides us with a catalogue of accusations made against Bloom's book:

> I have been able to identify the sixteen — count 'em — most frequent charges against it. Here they are in no particular order. Bloom has been repeatedly accused of (1) idealism, (2) sexism, (3) racism, (4) elitism, (5) Straussianism, (6) esoteric writing, (7) sloppy writing, (8) absolutism, (9) making scapegoats of students, (10) ignorance of professional philosophy, (11) un-Americanism, (12) failure to understand rock music, (13) pessimism, (14) uncritical advocacy of the Great Books, (15) bad scholarship, and (16) neglect of religion. That's all. (1988, p. 17)

Although it is surely the case that there is *some* truth to *most* of these charges, my own impression is that many of them are unfounded or, like some of Bloom's own points, somewhat of an overstatement. However, my purpose is not to defend Bloom against his critics, but rather to examine one particular aspect of his overall argument, namely, his critique of relativism, and especially of cultural relativism. As I see it, cultural relativism is really an aspect of a much larger problem, which I shall call the problem of fragmentation, that is, the absence of unity or coherence that may occur in an individual life, a society, or in its particular institutions such as religion and education, or in Bloom's case, in a particular kind of educational institution, the university. The existence of a thriving cultural relativism, especially among students, is both a cause of and a sign of a significant problem of fragmentation.

Although Bloom's book has somewhat inexplicably risen to the highest echelons of best-sellerdom, and its notoriety has overshadowed the work of many others writing in a similar vein, it is far from true that his is a lone voice crying in the metaphorical wilderness. To place his effort in its proper historical context, I shall examine the views of other critics of our cultural institutions, who, working quite

independently of Bloom, have written remarkably like-minded critiques of our present situation. It will become clear, I hope, that there is an underlying thesis to both their and Bloom's analyses, namely, the crisis posed by the spread of fragmentation, and also a remarkable underlying similarity to their suggestions for combatting the crisis.

To begin with, let us have a look at the thesis embodied in Neil Postman's 1979 effort, *Teaching as a Conservative Activity*. In a nutshell, Postman argues that the culture, especially the media culture of television, biases the minds of students towards a fragmented view of the world and that modern education reinforces that cultural bias. As Postman writes,

> At present, a typical modern school curriculum reflects, far too much, the fragmentation one finds in television's weekly schedule. Each subject, like each program, has nothing whatever to do with any other and for reasons that are even less justifiable than the reasons for television's discontinuity and incoherence. We must say this for television: It offers what it does in the hope of winning the student's attention. Its major theme is the psychological gratification of the viewer. Schools, on the other hand, offer what they do either because they have always done so or because the colleges or professional schools "require" it. There is no longer any principle that unifies the school curriculum and furnishes it with meaning. (1979, p. 121)

The cure for these cultural biases, says Postman, is to "redefine educational relevance as a corrective to the burdens of cultural bias" (p. 121) by providing students with "a sense of coherence in their studies; that is, a sense of purpose, meaning, and interconnectedness in what they learn" (p. 121). Postman prescribes, somewhat tentatively, a cure for the disease of fragmentation through an historically oriented curriculum centred around the theme of the "Ascent of Man," *à la* the book and, much less successfully in Postman's view, the television series of that name. But, at this point, I am less interested in the specifics of the cure than I am in Postman's diagnosis of the ailment and the explanation for its origin. The disease is fragmentation and a major cause is the infiltration of the media culture of television into our educational institutions. This is not the only cause, however. Postman also identifies two other sources of the problem.

The first he cites as the technical thesis, namely, that it is only through technique and "technicalization" that we can discover what is real, true, and valuable. Although media culture is not the source of the technical thesis, it does promote, develop, and exacerbate it. Postman regards the technical thesis as overbearing and dangerous. This is because human judgment is supplanted by objective testing. If something is not quantifiable it does not exist. We use testing (technique) to discover whether children have acquired the appropriate skills or techniques. This technical and contentless approach eliminates the important questions in the philosophy of education: What ought we be doing and why?

Perhaps a more important contributor to the disease of fragmentation is what Postman calls the "utopian thesis," that is, that schools should provide remedies for all of the social ills and failings of other societal institutions. If the family does not instill proper values, let the school do it. If parents or the churches don't teach

tolerance or sexual responsibility, let the school do it. By assuming responsibility for every aspect of a child's development, the school not only weakens these other institutions and individual responsibility as well, but also takes on so many tasks that it fragments its efforts into a hodge-podge of courses or activities designed to cover all aspects of a child's intellectual, moral, psychological, emotional, and social growth.

The themes sounded by Postman find strong echoes in two books published in 1987, the same year as Bloom's *Closing*. These books, E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* and Reginald Bibby's *Fragmented Gods,* detail the phenomenon of fragmentation in the areas of education and religion, respectively. I shall take up Hirsch's points first and then Bibby's.

Hirsch argues that the decline in literacy should not be laid at the doorsteps of family breakdown, poverty, or, contrary to Postman, TV programming, important as these factors may be. Rather the primary cause and single most alterable factor in the decline is the absence of a common background of national cultural knowledge or information in terms of which reading, writing, and thinking, or indeed, any form of communication, can be effectively carried out. Hirsch argues the decline in literacy follows the decline in cultural literacy, which in turn is directly attributable to the fragmented curriculum in our schools. How fragmented is it?

> Just how fragmented the American public school curriculum has become is described in *The Shopping Mall High School*, a report on five years of firsthand study inside public and private secondary schools. The authors report that our high schools offer courses of so many kinds that "the word 'curriculum' does not do justice to this astonishing variety." The offerings include not only academic courses of great diversity, but also courses in sports and hobbies and a "services curriculum" addressing emotional or social problems. All these courses are deemed "educationally valid" and carry course credit. Moreover among academic offerings are numerous versions of each subject, corresponding to different levels of student interest and ability. Needless to say, the material offered in these "content" courses is highly varied.
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> Cafeteria-style education, combined with the unwillingness of our schools to place demands on students, has resulted in a steady diminishment of commonly shared information between generations and between young people themselves. Those who graduate from the same school have often studied different subjects, and those who graduate from different schools have often studied different material even when their courses have carried the same titles. The inevitable consequence of the shopping mall high school is a lack of shared knowledge across and within schools. It would be hard to invent a more effective recipe for cultural fragmentation. (Hirsch, 1987, pp. 20–21).

But what are the causes of the decline of literacy and the fragmentation of the curriculum? Here Hirsch lays the blame squarely on the shoulders of educational theorists:

> The decline of American literacy and the fragmentation of the American

> school curriculum have been chiefly caused by the ever growing dominance of romantic formalism in educational theory during the past half century. (p. 110)

Here Hirsch is considerably in agreement with Postman. What Postman called the technicalization of education, the teaching of techniques and skills indifferent to the content of the material used, Hirsch calls formalism in education. Part of what Postman calls utopianism in education, Hirsch calls romanticism, which he traces to Rousseau via Dewey. Romanticism, according to Hirsch, emphasizes the "development of the whole child as a unique individual, under the theory that the infant has an inborn, instinctive tendency to follow its own proper development." (p. 118). If teaching techniques and skills and not a common content is what counts, and if teaching must be rigorously individualized to suit the individual's personal development, the inevitable result, suggests Hirsch echoing Postman, can only be the fragmentation of the curriculum and the decline of literacy.

Reginald Bibby's *Fragmented Gods* poses an interesting counterpoise to the speculations of Postman and Hirsch, as well as to those of Bloom. Although Bibby presents a fragmentation thesis, his is about fragmentation in religion, not in education. His main thesis is that religious groups "have responded to social and cultural change by offering religion as a range of consumer goods." These groups have in effect allowed the culture to dictate what religion should be rather than telling culture what religion actually is.

> The result is that the gods have been fragmented with the blessing of the majority, the silence of many, and the protests of few. Rather than presenting religion as a system of meaning that insists on informing all of one's life, the groups have broken it down and offered it as a wide variety of belief, practice, program, and service items. Religion is available to Canadians in all shapes and sizes, and fragment-minded consumers have before them a multitude of choices. (1987, p. 111)

Bibby sees contemporary religionists as primarily facing the challenge of the new fragmented culture with more new culture. The hawkers of religious wares have their spiel. "You want charisma, we got charisma. You want women priests, we got women priests. You want a non-sexist Bible, we got a non-sexist Bible. You want social activism, we got social activism. You want baptismal, marriage, and funeral services, we got 'em." What contemporary culture wants, contemporary culture gets. Indeed, so extreme is the response to culture that in the case of some churches one is not clear whether one is actually attending a church or an NDP social action policy meeting.

Bibby's point is that the church must have a conception of its mission and purpose which transcends culture, and Bibby does mention Catholics and conservative Protestants and Mormons as making "an effort to stand up against culture, to say something to culture that culture is not already saying to itself" (p. 255). He is not saying that the Catholic position on the male priesthood or against divorce is correct. He is saying that there is at least the attempt to challenge culture. But here there is the temptation to go to the opposite extreme: to ignore, renounce, and oppose culture

and to return to that old-time religion. The result is that the traditionalists have been fairly ineffective in changing culture or even in making use of culture, for instance, television to further their distinctive purposes.

The challenge to religious fragmentation is to mediate between the two extremes of cultural assimilation and cultural avoidance and opposition. Bibby sketches a solution, but we can safely pass it by, for we have been on the road a fair piece already without getting to our ultimate destination, Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind.*

I have spent time describing the views of these other thinkers to show that there is a veritable growth industry expounding the problem of fragmentation and that Bloom's book, far from being an isolated phenomenon, is directly in the mainstream of much popular thought about fragmentation. The major difference from the other books of its kind is that it takes as its focus, the university. But that is not the only difference. Although there are many possible ways to analyze Bloom's book, two recurring and connected themes are separateness and relativism and their interconnection, and these are distinctive in Bloom.

The second longest chapter in the book is entitled "Relationships." The title is intended to be both ironic and correct, for what Bloom catalogs are so many versions of a lack of relationship or a lack of connection. "In a relationship," Bloom writes, "the difficulties come first, and there is a search for common grounds" (p. 124). A few examples will suffice:

> America is experienced not as a common project but as a framework within which people are only individuals, where they are left alone. (p. 85)
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> The aptest description I can find for the state of students' souls is the psychology of separateness. (p. 117)
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> The most visible sign of our increasing separateness and, in its turn, the cause of ever greater separateness is divorce. (p. 118)

And what is the cause of all this separateness? Bloom identifies the source of the problem in the fact that people consider themselves to have "no common object, no common good, no natural complementarity" (p. 125). The contrast here is between the herd and the hive. Modernity has made us rationalize away all the differences of race, sex, religion, and ethnic origin as irrelevant features. There are in fact, on this view, only persons, which is to say abstract individuals whose mode of interaction is that of members of a herd grazing together and rubbing against one another. But the members of the herd share a hankering for more, to turn from herd into hive, to achieve genuine interconnection in the form of "community, roots, and extended family." But, says Bloom, such a change would require what no one is willing to do, namely, "to transform his indeterminate self into an all too determinate worker, drone or queen, to submit to the rank-ordering and division of labor necessary to any whole that is more than just a heap of discrete parts" (p. 125). Bloom's main case in point is the family, which, he suggests is an example of the sort of interconnection or unity that men and women seek. The family requires in pursuit of its common good that rank-ordering of priorities and division of labour "necessary to any whole." This rank-ordering of priorities and division of labour are grounded in the

natural complementarity of the sexes. In the traditional family, as is well-known and not denied by Bloom, the actual arrangements amounted to the man acting as sovereign of the body politic, treating his wife and children as property, and the result was manifestly unjust. When the traditional family was abolished in the interests of justice and replaced with the equality of men and women as two abstract individuals — "two equal wills" — the family was no longer a unity and marriage became an "unattractive struggle" over priorities and roles. Whose career comes first? Who does the household tasks?

Bloom's point is not that we should return to the traditional family. We can't and we shouldn't. His point is that the "new justice" of abstract equality has deprived us of significant forms of relatedness without providing any substitutes (p. 131). More important, the doctrine of equality of wills represents a kind of utopian scheme hatched in the complete absence of an understanding of the different natures of men and women. As Bloom notes, "That fathers should have exactly the same kind of attachment [to children as do mothers] is much less evident. We can insist on it, but if nature does not cooperate, all our efforts will have been in vain" (p. 130). Bloom here is pretty clearly reiterating his claim, made in the introduction, that the formation of our standards and the discovery of the good for man or woman rests on a knowledge of human nature, for, like the Greeks, he relates the good "to the fulfillment of the whole natural human potential" (p. 37).

Let me now draw the connection between separateness and relativism as Bloom conceives it. How is relativism the cause of the fragmentation and separateness in contemporary society? Bloom uses the term "relativism" to encompass both cultural relativism and historicism. Both views contend that there is no such thing as the good or objective goodness or badness, but rather that opinions about good and bad vary from culture to culture (cultural relativism) or over time within a culture (historicism) and that no opinion is true or superior to any other. Underlying these views, Bloom seems to argue, is the "dogmatic assurance that thought is culture-bound, [or time-bound], that there is no nature" (p. 38). Bloom seems to think that there must be a nature we are able to know if we are to have a standard of human goodness. He writes, "Nature should be the standard by which we judge our own lives and the lives of peoples" (p. 38). If this is true, it would indeed follow that if we don't know nature, then we don't know the standard of judgment. But Bloom gives us no reason to think that this claim is true. Why then should we believe that nature is the standard of good and bad?

I believe that Bloom is on to something in his claim that cultural relativism and historicism threaten the possibility of objective judgments of goodness or badness. But he has not stated his position well. I think he is making two claims. First, that these relativisms deny that there is something "accessible to all men as men through their common and distinctive faculty, reason" (p. 38) and hence deny the very possibility of rational knowledge or science itself. Second, to the extent that cultural relativism enthrones culture or convention, it denies the possibility of giving and evaluating reasons for our judgments of good and bad. Thus, as Bloom puts it: "Historicism and cultural relativism actually are means to avoid testing our own prejudices and asking, for example, whether men are really equal or whether that opinion is merely a democratic prejudice" (p. 40).

Bloom would agree with Postman and Bibby that the human task is to overcome culture. Postman uses the model of opposition: "[Education's] aim at all times is to make visible the prevailing biases of a culture and then, by employing whatever philosophies of education are available, to oppose them" (1979, p. 25). Bibby's vision is of transcendence and response: "If religion is to interact effectively with culture, then it has to be able to transcend culture, so that it has something to bring, and be responsive to culture, so that it knows how to bring it" (1987, p. 260). And again: "When religion claims to be more than culture, it has the possibility of having authority over culture, and becomes worth listening to" (p. 270). Likewise, Bloom writes, "Men cannot remain content with what is given them by their culture if they are to be fully human. This is what Plato meant to show by the image of the cave in the *Republic* and by representing us as prisoners in it. A culture is a cave" (1987, p.38).

To what extent does the university hold out to a beginning student a means of exit from the cave? In other words, how fares the battle between nature and convention, between reason and culture for the soul of the student? Here the university gets rather mixed reviews, to put it in the kindest possible light.

The natural sciences are doing quite well, thank you. They are successful, doing important work, and there is a unity to the natural sciences quite unlike the fragmentation in the humanities and the social sciences. There is a familial relation among the scientists: "Chemists are biologists' blood relations, and their knowledge is absolutely indispensable for the progress of biology" (p. 349). So within the natural sciences, there is the relatedness of a family. But the natural scientist's connection with the humanities and social sciences is "not familial, but abstract, a little like our connection with humanity as a whole." Here is the idea of the separateness of the herd, not the unity of the hive, a separateness that has existed since the time of Kant and Goethe. The activities of scientists involve that "common object, common good, and natural complementarity" that characterize all genuine relatedness and non-separation. But there is no common good that they share with the other divisions in the university. For Bloom, they are an island unto themselves. They share no common object, common good, or natural complementarity with the rest of the university. They can live without us.

This is not their only failing, for the important questions about the nature of human existence and the good for human beings, the questions that are likely to engage the passionate interest of the entering student, have been excluded from natural science and now have become the prerogative of the other two separate islands in the university, the humanities and the social sciences. How do things fare on those islands?

The picture Bloom paints is of vast disarray in the social sciences. With the possible exception of anthropology, which has a vision of wholeness in its conception of culture, the picture is of fragmentation. Bloom finds the source of the fragmentation in the first principles of the social sciences: "The issue is what is the social science atom, and each specialty can argue that the others are properly parts of the whole that it represents. Moreover each can accuse the others of representing an abstraction, or a construct, or a figment of the imagination" (p. 360). In sum, "There is no social science as an architectonic science. It is parts without a whole"

(p. 369). What remains unresolved is the underlying problem, the legacy of philosophy: What is the nature of human existence?

On the third island, the humanities, matters are, if anything, worse than with the social sciences. "In it there is no semblance of order, no serious account of what should and should not belong, or of what its disciplines are trying to accomplish or how" (p. 371). Again no common object, no common good, no natural complementarity. Separatism revisited.

One may quarrel with the rather pessimistic view Bloom takes of the prospects for the social sciences and the humanities. One may especially quarrel with the aspersions Bloom casts on one's pet discipline. But the fact remains that the university is fragmented: it has no common object, no common good, no natural complementarity. The idea of a university community is a myth. Or is it?

In fact, Bloom concludes his book on an upbeat note, not a denial but a reaffirmation of the possibility of community. I quote his words at length:

> The real community of man, in the midst of all the self-contradictory simulacra of community, is the community of those who seek the truth, of the potential knowers, that is, in principle, of all men to the extent they desire to know. But in fact this includes only a few, the true friends, as Plato was to Aristotle at the very moment they were disagreeing about the nature of the good. Their common concern for the good linked them: their disagreement about it proved they needed one another to understand it. They were absolutely one soul as they looked at the problem. This, according to Plato, is the only real friendship, the only real common good. It is here that the contact people so desperately seek is to be found. The other kinds of relatedness are only imperfect reflections of this one trying to be self-subsisting, gaining their only justification from their ultimate relation to this one. This is the meaning of the riddle of the improbable philosopher kings. They have a true community that is exemplary for all other communities. (pp. 381–382)

Bloom, I'm sure, is quite happy with the controversy his book has caused, for the extent that it has generated thought about the common object of the university and its common good, it has brought people together in their disagreement. The fact that so many people disagree about the object and common good of the university shows that the real community of friends, of those who seek to know the common good, already exists. Relatedness in the university has begun, and it is growing.

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