

Religion & Philosophy

THE DEFEAT OF THE MIND.

By Alain Finkielkraut. Translated by Judith Friedlander. Columbia Univ. Press. 165 pp. \$22.95

To most Americans, the current quarrel over "cultures" seems to be the product of unfortunate developments in U.S. society during the last few decades. Movements such as Afrocentrism and multiculturalism have arisen in this country, according to their proponents, in response to the continuing evils of racism or to the illegitimate claims to dominance of white America in particular or Western culture in general.

As Allan Bloom argued in *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), these particularistic claims have been especially successful in American higher education because widespread relativism has undermined the defense of culture in Matthew Arnold's sense as "the best that has been thought and said." "Cultures" have trumped "culture." This complaint was once considered conservative. But by the early 1990s, even such certified liberals as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., were decrying the cavalier deprecation of our real, if unfinished, achievements in civil rights and human dignity in favor of the disuniting of America.

Finkielkraut, a French intellectual of distinction and growing reputation, argues in this recently translated book that, *hélas*, the quarrel between civilization and cultures goes back at least to the 18th century. When Enlightenment Reason (initially French) and the universal rights of the French Revolution threatened the very existence of alternatives, they elicited a reaction. In Germany, Herder and the Romantics proposed national *Kultur* and the *Volksgeist* as humane counterweights to the powerful but abstract civilization of France.

Finkielkraut notes that these national characteristics quickly became complicated and intermixed. In Germany, Kant and Hegel accepted and further developed universalism. In France, a reactionary such as Joseph DeMaistre could invoke the French *peuple* against the universalism of the French revolutionaries. *Universal* and *particular* were not simply French or German, liberal or conservative, but could be used for

various purposes. Some figures, such as Goethe, switched sides: Goethe began as a Romantic but evolved into a proponent of universal human values and *Weltliteratur*.

As Finkielkraut points out, particularisms have a nasty history in the 20th century. From the anti-Dreyfusards in France to the contemporary advocates of *tercermundismo*, they have justified the crushing of individual rights and critical judgment. (Marxism, in Finkielkraut's view, was an antirational particularism of the proletariat despite its Hegelian underpinnings.) Ironically, says Finkielkraut, some of the very institutions created to prevent such movements from recurring soon began promoting them. UNESCO, for instance, was founded after World War II to spread universal principles after the lessons of Hitler. But it quickly fell prey to Claude Lévi-Strauss's anthropological reading of human history, which, out of honorable motives, refused to make judgments among different cultures.

Postmodernists relish such relativism because it underwrites a freedom in which what Michel Foucault called "absolute divergence" of thought reigns. Toward that end, no cultural or social practice can be "higher" than any other. Great works of art or thought, by definition, cannot exist. There can only be folkways and folklore in which, say, modes of shopping are as significant as serious music.

"Once hating culture becomes cultural in itself, the life of the mind loses all significance," the author warns. Worse yet, he finds that the "defeat of the mind" is already largely achieved. Without a successful counter action, Europe's (and, we might add, America's) only remaining attraction will be prosperity.

—Robert Royal

ARGUING EUTHANASIA: The Controversy over Mercy Killing, Assisted Suicide, and the "Right to Die."

Edited by Jonathan D. Moreno.
Touchstone/Simon & Schuster.
251 pp. \$11

In November 1994, the voters of Oregon overturned two millennia of medical tradi-

tion by allowing terminally ill patients to ask their physicians for "medication" to end life. If Ballot Measure 16 withstands all court challenges, Oregon will go beyond the precedent set by the Netherlands, where doctors may assist death with impunity (under guidelines) but without explicit legal sanction.

Among the 18 pointed essays collected here, readers will find fair and intelligent representation of both sides in the debate over assisted suicide and other forms of euthanasia. A few contributors, such as legal

theorist Ronald Dworkin, try to straddle the issue. (After asserting the sacredness of human life, he defends "choice" in interpreting what that means.)

But the thrust of this volume, whose contributors include physicians, medical ethicists, philosophers, and columnists, will not bring great comfort to supporters of the Hemlock Society. As Dr. Richard Selzer shows in a disturbing personal essay, the patient who begs for a lethal injection one day may ask for his life to be prolonged on the next.

—Jay Tolson

Science & Technology

ENGINEERS OF DREAMS: Great Bridge Builders and the Spanning of America.

By Henry Petroski.

Knopf. 479 pp. \$30

"Structural art" is what Petroski calls bridge design, and here he offers a spirited account of the lives and work of some of its leading practitioners. To earlier generations, the builders of great public structures were technological heroes, literally forging the unity of the nation. Petroski, a professor of engineering at Duke University, combines this half-forgotten sense of wonder with a keen analysis of the aesthetic, scientific, economic, and political choices facing his predecessors.

Focusing on five master engineers—James Eads, Theodore Cooper, Gustav Lindenthal, Othmar Ammann, and David Steinman—Petroski demonstrates that behind successful bridges lie both aesthetic vision and gritty financial and political skills. Unlike even the most ambitious buildings, bridges require agreements among municipal, state, and even national governments. For every site, there may be several plausible technologies. New designs appear, more attractive or economical, but not necessarily more durable. The imponderables include earthquake risk, future loads, and long-term maintenance. There are ugly surprises, such as the sudden collapse, in 1967, of the eye-bar suspension bridge in Point Pleasant, Ohio. And there are also unanticipated delights, including the lasting beauty, utility, and profitability of San Francisco's Golden Gate.

If graceful and economical design assured success, then bridge architecture would be a search for Platonic forms. Unfortunately, as Petroski shows, some solutions can be too elegant for their own good. Thanks to the deflection theory of the Latvian-born engineer Leon Moisseiff, the builder of the George Washington Bridge (Othmar Ammann) saved millions of dollars on steel. Yet the same slender-deck design has caused bridges to sway in crosswinds. In some cases, such as the Bronx-Whitestone Bridge, the only damage was to trusses, which ultimately had to be replaced. In others, such as the Tacoma-Narrows Bridge, the swaying caused the bridge to twist apart spectacularly.

Petroski cites research suggesting that bridge disasters occur in 30-year cycles. Each collapse promotes a new dominant design, which in turn encourages a new cadre of professionals, complete with interlocking consultantships, to grow in confidence and boldness until they lose touch

