

## **Bloom's Lament for American Higher Education: A Deweyan Critique**

**Charles Anthony Earls**  
*University of Nebraska at Kearney*

Engaging the issue of higher education's role in a democracy is a Gordian Knot that many insightful thinkers and profound authors have attempted to untangle. The purpose of this essay is to explicate the distinct metaphysical postulates underlying the thinking of two influential philosophers: Allan David Bloom (1930-1992) and John Dewey (1859-1952). Of course, these two men were quite clear as to the ontological postulates underlying their arguments. It is due to that clarity that examination of their respective metaphysics contributes to our own contemporary understanding as we carry on the discussion.

One would be hard pressed to find a thinker more influential in the twentieth century than John Dewey. This is true across the wide spectrum of schools of thought and fields of inquiry, not the least of which are the philosophy of education and the theory of democracy. His work remains actively studied and productively applied to this day. Allan Bloom's influence as a teacher of classical literature and political theory was sustained over many years, but his impact as an author was enhanced by his bestselling book *The Closing of the American Mind*, published in 1987. Perhaps the most often purchased and least read book of the decade, it became a symbol in the curriculum wars of the period. Its popularity was in some ways unfortunate, for like most symbols, the depth of its insight was too often lost in the heat of debate. The more difficult chapters of the book are well worth careful review.

Faith in one's democratic fellow has always been and yet remains the core matter of contention; one need not venture far into the folly of

human foible and frailty to question the prudence of self-government. Certainly, from the beginning of the American Experiment, education has been promoted as the best response to such misgivings. It is impossible to converse about democratic character, citizenship, or leadership without the subject of education emerging, the two are so entwined. Oftentimes, an impasse seems to be encountered and one feels compelled to choose from two less than satisfactory alternatives. It is at such moments that our unexamined assumptions are ripe for examination. This essay attempts to explicate some of those underlying assumptions about how the world "is"; that is to say, our ontology.

Allan Bloom (1987) is insightful when he points out that the fundamental crisis facing us today is the "incoherence and incompatibility among the first principles with which we interpret the world" (p. 346). However, his solution to this predicament falls woefully short; indeed, it may serve to make matters worse. The philosophy of John Dewey provides a fruitful perspective from which to examine the shortcomings of Bloom's thinking. Dewey also supplies an alternative to what Bloom views as the underlying impasse.

The essay below is divided into three sections. The first will summarize Allan Bloom's position as it is found in his influential book, *The Closing of the American Mind*. The paraphrase found here will be tightly focused upon those postulates underlying a more extensive argument. The second section will offer a critical examination of these underpinnings found in Bloom's analysis of the crisis in American higher education from the perspective of John Dewey's thought. The final section will furnish a brief account of Dewey's alternative ontology as it relates to the fundamental dualism underpinning Bloom's critique of American higher education. If the reader returns to Dewey's original text, the author will be delighted indeed.

## I.

### Openness and the Demise of the American College Student

Allan Bloom addresses "the state of our souls" in a report from "the front." The front of which he speaks is the current scene of higher education as he found it in the best universities. The students he encountered there are united in their claim that truth is relative. The belief that truth is relative is necessary to the virtue which they hold most dear: *openness*. This virtue of openness is the new insight of our time and it is the principle with which they are indoctrinated throughout their education prior to entering the university. The relativity of truth is not so much a theoretical insight as it is a moral postulate, the prerequi-

site of a free society. It is the true believer who represents the greatest danger. Openness is according to Bloom's students, "the only plausible stance in the face of various claims to truth and various ways of life and kinds of human beings" (1987, p. 26). A student may well ask, Who am I (you or anyone else) that I could say that one is better than another? The bottom line of this stance is not to correct mistakes and actually be right; instead, it is not to think you are right at all.

This openness in the service of the democratic ideal is new in our history according to Bloom. The "democratic man" of our tradition recognized and accepted man's natural rights, and in this doctrine found a fundamental basis of unity and sameness. Natural rights give to all men a common interest and make them truly brothers; class, race, religion, national origin, and culture are subordinate to the natural rights all men share. In contrast, the new "democratic personality" rejects this traditional view and disregards the doctrine of natural rights as well as the historical origins of our country. Instead, he is progressive and forward-looking. No fundamental agreement is demanded, nor are religious and cultural beliefs subordinated to any notion or goal that is held in common; rather, this new democratic personality is open to all kinds of men, all manner of life-styles, all ideologies or belief systems. Only the man who is not open to everything is shunned.

This new openness, however, is actually a closing, asserts Bloom. Relativism extinguishes the real motive of education—the search for the good life—and leads to indifference. If competing perspectives, views, beliefs, claims of truth are of equal importance and validity, then what is the point of liberal studies? To what end would one study classical language, German philosophy, or African art, when culture is simply a matter of different strokes for different folks? Who needs them? A student constructs his life-style from what is at hand; consequently, openness yields conformity and ethnocentrism. Openness used to be the virtue that allowed us to seek the good by using our reason, but it has now come to mean the allowing of everything and the denial of reason's power. Western culture is primarily characterized by science defined as the quest to know nature through reason, a distinctive faculty common and accessible to all men, while putting aside our conventions. But science and reason are seen as simply a trait of *our* culture, no more or less valid than the traits of any other culture. Thus we are rendered impotent: Reason is the only instrument which can combat prejudice, but cultural relativism reduces reason to the level of just another ethnocentric bias. The baby is gone with the bath water. We are caught between a natural desire toward the truth and a popular philosophy which asserts that truth is impossible and culturally distinct answers are of equal value. We are

pulled apart by science on the one hand and culture on the other. The latter offers the "openness of indifference," while the former points to the "openness that invites us to the quest for knowledge and certitude" (Bloom, 1987, p. 41).

It was knowledge and certitude which enticed the Enlightenment philosophers. Their dream was to offer to all men what heretofore had been the possession of only a few: The life lived according to reason. What made this possible was the discovery of a new method of inquiry, the scientific method. This method could make nature accessible to even ordinary men. The various mythic, poetic, and cultural visions of the cosmos and man's place within it could be overcome. All men would be united in their reason. What is more, this method demonstrates to man, "that by nature he belongs to the realm of bodies in motion, and that he, like all other bodies, wishes to preserve his motion, that is his life" (Bloom, 1987, p. 164). Fear of death is the way of nature; any other end attributed to man can be shown to belong "to the realm of the imagination, of false opinion, or derived from this primary end" (Bloom, 1987, p. 164).

Thus all men are unified in the realization of their common problem: "Vulnerable man must seek the means to his preservation" (Bloom, 1987, p. 164). This assertion is lent all the more credence by the events of 9-11, which occurred after his passing. Given that self-preservation is the fundamental motive of man, "whatever arrangements help them get food, clothing, shelter, health and, above all, protection from one another will, if properly educated, win their consent and their loyalty" (Bloom, 1987, p. 164-5). The understanding through science of nature enables men to conquer it, thus securing their self-preservation, which is the natural motive of man. The construction of governments is for the purpose of protecting, "the product of men's labor, their property, and therewith life and liberty" (Bloom, 1987, p. 165). The notion of natural rights is a philosophical invention based on the understanding of nature, how things really are: "An analysis of universal needs and their relation to nature as a whole demonstrates that this passion is not merely an imagination" (Bloom, 1987, p. 166).

But such knowledge and certitude is not our lot, asserts Bloom. Rather, it is indifference which currently rules the day. College students lack motive. In the past it was simply a matter of putting the intellectual feast on the table, but now students must be enticed to eat what is before them. The reason for this is that today's students are cut off from their rich political and religious heritage. It used to be that students knew well the history, issues, and characters surrounding the founding of our nation and its growth. They also had a religious heritage taught to them at home; Moses and Jesus were an essential part of their lives.

*The Bible* provided a model which explained the cosmos and our place in it. But historians, such as Charles Beard, discredited the heroes of American history, and religion has become increasingly less central in family life. Thus students no longer have an immediate experience of the nation's meaning and project that can provide a basis for reflection; nor do their experiences include even the possibility of a total book that explains the world. There is no overall picture for these students; there exists for them no common and rich tradition from which to draw examples and metaphors. They have only the here and now.

Being detached and cast off from a common tradition or framework—having no foothold with which to commence a search for one's place within the whole—students become preoccupied with themselves. This condition is similar to the state of nature:

Spiritually unclad, unconnected, isolated, with no inherited or unconditional connection with anything or anyone. They can be anything they want to be, but they have no particular reason to want to be anything in particular. (Bloom, 1987, p. 87)

As Rousseau says in *Emile*, everyone has “his own little separate system” (Bloom, 1987, p. 117). In this self-preoccupation there is little concern for others. Our increasing separateness makes it more difficult to share in a common goal. Thus we witness the disintegration of family, community, and culture. The pop psychology of our time encourages one to become “inner-directed” in the hope of becoming less lonely. But authenticity is not the problem, rather it is that we have “no common object, no common good, no natural complementarity. Selves, of course, have no relation to anything but themselves, and this is why ‘communication’ is their problem” (Bloom, 1987, p. 125). We fear commitment, we shun dependence, our individualism becomes extreme, and so we are social solitaires.

Our self preoccupation is made worse by our value relativism, our inability to talk in terms of right and wrong, good and evil. Value talk has few demands; it lacks the power to compel our conduct: “The term ‘value,’ meaning the radical subjectivity of all belief about good and evil, serves the easygoing quest for comfortable self-preservation” (Bloom, 1987, p. 142). One is not wrong; he simply could use some value adjustment. But while we seek to escape from the constraints of good and evil, we admire those who are committed to their values. We are impressed by those who believe in something: “Their intense belief, their caring or concern, their believing in something, is the proof of autonomy, freedom and creativity” (Bloom, 1987, p. 142). Thus our value relativism pulls us in two opposing directions: “To follow the line of least resistance, and to adopt strong poses and fanatic resolutions” (Bloom, 1987, p. 143). These

contradictory deductions come from a common premise: Values cannot be discovered by reason; there are no objective criteria from which to judge what is right or good.

It is to those who would live the serious life that the university owes its allegiance. Within a democracy, particularly that in America, each man is free to use his reason to discern good from bad, true from false. Since every man can rely on his own natural faculty, he is freed from tradition and authority, the common source from which to draw help in judgment within non-democratic societies. External impediments to the free exercise of reason are removed and democratic men are, by comparison, on their own. But most men lack the time or capacity to train themselves in reason's usages. So, in the absence of any authority to appeal to, democratic men rely on public opinion for guidance. It is the majority of opinions (often uninformed and unanalyzed) which hold sway: "This is the really dangerous form of the tyranny of the majority, not the kind that actively persecutes minorities but the kind that breaks the inner will to resist because there is no qualified source of nonconforming principles and no sense of superior right" (Bloom, 1987, p. 247). The danger which faces democracy is the drift toward monotony of thought, an intellectual leveling of all men. Vigorous independence of mind becomes increasingly rare. The public opinion must be balanced by an alternative source of thought. This is the proper role of the university; to act as an intellectual aristocracy which holds up the best as a standard to attract those with the rarest talents. The university does this by preserving the best of the great thinkers from the past; by maintaining the "permanent questions front and center," as well as the greatest responses to those questions. It must provide for its members the type of experience that cannot be had in democratic life: "The deepest intellectual weakness of democracy is its lack of taste or gift for the theoretical life" (Bloom, 1987, p. 252). The democratic concentration on the useful threatens the preservation of pure theoretical reflection:

When there is poverty, disease and war, who can claim the right to idle in Epicurean gardens, asking questions that have already been answered and keeping a distance where commitment is demanded? The for-its-own-sake is alien to the modern democratic spirit, particularly in matters intellectual. (Bloom, 1987, p. 250)

But the public opinion of democracy must have a counter voice to keep its egalitarianism in check. Even though this voice be unpopular, it is necessary to a democracy's survival, for it is the voice of reason and what it says is based on the true nature of things.

The four years of undergraduate experience are civilization's only

opportunity to get to one who has any hope of a higher life: "In this short time he must learn that there is a great world beyond the little one he knows, experience the exhilaration of it and digest enough of it to sustain himself in the intellectual deserts he is destined to traverse" (Bloom, 1987, p. 336). Liberal education must address itself to the question of the unity of man and the unity of the sciences. It must provide a coherent picture of the cosmos which includes man in his essential place. The student must address the interrelatedness of all knowledge and its bearing on the fundamental, permanent questions. This synoptic vision can be gained through careful study of the great books of the past, previous attempts to unite what was then known. But the university today cannot put together a curriculum that has such a vision. Instead there is a "democracy of the disciplines," each with its own specialized slice of the pie. There is little attempt to unify these specialties into an overall big picture. The students of today bring with them no all-embracing model of the cosmic scheme of things, nor does the university provide one to them. Thus liberal arts courses are meaningless and unrelated in the eyes of students. They view these requirements as pointless, something to be endured. The natural sciences deal with knowledge and truth, while the social sciences and humanities deal with culture and value. Today's university has no unique perspective; it suffers from the same incompatible dualism between natural reason and cultural relativism which emasculates the democratic society which contains it.

## II.

### **The Impasse of Dualistic Thinking**

The root of the crisis, as Bloom sees it, is the duality that exists at the foundation of how we look at the world around us: Reason on the one hand and mere imagination on the other, nature as opposed to convention, science against culture, fact versus value, The Good next to one's own brand of good, Truth over and against relativism, theory contrasted to utility. The former in each case leads to the openness of knowledge and certitude, while the latter descends into the openness of indifference. Bloom attributes our current sorry state of affairs to our having denied our natural ability to reason, and thereby discern the truth, in order to pursue the more comfortable life-style of allowing each to do his own thing. It is too much to expect that the "democratic personality" can turn from his wicked ways; instead, the more feasible solution would be to set aside a few universities whose role in our society would be to cultivate Epicurean gardens where the permanent questions can be pondered using natural reason, thus ensuring a place for the voice

of truth amid the clamor of public opinion. But Bloom's proposal misses the mark. The duality which he has so expertly dug up from the roots of our presumptions and uncovered for our perusal is still there. The basic truth-relativity dualism is left unresolved. After having enumerated the many pitfalls and dead ends of the latter half of the fundamental dualism, he simply asserts that we (rather, only the few among us with the capacity) jump to the former. But the quest for certainty is not without its own box canyons.

One of the models Bloom holds up as a shining example of this striving toward the truth is the Enlightenment thinkers. Their thought is pursued in the spirit of the Ancient Greeks who represent the ultimate paradigm for the search for Truth. The Enlightenment thinkers are summarized in Bloom's interpretation of the "democratic man," which firmly believes in the natural rights of all men as well as the natural endowment of reason. This Reason, via the scientific method, makes truth accessible to even ordinary men. It is interesting to note that while he admires this philosophy, he does not agree with it. He parts company with the Enlightenment view in that he denies the ability of ordinary men to use their reason. Thus it is necessary to establish a setting for those elites, small in number, who can make use of this gift. Be that as it may, a more fundamental difficulty rests with his analysis of the Enlightenment tradition.

Enlightenment thought is set within the model of Newtonian physics, which takes for granted the split of man from nature identified by Descartes. The physical universe is guided by natural laws, and man is equipped with natural reason, which can correspond to those laws. Like the irreducible atom, man is essentially individualistic. Man is already made (in some mysterious manner), prior to any consideration of society or culture, with certain liberties of thought and action; such are natural rights. It is the duty of the political order to protect these natural gifts. But Bloom does not explain, nor do the Enlightenment philosophers for that matter, how men came by these rights. This premise is more like an article of faith than it is a philosophical proposition. Bloom does say that the notion of natural rights is a philosophical invention which corresponds with the way things are, but he fails to mention why this invention cannot be questioned or correctly disputed.

Yet it is precisely this concept that John Dewey calls into doubt. Dewey points out that the assumption of man as ready-made, already possessed, and needing only the removal of certain legal restrictions in order to become whole, discourages the notion that personal fulfillment is a moving thing which can only be achieved through continuous growth (1935/1987, p. 30). Moreover, under the Enlightenment view,



asserts Dewey, from the very beginning man is thrust into a naturally antagonistic relationship with those who rule him; for the enemy of individual liberty is the government's tendency to encroach upon those innate freedoms (1935/1987, p. 8).

Dewey is critical of another tenet of the Enlightenment model that Bloom holds dear: People are motivated by self-interest and the purpose of legitimate government is to act in such a way as to protect individuals in the exercise of their natural self-interest. It was originally supposed that the competition of the marketplace would keep all in relative balance (Adam Smith's "invisible hand"), but the economic crisis of 2008 has added yet another example of how this is not the case. Economic disparity, not equality, is the consequence of governmental protection of man's natural pursuit of his self-interest. Bloom insists that morality is based on enlightened self-interest: One respects others so that they will respect him. Enlightened self-interest comes with the recognition of "universal needs and their relation to nature as a whole" (Bloom, 1987, p. 166). Here again, Dewey disagrees:

Natural rights and natural liberties exist only in the kingdom of mythological social zoology. Men do not obey laws because they think these laws are in accord with a scheme of natural rights. They obey because they believe, rightly or wrongly, that the consequences of obeying are upon the whole better than the consequences of disobeying. (1935/1987, p. 15)

The point of mentioning these objections is not to suggest that the Enlightenment thinkers were wrong and, consequently, that their worldview should be discarded; rather, it is to say that no school of thought is entirely correct to the point of fixating upon it as a creed regardless of the consequences. Bloom insists that our "problems are permanent but their expressions are changing" (Bloom, 1987, p. 283). He denies the recognition of the historical context which shaped these thinkers to say what they did. The economics of the time were based on property. But the context in which men lived altered radically with the Industrial Revolution to an economics founded upon production. The Enlightenment philosophers themselves were reacting to old ways of thinking, which they believed had outlived their usefulness. It would be a tragedy to assume that modifications to their way of viewing the world could not be made as new difficulties arose. As with any successful revolution, those who come to power soon become the *status quo* and fail to realize that as circumstances alter, so too does the nature of liberty and that which threatens it. What is pointed to as formal or legal liberty is not necessarily equivalent to effective liberty. Rather than return to the

18th century Enlightenment, as Bloom calls upon us to do, Dewey would encourage us to retain that which is relevant for us from that tradition, while mixing it with new ideas, to make an adequate response to the forces and problems we find in our current circumstances.

Bloom would like to put us on the road to Truth which is eternal, to knowledge which is unchanging, to certainty that is sure. However, our experience in the world will not stand still long enough to be encapsulated by an explanatory model once and for all. One can select certain aspects of experience and abstract from them some notions or principles which can then be declared as absolutely true, but abstractions have only limited relevance to the world of experience. One can attempt to force experience to fit the abstracted mold, but then allegiance is to one's pet model, not to truth. Dewey gives this tendency the name Intellectualism. Too often, those who hold to notions of absolute truth either contradict obvious experience of the world or contradict themselves.

Bloom identifies the kind of openness that, "invites us to the quest for knowledge and certitude" and then in the same paragraph states that this openness encourages the serious college student to desire, "to know what is good for me, what will make me happy" (Bloom, 1987, p. 41). But if knowledge and certitude are to be had, would they not be the same for all? Should not the student on this path search for what is good *period*, as opposed to what is good *for me*? If two serious students find conflicting interpretations which are "good for me," to what intellectual court do they appeal? Both cannot be right.

Bloom could fall back to a position which says that if we are to achieve an overall systematic vision of the world, then debate between the great systematic philosophers from the past is required. An inadequate philosophy is better than none at all so far as this quest for truth is concerned. Indeed, Bloom concludes his book by asserting that Plato and Aristotle are one soul in the very moment that they are disagreeing about the nature of the good. Certainly, they may be united in their quest, but they cannot both be right absolutely in Bloom's scheme of knowledge. But if it is insisted that both are correct within their own philosophical system, then it is unclear how they differ from the cultural relativist who fights for culture "while knowing it is not true" (1987, p. 202). It seems that Bloom falls into the crack that separates the dualism of objectivity and subjectivity.

For Bloom there is a sharp distinction between the theoretical on the one hand and the useful on the other. Following Tocqueville, he states that, "The deepest intellectual weakness of democracy is its lack of taste or gift for the theoretical life" (1987, p. 252). Consequently, bastions of higher learning are required to allow those who have the

knack for theory a place to seek refuge from “the democratic concentration on the useful” (1987, p. 250). Making dualistic distinctions, such as theory/utility, objectivity/subjectivity, absolute truth/relative truth, nature/convention, etc, and then holding to one while rejecting the other in an absolute, dogmatic fashion is tricky business. Dualistic distinctions can certainly be useful in specific instances, but making the dualisms themselves absolute leads to trouble. The long list of dualisms which Bloom exhumes for our examination is left unresolved. He effectively demonstrates the pitfalls of the one side in each case, yet the other side, which he favors, is likewise problematic. For Bloom, these dualisms represent an impasse; we must choose whom we shall serve. But Bloom has not dug deep enough; for the root of this impasse lies in the ontology he, as well as the Enlightenment thinkers, acquired from the ancient Greek philosophers. Inherent in the thoughts of Plato and Aristotle is the separation of man and nature from which these conflicting divisions stem. Dewey guides us in our deeper excavation.

The isolation of contemplative, theoretical man from the everyday emphasis upon utility is in keeping with the philosophical origin of the notion that the true nature of things is fixed and permanent. Dewey, like Bloom, identifies this origin with the classical Greek thinkers, particularly Plato and Aristotle: “Greek reflection, carried on by a leisure class in the interest of liberalizing leisure, was preeminently that of spectator, not that of the participator in the process of production” (1925/1981, p. 78). Platonic and Aristotelian cosmology was founded upon their conception of art imitating nature. Amid a world of unrest, struggle, and uncertainty, joy was found in that which was finished and completed, in that which provided rest from the uncertain hazards surrounding them. They modeled their conception of the cosmos after the wonderful finished works of art around them; satisfying their “craving for the passage of change into rest, of the contingent, mixed and wandering into the composed and total” (1925/1981, p. 78). Form was viewed as the essence of art, and so too was it made the essence of philosophy. Form is flux arrested into a superior, preeminent object: “It conveys a sense of the imperishable and timeless, although the material in which it is exemplified is subject to decay and contingency” (1925/1981, p. 78). The abstraction and elevation of form, as that which is real, into their cosmology over and above other experiences of the world, allowed them to suppose and take comfort in a realm where meaning was secure, eternal, and self-possessed. For them, that which was cosmically real was finished, perfect, and complete.

Bloom quotes with approval Lessing as he speaks of Greek sculpture: “Beautiful men made beautiful statues, and the city had beautiful statues in part to thank for beautiful citizens” (1987, p. 80). But this is

not quite the case. The “beautiful men” of classical Greece, whom we so justly admire, were not the men who made the beautiful statues:

For the Greek community was marked by a sharp separation of servile workers and free men of leisure, which meant a division between acquaintance with matters of fact and contemplative appreciation, between unintelligent practice and unpractical intelligence, between affairs of change and efficiency—or instrumentality—and of rest and enclosure—finality. (Dewey, 1925/1981, p. 80)

The artisans and craftsmen who constructed the artistic objects were concerned with a different project than the “beautiful men” who were surrounded by the final objects of their endeavors. The attention of the artistic workmen was on the perishability of their material, the usefulness of their tools, the efficiency of their technique, and the practicality of their craft, as these related to their goal of producing a finished product. Unlike the philosophers whose wealth and leisure allowed them to experience artistic objects as finished and ready-made, the experience of those who made the statues, which Lessing and Bloom praise, was not conducive to the intellectual assumption that the real was fixed and eternal.

Bloom makes clear the ontology upon which his solution for the current crisis in society and education stands. The university's task is “always to maintain the permanent questions front and center” (1987, p. 252). For Bloom, the problems are permanent; only their expression is changing (1987, p. 283). Human nature is inalterable and fixed; it always remains the same (1987, p. 278 & p. 304). So, too, the order of nature is fixed, subject to principles and laws which are universal, and intelligible through reason which is in accord with those laws (1987, p. 270). Since man's relationship with the universe does not vary, the scholarship of ancient Greece is as applicable to us today as it was at its inception. Actually, it is more than applicable; it is the source of innovation and inspiration. When it is studied on its own merit, as opposed to merely reading it for historical appreciation, it transforms our thinking. The Renaissance was the rebirth of Greek thought. It was the Greeks who discovered that theory and practice were distinct: “Theory looking to the universal and unchanging while understanding its relation to the particular and changing; practice, totally absorbed by the latter, seeing the whole only in terms of it...” (1987, p. 290). The solutions to the permanent problems that trouble us will come from the contemplative use of our reason on the nature of the cosmos. Thought is primary: “The essence of it all is not social, political, psychological or economic, but philosophic. And, for those who wish to see, contemplation of Socrates is

our most urgent task. This is properly an academic task" (1987, p. 312). Thus Bloom's ontology, that which is real is permanent, is the foundation upon which rest his epistemology: "The philosophers, ancient and modern, agreed that the fulfillment of humanity is in the use of reason. Man is the particular being that can know the universal, the temporal being that is aware of eternity, the part that can survey the whole, the effect that seeks the cause" (1987, p. 292). In turn, his epistemology lends credence to the task he assigns to scholars: To discern reality as it is and then to pass it down to the masses who are preoccupied with everyday affairs.

The incoherence and incompatibility among the first principles with which we interpret the world are in large part due to the stratification of ancient Greek society. Men of leisure saw the world around them as finished art. Such a perspective led them to abstract analogous traits for the fundamental character of nature. But such presumptions are the seeds of discord, for the world is not a finished product. The dualistic tension in our thought stems from the denial of motion, change, and freedom as *real* dispositions in nature. Dewey offers an alternative to the spectator model of the ancient Greeks; one which is more in keeping with the craftsmen who made the "beautiful statues."

### III.

#### Reason, Intelligence, and Danger

No one can deny the success of the natural sciences. Even Allan Bloom tips his hat and acknowledges that the physical sciences are doing well: "Our way of life is utterly dependent on the natural scientists, and they have more than fulfilled their every promise" (1987, p. 356). This success, however, is not shared by those who would study man:

Where natural science ends, trouble begins. It ends at man, the one being outside of its purview, or to be exact, it ends at that part or aspect of man that is not body, whatever that may be. (1987, p. 356)

Why are the natural sciences so triumphant while the scholarly endeavors concerning man seem stuck in the mire? John Dewey points out that there is a union of man's experience and nature assumed in the methodology of scientific thinking. Certainly the natural sciences are as theoretical and as abstract as any thinking is today. Their theories are inaccessible to those who have not been initiated by years of study into their mysteries. But the abstractions of science are essentially bound to experience, to observed subject-matter, at both ends: The questions arise from experience and the subsequent hypothetical responses return

to experience through experimentation. A theory may be as abstract and as contrary to common sense as it will, so long as the predicted consequences which follow from it are actualized in experience for all to observe and duplicate. A theory's worth is judged by the consequences it brings to pass. The success of the scientific method indicates that there is a unity between man's experience and nature. To deny this unity is to subvert the validity of scientific inquiry. The scientist acts on the presumption that experience is both *of* nature and *in* nature. His project cannot be worthwhile if he believes otherwise. The scientist habitually treats experience as a starting point, as a method for dealing with nature, and as the goal in which nature is disclosed for what it is (1925/1981, p. 12-13).

While there is consensus on the successful use of the scientific method in the physical sciences, there is controversy as to its application to the study of man. The contending camps, the social sciences on the one hand and the humanities on the other, differ on the predictability of human nature: One focuses upon forecastable behavior while the other underscores the mercurial quality of spirit. But the rivalry of these two camps and the consequent lack of advance by both stem from either the denial that experience and nature are essentially bound together, or the reductionist assumption that views experience as merely physical.

There is nothing implicit in the methodology of science that requires experience to be reducible to physiology. The only presumption is that experience is of and in nature, and the only requirement is that reflection returns to experience to be validated. Experience is simply had; the events of experience merely occur; they are what they are. Dewey terms the immediate, unreflected occurrence of events as *primary* experience. What that event is, what it means, why it happened, is discerned by study and reflective thought. This Dewey calls *secondary* experience. Choice, abstraction, and theorizing belong to this level of experience. To add to this method the assumption that nature is comprised of a physical substance that is entirely separate from the unique mental substance of man is to impose a conclusion from secondary experience upon the essential character of primary experience that is unwarranted as far as the method itself is concerned.

On the contrary, the method calls for experience to be examined in its fullness; whatever is found in experience should be studied on its own account: "If experience actually presents esthetic and moral traits, then these traits may also be supposed to reach down into nature, and to testify to something that belongs to nature as truly as does the mechanical structure attributed to it in physical science" (1925/1981, p. 13). Further, to burden nature with the notion, again from secondary

experience, that it is fixed and determined is also not called for by the use of the scientific method. The method only requires that reflection in general takes the fullness of experience into account and that conclusions return to experience in its repletion. There is nothing in the scientific method that leads us to believe that nature is perfectly ordered and rational, nor that man is divided from nature, nor that nature is synonymous with the physical, while man is essentially mental. This divorce of man from nature is a burden that is self-encumbered by the failure to take primary experience in its wholeness as the fundamental foundation of thought, which is secondary.

The way to shed this self-imposed yoke is the proper use of the scientific method in all thinking. The incidents of crude primary experience form the context from which questions and problems arise. It also supplies the raw data from which the reflection of secondary experience constructs possible explanatory answers. The confirmation of these hypotheses is gained by return to the crudeness of primary experience for testing. If prediction in experimentation is successful, then the constructed theory enables one to understand, to grasp the significance of the event in question. The occurrence under study becomes part of a conceptual scheme which attempts to relate the whole of experience: "They get the meaning contained in a whole system of related objects; they are rendered continuous with the rest of nature and take on the import of the things they are now seen to be continuous with" (1925/1981, p. 16). This system enriches primary experience and refines the context that leads to further questions and, consequently, to further refinement. This refinement manifests itself in the productive use of its explanations as to how things are; thus the ability of the natural sciences, which utilize this methodology, to fulfill their promise.

When reflection does not return to primary experience, when it fails to come back to earth, its proceedings become obscure, and lose contact with everyday affairs. Dewey charges that the bulk of philosophy fails in just this way. It is little wonder, as Bloom laments, that students do not see the point in studying the great thinkers of the past. But the greater tragedy of this failure comes when the objects of reflection in philosophy are attributed with supreme reality. That is to say, the explanatory theories or models are taken to be more real than concrete primary experience. An idea is cherished above the events of experience; those events are forced to fit the idea, rather than the other way around. What the cherished explanation leads to, what new meanings it contributes to ordinary experience, is not considered. Thus seemingly insoluble dualisms are introduced into our thinking. We become torn by philosophical debates, which go on without end. We become stuck in a

conceptual quagmire of our own making.

Following the scientific or empirical method yields three results. First, when ordinary/primary experience is treated as the ultimate foundation of thinking, then reflection is protected from the creation of artificial problems—such as the various dualistic distinctions which plague the first principles with which we interpret the world—and attention is focused on real problems, which arise from actual experience. Second, it provides a test or check for the conclusions of reflective experience. The conclusion in question clarifies our understanding of what is found in primary/ordinary experience rather than muddles. Third, as these conclusions clarify ordinary experience of the world, they take on empirical value themselves by leading thought to further productive questions and reflection (1925/1981, p. 26).

Use of the empirical method in philosophy protects in yet a fourth way. It maintains the focus of reflection upon experience in its repletion: “It includes *what* men do and suffer, *what* they strive for, love, believe and endure, and also *how* men act and are acted upon, the ways in which they do and suffer, desire and enjoy, see, believe, imagine - in short, processes of *experiencing*” (1925/1981, p. 18). By studying all that is found within experience, the common assumption of traditional Western philosophy—to equate objects of knowledge with that which is ultimately real—is thwarted: “That is to say, nature is construed in such a way that all these things, since they are actual, are naturally possible; they are not explained away into mere ‘appearance’ in contrast with reality” (1925/1981, p. 27). Primary experience includes much more than what is *known*; it also contains what is *felt* and *done*. Affective, volitional, aesthetic, and moral experience reveals traits of real things as much as intellectual experience does. Emotion, attraction, revulsion, joy, despair, poetry, success, failure, ambiguity, and mystery are as much real and significant components of ordinary experience as are the clear and assured. Dewey declares that “the assumption that nature in itself is all of the same kind, all distinct, explicit and evident, having no hidden possibilities, no novelties or obscurities, is possible only on the basis of a philosophy which at some point draws an arbitrary line between nature and experience” (1925/1981, p. 28).

To bestow upon objects known a superior status of being is to forget that things are *had* in experience before they are things cognized, according to Dewey. Knowledge is not its own end; the purpose of knowledge is survival, adaptation, life, and life lived more abundantly. When objects of knowledge are viewed as more real than other objects of experience, these other integral components are banished from the “real” world and exiled to the realm of private subjectivity. Thus an essential part of ex-



perience is cut off; individuals become separated from both companions and nature. This separation, which results from fixating upon knowledge as reality, is clearly evident in the writing of Allan Bloom:

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. Presumably he would prefer not to practice deception; but if it is a condition of his survival, he has no objection to it. The hopes of changing mankind almost always end up in changing not mankind but one's thought. Reformers may often be intransigent or extreme in deed, but they are rarely intransigent in thought, for they have to be relevant. But the man who fits most easily into the conventions and is least constrained by struggle with them has more freedom for thought. (1987, p. 279)

Such loyalty to knowledge for its own sake is to be greatly feared. But such separation and, when required, opposition is of the philosopher's own making. It is not a fundamental ingredient of the human condition; rather, it is born from a natural desire to seek solace in the comfort of certitude amid a world which is perilous and uncertain. It is the precariousness of the cosmos that is part and parcel of the condition of humanity.

There is no doubt that the world of ordinary experience includes, "the uncertain, unpredictable, uncontrollable, and hazardous" (1925/1981, p. 43). As creatures we are fearful because the world includes much that is threatening. The response of traditional Western philosophy to this fear has been "to deny the existence of chance, to mumble universal and necessary law, the ubiquity of cause and effect, the uniformity of nature, universal progress, and the inherent rationality of the universe" (1925/1981, p. 45). But the denial of the precarious character of the cosmos serves only to deceive; it does not change the fact that it is so. In order to escape the recognition of this fundamental condition, we embrace the myth that the universe is totally permanent and ordered; but as we do this we split experience in two: into that part of experience that one is willing to acknowledge, namely the regular and habitual tendencies of nature on the one hand, and on the other the indeterminacy which persists in the present but is denied as illusion. This split manifests itself in a multitude of dualistic distinctions. The endless debate over all these conflicting oppositions rest on a common premise which denies the contingent character of the cosmos.

Dewey brings us to the edge of the abyss in order to make us aware of our responsibility for our own fate. Yet, honest confrontation with the abyss reveals that the world also includes recurrences, regularity, routine, and rule. Experience of nature is a fusion of both reliability and

ambiguity: "We live in a world which is an impressive and irresistible mixture of sufficiencies, tight completenesses, order, recurrences which make possible prediction and control, and singularities, ambiguities, uncertain possibilities, processes going on to consequences as yet indeterminate" (1925/1981, p. 47). It is because the universe is comprised of just this mixture that intelligent human conduct is so critical. Humanity's survival in an existence that is, at the same time, precarious and stable depends upon his, "Striving to make stability of meaning prevail over the instability of events" (1925/1981, p. 49). Because the world is chaotic, it is crucial that every discovered regularity be scrutinized; because the world is incomplete, it is important that every terminus or satisfaction be examined; because the world is threatening, it is critical that every good be pursued as an ideal for further conduct; because the world holds no guarantees, it is urgent that intelligence, reflection, and reason inform every decision and deed. Only in this way can we profit from our condition instead of being at its mercy.

Dewey is no critic of the rigorous use of thinking and reason, for only rational thought can save us; his criticism is aimed at the philosophical tendency to outsmart ourselves into supposing that Reason is more real than the danger which surrounds us. Our thinking must be applied to the choices we make; it must guide our efforts to substantiate order out of disorder, make secure the good from its present fragility, to actualize the potential of our ideals. Any philosophy that disregards or degrades common ordinary experience and the action that takes place within this realm, while elevating thought to a higher level of being, renders a grave disservice to us all.

This final point will serve as a conclusion. Dewey emphasizes that: "The fundamental principle of democracy is that the ends of freedom and individuality for all can be attained only by means that accord with those ends" (1937/1987, p. 298). Bloom proposes that higher education should be supported by the democratic society as an intellectual aristocracy which pursues its own end. Only incidentally is this intellectual elite of any benefit to the society which surrounds it. Its role is to hand down from above the Truth about how things are, thus acting as a corrective voice to the public opinion of those below who are preoccupied with their mundane and self-centered lives. Bloom entitles his book *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*. But it is Bloom's proposal that has failed democracy, for it denies the democratic, "faith in our common human nature and in the power of voluntary action based upon public collective intelligence" (1937/1987, p. 299). The means suggested by Bloom are not in accord with the ends of democracy.

Faith may persist but it does not go unchallenged. Both Bloom and Dewey taught university students for decades; their frustration and faith in their contemporary democratic youth is similar to that of faculty members and student affairs practitioners today. Their respective ontologies are not only borne of their extensive research into philosophy and literature but also of experience. This experience is had daily by professors, residence hall directors, and assistant deans of students striving to create experiences for college students that will provoke reflection and subsequent insight. Clearly, this author is sympathetic with Dewey's ontology, but convincing the reader that Dewey is right and Bloom wrong is not so much the purpose here as it is to uncover the philosophical assumptions that often go unexamined as we engage in the debate over the purpose of higher education in a democracy. The difference between Bloom and Dewey ultimately comes down to a matter of faith—in this case, democratic faith—and faith is about the promise of things not yet seen.

### References

- Bloom, A. (1987) *The closing of the American mind: How higher education has failed democracy and impoverished the souls of today's students*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Dewey, J. (1925/1981). Experience and nature. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.), *John Dewey: The later works* (Vol. 1). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1935/1987). Liberalism and social action. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.), *John Dewey: The later works* (Vol. 11, pp. 1-65). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1937/1987). Democracy is radical. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.), *John Dewey: The later works* (Vol. 11, pp. 296-299). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.