

# C o n f e r e n c e

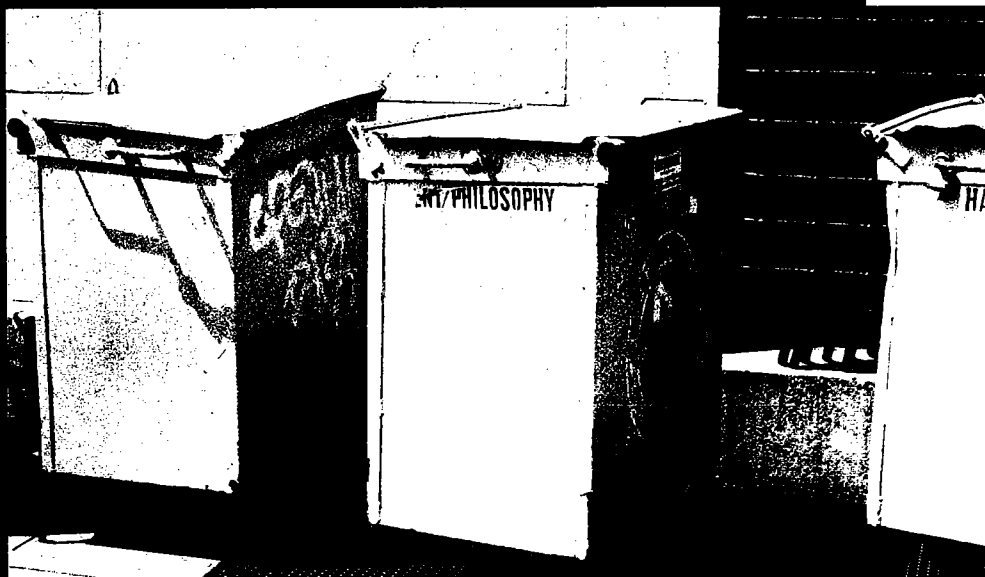
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## Book Reviews



*Philosophy and the Human Soul: Essays in Honor of Allan Bloom*

Edited by Michael Palmer and Thomas L. Pangle

Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1995 (300 pages, \$34.95 cloth).

This anthology, as its title indicates, is dedicated to the memory of Allan Bloom, late professor of political philosophy at the University of Chicago and member of its renowned Committee on Social Thought. Before teaching at Chicago, Bloom taught at Cornell, Tel Aviv, and Paris and became both pre-eminent and notorious for his scholarship on Plato's *Republic* and Rousseau's *Letter to D'Alembert* and *Emile*. Outside academic circles, Bloom is known for his 1987 best seller, *The Closing of the American Mind*, in which he warned Americans that their universities were failing in their important role as a counter-force to the worst tendencies of democracy, which emphasizes utility and:

Suppress[es] the claims of any kinds of superiority, conventional or natural, essentially by denying that there is superiority.<sup>1</sup>

That is, democracy tends toward nihilism and moral relativism, views that undermine the belief in natural rights and limited (i.e. constitutional) government.

Therein appears to lie the *raison d'être* of *Philosophy and the Human Soul*. This text is a collection of fifteen essays, varying in length from twelve to twenty-eight pages, composed by former students of Allan Bloom (excepting "Allan Bloom: A Reminiscence" by Dannhauser and an excerpt from the previously unpublished dissertation on Isocrates written by Bloom), the majority of whom are now established or upcoming scholars in the field of political philosophy. In general, the essays reflect the interests of Bloom: Plato, Machiavelli, Homer, and the subjects of love and friendship. But behind these essays is the belief that it is the duty of the American university and its scholars to act as an antidote to creeping nihilism and relativism. So, while saluting Bloom's accomplishments, this book attempts to continue Bloom's (and his teacher, Leo Strauss's) mission to preserve democracy in America.

Central to this effort is exposing students to the "great books" which either offer an explanation of our place in the cosmos (or absence of a place) or offer an example of the fantastic art that we can create. Some students will come away from this experience with a belief in natural right, something the opposite of nihilism. Other students (the elect?) will learn that human society is fragile and can easily slip into internecine and suicidal tumults unless the masses are kept sensible through the trumpeting of certain self-evident "truths" about humankind. All who study "great books," it is hoped, will learn, that contrary to the democratic impulse which declares all

expression mere opinion, and hence equal, there is high and low art, and hence, high and low being.

This said, the question to be asked by a reviewer is not whether they agree with Bloom's and Strauss's beliefs and their self-appointed objectives, but whether their disciples and fellow believers help their cause in *Philosophy and the Human Soul*.

Hillel Fradkin's essay, "Poet Kings: Biblical Perspective on Heroes," comes across as weak because it fails to persuade the reader that the "Bible's model of the hero is the poet-king"<sup>2</sup> on two counts: one, that the poet-king despite his clearly wrongheaded or sinful behavior is nonetheless a hero in the eyes of God (or the writers of the Bible), and two, that God even held the idea that there were "heroes" (a word which is usually ascribed to a man by other humans, not by a deity). Also disappointing is James Nichols's contribution, "Platonic Reflections on Philosophical Education," in which he attempts to describe Plato's ideal of education. A worthy and interesting task, but one which is destined to fail since he tries to do so in only ten pages.

Excepting these two, the quality of the essays, though varying somewhat, is generally speaking, quite good. More important is that they persuade the reader that the "great books of Western thought" are not great because they are Western, "but because they are great."<sup>3</sup> Two examples suffice to demonstrate this point.

First, Michael Palmer's "Kings, Philosophers, and Tyrants in Plato's *Republic*" claims, in very convincing fashion, that the confrontation at the home of Cephalus was a set up, initially of the rhetorician Thrasymachus, but more importantly of Polemarchus's brother Glaucon. Recognizing in Glaucon both an erotic soul and an attraction to politics, Polemarchus contrived to dissuade Glaucon from pursuing politics where he was destined to go mad on power. With the assistance of Socrates, Glaucon learns that:

The philosophic soul and the tyrannic soul are twins; fraternal, not identical: the philosopher is a very erotic man, like the tyrant.<sup>4</sup>

The tyrant is the most unhappy person because their soul is the "harmony of desire and spiritedness, with reason suppressed."<sup>5</sup> Thus the road of politics can only lead people like Glaucon to personal misery. Such exegesis is ripe with insights, for not only do we better grasp why the dialogue of the *Republic* takes the twists and turns it does but also it gives to readers who are versed in the *Symposium* yet another potential link between it and the *Republic*.

Second, Richard Ruderman's "Love and Friendship in Homer's *Odyssey*" helps bring to life a text which often bores students. Ruderman not only offers an interpretation which explains why Ulysses set out to sea to begin with (no doubt an important question), but also gives a psychological portrait of this mysterious character. Consider:

In fact, Odysseus's resistance to love and friendship is not only by design, it is part of the central goals of his wanderings, nay, his life...Responsibilities to his country, to companions, to wife and child, may well be what define a noble or even decent life but, for Odysseus, they also mark the extent to which his soul (or life) is not his, to be disposed of as he chooses...In strikingly modern fashion, Odysseus seeks to become a self-directing, authentic self who denies others the right to choose for him.<sup>6</sup>

While remaining true to the text, Ruderman shows us that humans with the wandering soul who cannot find lasting pleasure in the day-to-day life as a homeowner and spouse are not a modern peculiarity. People like this have lived throughout the ages, and in the *Odyssey* we are shown the pain and folly of this kind of soul. The inference being, "maybe Homer isn't just a dead white man who has nothing to say to me living here and now."

Returning to the question of this review, do the contributors succeed in showing that the "great books" are worth reading? In short, the answer is yes. The essays in *Philosophy and the Human Soul* demonstrate that every one of the classics of the Western tradition, whether one agrees with their various conclusions or not, is either an awe-inspiring piece of artistry or an instruction in some of the eternal verities of human existence. And some, like the *Republic*, are both. As such, they are worth study, and those who come in contact with them almost inevitably come out with either the appreciation that they have experienced great art or a belief that they have learned something about eternal truths. In either case, Strauss, Bloom, and those who agree with their understanding of "liberal education as a counterpoison to mass culture"<sup>7</sup> will be pleased. So too the contributors to this anthology should also be pleased. By devoting their essays to texts familiar to most of the Western world, and by keeping their essays under thirty pages but nonetheless profound, the contributors have made *Political Philosophy and the Human Soul* a collection that is accessible to undergraduates yet interesting and enlightening to those learned in the "great books." In sum, *Philosophy and the Human Soul* duly serves its designed purpose. As such, it is a fitting tribute to Bloom and his ability as a teacher. ♪

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), p. 329.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Palmer and Thomas L. Pangle, eds., *Philosophy and the Human Soul: Essays in Honor of Allan Bloom* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 1995), p. 63.

<sup>3</sup> *Philosophy and the Human Soul*, p. vii. Italics in original.

<sup>4</sup> *Philosophy and the Human Soul*, p. 145.

<sup>5</sup> *Philosophy and the Human Soul*, p. 145.

<sup>6</sup> *Philosophy and the Human Soul*, p. 37.