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Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities have given up on the Meaning of Life

Anthony T. Kronman; (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2008).

Reviewed by Leslie C. Poe

What is the purpose of undergraduate education? For many students, education is synonymous with the acquisition of knowledge and skills that set the foundation for a specific vocation. This has not always been so. As Anthony T. Kronman outlines in *Education's End*, the original role of higher education was to prepare students for a life well-lived; a life centered on one thoughtfully answered question: what is meaning of life? While today's students seek their response to this question in sanctuaries and homes, their predecessors also wrestled with it in the classroom, guided by the wisdom of faculty members and the voices of a timeless curriculum. Why has this question disappeared from the lecture halls and conference rooms of our colleges and universities? What are the consequences of its absence? Is there any hope for its restoration?

Kronman answers these questions through five chapters outlining the historical and philosophical changes that have defined the nature of existential education. As professor of law and humanities at Yale University, Kronman's experience confirms his conviction that this epic question can be addressed in the university classroom. In addition, his position affords him the perspective of a faculty member in a devalued, so-called irrelevant discipline that has abdicated its responsibility for addressing this existential question concerning the meaning of life.

According to Kronman, "the lives we actually lead are the more-or-less well-thought-out answers we give to this question" (p. 9). It is a question that can only be answered personally, not suggested by a mentor or dictated by a parent or priest. It is illusive, dominating our thoughts in particular times of life but neglected in others. It is contextual, heavily influenced by where we have been and by the institutions that will outlive us. Our response to it shapes all other aspects of our lives. Kronman illustrates this idea as a reversed pyramid; a Maslow's hierarchy of needs turned upside-down. The foundation of life lies not in our many answers to everyday decisions but in the singular response to the question concerning the meaning of life.

Kronman argues that this question has long been the foundational subject of the college experience. From the early Age of Piety in which young men were guided through the classics by faculty whose ultimate duty was to God, through the attack on this dogmatic assurance in the mid-19th-century, this existential question remained central to the educational mission. Even as religious skepticism and scientific reason began to hold sway, the philosophy of secular humanism allowed the humanities to adapt this existential question—and its possible answers—into a pluralistic appreciation for the range of individuality, still rooted in the great conversation of the classics.

The efforts of secular humanism could not withstand two great threats to this existential question, and it is at this juncture that Kronman's argument becomes particularly interesting. First, he approaches the proliferation of research universities

and the ideals that bely them. Inspired by the German university, reinforced by a growing cultural priority on the sciences, and affirmed by federal actions like the Morrill Act, the American university quickly became a center for specialized discovery of new, applicable information. As quantifiable truth became the standard and progress became the goal, the idea of a great conversation with abstract thinkers of the past suddenly appeared silly, even unprofessional.

Kronman's second great threat, political correctness, found its origin in the mid-20th century. As the Civil Rights movement gained momentum, its demands for equality inevitably confronted an area of society that had traditionally placed minorities at a disadvantage: education. The resulting policy of affirmative action forced universities to recognize diversity as an essential asset to the educational experience. While Kronman does not deny the value of diversity and multiculturalism, he argues that their over-emphasis has hampered the fundamental goals of the liberal education. In his words:

The more a classroom resembles a gathering of delegates speaking on behalf of the groups they represent, the less congenial a place it becomes in which to explore questions of a personally meaningful kind including, above all, the question of what ultimately matters in life and why (p.151).

Kronman describes the diversity of today as a camouflaged return to the dogmatism of the Age of Piety; just as the way of God was the only viable option then, the way of political correctness is the only socially acceptable way of living today.

In addition, as technology dominates our lives and tempts us to deny our mortality and the urgency of life's greatest question, an emptiness results. While many attempt to fill it with family and friends, the church is the most common outlet for those seeking fulfillment. Churches enjoy a near monopoly on the meaning of life, largely because an answer lies at the heart of every religion. Yet Kronman argues that religions—tolerant though some of them may be—ultimately take a decisive stance on the meaning of life, a stance that denies individual choice and demands a "sacrifice of intellect" (p.198). As such, churches too fall short of Kronman's qualifications for guiding life's greatest question.

Kronman's conclusion is that our only hope for restoring the question to our colleges and universities is a return to secular humanism and the ancient conversation of the classics, guided by empowered professors of the humanities. Can this be done in the modern academy? Kronman believes that it can, not by the authority of college presidents or by the vote of faculty senates, but by change within individual teachers—a change in which the authority and sacred responsibility for broaching this existential subject is restored to the lecture, the syllabus, the classroom discussion, the one-on-one conversation. This is Kronman's challenge and hope: that colleges and universities be restored to their position as spiritual leaders in the search for life's meaning.

As a whole, Kronman's argument is well-developed and reminiscent of Parks (2000) and Holmes (1975). Though philosophically based, his style of writing is informal and personal (yet urgent and bold when necessary), making the book enjoyable for even the

most philosophobic reader. The most significant weaknesses in his argument lie in his reliance on anecdotal evidence and in his discussion of diversity (chapter four). Though the heart of his argument can be assumed by the end of the chapter, it is difficult to overlook what appears to be limited, out-of-date thinking. Nevertheless, Kronman should be commended for his boldness in making statements that most in this age of political correctness would shy away from.

The intensity of Kronman's crisis may differ between institutions. The Christian liberal arts university may even assume that it is doing well compared to its peers in secular higher education. That may be, yet Kronman's argument raises some thought-provoking ideas for us as well:

- Are Christian students predisposed to a limited view of life's meaning?
- How can we strike a balance between free exploration of the question and our obligation to our faith tradition?
- How does Scripture fit into the curriculum of the humanities?
- How can we give Godly counsel to our students without answering the question on their behalf?

These questions make *Education's End* a timely addition to the library of any member of the academy. It fortifies our work with students and spurs us on in our personal quests for the meaning of life.

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References:

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Parks, S. D. (2000). *Big questions, worthy dreams*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.