

*Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life.* By Anthony T. Kronman: Yale University Press, 2007, 308 pp., \$17.50 (PB), ISBN: 978-0-300-14314-0.

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Anthony Kronman is bound to agitate the higher ups in humanities programs at most institutions of Higher Education in the United States, and there could not be a bigger compliment for him. As Nietzsche once remarked, one cannot be a good philosopher if one does not anger his contemporaries. I believe that Kronman has successfully done this. He is also in a position to do this, being a Sterling Professor of Law at Yale University, the former Dean of the Law school and currently a teacher in the Directed Studies Program at Yale. The thesis of the work is straightforward: humanities programs in American institutions of Higher Education are more interested in gaining funding, initiating research, being considered politically correct and above all emulating the natural and social sciences' quest for objectivity and validity than in pursuing their true purpose, the purpose of which they were created for, that of helping students answer the most fundamental question of existence, the meaning of life. While this book is an indispensable criticism of the sorry state of humanities education in American colleges and universities, the major flaw in it is that its attack does not go far enough.

The first chapter, entitled "What is living for?" reads like an essay on existentialism, and could really stand on its own. To support his claim that the meaning of life should be taught as a subject, this methodology suits his purpose well. He dissects the ambiguous question of meaning, and while it cannot yield concrete answers, Kronman does give some illuminating insights into exactly what meaning could entail. Kronman states that the question of the meaning of life can obviously not be answered in a scientific manner. There can not be one, objective and empirically verifiable answer. It is also removed from the concerns of daily life, it seems remote in a bureaucratic, industrial and profit driven world. Although it was not always like this and the rest of the book is devoted to assessing just how the question of meaning was removed from the universities, specifically the humanities.

The majority of book (chapters two, three and four) is a historical treatment of the question of meaning and how it has evolved in American Higher Education over the last 400 years. In chapters two and three, he divides the history of higher education into three phases. The first spanned from the creation of Harvard in 1636 until the Civil War in 1865, the second spanned from the 1870s until the 1960s, and the third began in the late 1960s and has continued to the present day. In the first phase, students in Higher Education in humanities entered a university and read a proscribed list of books over their four years, Western classics such as Plato and Augustine. The students were not meant to create any new knowledge; rather, they were simply to be equipped with the tools to understand the larger questions of life of which this literature pointed to. In addition, almost every university was considered Christian, and thus their curriculums were tied up with religious concerns.

After the civil war, by the 1870s, American higher education underwent a massive change. For one, institutions were increasingly liberated from theological concerns. In its place, Kronman argues that the phenomenon of Secular Humanism began to take hold. This was mainly due to an increasingly stock of human knowledge, particularly in the fields of industry and science. There was no single way to search for knowledge as under the old system, but rather various avenues opened up for the attainment of new knowledge, for new answers to the meaning of life. Here it is obvious that Kronman views this second phase of American higher education in humanities as the time of its greatest glory. The question of the meaning of life had finally been liberated from its theological constraints, and could be pursued with unmatched vigor. However, here he also points to the causes for its demise.

Chapter three deals specifically with what Kronman has termed “the Research Ideal.” Kronman points out that a major boon to American Higher Education was its influence from German universities. In the late eighteenth century, many American universities began emulating German universities which stressed research practices and the adding of new historical knowledge. He argues that in this climate, the question over the meaning of life became increasingly unprofessional. The meaning of life seemed like a childish question, reserved for private reflection, not the task of the universities. The task of the university was creating new knowledge.

Kronman argues that one of the factors of decline was the humanities emulation of science for acceptance by the public. The research ideal was suited very well to the sciences and social sciences. And while it allowed for gains in the humanities, Kronman ultimately argues that its results are mixed at best, and at worst have hurt the humanities greatly. The research ideal has essentially turned the humanities into a second rate scientific discipline, forcing it to produce results that it cannot. While this is undoubtedly true, Kronman almost completely ignores the influence of industry and capitalism. Kronman only makes one passing mention to the effects of industrialization and capitalism on education. While it cannot be denied that Kronman’s analysis has merit, especially his insistence that increasing scientific thinking makes us forget our humanity, the effects of industrialization and capitalism on education cannot be ignored. Education, while conforming to science, has also become a lackey of capitalism, and this is a sentiment that Kronman is curiously silent about.

Chapter four deals with Kronman’s last historical delineation. By the 1970s, he argues that the golden age of secular humanism had come to end due to the increasing headway made by the research ideal and by the idea of political correctness (also the title of the chapter), which had taken hold by the late 1960s. Multiculturalism, cultural relativism and the introduction and prevalence of non-western history were all to blame. He laments the fact that some Western thinkers, such as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine and Shakespeare are not diverse enough, are not “politically correct enough,” for many college curriculums, and thus the curriculums are purged, and room is made for more diverse authors which in his opinion lack merit. He cites the phenomenon of constructivism, or the belief that all values are simply the creations of a particular culture. Thus it follows that one set of values is equal to others. Kronman argues that whereas secular humanism unleashed a hitherto unknown freedom in regards to the search of the meaning of life, constructivism took much of it away again. Constructivism forced the question out of the hands of the university and back into the hands of the church.

The final chapter “Spirit in an Age of Science,” examines Kronman’s conclusions and suggested remedies. Ultimately, he believes that humanities should be charged with answering the question of the meaning of life. The question over the meaning of life should be asked and debated, that is the true meaning of education. Kronman argues that most people today agree that the question of the meaning of life is out of the hands of the universities. Thus, it has increasingly been taken up by the churches and religious institutions in twenty-first century America. His attack on organized religion is unrelenting, yet in my opinion well deserved. It is not simply an atheistic lambasting of religion, but one that penetrates to the core of the age old conflict between faith and reason, and the tensions associated with secular education in a Christian country. No matter how progressive a church or religious organization may claim to be, they nonetheless can only offer a closed vision of meaning, one based ultimately on dogmatic faith, not questioning reason. Here, I think Kronman would have done well to historicize this conflict a little more sufficiently, in order to lend it even more credibility. The tension between faith and reason has been an issue since the rise of universities and Scholasticism in the later Middle Ages, and this was of course transported to America later on. How can faith and reason be reconciled? Ultimately, Kronman advocates for reason to triumph, he makes an impassioned plea for the universities to take back the questions of meaning, so as to liberate it from dogmatic theology. In his view, there can be no reconciliation.

Kronman argues that the humanities must fill the emptiness created by modern science. Where science tries to make us forget our mortality, the humanities must make us conscious of our limits, and thus bring the question of meaning to the fore. Here, I think this is the book’s greatest strength and simultaneously its greatest weakness. What is needed is not just reclamation from modern science, but really a justification of human knowledge itself. I believe Kronman’s historical analysis is lacking, mainly by what he omits. And his omission stops him from truly illuminating the major problem of American Higher Education in the humanities. After the Enlightenment and particular the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror; many began to wonder if knowledge had gone too far. Some wondered if man reached his “rational limit,” while still others wondered if man’s knowledge only made him realize his own futility and purposelessness. During the eighteenth and nineteenth century, science along with socialism and militarism were feeble and overall unsuccessful attempts to answer this question, of why we are here and if we should be here at all. What the humanities have to do is not only reclaim the world from science (this is an ancillary task) but more importantly, eradicate the void posed by human knowledge itself.

While Kronman speaks progressively of the humanities reclaiming its lost position, his vision is nonetheless static in many respects. Contemplation of Plato and Augustine and the “timeless” questions of humanity can only yield a type of knowledge for curiosities sake. Only contemplation of Plato and Augustine through a modern cultural framework with modern problems in view can be of true practical use. Humanities education cannot be a hobby for the curiosity of a rich aristocracy. It must not only reclaim its position but invent a new one for itself; it must become the organ of movement for the continued existence of mankind in an increasingly indifferent and ultimately meaningless world.

Kronman's work is an indispensable pathological diagnosis of the sickness of the current state of humanities education; yet it is really just the first prick of the surgeon's scalpel which must go much deeper.