

Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life, by Anthony T. Kronman. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007, 320 pp., \$27.50 hardbound.

A Liberal Salute to Liberal Education

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Anthony Kronman's *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*, a defense of liberal education and the core, is spirited, immensely rewarding, and deserving of an attentive audience. That it was produced by a law professor and former law school dean rather than by a specialist in the liberal arts only emphasizes the lack of defenders from within the ranks these days. Unconvinced of the worth of liberal education, its practitioners must increasingly rely on the un-jaded support of bewitched outsiders. This is

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not to deny that any well-educated person might have something compelling to say about liberal learning. Liberal education has never been the exclusive provenance of a set of academic disciplines called “the liberal arts.” Yet it is a sobering fact that its defense increasingly appears to be left to “amateurs.” Thank God for them.

That the air has been sucked out of liberal education is obvious. The events and movements that have brought us to this pass are no secret, and the author chronicles and draws out the consequences of most of them. Yet this is far more than a competent intellectual history. From beginning to end, Kronman never loses sight of the highest (though not the only) purpose of liberal education: to provide students the means necessary to come to grips with the most important questions life poses, namely, what is life for, and what is his own life for? The gap between what human beings *qua* human beings *are*, and what they can or could be, provides the starting premise of liberal education. If we can know both our powers and our limitations as human beings, we can attain self-knowledge.

There are other arguments for liberal education—that it will encourage

clear thinking and precise expression, that it will pass on the historical roots of the time and situation in which we happen to find ourselves, that it will provide career-relevant skills—and Kronman affirms or dismisses each as the case demands, always with a view to keeping life's most serious and elusive questions central. At the very least, liberal education aims at producing some measure of what Robert Maynard Hutchins called “the higher learning”—learning that contributes to the pleasures of thinking and comprehending, to both the pursuit and the attainment of understanding. It fits the bearer for the most specifically human of human activities, intelligent conversation.

According to Kronman, the purpose of the liberal arts college and, to a lesser extent, the undergraduate core, is to provide the conditions under which understanding may be pursued by way of an organized, well-structured curriculum. Given that liberal education has been in decline for more than half a century, it should come as no surprise that examples of the core, that is, of a comprehensive, staged, and prescriptive curriculum, are more likely to be found in the past than in the present. Admiring the past is the sort of thing that critics are likely to pounce on, claiming that someone who does so

seeks a return to an idealized world that never was. However, the ever-present backward glance woven throughout this book implies no such thing. Kronman exhibits no desire to reverse the hands of time, or as Jacques Barzun put it, the hands of the “sacred clock—the one that nobody must ever appear to turn back, even when it strikes 13.” Kronman does pull a great deal from the past, but his arguments are not meant to falsify or idealize it.

The “old college” believed that its highest duty was to provide students with intellectual and moral guidance. Knowledge and experience were thought to be cumulative and teachable; the curriculum was forthrightly prescriptive, and the faculty sure of its worth and sure of itself. The new university believes that knowledge is ever expanding rather than fixed or accretive. It is not something to search for in the past, but something to search for in the future. This view of the instability and the constant expansion of knowledge undermines confidence in the humanities. Prescription, at least prescription with a clear conscience, is now a doubtful enterprise. Combined with late modernity's rejection of purpose in either nature or God, the research ideal has produced a break between knowledge and the good. The comprehensive,

prescriptive curriculum lost its reason for being.

In Kronman's view, a newer form of liberal education emerged in its place, one based squarely on secular humanism, something which requires neither certainty nor purpose. Secular humanism, Kronman tells us, is capable of accepting the loss of certainty or dogmatism (i.e., religious conviction) regarding purpose, and yet it does not require abandoning the pursuit of life's meaning. As a result, the previous "fixity" of the curriculum has become an "evolving tradition that forms a conversation of sufficient richness and strength to frame the student's search" for life's meaning. "This was the tradition of arts and letters whose spiritual vitality secular humanism affirmed." Secular humanism thus transformed the meaning of liberal education, and in so doing was able to preserve it through most of the twentieth century.

The certainty that originated in faith and in an outmoded view of science having been discredited, it is now suggested that all claims of trans-historical truth must be treated as bound by time and place, and therefore as illusions, beneficial or harmful according to one's tastes. Kronman appears to accept the rhetorical sleight of hand used to accomplish this, which is to insist that all claims for truth are claims

for "absolute" truth. It is no longer sufficient to demonstrate that a statement is true; it must be absolutely true.

"Absolute" is an awfully high—in fact an unattainable—standard, the very word serving as an invitation to an impossible defense, akin to attempting to prove a negative. Yet, one might argue that this standard is something of a straw man. Liberal education never claimed to have discovered "absolute" truth or even absolute truths.

Nevertheless, the solution provided by secular humanism during most of the twentieth century has been under attack from a virulent form of historicism in support of a radical multiculturalism and hyper-political correctness since the 1960s. As a result, it is no longer sufficient to denounce human nature as simply a comforting myth. Claims based upon human nature are now roundly to be condemned as expressions of power posing as truth, and therefore as justifications for those making the claim to impose their "truth"—read, "their will"—on others. Thus, the easy relativism embedded in early historicism (no ranking of cultures or ways of life, since this implies that some may be superior others), when combined with attempts to impose one's will or way of life under the banner of objectivity has transformed

the claim of objectivity into a subject of outright scorn in many quarters of the humanities. The relatively benign plurality of early historicism has, whether intended or not, spawned a visceral hatred of all things rational.

For Kronman, it follows that the crisis of liberal education is a “deeply spiritual crisis,” which is a way of saying that the loss of belief in a knowable human nature is *the* crisis of our time. Boundless technology discourages the idea that the horizon provided by our finitude might be a condition of “the meaningfulness of our lives.” Our current situation is characterized by a longing for the abolition of the very limits “whose final abolition, were it actually attainable,” would be the creation of non-humans. Unaware of the horizon imposed by our own mortality, we have become blind to the reality of the human condition. True, slipping the restraints of nature has produced a level of personal freedom never before experienced. Yet freedom from nature raises its own difficulties.

No longer able to consider questions about human nature, the just and the unjust, or the best regime, liberal education has lost its primary purpose. And, abandoning belief in a knowable human nature has exacted a terrible price from the humanities: it has “compromised their sense of purpose and self-esteem by cutting

them off from their connection” to the question of life’s purpose or purposes.

What, if anything, can be done about this? Unlike most supporters of liberal learning, Kronman appears to believe that the authority and self-confidence of the humanities can be restored. This restoration must be secular in all respects, as religious conviction cannot by definition be as pluralist and open as contemporary circumstances require. “No religion can accept the proposition that there are incommensurably different answers to the question of life’s meaning, among which no rank order can be fixed.” Nor does a return to classicism offer a solution, due to its no longer credible assumption that there is a single right way of living. For Kronman, then, all that is left is the secular humanism that he has claimed was able to breathe life into the humanities once before.

This raises the question whether is it altogether accurate to characterize the education that flourished in this country from the end of classicism to the mid-twentieth century as wholly an expression of secular humanism. It may be true that significant elements of secular humanism provided the basis for much of post-Civil War undergraduate education. Yet when this education was at its peak, very

few colleges either thought or acted on the view that religion and liberal education are incompatible. Hence, if Kronman's strictly non-religious version of secular humanism were to be put into practice, it is unlikely that the result would look anything like the liberal education he has described as the successor to nineteenth-century classicism.

Perhaps the most pressing question is, just what is it that one would study in the new secular humanist college—and why? As Kronman points out, “the authority of humanities teachers to lead their students in an exploration of the question of what living is for is a function of how seriously they take this question themselves.” Yet, according to the historicist-relativist dispensation that dominates higher education today, neither the opinions nor the lifestyles of other times and places can be taken seriously. To ask whether something is true or false, just or unjust, is to ask a meaningless question. One can learn *about* figures and events of the past, but not *from* them.

Evidently, then, liberal education must be about asking meaningless questions under the guidance of those who make no pretense of knowing or even being able to perceive, however dimly, the answers. Perhaps this is why Kronman speaks so eloquently about self-knowledge, yet is seldom able to provide non-trivial accounts of it. The choice of one's vocation is without doubt a serious matter; but it is a personal one, and in most cases it has little to do with gaining self-knowledge as that term has been traditionally understood.

This running criticism of Kronman's proposals may appear to suggest that the book's perceived faults outweigh its virtues. Nothing could be further from the truth. There is real insight and wisdom on display here, and an ardent enthusiasm for the grand questions of life. In *Education's End* these questions shake off the presumptuous intellectualism of the specialist and regain their moral and rational potency, drawing us into the almost forgotten inquiry of just what an education is for. This is virtue enough for any book.