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by Anthony T. Kronman

Review by: Kurt Spellmeyer

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REVIEW: A Massive Failure of Imagination

Kurt Spellmeyer

Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life.
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Here's what happened. In the twentieth century, the humanities started strong and ended weak. For decades early on, English was the largest major nationwide and the English department was the envy of other departments. As late as the 1960s, a quarter of all college graduates majored in the humanities. The demand for Ph.D.'s in many fields was so great that the graduate schools couldn't keep up. Tenured positions had to go unfilled, and sums of money went unspent.

Flash forward forty years and it's a different world. The percentage of undergraduate degrees given to humanities students hovers between 8 and 12 percent. Every wave of faculty retirements sees the loss of tenured lines. Public universities have witnessed years of depressing cuts and givebacks. But there's something else that really hurts—a loss of influence and prestige. One fine day, it became very, very hard to suppose that disciplines like English played a central role in the culture of the time.

That's what happened, but why it happened is another matter. In societies, as in all complex systems, it's never easy simply to say, "This caused that." In fact, it's probably the case that no event has a single cause or a single effect. If you're willing to accept the proposition that the humanities are declining, the predicament almost surely follows from a concurrence of many causes. It all deserves a careful tracing out.

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Such care hasn't always been taken, however, and there may be a rush to judgment. When you tell the story of decline in English, for example, you might decide that the blame rests primarily with Derrida, Foucault, and the other apostles of "Theory." I must confess that I've made that argument myself and I'm still convinced by it. But, then again, the rise of Theory might have been a reaction to a collapse that was already underway—less an expression of hubris than a "Hail Mary" pass. Indeed, without the stratagem of Theory, the decline might even have been worse than it was. Or, just possibly, Derrida and company had no significant effect at all. The real stab in our backs might have come from the explosion of new media, or from a globalizing economy that heightened tensions felt most directly by the young. Even with the chance to explore the Copula and the mysteries of Power/Knowledge, fewer undergraduates might have chosen English if they thought they'd spend the rest of their lives waiting tables.

We don't know enough about what happened, and maybe we never will. It's important to recognize, however, that the sheer fact of decline offers a tempting occasion for anyone eager to settle old scores or advance new schemes. But, just as we can't say, "This caused that," with a high degree of precision, there's always a bit of a bluff in declaring, "This is guaranteed to fix it."

Education's End is a good example. It's not concerned with declining enrollments or the loss of faculty positions. But the book's appearance at a moment of great consternation lends its argument a force that it might otherwise lack. *Education's End* is a lineal descendant of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*. In fact, its roots go back even farther, to the elitist humanism of Irving Babbitt. It makes much the same argument that Bloom did and it has the same basic loyalties, but it does rather furtively what Bloom did in plain view. Bloom was brilliant enough, and suave enough, to put everything (almost) right out there—his contempt for the sixties and for popular culture, his Leo Straussian dislike of the Left, his University-of-Chicago neoclassicism. Kronman doesn't pack ammunition of that caliber. Instead, he asks questions and gives answers that are so free from complication that, in our present crisis, they might just take on a high degree of salience. And that would be a great shame.

"Whatever happened," this book asks, "to the Meaning of Life? Why has higher education turned its back on the Big Issues that once formed the core of the humanities?" Right out of the box, such questions practically invite ridicule: "the 'Meaning of Life'—you've got to be kidding!" But anyone responding in this vein becomes Exhibit A for Kronman's case. To dismiss such questions as gauche or wrongheaded is already to stand convicted of cynicism and mean spiritedness. That's the brilliance of Kronman's approach. It's like arguing with someone who's convinced that your immortal soul needs to be Saved. If you can't feel the Holy Spirit yet, it just proves that you're still hungry for redemption.

It's not for nothing that Kronman teaches law at Yale. An artful litigator indeed, he doesn't feel obliged to offer evidence of the deficiency that he sets out to rectify. Evidence would introduce multiple explanations, which always weaken a case whose appeal lies in its simplicity. Instead, he declares what seems self-evident to him. American colleges and universities are no longer willing to provide the life-transforming experience that once was education's primary mission:

I have written this book [because] I have watched the question of life's meaning lose its status as a subject of organized academic instruction and seen it pushed to the margins of professional respectability in the humanities, where it once occupied a central and honored place [. . .] [But there] are [still] humanities teachers who [can] recover the confidence they once possessed in their authority to lead the search for an answer to the question of life's purpose and value—[teachers who] were originally drawn to their work by this question itself and the need to be reconnected to it. (7–8)

Please pay close attention to the language here. Notice that the man says, "life's meaning," in the singular. I want to pause and read the small print because I'm doubtful about this basic claim. Life, after all, is a pretty big affair—is one Meaning really adequate? But we get some other crucial singulars a few lines down: "an answer to the question of life's purpose and value." One meaning, one question, one purpose, one value. What's the problem with multiples? We'll see in a just a moment.

Early in the book, Kronman takes great care to say that the search for life's meaning is "unavoidably personal." As he writes, "How I answer [the question of life's meaning] depends upon my interests, tastes, and talents, as well as my upbringing and social and economic circumstances—in short upon a thousand factors that distinguish me from you and everyone else" (10). And then, a little later, he says it again in case we missed it the first time around: "There is a second, deeper sense in which the question" of life's meaning "is personal to me. For it is a question that only I can answer. No one else in the world is competent to answer it for me, even if they know as much about my make-up as I do" (10).

At first sight, this way of thinking looks far more generous than the poststructuralist erasure of the subject or the claim that everything is predetermined by enormous, impersonal historical forces. There would appear to be room in Kronman's world for real freedom of thought and conscience, and that's refreshing in a society like ours, where ideological bullying takes place at virtually every level. But, as I went deeper into the book, I felt like a juror who was being prepped, ever so adroitly, to let a guilty party off the hook. And indeed the defendant is kept out of the room until after the closing argument. When he takes the stand, he does so as a mere Appendix—the reading list for Kronman's Directed Studies Program at Yale.

On the list, you see Homer, Aeschylus, excerpts from the Bible, Plato, Augustine, Shakespeare, Milton, Dostoevsky. The readings are arranged by categories: Lit-

erature, History and Politics, and Philosophy. One remarkable thing about this list is that it could have been compiled in the 1950s. There's not a single non-European on it, and just one woman, Hannah Arendt. In other words, this is a Great Books course and, in fact, an abridged survey of the Western Canon. It's as though Kronman jumped into a time machine at the start of the Kennedy era and emerged fifty years later with the same books that he'd read when he went off to college.

Now here's the catch. At the outset, you'll remember, Kronman promises his readers something like an unconditional freedom, but, by the end, he takes it away. In pursuit of *Life's Meaning*, we're not free to seek it out anywhere at all. No, we need to find it in a "conversation" that all Westerners are "invited" to join. It would seem that "invited" operates here as an offer that you can't refuse:

The conversation of the West invites a free and critical response to the inheritance it conveys. It insists that the past be studied and given the weight it deserves, but demands that one struggle to reimagine its claims in fresh and better ways, in a conversation that is permanently open. To be free of the restrictions one inherits when one joins an ongoing conversation of this kind is not freedom but the illusion of freedom. It is, in fact, a form of irresponsibility, for to think that even with the best of intentions one can create on one's own, with the help of one's contemporaries, a new conversation [. . .] is to arrogate to oneself immense and immodest powers. (170)

In other words, don't even think of stepping outside the Great Conversation. It's "free and open," but it "insists" and "demands." *The Meaning of Life* may be personal, but if you imagine that you have the right to create a conversation of your own, you stand exposed as morally defective. Is this really better than the Political Correctness that Kronman claims to deplore? Please notice also one other detail. His "conversation" prohibits not only any effort to leave the room but also any hope of bringing outsiders in. It is, as Kronman says, the "conversation of the West." If the ancient Jews had thought this way, they never would have put into their Bible the Sumerian myths of Eden and the Flood, or the idea, borrowed from the Persians, of a cosmic struggle between Good and Evil. The Greeks would never have become obsessed with geometry, first invented by the Egyptians. The Romans would never have adopted the Christian faith, nor would the French, the Poles, the English, or anyone else. To have done so would have been "the illusion of freedom" and a betrayal of their patrimonial "inheritance."

What we get here is the standard Great Books party line. Like his predecessors, Kronman presupposes that just reading those monuments of unaging intellect makes you a better human being. But this claim is just as much a superstition as the belief that rubbing the fur of a black cat makes your warts go away. People who are well versed in the Greeks, the Bible, Shakespeare, and the rest have proven themselves quite capable of the most extraordinary cruelty. Among those who sponsored the Conquest of the New World, many were the grateful recipients of a classical educa-

tion. The Great Books guided the British officers who strapped “Sepoi mutineers” to mortars and blew their bodies to pieces. Most notable of all were the Germans, of course. It would be hard to imagine a society that held the Western Canon in higher regard, yet, for all the talk of *Bildung*, the Conversation of the West didn’t stop German intellectuals from supporting Hitler en masse.

Please don’t think of this as “hitting below the belt.” One way to explain the last thirty years of scholarship in the humanities—which the time machine lets Kronman circumvent—is to say that it offered a chance for the West to address, at long last, its many failures. However confused, contorted, spiteful, derivative, and just plain wrong much of that scholarship happened to be, it represented an honest effort to take the past seriously. After the Conquest of the Americas, after slavery, after colonialism (which hasn’t really ended, by the way), and after Auschwitz, it’s deeply immoral and intellectually dishonest to pretend that all of this smoke and fire was just a little engine trouble and that basically the Great Tradition is as sound as the American dollar. Do you remember World War I and World War II and the hundred million people left dead by those events? Any civilization that refuses to acknowledge its own complicity in the wholesale derangement of the planet is living in the deepest self-deception.

The truth is that reading Socrates won’t make you a better person. Reading the Bible won’t make you a better person. Reading Shakespeare won’t make you a better person. Thinking so is an error of misplaced concreteness. It’s like thinking that because rain follows a thunderclap, the thunderclap made the rain. Readers of Socrates and the Bible and Shakespeare might have become a little better, but the particular books didn’t do it, and other books might have served just as well. We’re not talking about aesthetic quality; we’re talking about the moral character of our lives.

If what you’re after is to be a better human being, that achievement is much, much harder than reading some books, even Great ones. When any real improvement takes place, it makes the mind more open to not-knowing rather than more certain and well-grounded in tradition. First, you read a book or adopt a new way of thinking, and, for a while, it explains everything. But then you see that it doesn’t. Something’s been left out, or something’s absolutely wrong. And then you read another book, and, for a while, it explains everything. But then you see that it doesn’t either. Something’s been left out, or something’s absolutely wrong. This process goes on and on, and, after a time, you might come to regard the structures of knowledge as necessary but crippling, redemptive but destructive, civilizing but barbaric. Then you might begin to suspect that there’s no point at which this process will come to an end, and you’ll finally be There. And, if you have that humbling experience, it’s just possible that you might look at others with a little greater patience, forbearing, and curiosity.

When Kronman says that the meaning of life is a “subject that can be studied in school,” he’s half right, and I’m glad that he’s said it. Something important can happen in school, and we can help it happen, yet it almost certainly won’t happen in the way that he proposes. To see what I mean, please join me in what philosophers call a “thought experiment.”

Just imagine that, in your sophomore year, you registered for an English course in order to fulfill an elective. The title of the first book that you were assigned to read told you nothing about what would happen next: it was simply called *Wuthering Heights*. Whatever you expected or didn’t expect, reading this book was like entering a trance more vivid than any dream you’d ever had. But, then, off campus, something else was taking place: the first intimate relationship that you really cared about went careening down the tubes. The excitement of the book, together with the depth of your personal unhappiness, put you in an unfamiliar place. At times, it felt like being homeless—at other times, like your first taste of freedom.

More and more, you found yourself wondering who anybody really is. And then your teacher gave you some lines from a poem that seemed to crystallize everything that you felt just then:

“Put off that mask of burning gold
With emerald eyes.”
“O no, my dear, you make so bold
To find if hearts be wild and wise,
And yet not cold.”

Take off the mask—that’s exactly what you wanted. But the poem, by a man whose name you kept forgetting, ended with advice that turned your mind around 180 degrees. He seemed to say that the point wasn’t to take off the mask at all, but to feel the “fire” burning behind it.

For reasons you never stopped to explore, you signed up for some very strange courses for the next semester. Throughout the spring, you spent three hours weekly discussing Socrates’s injunction “Know thyself.” (Yes, Plato is worth reading.) And then, that same semester, you worked your way through *The Awakening* and a chapter from a book called *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which was like looking at your own mind from the outside.

The semester after that, you read *V.* and *The Golden Notebook*. You went into the city with a few of your friends and saw paintings by a man named Jackson Pollock, and you woke up before dawn with those paintings in your mind. A friend took you to hear the music of Lou Harrison, whom you thought might have been one of the Beatles. On the stage, the musicians banged cans and metal tubes, but somehow all of this clatter organized itself into a current of sound as elegant as lace and as natural as grass. From the handbill, you learned about Harrison’s long love affair with In-

dian and Indonesian music, and that handbill sent you to a course the following term called, "Religions of the East." You read *The Bhagavad Gita* and the *Tao Te Ching*, and you decided to study Mandarin.

Imperceptibly, something had happened to you. For a few amazing months, everything you read or saw or talked about seemed to open doors into yourself and the world. You even started reading on your own.

The purpose of this "thought experiment" is to ask you to consider for yourself whether your undergraduate years traced out something like the same trajectory. If you're twentysomething and they didn't, there really is a problem. But if this sort of thing is still happening to students, the humanities are doing what they do best, even though the numbers are dropping. We might ask how we can do more of it and how we can do it in new ways, but we shouldn't be cajoled into blaming our victories for our defeats.

Kronman wants us to do just that. But Kronman might have profoundly misjudged what the humanities have to offer. Do people really want "the Meaning of Life," or are they looking for richer ways of being alive? The difference is more than semantic because the two aren't at all the same. Reading *The Golden Notebook*, seeing Jackson Pollock, and listening to Lou Harrison might all bring about an important existential change: a broadened awareness of possibilities and a deeper sense of gratitude for life itself. Yet such adventures of the mind and spirit probably won't ever culminate in one coherent system of judgment or explanation. I know that there's a kind of person out there who says, "It's all in Plato," "It's all in the Bible," or "It's all in the Great Books"—but it's not. No poem, story, novel, play, painting, musical composition, or philosophical essay has a single meaning. Why would it stand to reason that a life ought to have one, especially when life, so-called, is the general field out of which all of these cultural artifacts emerge? If life is the raw material from which human meaning gets made, it's the last place where we should expect to find anything in the singular. One could also note in passing that modernity begins with just this recognition, typically in an implicit and ambivalent way. Modernity (which hasn't ended either) is all about replacing The Meaning of Life with the search for connections to a universe more alive, diverse, and mysterious than any cultural tradition has fully understood.

In making his case for Western tradition, Kronman is not above trying to scare his readers with various bogeymen. His rogues' gallery includes many stock figures from conservative polemics—shrill feminists, smoldering leftists, and other academic inquisitors. He also places blame on professional specialization, which does indeed deserve a critical rethinking. But, on this subject, as on others in the book, the rhetoric of simplification works to obscure much that could be learned. When the humanities first started to pattern themselves on the sciences and technical professions, they didn't surrender moral authority, as Kronman alleges. In the era of profession-

alism, the nature of moral authority changed, and the humanities changed in response. The aftermath had its pluses and minuses, its costs as well as its opportunities. *Education's End*, however, is not the place where those distinctions get weighed out.

Bad as specialization seems, it turns out to be the least of the bogeys that Kronman warns against. Even more frightening are the other two: fundamentalist religion and science. Kronman writes with loving nostalgia for the faith-based education of the nineteenth century, and he lards some pages so heavily with the word "God" that you have to think he's some kind of believer. But, intellectually, Kronman describes himself as an advocate of "secular humanism," which he understands as replacing God with tradition. From this standpoint, he sounds a clarion against the growing power of fundamentalism. Our only hope, he warns, is to stop fighting among ourselves and rally round the Great Books, much as enemies abroad induce our President to constrict debate here at home.

About secularism, Kronman nearly has a point. Although he doesn't say so, for three hundred years literate people in the West have gone to the arts and humanities for the tools that they needed to enrich their lives and transform their ways of thinking. Books such as *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, *Sentimental Journey*, and *On the Road* shaped whole generations. So did the music of Beethoven, Franz Liszt, and Joni Mitchell. By comparison, what many people got from the houses of worship, if they even bothered to go there, ran a distant, plodding second. It may sound odd to say so, but the greatest spiritual achievements of the early nineteenth century were created by the Romantic poets, not by theologians. And the Romantics were succeeded by the French Impressionists. Without any reference to god or heaven or anything of the kind, *Déjeuner sur L'Herbe* is as powerful a spiritual statement as the Sistine Chapel. And so, for that matter, is Georgia O'Keefe's *Faraway Nearby*.

Fundamentalism could end all that. But, just as life has many meanings and not one, so there's not a single Christianity or a single "real" Islam. At a time when we need all of the friends that we can get, is it wise to raise up yet another wall along yet another border? Martin Luther King wasn't Christian in exactly the same manner as Pat Robertson. And the one man, other than Jesus, who might have inspired King the most was Mohandas K. Gandhi, as devout a Hindu as any member of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party. I see King and Gandhi as preeminent examples of whatever ethical intelligence the humanities claim to impart. But there's another argument for including religion in the humanities. How can we make sense of our current world without it? Indeed, some understanding of the inner lives of Moslems seems to me more urgent and enlightening than an acquaintance with *The Symposium*. In an age when our imperial aspirations have put the survival of whole nations at risk, young Americans would be far better served by reading Gandhi than by going back to Machiavelli.

Much the same holds true for science. Kronman's idea is to render unto science all objective knowledge of the physical world, while shoring up our authority over the inner life:

At the very heart of our civilization, with its vast powers of control, there is an emptiness that science has created and cannot fill. It is an emptiness that many people feel and it is a cause of much anguish and yearning. It is the nursery bed of that great upwelling of religious feeling, of the surge of fundamentalist belief, that is such a striking feature of life today. [. . .] To this yearning, which many in our colleges and universities wrongly dismiss as a kind of mindless obscurantism, the humanities offer the best response we have. (229)

Thoughtful people wrote words like these in the 1950s. Their aim was to establish the same division of labor that Kronman proposes, but it ultimately proved unsustainable. The humanities were supposed to remind us of our limits as mortals and provide an inner check on the quest of science for greater and greater control over the world. But when travelers use a time machine, they miss the opportunity to learn from events, such the failure of the humanities to market themselves in this way.

Assuming that people really feel the emptiness that Kronman describes, it surely preceded science. Wasn't *Fear and Trembling* on the reading list? It seems to me more likely that science was a response to this emptiness, not the cause. Indeed, our intimations of emptiness may be the well from which all of our creativity springs. Long before we had the technology to put men and women into space, our restless minds were already dreaming of a journey to the stars. Maybe there, we hoped without much conviction, the emptiness would go away.

The wall between the humanities and science failed for another reason. Consider one commonplace example. Few technological innovations have been as liberating and transformative as the birth control pill. Women didn't just use the pill, however. The pill transformed what it meant to live as women—and as men. This pattern reaches back to our prehistory. Although it's true that early hominids learned to use tools, tool use itself actually created *Homo sapiens*. This is why the humanities can't avoid a deeper engagement with both science and technology. We can't wall them off in the way that Kronman proposes because, like the arts, they give expression to the fundamental openness of our human nature.

Although it should be abundantly clear by now that I'm skeptical about Kronman's argument, he has a powerful ally, albeit an unwitting one. That ally is the humanities themselves in their current state. Please excuse me for telling one additional story, this one true and not a "thought experiment." About a year ago, a prominent figure in English came to Rutgers, where I teach. She was invited by the Indian Students Association because of her cachet as the world's leading figure in postcolonial scholarship. And, also, she was born in India. Unable to attend, I asked one of my much younger Indian friends to report on the talk a few days later. My friend has

what Robert Penn Warren once described as “first class brains.” A Ph.D. candidate in microbiology, she has already published several notable papers and will soon start a highly competitive postdoc at Princeton.

“I couldn’t understand it,” she told me later, “but then again, I’m not that smart when it comes to these ideas.”

It turned out that my friend was not the only one who didn’t feel smart enough. As far as I could ascertain, many in the audience were baffled. During the question-and-answer period, a number of students had asked the distinguished professor why she chose not to communicate in a way that was more accessible to ordinary people. Basically, she made it clear to them that she was an Intellectual. It was the job of the audience to reach up.

From a pragmatic standpoint, there’s something stunningly unintelligent about delivering a public talk that the public can’t understand. I know, I know, the speaker was subverting the standard categories and forcing her listeners to confront the interpellations of ideology. But in this case, it just didn’t work, did it? Language that can’t be understood has no transformative power. It’s noise. Over the last twenty years, such noisy events have happened all the time, not only in public but also in print. They make the simplicity of Kronman’s book all the more enticing.

Between Kronman and our postcolonial diva, we truly face a Hobson’s choice. Both paths entail a massive failure of imagination at a time when we need imagination more than ever.

In that spirit, we might give some thought to a range of other alternatives. For example, the humanities could play a greater role in sustaining a vital culture of the arts, which they pushed to the margins in the heyday of Theory. The arts exist primarily to demonstrate ways of making the world more coherent: they showcase modes of experience that enlarge our ability to see, to act, to know, to feel, and to share. I recognize that this idea of the arts gives offense to many, but the problem isn’t with arts themselves—it lies with our past pretensions about them. Once we jettison the genius in his or her studio, to say nothing of the antiquated wreckage of aesthetics, we can see the arts for what they’ve always been: dramatic enactments of a creativity inherent in many things that people do. Knowing this, fields like English might extend their reach beyond connoisseurship and critique by welcoming cultural production more warmly than in times past. When we talk about making poems, blogs, or videos, the stakes are rather higher than the artifacts: what actually gets made is humanness itself.

Pulling down the wall between the humanities and the arts, we might also dismantle the one that divides the humanities from the sciences and social disciplines. Rather than confine ourselves arbitrarily to a body of knowledge that looks smaller every day, we might proceed as though our legitimate concern was the human dimension of every field, from economics to cosmology. Most of us don’t know beans

about stem cell lines, but we could certainly participate in the debates about genetic technology. And it wouldn't hurt to do a little further reading as well. We might redeploy the tools developed to make sense of Sophocles and the Renaissance, Titian, D. H. Lawrence, and Wittgenstein in contexts that our predecessors saw as *déclassé*. If this sounds too much like "cultural studies," whose failure still hangs in the air like a bad smell, just imagine what that undertaking might have become without its posturing and contentiousness. It's still not too late to try again. Why would other disciplines treat us with contempt if we really wanted to assist them in the understanding of their own work?

In the last remove, however, the humanities' survival depends on their ability to strengthen and enlarge the various public spheres that constitute whatever remains of civil society in postdemocratic America. When students have the opportunity to work against the fragmentation of the curriculum—bringing together economics and environmental science, or medicine and anthropology, or literature and the media—they are creating the knowledge needed to prevent the phrase "educated citizen" from becoming a term of ironic derision.

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