

---

**On Looking Into the Abyss: Untimely  
Thoughts on Culture and Society**

by Gertrude Himmelfarb

Knopf • 1994 • 192 pages • \$23.00

---

Reviewed by Peter J. Boettke

---

Gertrude Himmelfarb is Professor Emeritus of History at the Graduate School of the City University of New York and the author of numerous studies in intellectual history (such as her studies on Acton and Mill) and the history of Victorian England. She is a wonderful writer who takes her vocation seriously—both in terms of turning a phrase and in doing the dirty work of historical scholarship. *On Looking Into the Abyss* is her reflections on the state of our intellectual culture. It is not optimistic. Literary criticism has disregarded the books it is supposed to comment on, and instead concerns itself with “theory” as if that were more important. Philosophy has embraced nihilism and history has abandoned the footnote. Himmelfarb’s message—one that should resonate with readers of *The Freeman*—is that ideas have consequences. Bad consequences in the political world, such as witnessed in the former Soviet Union or in Nazi Germany, are the result of bad ideas, not historical accident. Ideas matter and therefore we should all be serious in our dealings with ideas.

Sometimes Himmelfarb misses her target, other times she hits the nail right on the head. In reflecting on post-modernism, for example, she finds it too easy to discredit philosophical ideas because of the political association of the author, say, Martin

Heidegger or Paul de Man. Criticisms of their philosophical position are, of course, fair game, but to dismiss their work because of poor moral character on their behalf is another question. Himmelfarb and other critics would have to show how Heidegger's and de Man's scholarly work relates to their fascist affiliation. Maybe that can be demonstrated, but to my mind none of the critics have yet done so.

Himmelfarb is also weak, I think, in her examination of Mill's *On Liberty*. Certainly there is a tension in Mill, but to see in him a confusion between liberty and libertinism is perhaps stretching it. Readers of a conservative bent will find in Himmelfarb a great champion in their fight against the moral decline of our age and the intellectual bankruptcy of libertarianism. The good Mill, to her, is the one who reminds her of Tocqueville and Acton, the bad Mill sanctions the heroin-addict prostitute on the streets of New York. But, those who, like me, are much more comfortable with the libertarian position, and the liberal idea of tolerance for "experiments in living," will find that in her discussions of Mill, Himmelfarb is missing something fundamental about liberal virtues. Libertarianism does not mean libertinism (defined as the absence of responsibility), but libertarianism does mean absolute individual autonomy within those bounds of responsibility. We may not like how some choose to live their lives, but as long as responsibility for their choices lies with them and they do not invade my life, then they must be free . . . and this is a pre-condition for me to live the life I choose. As Albert Jay Nock emphasized in his "On Doing the Right Thing," the libertarian position must permit people to make mistakes in their choices of living not because it sanctions "immoral" behavior, but because it is only by permitting people to make their own choices and bear the consequence of those choices that "moral" living even has an opportunity to emerge as a norm.

On the other hand, with regard to the disappearance of the footnote in historical scholarship or in her critique of post-modern history, Himmelfarb is brilliant. She is a

practitioner of the "old" school of historical scholarship, and shuns the kind of social history often championed in scholarly circles today. The historian should be able to locate heroes and villains in the past and record their deeds. A constant theme in this volume is how the Holocaust, for example, becomes trivial under the influence of some of these trends in our current intellectual culture.

Certainly developments in philosophy and literature have questioned modernity and presented us with an interesting abyss to stare into. But Himmelfarb argues that we need not jump in. Our current generation, however, has already done so. At this point, Himmelfarb can no longer help. She has nothing to say once someone has fallen into the abyss; she offers no way out. Her strong suit is warning us not to jump in. Once in the abyss, what can get you out except some blind faith concerning moral reasoning? Scholarship, and the intellectual culture in general, necessitate "good reasons," not moral posturing. We are already in the post-modern moment. Appeals to modernity or even pre-modernity (like Alan Bloom gave us) are not going to get us anywhere. Classical liberal intellectuals at this time must engage the post-modernists. They must challenge the value of abandoning standards of historical and philosophical argument, champion the idea of liberal virtues and cosmopolitanism, and demonstrate the consequentialist grounds for these positions.

*On Looking Into the Abyss* is a very good book written by a serious thinker reflecting on the state of her culture. Himmelfarb offers the reader many insights. Her emphasis on the role of ideas in society is delightful, and her championing of the standards of scholarship is admirable. This is a book that readers of *The Freeman* will find of great benefit. Despite my reservations about the social-conservative political implications of Himmelfarb's reflections on our intellectual culture, I highly recommend her book. □

*Dr. Boettke teaches economics at New York University.*