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Conservatism Might Not Be What You Think It Is

by Mark G. Brennan

True Conservatism: Reclaiming our Humanity in an Arrogant Age, Anthony T. Kronman, Yale University Press, 2025, pp. 328, $25.00 hardcover.

Skim the pages of *National Review*. Watch Sean Hannity's nightly monologue. Listen to Lindsay Graham. Better yet, don't. Former Yale Law School Dean Anthony Kronman already has. His conclusion—"The conservative cause has lost its way"—will only surprise long-time *National Review* subscribers who fall asleep every night to Fox News screaming for war against Iran (IX). And that's only after they've donated what's left of their Social Security checks to Lindsay Graham's umpteenth senatorial campaign.

Kronman's new book, *True Conservatism: Reclaiming Our Humanity in an Arrogant Age*, won't appeal to the aforementioned, so-called conservatives. Instead, his work harnesses his decades of law school instruction and his Ph.D. in philosophy to explain conservatism's enduring verities, and how they came about. Flying in the face of the Republican Party's opportunistic platform, Kronman's conservatism "reminds us of the worth of custom and inheritance" as well as "the dignity ... of the human longing for a connection to the eternal and divine" (IX). He will leave MAGA minds reeling when he argues for these "timeless goods" and their natural harmony with the "modern ideals of liberty, toleration, and reasoned argument," as opposed to just voting our way to prosperity (IX).

Unfortunately, Kronman aimed his book at the wrong audience. His intended readers, those who maintain "a progressive view of life and feel no attraction to conservative values," refuse to engage in civil discussion nowadays. And no reasonable person could expect them to work their way through 251 pages of rigorous argumentation that will show them why their most cherished beliefs make little sense. Nonetheless, this reviewer has no right to

cast judgment on another author's good intentions. But Yale University Press's marketers should have hijacked the editorial process to attract the book's real audience, thus: "This book will teach today's conservatives what conservatism is, and why it is right."

Kronman takes one full paragraph to outline "the conservative cast of mind." True conservatives abhor "speed, abrupt change, and discontinuities in practice and taste" almost as much as they despise "large abstractions untethered from habit and custom." Their "instinctive mistrust of enthusiasm, charisma, and utopian dreams" explains why they question today's artificial intelligence mania, keep at arms-length from the likes of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and reject nation building, respectively. True conservatives also marvel at life's complexity. "Rigid judgments and partisan polarities" run smack into their belief "that most people are too complicated ... to be celebrated or reviled as wholly good or bad." Lastly, despite their mistaken reputation as cynics, conservatives cling to the optimistic hope that "it is almost always possible to do at least a little bit better" (235).

Sadly, this indispensable summary doesn't appear until the book's last chapter. It nonetheless stands on the rock solid foundation of the previous chapters' rigid logic, serious scholarship, and concise prose.

Even before he sets out to construct this "conservative cast of mind" framework, Kronman does the same for progressivism. He boils down progressivism's "attitude or disposition" to a relentless cry for "more justice, greater equality, and better science, not less" (2). While progressives will quibble amongst themselves about how many genders exist or which American taxpayers should fund NPR, their smug self-righteousness reassures them that their "basic values are sound." Their ideological revolutionary spirit has long convinced them their political problems are solely "the result of imperfect devotion" to leftist dogma (2). And they will have nothing to do with Kronman's text. Its intellectual demands would only distract them from their never-ending crusade to immanentize the eschaton.

Basta on the psychopathology of progressivism! The editors have not given me enough space to spell out Kronman's argument in its entirety, let alone to put progressive thought in the overflowing wastebasket labeled "Really Bad Ideas." So I offer this pithy summary of Kronman's highlights instead, but with a proviso. Those who have ever wondered whether "it is possible to be faithful to the spirit of philosophy and a conservative too" need to immerse themselves in Kronman's work (233). Short answer: it is.

Kronman kicks off his philosophical tour with a comparison of Cicero and Tocqueville. He explains how Cicero's "ideal of connoisseurship," which put its thumb on the scale in favor of inheritance over invention, flew in the face of Tocqueville's positive view of equality, the *summum bonum* of progressivism

(36). Yet they differed by degree. Tocqueville understood equality's limitations, even as he distanced himself from Cicero's elitism.

Tocqueville feared that the "democratic passion for equality" could lead to three disastrous outcomes (36). First, conformism, or the "tyranny of majority opinion," could become what Kronman aptly terms "the nursery bed for a novel species of despotism," like, say, cancel culture (36). Second, an abiding belief in equality could also lead to a stultifying mediocrity, which would "deny the intrinsic worth of greatness in learning and the arts," as a visit to the Venice Biennale will confirm (37). And lastly, materialism tends to elevate "material concerns to a position of overriding importance," as the popularity of undergraduate business education proves (38). Tocqueville's prescience never ceases to amaze.

Kronman ends his Cicero-Tocqueville tug-of-war with a long overdue apology for "our institutions of high culture" (49). Conservatives need to understand his position. The more that progressives endeavor to "puncture the aristocratic pretensions of art and learning"—whether by tearing down public statues or bowdlerizing classic art collections—the more conservatives will need to justify their counterrevolutionary arguments with historical precedent and philosophical coherence (54). Kronman supplies abundant forensic ammunition for that battle.

Like every other political issue no matter how trivial, progressives will take umbrage at Kronman's analyses of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Chauvinistic "big c" Conservatives will also blanch when he minimizes some of American Exceptionalism's sacred tenets that they love to cherry pick from the founding documents. Nothing in the Constitution "explained or justified" the horrors of slavery (141). Instead, Kronman tells us to look for its condemnation in the Declaration's explication of the "transcendent norms of a moral or theological kind that apply to all people at all times" (141). And, as he explains, when political regimes violate these timeless truths, "Absolute rights or duties" take precedence. Ethical certainties "enjoy a moral and epistemic priority over all merely political privileges and obligations" (147). Sadly, such obvious reminders have become all the more necessary; moral relativism now vies with equality as the West's highest aspiration. In that sense, the Declaration exists in a pre-political sense. Murder was always and everywhere wrong, even before the American Revolution's deep thinkers put their quill pens to sheepskin parchment.

By contrast, the Constitution's authors turned their attention to "questions of institutional design and durability, not the vindication of God-given rights" as the Declaration spelled out (153). In Kronman's assessment, the Constitution addresses "the problem of power." Its well-designed checks and balances foil human ambition (153). They also temper mobs, arguably the

Framers' greatest fear. Even originalism, the closest we get to a conservative judicial ideology, comes in for inspection.

Kronman speaks truth to the powers that be at Con Inc. and the Federalist Society when he admits that "originalists may support conservative positions," (180) but their support isn't based on conservative principles, due to originalism's Lockean tilt. Like its antithesis, judicial activism, originalism's fixation on a single historical moment rejects David Hume's "valorizing power of time" (179). And contrary to the mechanics of Locke's contractualism, Hume insisted that our beliefs "acquire legitimacy only because they last" (180). A strict adherence to originalist interpretations skirts Hume's ideal of "the normative value of adjustment, delay, and habit" (180).

As I mentioned earlier, life is complicated. The adults in the room—conservatives—must remember this. In doing so they will find much sense in Kronman's Humean warning that originalism "elevates the authority of the moment, the instant" at the expense of delay and habit (180). After knocking conservatives off their originalism hobby horse, Kronman then politely suggests they look to Alexander Bickel's "more promising though underappreciated strain of conservative thought" which builds on the Humean "value of delay in the adjudication of constitutional questions" (180,181). Unlike progressives, Kronman doesn't just tear down. He also builds.

Finally, *True Conservatism* reminds us of what we have forgotten from Philosophy 101—assuming we attended college before the Age of Woke. Aristotle taught us to rely on "practical judgment" in lieu of "deductive rigor" when debating politics (237). Burke preferred the "friendship for the dead" and the "need for a wall between the here and the hereafter" to political abstractions (239). Like Hume, Burke extolled the "value of delay," or what Kronman identifies as not just "a conservative idea," but quite possibly "*the* conservative idea" (239, 243). And Kant reminded us that rules aren't just "accidental or contingent" (244). Kronman explains how all these thinkers, in dialog and in disagreement, wove in parts of the complex tapestry we know as conservatism.

Throughout the text, Kronman makes conservatives rethink some of their first principles, at the same time that he reaffirms others. Skeptical introspection leads to intellectual growth. His coda praises a thinker your Philosophy 101 professor probably overlooked as he rushed to exalt Foucault, Sartre, and Derrida lest the department chairman throw a hissy fit: Baruch Spinoza, "the 'prince' of philosophers," according to French Postmodernist Gilles Deleuze.

No one knows why Spinoza sported a signet ring engraved with the word "*Caute*," Latin for "caution" (251). But Kronman speculates as to why the great Jewish thinker chose that word. It will come as little surprise that his conjecture echoes his earlier description of

the "conservative frame of mind." It deserves full quotation:

> Proceed with modesty and care in cultivating your personal character; in respecting the fragility of the political order, and in the ecstatic work of thinking, whose extravagance demands that we proceed with utmost rigor by making sure at every step that we have not been unhinged by the passion for eternity that carries us up and out of the world of human things (251).

Anthony Kronman has added an important work to the genre I will oxymoronically call "Practical Academic Philosophy." His book is not an easy read. For those who want to understand it, multiple readings will be required, much like the price one must pay to learn from Alasdair McIntyre's *After Virtue*. Kronman forces conservatives to question their priors, as his takedown of originalism makes clear. Then again, improvement only comes "with utmost rigor" even as Kronman's erudite presentation "carries us up and out of the world of human things."

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