AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE

THE EXAMINED LIFE: ROBERT GEORGE AND CORNEL WEST ON THE PURPOSE OF LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

THE STATE OF THE AMERICAN CAMPUS

INTRODUCTION AND MODERATOR: RAMESH PONNURU, AEI

PANELISTS:

ROBERT P. GEORGE, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

CORNEL R. WEST, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

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RAMESH PONNURU: (In progress) — welcome you to “The examined life: What is the purpose of a liberal arts education?” And we have two extremely distinguished people to discuss that issue. I’m planning to spend about an hour introducing them — (laughter) — based on what I’m looking at in front of me, and then we’ll have a discussion, and then we’ll open it up for questions.

I’ll start with Robert P. George, who holds the Princeton University’s McCormick Chair in Jurisprudence and is the founding director of the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions. He served as chairman of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom and before that on the President’s Council on Bioethics and as a presidential appointee to the US Commission on Civil Rights. He also served as the US member of UNESCO’s World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology. He is a former judicial fellow at the Supreme Court, where he received the Justice Tom C. Clark Award. He is the author of books such as “In Defense of Natural Law,” “Making Men Moral,” “The Clash of Orthodoxies,” and “Conscience and Its Enemies.” His scholarly articles and reviews have appeared in the Harvard Law Review, the Yale Law Journal, the Columbia Law Review, the American Journal of Jurisprudence, the Review of Politics. He is a recipient of the United States Presidential Citizes Medal, the Honorific Medal for the Defense of Human Rights of the Republic of Poland, and many other national and international honors, including Princeton University’s President’s Award for Distinguished Teaching. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and holds 19 honorary doctorates of law, ethics, science, letters, divinity, humanities, law and moral values, civil law, humane letters, and juridical science. A graduate of Swarthmore College, he holds J.D. and M.T.S. degrees from Harvard University and a Ph.D. from Oxford University. This month, he will receive the degrees of B.C.L. and D.C.L. from Oxford University.

Glad to hear you’re finally getting your degrees, Robbie. And just imagine how long that would have been if I had included everything.

Cornel West is the Class of 1943 University Professor in the Center for African-American Studies, emeritus, and senior scholar in the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton University. He has also taught at Yale University, Harvard University, the University of Paris, and Union Theological Seminary. He has written and edited more than 30 books, including his memoir, “Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud,” “Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight against Imperialism,” and “Race Matters.” His most recent releases, “The Radical King” and “Black Prophetic Fire,” were received with critical acclaim. Dr. West is well-known as a justice, antipoverty activist, and distinguished scholar. He has co-chaired the Democratic Socialists of America and is a founder of the Network of Spiritual Progressives. He co-chaired the National Parenting Organization’s Task Force on Parent Empowerment and participated in President Clinton’s National Conversation on Race. He is a frequent guest on “Real Time with Bill Maher,” “The Colbert Report,” CNN, C-SPAN, and Democracy
Now. He made his film debut in “The Matrix” and was the commentator with Ken Wilbur on the official trilogy, released in 2004. He also has appeared in more than 25 documentaries and films, including “Examined Life,” “Call & Response,” “Sidewalk,” and “Stand.” He has made three spoken-word albums, including “Never Forget,” collaborating with Jill Scott, Andre 3000, KRS-One, Gerald Levert, and Prince. Dr. West has received more than 20 honorary doctorates. He graduated magna cum laude from Harvard University in three years and obtained his M.A. and Ph.D. in philosophy at Princeton University.

So not just two people we collected from the street, as you can tell. In addition, both of these gentlemen were professors of mine when I was an undergrad at Princeton. I took their classes. They set the agenda. They asked the questions. They handed out the grades, so the unofficial theme of today is payback. (Laughter.)

A note to those of you who are watching online. We are able to field questions from our online audience today. To submit a question online, please go to sli.do and enter code AEIevent. It’s very easy. You just enter your name, type in your question, and submit it. And if you’re lucky, we’ll choose to discuss it. Once again, that’s sli.do. Thank you. All right. (Applause.)

So the great thing about being moderator when you’re dealing with professors is they are used to talking at 50 minutes at a stretch. That’s also the bad thing about moderating a panel of professors. But I thought I would start with a pretty open-ended question because I believe that when you have a panel asking a question, what is the purpose of liberal arts, well, you ought to address that question. What is the purpose of a liberal arts education? This might be a special interest to those who are have shelled out the money to have one, which I’m guessing is quite a few of the people in this audience.

ROBERT GEORGE: Well, before launching into an answer to that question, let me begin by thanking AEI and thanking Arthur Brooks for the opportunity to be here. A special word of thanks to Dan D’Aniello. It’s great. This is my first opportunity to be in the building that he was the lead giver for — AEI deserves to be in digs of this sort, and to Mr. D’Aniello, who has taken a lead in making it possible. So all praise to Dan D’Aniello for that generosity.

And what a great pleasure it is to be with our former student, Ramesh Ponnuru. He studies with both Cornel and with me. I won. (Laughter.) He won a few, but it is great. I’m so proud of Ramesh. Yesterday, there was a celebration of Ramesh’s 20 years with National Review. It seems like just yesterday that we unleashed him on the world, but it’s been 20 years and 20 very productive, extraordinary years in which he’s established himself as one of our nation’s leading political commentators. And I’m just overflowing with pride in him. His beloved father, Mr. Ponnuru, is here, and he must be my only competition for pride in Ramesh and all that Ramesh has accomplished, and that’s great.
And what a joy it is, as it always is, to be here with my dear friend and brother, Professor West. We have been working together now for almost a decade, going back to 2007. It will be our 10th anniversary. It will be our 10th anniversary next year. And we’ve been preaching a certain gospel. And that gospel is the gospel of the examined life. It’s the gospel of liberal arts education. It’s a gospel that is all about interrogating your own assumptions and presuppositions. In an age of ideology, it’s hard to think of what could be more important than the self-critical attitude and the virtues of intellectual humility and love of truth that are at the core of liberal arts learning.

Brother Cornel has been a model and an example and an inspiration for me in that respect. Our teaching together has been such a pleasure. We get to teach outstanding students. We didn’t have Ramesh together in our classroom. We taught him — we were separately teaching him. We hadn’t started teaching together yet. But even with our wonderful students, it’s a challenge these days to provoke them to serious self-critical reflection, to get them to understand the importance and the value of leading an examined life.

And, Ramesh, that’s the answer to your question. We’ll dig deeper. We’ll go down deeper, but the first and most important thing I want to say is that there’s a good reason that the title of this forum is the examined life and the subtitle is the question “What’s the point of a liberal arts education?” The title answers the subtitle’s question. The point of a liberal arts education is an examined life.

But here’s the thing: it’s not obvious to everyone that an examined life is worth living. It’s not obvious to everyone that we ought to lead an examined life because our age is not only an age of ideology. Our age is an age of the celebration and valorization of wealth, power, influence, status, prestige. Those things are not bad in themselves, but they easily and all too often become the competition for leading an examined life.

Why should I lead an examined life when I can go after the brass ring of wealth, power, prestige, influence, status? Why do I want to when an examined life will call into question the time and energy I spend, the devotion I give to seeking worldly goods? By goods I don’t just mean toys like Teslas and iPhones. I mean things that we regard as good things, like wealth and power and prestige and status.

Why should we? The examined life may very well lead in another direction. It may lead us to embrace a vocation, which is utterly inconsistent with the things that the world today, in this age of ideology and in this age of feeling, things very different from those that are regarded as the things worth having, the things that will not pay off in terms of wealth and power and prestige and status and influence.

And yet, our task, if we believe in liberal arts education, is to provoke our students to ask the question “What’s the point?” and to see that the answer to that question is an examined life, to raise the possibility with them in their own minds that an examined life is indeed worth living and, as Plato said, perhaps an unexamined life is not worth living. Perhaps the wealth and the prestige and the status and the power and
influence are mere dross. Maybe the real meaning of life, what it’s really all about is something different, something that can only be obtained through critical self-examination.

And a liberal arts education makes available to us, makes available to our students, for those of us who are professors, the wisdom, the insight, the probing questions of Plato and Augustine and Dante and Shakespeare and Locke and Newman and Gandhi and King. If you look at the kinds of authors that Cornel and I in our courses together, in our courses separately, expose our students to, those are the folks who are on the menu. And they’re not there just because they write well — the great prose stylists. They’re there because they ask the critical questions and force the reader to confront the deep issues about what it means to be a human being. They are people who have attempted themselves to lead examined lives and who show the way, who chart the course to an examined life.

So there, for starters, is what I think the point of liberal arts education is.

Cornel?

CORNEL WEST: Absolutely. Let me first say I am blessed to be here and be able to see Ramesh, a former student, flowering and flourishing in a way that he is to meet the captain of the ship, my new dear brother, Arthur Brooks, wrestling with happiness, (eudaimonia ?) in the fascinating way that he does. And then to be part of a series at actually a moment in which the history of this institution going back to 1938 and still going strong opens a new space, and I think the timing of the opening of this new space and the beginning of a new era of the Trump administration could be downright providential if in fact we take seriously what it means to live an examined life.

Now, to be here with my dear brother Robbie, I could just go on and on and on. I have a deep love for this brother. I have a deep respect for this brother. A lot of people don’t understand and realize that you can have a deep love and respect for somebody and still think he’s wrong about a number of things. (Laughter.) He knows there are things I’m wrong about, a number, but we work it out together.

It is not just the fact that we share a very deep commitment to our Christian faith but, actually, we have a deep commitment to wrestling with the most terrifying question any of us have to wrestle with in our short trek from momma’s womb to tomb, and that is what it means to be human — Latin, humando, burial, what it means to be on the way to the culinary delight of terrestrial worms, and as you’ll engage in that process, what kind of choices will you make in terms of the kind of human being you choose to be. I’m blessed now with the Princeton freshman seminar in the Madison program to teach a course on Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King Jr. These are two of the great prophetic figures in the most catastrophic of all centuries in recorded time, the 20th century, over 150 million people killed in the name of some ideology.
And I tell my students each time, you have come here to learn how to die. And they kind of look at each other. Just started with the freshman seminar at Princeton. No, no, no. (Laughter.) I mean, Plato said, philosophia, love of wisdom, philosophy is a meditation on the preparation for death. And to learn how to die is to muster the courage to critically examine yourself, the courage to interrogate yourself so that you must wrestle with a certain doctrine and dogma that may have to die — certain xenophobic prejudice, certain assumption or presupposition you’ve had in your life, you’re holding on for dear life and you have to let it go. That’s a form of death. And there is no learning how to live well without learning how to die in that sense. Death itself in — (inaudible) — sense, death in life. And to think one can live a life in denial of that process of learning how to die is precisely to live an ossified and petrified life in which you’re frozen oftentimes in a very childish and adolescent moment as opposed to childlike and humble moment. Montaigne says to philosophize is to learn how to die. Seneca says he or she who learns how to die unlearns slavery.

Now, I think that in our present moment, we’re living in a moment of spiritual blackout and moral breakdown in which people are unwilling to want to be vulnerable enough and courageous enough to critically examine themselves across political lines, ideological lines. We’re talking about humanity at this point. It’s deeper than skin color, deeper than gender, deeper than sexual orientation, deeper than national identity. It’s our human identity as the kind of linguistically conscious organisms that we are transacting with our environment. And it has everything to do with the future of very fragile experiments in democracy.

So to go back to the legacy of Athens, the examined life — the untransformed life, the uncommitted life results in forms of complacency and conformity in which one simply adjusts to the dominant forces. The dominant forces in our society, I would argue, are market forces, the obsession of just getting over making money or obsessed with the 11th commandment: thou shall not get caught. And a spiritual blackout is about the eclipse of integrity, the eclipse of honesty, the eclipse of decency. And once that goes, no matter what our ideological or political orientations are, we’re just on the way to the survival of the slickest. Thrasyvachus wins in the “Republic.” You see, (pirate ?), might does make right. The grand inquisitor wins Dostoyevsky’s “Brothers Karamazov.” Manipulation and domination do reign, and that’s a very frightening moment. I’m not talking about just individuals because, I mean, I’m not just talking about Brother Trump, even though we could start that.

But this is something that cuts across the culture. And, of course, this is transnational, too, because it’s global, but it cuts across the culture and the legacy of Athens and the legacy of Jerusalem, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam admit that in their best and their prophetic forms especially provide some way in which we can enact an examined life without opting for agreement, of thinking that we’re going to reach the same conclusions.

And that’s one of the wonderful things that we’re able to do, especially at Princeton and other places that talk to the young people and say, yes, let’s learn how to
die together so we can learn how to live well together, even as we disagree on some very deep issues.

MR. PONNURU: I’m trying to picture telling my parents in 1990, yes, it is a lot of money to go to Princeton, but don’t you want me to learn how to die? (Laughter.) It seems to me that our dominant way of thinking about the purpose of college has more to do with wage premiums these days. And, I mean, is that inherently wrong to think about the economic value of getting a college education?

MR. GEORGE: No. It’s not inherently wrong at all, and it’s part of the story. Even when I was talking about the way in which the desire for wealth and power and influence and prestige and status can’t compete with the desire to truly lead an examined life, I made the point that those are not bad things in themselves. Those things are not to be condemned. Think of the good you can do with wealth. Think of the good that you can do with power if you’re a good power. We want power in the hands of good people who use it well. Influence? Sure. We need people, good people who have influence. Status? Yeah. Status can translate into influence. Good things can be done. Those things are not bad in themselves.

But what we don’t want is for higher education across the board to be instrumentalized to the goal of, for the individual, career attainment, and for the society as a whole, simply training our workforce for the new economy or the next stage of the economy. Again, no because those things are bad in themselves or have no role to play. It’s because of the potential they have, unless we’re serious about preventing it, is to squeeze out the true liberal arts ideals.

Now, let me speak for a moment autobiographically. Some of you here I know know my own personal story. I introduce it here not to just tell my story, but because I think it addresses your point — your question, Ramesh.

My grandparents were immigrants. Both of my grandfathers were coal miners in West Virginia and Southwestern Pennsylvania, in Appalachia. Neither of my grandparents or, for that matter, my parents went to college. For my grandparents, it wasn’t even thinkable. The idea that you would go to college wasn’t — it would be like going to Mars or going to the moon. You wouldn’t consider that even a possibility. It was just scratching out a living, hoping the mines were working this week and not down — that there wasn’t a strike or things weren’t shut down. That was their lives.

So for my parents, as the children of immigrants, people who were striving, for them, what college meant for their children, for myself and my four brothers, was upward social mobility. It was advancement. It was having a better job. It was having a greater income. It was having higher status. Generations of relatively poor immigrants have wanted that for their children. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with that.

But growing up with that background understanding of what college, what higher education was all about, it came as a bit of a shock to me when I actually encountered the
great teachers of mankind as an undergraduate — when I read Plato and Augustin and Dante and Shakespeare and realized the intrinsic and not merely instrumental value of engaging seriously with these writers and thinkers, that there was something that was not reducible simply to getting a better job, having a higher income, or even being more entertaining company at a cocktail party because you quote from the “Tempest” — that there was something in itself valuable about this engagement, that we human creatures, constituted as we are, mere dust of the earth, mere animals, but spiritual creatures, creatures with rational power. Something about us is such that our fulfillment, our integral fulfillment depends in part in our intellectual engagement. And the higher the level of intellectual engagement, the deeper, the richer the fulfillment.

In rightly praising Arthur’s work, Arthur Brooks’ work on happiness, Cornel slipped in that Greek term, eudaimonia, often translated as happiness, but these days, since happiness has taken on an almost exclusively psychologistic connotation, it would actually be better translated as fulfillment or flourishing or all-around well-being. Our all-around well-being includes not only our physical health as biological organisms, not only our social well-being as social creatures who can only be fulfilled in families and communities and with relationships with other people, not simply our moral well-being in terms of good character, although what could be more important than that, but it also includes our intellectual well-being. And that cannot be reduced simply to its instrumental component.

And yet, as I go around the country — Cornel and I both lecture in a lot of places around the country — as I go around the country, I see college after college and university after university, many of which were institutions devoted to liberal arts learning, many of which were institutions — some famous, some not so famous — who did an excellent job for decades or even generations of providing liberal arts learning. At institution after institution, I find liberal arts relegated to the status of service department with the focus now being on skills. So the dominant majors are business, communications, computer science — those are all great things. Again, this is not to condemn them at all. And if a student is called to a business major, great, terrific. But there are colleges that didn’t have an undergraduate business major 20 years ago, whose number one major statistically now is business. And the college’s own identity has had to shift, sometimes just to keep the doors open. Sometimes in order to get the enrollments needed, to pay the bills for faculty and staff, they’ve had to shift away from their traditional vocation to liberal arts learning, toward skill development with the focus on what kind of a job you can get coming out of here. And to me, for countless individuals who would deeply benefit from a liberal arts education, and who, other things being equal, would opt or a liberal arts education, and for our society, which needs people educated in the liberal arts tradition, this is a deep loss and one that I hope we will not be satisfied to leave as a loss.

I think there are still many institutions that can turn themselves around. Those institutions that still hold to liberal arts ideals can do it better, and they should set themselves the task of doing it better. And those that have abandoned or nearly
abandoned liberal arts ideals, I hope that we can find a way for them to be restored to their traditional vocation and still pay the bills and still keep the lights on. I’m a realist. I understand that we have economic realities. There are market realities.

MR. WEST: Absolutely.

MR. GEORGE: There are reasons that particularly small colleges that are on the edge financially have moved in the direction that they’ve moved. But this is not something that I think we as a society can take lightly or simply be satisfied with. It is a loss to all of us to see liberal arts education decline. All of us have a stake in the richness of the lives that are led by all us. That’s why we want to do something about poverty. That’s why we want to do something about environmental degradation. That’s why we want to do something about justice. It’s because we all realize we all have a stake in the all-around well-being of everybody.

But that includes our intellectual well-being. We have a stake in what kind of people Americans are going to be. And we can’t just legislate that people will be rich, well-rounded critical thinkers. We can’t do that. It’s a much more complicated job, but it’s a job that many of us should be about the business of pursuing — to restore the liberal arts ideal where it can be restored in our educational institutions.

And, you know, and it’s not just — this is not some condemnation of business. There are colleges and universities and seminaries in this country where the liberal arts ideal is not being compromised because of the desire to get people good jobs in the tech sector or in the financial sector. Sometimes it’s social justice, right? People want to know — students want to know, “Why should I bother studying Plato or St. Augustinewhen that’s not relevant to my mission to change the world as soon as I get out of this seminary or as soon as I get out of Oberlin or Reed or Swarthmore?”

Well, that, too, is no less a dangerous to the liberal arts ideal. It’s still an instrumentalization of learning, an instrumentalization of knowledge, an instrumentalization of these institutions to some cause other than liberal arts learning, the examined life, and comes at a cost to that ideal.

Do you agree with that?

MR. WEST: No, I do. I do. I mean, again, on a very personal note, that I am who I am because somebody loved me, somebody tended to me, cared for me so that I begin first on a note of piety. Piety is not uncritical obedience to some authority or some blind faith to some tradition. It’s an acknowledgment of the sources of good in one’s life and the indebtedness one has to those figures, voices, texts that have helped shape you to the best that you are, and we’ve all got the worst in us.

And so when I hear, for example, the claims about you go to college in order to gain access to a skill, to make some big money to live in some vanilla suburb and have some trophy spouse, I say to myself, how spiritually hollow and morally shallow. He or
she who views life as a gold rush ends up worshipping the golden calf, or reduces the golden rule to he or she who has the gold rules, back to the victory of Thrasymachus in the “Republic,” might makes right.

The liberal arts tradition, and that’s — in a way, that’s almost too abstract, what we’re really talking about is certain virtues, the enabling virtue, courage, justice, discipline, self-sacrifice, and as a Christian I call it gnosis — the courage to empty yourself by serving others and putting the needs of others above or alongside those of oneself. Now, I come out of a — Brother Robbie and I talk about this all the time — see, I come out of the history of a people who have been terrorized in America for 400 years, but taught America so much about how to engage in the quest for liberty. That’s Frederick Douglass. He’s terrorized but he doesn’t terrorize back. He wants freedom for everybody. He’s hated, but what black people do at our best, John Coltrane, “A Love Supreme.” Mama, “A Raisin in the Sun,” Lorraine Hansberry, never has there been a figure full of so much love on the American stage. That’s true for Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and Eugene O’Neill — none of them have a figure full of so much love like Mama. Or Toni Morrison’s “Beloved” is complicated, it’s still about love. James Baldwin — I could go on and on, you see.

So that’s my tradition. I have to be true to that tradition even if I’m the last person around because I have to be true to what I think is the best that went into me. Now, when my father dropped me off in college, he said, now, Corn — that’s what he called me; he’s been dead now for 22 years, but he’s still alive and his afterlife in part manifests in my life — he said, I’m not preoccupied with your grades, even though I want you to do the best that you can, but I’m concerned about what kind of human being is going to be in your life in this moment at Harvard will empower you. You’ve already been shaped. What kind of armor will you have in your move from mama’s womb to tomb. But that’s dad echoing me every day.

So when you talk about wages, I say, oh, no. I’m going to make some money because I’ve got loved ones I want to take care of. You see — and I’m not like some of my deeply Catholic brothers and sisters who make vows of poverty. I appreciate that tradition, but I don’t think it’s going to be a mass movement. (Laughter.) I’m not part of that movement but I am concerned about integrity, honesty, decency. It has nothing to do with purity, nothing to do about pristine, nothing to do about having a monopoly on Truth, capital T. It has to do with what kind of human being will you be in your quest for these — and you can do that as a physicist, engineer, computer scientist major, and so forth and so on.

But I do believe in all honesty that we’re in a deep moral and spiritual crisis. The liberal arts tries to get us to look at the world through moral and spiritual lens, whatever our traditions are, so that the sense of what it means to be human is not reduced to just money making, status seeking, manipulation, domination. Those are the dominant forces in human history. Human history is a cycle of hatred and revenge and resentment, domination, exploitation, and subordination. How do you interrupt those? That’s what Plato is concerned about. Why is Plato concerned about it? Because his mentor
condemned — Socrates. He said, I’m going to make the world safe for the legacy of Socrates so every generation will have to come to terms with his example, the enactment of an examined life. And Plato pulled it off pretty well.

Many of us are proud to be part of that conversation even as we radically disagree with Plato’s conclusion, these authoritarian, crypto-fascist infanticide, a whole lot of other things going on in his texts that we radically call into question in the name of other elements in his texts: dialogue, critical exchange, resistance to what you consider to be evil and so forth and so on. And the same is true for Jesus. The same is true for Amos. Same is true for Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer. We can go on and on, Grace Boggs, Dorothy Day — these are the figures who cut radically against the grain, trying to create some interruptions from the dominant cycles of hatred, revenge, and domination and exploitation from the beginning of time up to this very celebratory moment for this institution.

MR. PONNURU: Both of you have talked about the various virtues that a liberal arts education encourages and that are also necessary if you are to achieve the goods of a liberal arts education. And I wonder if you’ve noticed any change in how well our society is equipping young people with those virtues as they come in to college. Certainly one gets the impression from reading about various controversies on campuses that a lot of young people are not only not willing to engage in a dialogue with multiple points of view, but are sort of taken aback by that possibility — just sort of psychologically unprepared for it.

MR. WEST: That’s a good question.

MR. GEORGE: Well, it seems to me that at the base of the crisis in liberal arts education and at the base of some of our other crises — and we’ve got a lot of them — it’s fundamentally a spiritual problem. Now, there are other dimensions to it. I mean, I’ve already mentioned some. I mean, market forces are part of the problem. You’re only going to get liberal arts education if somebody is prepared and able to pay for liberal arts education. It doesn’t pay for itself. And so it’s all too easily considered to be a luxury. I think we have to resist that.

But even more fundamentally I think than the market forces, at the base of the crisis is a spiritual problem, and that’s what your question is really pointing to. It’s a problem about what we think the meaning of life is, what we value, what makes life worth living if anything does make life worth living.

I think the dominant goal for most people these days, or at least many people these days — perhaps I shouldn’t be quite so judgmental — is feeling good. It’s having satisfaction. People find it in different places, look for it in different places, often look for it in all the wrong places. But they’re after a certain psychological status, a certain desirable psychological state. I mean, nobody wants — except kind of crazy people want money for its own sake. I don’t think our problem is fundamentally greed. It’s something deeper and more difficult to handle.
Why do people want money? Because prestige comes with it. Why do — or status. Why do people want prestige and status? Because you feel good. It makes you feel good. It’s like a drug. It’s the same reason people like applause. It’s the same reason people, including students at universities, are so conformist, so unwilling to cut against the grain, so unwilling to question the campus dogmas and orthodoxies, because if you do, you get criticism, and that doesn’t feel good. What feels good is applause. It’s like a drug. It’s addictive like a drug. And to avoid that drug, you need spiritual strength.

And even though we’re still formally at least a fairly religious society — we have many, many different traditions of faith, we’re still a fairly religious society — the infection has even entered our religions, our religious traditions, our religious communities. So there’s not coming out of our religious communities a fundamental and consistent critique of the doctrine of the — the key doctrine of the me generation: if it feels good, do it.

You know, intellectual histories and social historians are fond of breaking up the epochs into the age of this and the age of that. So we’re often told that the Medieval Period was the age of faith and the Enlightenment was the age of reason. And that’s an oversimplification, but there’s some truth to that. It’s an oversimplification because there was an awful lot of concern about reason in the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment was far from bereft of faith, especially if you move out of the French Enlightenment, you start talking about, for example, the Scottish Enlightenment. But there’s some truth in those things.

But if the Medieval Period was the age of faith and the Enlightenment was the age of reason, what’s our age? Well, it seems to me that our age is the age of feeling, just as in the medieval period, faith was the touchstone of truth, of value, of goodness, of rightness, of justice, and in the Enlightenment, reason, science was the touchstone of truth and value and justice and rightness. In our age it’s feeling that’s the touchstone of good and justice and rightness. And feeling, unlike faith and reason, just in itself — there’s nothing wrong with feeling in itself, but just in itself, it’s subjective. It’s not objective. Feeling can give us no objective standards to which to hold ourselves or others, under which to praise or condemn regimes of law, regimes of government, or economies or any other social institutions.

And the age of feeling — feeling is what slips into the role of governor when faith and reason are abandoned, when they lose their status, when they lose their prestige, when they lose their authority. And that’s what you get — I think what Cornell is calling spiritual blackout. You get spiritual blackout when feeling is the whole thing and what we’re after is feeling good. Some people seek that in very, very bad and dangerous ways: through drugs, promiscuity. Other people seek it in other ways, less physically dangerous but perhaps no less spiritually dangerous: through the status and prestige that comes with wealth or power or what have you.
But it’s still a misguided goal as a fundamental goal. Again, there’s nothing wrong in itself about feeling or desiring to feel good, but if that’s your fundamental goal, then you’ve got a deep spiritual problem. And the last thing you’re going to be looking for is the examined life. You will not see the point of the examined life because what it does is make you feel bad.

The examined life is a life in which you’re constantly questioning yourself. You’re subjecting yourself to self-criticism. Intellectual humility is a central virtue because in order to carry out the enterprise of self-criticism, you have to actually deal with the possibility that you might be wrong, and that’s hard, especially if changing your view would result in your being stigmatized, ostracized, isolated on your campus or in your community, whether your community is right, left, center, Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim — whatever your community is. Seeking the examined life can be a very dangerous thing if what you’re after in life is satisfaction and feeling good. It’s a probe. It’s a prod. It’s a disruptor.

And yet, I think if we are self-critical, if we are thoughtful, if we engage that aspect of ourselves that is the defining aspect of our humanity, we will even through the haze, perhaps only through a glass darkly, but nevertheless we will see, we will perceive the value, the preciousness of the examined life and the need for the spiritual strength to carry it out.

MR. WEST: I was thinking, Brother Robbie, you tell me — I wonder whether beneath the feeling that you’re talking about is really the threat of nihilism. And what I mean by that is the feeling becomes an escape from the real possibility that life has no meaning, that there’s a lovelessness, a hopelessness, and the only way in which you feel as if you have some significance is to feel good.

Now, if that’s the case, and what we’re really coming to terms with is nihilism in all of its various forms, and this is why I’ve always argued that we really live in the age of Chekhov. Even though he died 1904, his spirit is dominant in our day. And it’s no accident that Chekhov is the most population playwright alongside Shakespeare around the world, not just in the United States. And, of course, Chekhov was probably the most un-American literary artist of the late 19th, early 20th century.

If America is about limitless possibility, no restraints, nothing can hold us, and we get that every January in the State of the Union because we are Americans. The last two paragraphs of the “Great Gatsby,” Gatsby believed in the green light because tomorrow will be better, bigger, stronger, mightier. That’s America, ascribing metaphysical status to futurity, to the future, consequences, pragmatism, generating effects — that’s who we are as a people, profoundly romantic. Chekhov was the opposite. He starts with limitations. He starts with constraints. He starts with catastrophe. America has problems; everybody else has got catastrophes. John Dewey, problematic situation, pragmatism. Chekhov says, no. The catastrophic is the starting point. Learn to make catastrophe your intimate companion. That’s Chekhov. That’s “The Cherry Orchard.” That’s “Seagull.” That’s “In the Ravine.” That’s our moment.
Now, if we’re in denial about catastrophe, then there’s no accident we’re going to look for these instant gratifications and feeling better and grabbing for status and power because we don’t want to come to terms with the underside of our situation and condition, which is dealing with forms of catastrophe. And, of course, catastrophe is on its way to all of our houses. When our parents die, our loved ones die, and so forth and so on. That is catastrophic. That’s not a problem. The body in the coffin is not problematic. That’s a catastrophe to your soul, your life, and how do you respond in that way?

And I think part of the problem with spiritual blackout these days in the United States, and it’s a kind of indictment in some ways of our educational system, is that we have not adequately prepared our fellow citizens, not just those who go to college. One reason why I’ve taught in prisons for 37 years is that the paideia that we’re talking about, this deep education that we’re talking about, has to be widely available. It can’t just be available to those that gain access to institutions of higher learning. About two-thirds of our fellow citizens never go to college. They’re going to get their education one way or the other. They turn on the television, not too high quality, listen to the music, and I listen to Stephen Sondheim. If they’d listen to Sondheim every day, it would be a different situation because that’s some serious paideia going on in his music. They listen to the flattened, narrow, parochial stuff for titillation and stimulation, not for self-examination.

And what happens is democracies run out of moral and spiritual capital. All the policies in the world cannot sustain a social experiment when your moral and spiritual capital is running out and Thrasymanchus wins, might makes right, so forth and so on.

Does that makes sense to what —

MR. GEORGE: Yeah. I think it does. I mean, nihilism —

MR. WEST: And you jump in at any time now, brother, because you’re an interlocutor here. You’re not just —

MR. PONNURU: It’s taken me back to sitting in the front row of good days, or sometimes the bad.

MR. GEORGE: Well, what is nihilism? Nihilism is the loss of belief that anything really matters.

MR. WEST: Really matters.

MR. GEORGE: Nihilism is what you get when there is spiritual collapse. The spiritual knowledge is the knowledge that there are things that matter.

MR. WEST: That matter.

MR. GEORGE: There are things that are worth living for.
MR. WEST: Living and dying for.


MR. WEST: That’s right.

MR. GEORGE: Things worth suffering for, things worth sacrificing for. But let’s just look at the most dramatic situations, not because they’re the only ones and the spiritual poverty — what Mother Theresa called the spiritual poverty, as she herself pointed out transcends race, class, ethnicity, you name it, right? It’s all over the place. But let’s just look at the most obvious cases. Poor, largely minority, inner-city areas; old Rust Belt cities, my native Appalachia. Drug problem totally out of control. Why? Why are people turning to heroin in New Hampshire and Logan County, West Virginia, and Harlan County, Kentucky, and South Bend, Indiana, and Dubuque? Why?

People don’t feel as though anything matters, that they’re looking to feel good, something that will make them feel good. People want to at least feel like they matter, something matters. And when they can’t find that, when they’re in the condition of nihilism, you will turn to something else. Now, drugs are just the kind of gross, obvious example for people who are very poor, who don’t have an alternative, although it also affects people who are very rich. But for a lot of people who are very rich, they can find that. They can look for that in a less obviously physically dangerous way. And it can, in its pathological forms, take the form of not just power but domination; not just influence, but narcissism — can take these kinds of forms. And there’s an awful lot of that about.

So the call for the restoration of liberal arts ideals is necessarily a call for a sort of spiritual reawakening, a revival, which is at the same time a condition for anybody’s truly appreciating that it’s worth working hard for things, that there are things that are worth having that go beyond how they make you feel, things that are worth having even though — you know, the drug rush is not going to be the reward but, nevertheless, whose value we can perceive and appreciate and struggle for and dedicate ourselves to.

MR. PONNURU: I’m going to take this opportunity to interject. It seems that a lot of our discussion here about the purpose of liberal arts education has come up right to the edge of religion. We’ve been talking about learning how to die well, figuring out what the purpose of existence really is, what kind of people we should be. All of this seems to me at least naturally to point toward religion. And yet, most of our liberal arts colleges think of themselves in resolutely secular terms. And I wonder what you each think about the relationship of the liberal arts to religion. And, of course, here I’m going to refer to your deep difference, the obvious difference that you’re a Protestant and you’re a Catholic. That’s the first thing that comes to mind.

MR. WEST: We’re both Christians. That’s the important thing that we share the cross, we shared the countercultural orientation of folk who are preoccupied with the
idols of the world and the tribe and try to keep track of a love that is usually suppressed, but never fully suppressed in any generation, because that’s the history of Christianity at its best. There’s this unstoppable predilection toward keeping track of the humanity of everyone, especially the least of these, even when it’s absurd to do it. You do it because it’s right and just.

You’re not looking just for the rewards or the results, you see. And, of course, that flows over, it comes out of prophetic Judaism, of course. We don’t want to have a spiritual Oedipus complex here. It comes out of prophetic Judaism in that way. And then, of course, the rich tradition of Islam flowing right through. I didn’t mean to knock the water over talking about religion like that. Yeah. But I am a left-wing Protestant. I get the spirit any moment, you know what I mean? That’s right. (Laughter.)

But I think that is very important. I mean, I think one of the reasons why we’re having this magnificent revival of Catholicism is that you had this rich tradition of continuity that provides structures of meaning and value with rich rituals and a nihilistic moment that can help sustain one even if some is self-styled. Catholic is always deferential to whatever the authorities are of the day.

And I think that’s going to increase in fact. Pentecostalism — we get the same thing on the Protestant side, you see. You see it in Islam, the revival of Judaism, various kinds of revivals. But the question becomes in the end the degree to which most of our religious traditions themselves in their dominant modes are also highly commodified and commercialized and market-driven.

So when people go to these institutions, will they encounter prosperity gospels in churches or attempt to marginalize Amos and accent certain other prosperity orientations at the temple or synagogue or in the Buddhist temple and so forth and so on? Because our religious institutions are deeply shaped, like any other institutions, by the market forces — university, market models in university, market models in churches and mosques and synagogues and so forth. But I do think these religious traditions are for me not just inescapable, but they are constitutive of who I am as a human being.

MR. GEORGE: Well, a few things about that. First, it is true. Cornel and I have in common a deep spiritual commitment that we try, fail to live up to; try again, fail again; try again even harder.

One of the things that means and part of the bond between us, frankly, is that we know we answer to a power higher than the opinion of our students, as much as we value the opinion of our students. The opinion of our colleagues. I don’t much value — well, you speak for yourself about whether you do.

MR. WEST: It depends on which ones.

MR. GEORGE: Public opinion.
MR. WEST: Oh, yeah, public opinion too.

MR. GEORGE: The opinion of party, what’s going to get you ahead? I like to get ahead. I like to have nice things. I like to have a raise. But I know that those things are subsidiary. They’re of lesser importance. They’re relativized by the demand of a higher power: our accountability to God. And I think that’s important.

I mean, if you happen to be a person of faith, you have to realize it’s not all about you. You’re not ultimately in charge, and you ultimately do not make the rules, even in a culture in which we seek autonomy, giving the rules to ourselves, making our own rules for ourselves, getting to be the ones who make the rules at least as far as my life is concerned. As a Christian, I have to acknowledge I don’t make the rules even as far as my life is concerned. I’m accountable to some power much greater than myself to whom I owe an enormous debt of what Cornel called piety, a duty of gratitude for blessings given. So that’s number one.

Number two, I think we’ve got a problem in our churches with feel-good religion. The age of feeling affects all of our institutions. It affects the self-understanding of all of us to some extent. And that extends to the churches and to the other religious communities. You find it everywhere. You find it in the Catholic — you find it in the Catholic Church, not just in the prosperity gospel of the Protestant churches.

I’m sure that this is something that Mormons struggle with and Muslims struggle with and the Jewish community struggles with, people who are serious about faith, who know that tradition, who know that the tradition, whatever that tradition is, whether we’re talking about Islam, Christianity, Judaism, it’s not a — none of these are traditions that say, sign up with us because you’ll feel good. No. All of those traditions make profound demands on people that can be rough and hard and make you feel really bad and require self-sacrifice and forgiveness even when forgiveness is hard.

And Christianity goes beyond all that to the absolutely crazy idea that forgiveness, as hard as it is in any case, extends even to enemies. Love, as hard as it can be to give when people don’t love you back, extends even to enemies. This is why people thought Jesus was crazy when he went way beyond what other rabbis and preachers had taught, to say, love your enemies, bless those who persecute you. Talk about something contrary to human nature, something very difficult for us to assimilate. Well, that’s what it is. It’s going to be hard to understand what that means, much less take it on board in a culture shaped by a desire to feel good, a desire for psychological satisfactions, a society where that’s the end all and be all.

So unless we’re able to overcome that, the Christian message is going to fall on deaf ears, or it will be weakened and watered down, ultimately to the point of being a feel-good religion. So we can’t count on religion to save us because the reform is needed not only in the institutions that we would hope would be positively affected by religion but in the religious communities themselves.
Third thing, and this gets to a point that Cornel and I have debated before, and it might be good to see if we’ve made any progress with each other now. I think one of the things that liberal arts learning offers us, if we’re serious about it and if we’re blessed with the opportunity to have it, is the possibility of ordering our souls properly. Here I go back again to Plato. Plato taught that in the disordered soul, the appetitive aspect of the soul, the appetitive aspect of the person, the desiring aspect of the person has control. And reason, the rational dimension of the person, the rational aspect of the soul, is then subordinated to feeling, to desire, to emotion — subordinated and even harnessed in the cause of producing rationalizations for whatever desire wants. That’s the disordered soul.

Hobbes thought that that’s the way the soul is and can only be that way. Remember Hobbes teaching that the thoughts are to the desires as scouts and spies to range abroad and find the way to the things desired? The mind, the thoughts, the intellect can’t tell you what to want — can only tell you how efficiently to get what you want, whatever it is you want, your wants given by some sub-rational aspect of the self. The wants are brute. Hume echoes Hobbes when he says that reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions and may pretend to no office other than to serve and obey them. Once again, this instrumental conception of reason where desire is what ultimately has the whip hand.

Well, you’ve got to choose here between Plato on the one side and Hobbes and Hume on the other side because in Plato’s well-ordered soul — and Plato thinks we have a choice. Hobbes and Hume don’t think we have a choice. Plato thinks we have a choice. And if we order our souls properly, then reason has control, and reason doesn’t eliminate desire as a kind of radical stoicism might have it or some forms of Buddhism might have it. It doesn’t wipe out desire. Reason rather shapes and forms desires. Reason is able to ascertain what is really worth wanting, what is intelligibly want-able, and shape desire to move us, motivate us in the direction of seeking what’s truly good, truly right, truly just, truly beautiful, truly worth having.

And what a liberal arts education will not guarantee but at least gives us the prospect of having is a well-ordered soul. The self-critical capacities that are a part of the gift of a liberal arts education — those critical capacities make it possible for us to put reason in control, making us masters of ourselves.

So the point that I’ve made before and we’ve debated is that I think the most abject form of slavery — worse even than the most brutal forms of chattel slavery, the most abject form of slavery is slavery to one’s own passions, one’s own disordered desires, one’s own wayward feelings and emotions. It’s the worst form of slavery because it’s self-imposed. Nobody can take your integrity away from you but yourself. Even in an abject form of slavery, even in chattel slavery, you could still have integrity. They can take your freedom. They can take your life. They can separate your families. They could humiliate you. They could beat you, but you could still have integrity because that’s something only you can take away. And in a disordered soul, you have taken it away. You’ve given it up. You’ve traded it in for some mess of pottage. So I think that a key aspect of what a liberal arts education is for is self-mastery.
Now, what Cornel has raised and what I would invite you to share as a critique of my view on this is —

MR. WEST: We agree about the need for a well-ordered soul, but —

MR. GEORGE: You see self-giving as the —

MR. WEST: Yes. You’re still so tied to Aquinas, and God bless both of you. And I’m tied to Kierkegaard, you see, and Coltrane and Chekhov. And what I mean by that is that I start with the great Leopardi’s notion of reason’s sweet shipwreck, that reason will only take you so far and the wrestling with what it means to be human in the face of catastrophe is not one in which reason can do the kind of work you want it to do to generate the well-ordered soul. With Kierkegaard and Chekhov and Coltrane, you’re talking about love being at the center of that.

Now, it can be pagan and secular in terms of love of truth, love of beauty, love of goodness, or it could be deeply Christian, in which a love of God and a love of neighbor has a power to allow you to generate some sense of a well-ordered soul so that you’re not enslaved to the appetitive. You’re not enslaved to the worst aspects of it. But I’m not sure it’s reason that’s going to do that. You see it in the tradition, the great tradition of Aquinas more tied to Aristotle and Plato, of course. There’s a power ascribed to reason that we Kierkegaardians are highly suspicious of. That doesn’t mean we’re anti-reason. It just means that reason reaches a certain moment of shipwreck and that’s the starting point. That’s where you begin, and that’s what leaps of faith and an openness to a love that allows you to be transformed as well as to have some well-ordered soul.

I know it’s getting about 2:00 p.m. I think the audience probably has something about well-ordered souls, too. I know you’re running a program.

MR. GEORGE: Well, I just want to respond to that by saying, look, the Reformation was wrong about that 500 years ago. It’s wrong about it now. Nothing has changed. (Laughter.) It is a Protestant-Catholic division at some level. Yeah.

MR. WEST: No. It’s an interesting — Pascal was Catholic, and he’s on my side.

MR. GEORGE: That’s true.

MR. PONNURU: An erring brother. We have plenty of time for questions. Don’t worry about that.

MR. WEST: OK. That’s good. I know he wanted to jump in.

MR. PONNURU: I wanted to go — circle back to actually a couple of things that you’ve already mentioned. And one is what Cornel talked about — and I’m very glad you alluded to the fact that most people don’t have college degrees. That’s not going to
change anytime soon. If the purpose of a liberal arts education is self-mastery, what does that say about most people who are not going to partake of it?

MR. GEORGE: First, I would say that self-mastery doesn’t require a college education, much less a liberal arts education. Jesus had it, and not just in virtue of his divine nature from a Christian point of view. Many important heroes and saints have had self-mastery. You know, Cornel and I might have a debate about exactly how they got to where they got and what’s the role of reason and what’s the role of faith and which is prior and which is the fruit of the other and so forth.

Probably the most morally upright person I ever knew was my grandmother. And she didn’t even have a high school education, but she had self-mastery. She had integrity. She had self-control, self-possession. She knew who she was. She was able to sacrifice and not just yield to whatever desires there were. So it’s not a necessary condition, nor is it a sufficient condition.

And, nevertheless, we know that it can be an important element in the movement to self-mastery, that engagement with the great thinkers, including the heroes and the saints — Augustine is not only a great thinker; he’s a great saint. He’s not only — he teaches us not only by precept but by example. To some extent, this is also true of a figure like Plato, right?

So this is not an argument that you have to have a college education or a liberal arts education to be a good person. It’s just that the value of a liberal arts education consists at least in part in its capacity to contribute to our spiritual and moral fulfillment, our spiritual and moral well-being, and there will be a certain number of people for whom, absent that provision, the path is going to be the wrong one. It will be down the path toward seeking wealth and power and status and prestige and influence because there will be a certain number of people who will confront Shakespeare or confront Plato and suddenly realize, “I’m on the wrong path. I’m going the wrong direction. I need to reevaluate my life. I need to assess what really matters. I need to rethink what I’m going, what I’m going to dedicate these next 60 years or 70 years to doing.”

For some people, the engagement with the great thinkers will cause and enable them to look at what they do now and at each moment forward from the perspective of their own death. This is one of the great teachings of Plato that we should all absorb — that if you want to figure out what you should be doing right now, imagine looking at your situation right now from the point of your death and look back on it. Will it look like this was worth your time and attention and effort from the perspective of your death?

For many, many of our young people, especially our most gifted and advantaged young people, they care about what’s on their C.V. when they ought to be caring about what’s going to be on their tombstone. If you look at the question, what is going to be on my tombstone instead of what’s on my C.V., you might have a very different set of decisions. You might make very different decisions about what you’re going to do now and next week and next year and for the next five years.
MR. WEST: And that’s very powerful. My brother David Brooks talks about this in terms of the shift in his own life from being obsessed with his resume as opposed to becoming obsessed with his eulogy said at his funeral. That’s a very different set of stories and narratives and analysis of what’s said at your funeral as opposed to just what’s on your resume. I think what’s said at your funeral is very much about integrity and honesty, decency, love, sacrifice, self-surrender, service, and what have you. It is very, very much so. I forgot what I was going to say after that powerful point. That’s true. That’s very true.

MR. PONNURU: Which brings us to intellectual humility.

MR. GEORGE: Can I go back to — since we’re circling back, one additional point I wanted to make about religion and liberal arts learning. I think that our society is served well and would be served well in the future if we had a wonderful mix of religiously affiliated institutions of higher learning, of all the great traditions. You know, we’ve had many Catholic ones for many years. Obviously, there are Protestant ones. We have BYU and a couple of other Mormon ones. We now have a wonderful Muslim liberal arts college, Zaytuna College in Oakland, California. I think having religiously affiliated institutions, liberal arts institutions in particular, is very valuable.

And I think it’s valuable to have nonsectarian ones. Now, I choose the word nonsectarian as opposed to secular because I think that given the spiritual nature of the struggle and of the project, the reasons we’ve already articulated, both Cornel and I have set forth, I think it’s very important at the nonsectarian universities for there to be a vibrant religious life for students of all faiths. We’re blessed at Princeton to have that. And we’re blessed that our university actually does encourage that. That’s not true at all places. At some places, religion is at best tolerated. At some places, it’s not even tolerated very well unless it’s religion that has conformed itself to the campus ideological orthodoxies. But at Princeton, we have flourishing religious communities, including those that are very much not with the program of the majority view on the campus on a lot of moral and political questions.

And I think that is a very good thing. But I think there’s got to be some spiritual. It’s not necessary that it be theistic, but it can’t be nihilistic and I doubt, therefore, that it can be purely materialistic. So whether it’s theistic or not, there has to be a spiritual dimension. Camus was not a theist, but he was a spiritual striver. He realized that the problem and the project of leading a human life was a spiritual project. Without that presupposition in place, without that assumption in place, I don’t know that the liberal arts project can really be sustained. I don’t see how it won’t be undermined by the sense that there’s really just nothing ultimately that matters. And the presupposition is there’s something that matters and we’ve got to find the something or things that matter.

MR. WEST: But on libertarian grounds, it’s very important that we support fellow human beings who are nihilists. They have a right to be wrong. It’s part of the dialogue. It’s part of the conversation. And to the degree to which they become more and more
numerous, it’s the degree to which those of us who are committed to certain humanist orientations are indicted.

MR. GEORGE: Yeah. I mean, one of the problems we have on campuses now is that people in many cases aren’t interested in having an argument because they don’t think the other person has a view that just happens to be wrong. They think that the other person has a view that is evil and that the other person is, therefore, evil and that, therefore, the other person shouldn’t even be there because this is not a debatable question. So the list of non-debatable questions keeps growing larger and larger. And the response to someone questioning a campus dogma or orthodoxy is to call them a name as if that was a response to an argument.

MR. PONNURU: As a case in point, I gather that when you two had a conversation very much like this one at Swarthmore recently, there was a controversy on campus as to whether this should have been allowed because of Professor George’s well-known socially conservative politics.

MR. GEORGE: You mean they weren’t — I thought they were objecting to Cornel.

MR. WEST: Probably both. That night, you were the main target. You were the main target. That’s true. That’s true. You’re right about that.

MR. GEORGE: Yeah. They didn’t even manage to put together a protest, actually. They had planned a protest that never came off. The only thing that happened is one of the students stood up and asked I think what he thought was a very tough and aggressive question, to which I provided an answer that seemed to me to be right, and that was that. But it is a case in point. I mean, the fact that they would want to protest having somebody on campus, actually having in this case an alumnus on campus who disagreed with campus orthodoxies is part of the problem that we’re pointing to here. And we know that at campuses around the country, dissenters have not been allowed to speak, or they’ve been disinvited. Condoleezza Rice was pressured to step away as commencement speaker at Rutgers I believe, wasn’t it, Cornel?

MR. WEST: Yeah.

MR. GEORGE: I think it was Rutgers.

MR. WEST: I think that was for an honorary —

MR. GEORGE: Oh, it was for an honorary — it’s for something. Yeah.

MR. PONNURU: I think it was commencement address probably accompanied by —

MR. GEORGE: Yeah. And there have been many other cases of that. And this is an unhealthy sign. And it’s a sign of the collapse of liberal arts ideals on campus because
for anyone who’s sincerely interested in liberal arts learning, having dissent is like having oxygen. You can live without — there’s got to be somebody poking and prodding.

And that’s not only because you might be wrong. The poking and prodding is valuable even when what’s being poked and prodded and questioned and examined is something that objectively happens to be true because even in that case, the poking and prodding and questioning and examining will lead to a deepening of one’s understanding of why something is true. It’s one thing to know that a proposition is true. It’s another thing altogether to know why it’s true or to understand the deeper, larger, broader, existential meaning of the truth of the thing.

So as John Stuart Mill pointed out in his great work on liberty, the second chapter of which really should be a universally required text of “Liberty and Thought and Discussion” — that’s the title of the second chapter of Mill’s “On Liberty” — there Mill makes the point that we should value dissent even when we are confident that the dissenters wrong because that dissent will enable us by way of defending the truth to deepen our understand and appreciation of it.

And, of course, on top of that, there’s always the possibility that one’s wrong. If you have the virtues necessary for a liberal arts education, then you’ve got that intellectual humility that is always prepared to be shown that what one thought was the case actually turns out not to be the case. However confident one might be in one’s position, one is still open to the possibility that evidence, argument, reason will show otherwise.

I do not find anything persuasive in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, and yet I recognize the power of Nietzsche’s mind, the seriousness — the intellectual and moral seriousness of his critique of Christianity and liberalism and just about everything else. I don’t want what he says to be true. We human beings wrap our emotions around our convictions, which is not a bad thing in itself, but it can become an impediment to having an open mind. So, you know, I’ve got a lot of stuff against Nietzsche, and yet I read him and I assign him not only because I know that trying to respond to his criticisms will deepening my understating of what I believe to be true, but also because I know that there is a chance — maybe an outside chance, but a chance — that he’s right and I’m wrong.

Now, students will sometimes when I make this point say, yeah, but if that’s your attitude, no one would ever act for any cause. No one would have enough confidence in their beliefs to stand up for justice or to stand up for what’s right or to defend what’s good or to push back against efforts to dismantle institutions and structures that are actually valuable. And I just don’t think that’s true.

Cornel and I share the same attitude toward the intellectual life, and no one can accuse us of sitting on the bench when it comes to activism. So I think it’s perfectly — and an open mind if perfectly consistent with being a person of conviction who’s prepared to act on conviction.

MR. WEST: Sure.
MR. GEORGE: But what it does mean is that one is never closed to argument. One is always willing to listen. One is always willing to engage the other person and not simply try to shut the other person down or prevent the other person from speaking or call the other person a name — that one won’t be satisfied with confidence in one’s position unless one can answer the criticisms made by an intelligent, well-informed interlocutor.

MR. WEST: But you would agree with Nietzsche when he says it’s not a matter just of having the courage of our convictions, but the courage to attack our convictions. That’s a Socratic moment in Nietzsche. You would agree with that.

MR. GEORGE: Yeah. I would, and I would take it one step further. If a student has had and taken on board — has really appropriated the liberal arts education — they scarcely need an interlocutor because from that point forward, having learned how to learn, that man or woman will be his own best critic. That’s what I love about — you know, my best students, like Ramesh, you know, you read — Ramesh, your father will appreciate what I’m going to say. You shouldn’t listen. You read Ramesh’s writings. You notice that as you’re reading along he’s not just laying out a case. He’s anticipating possible lines of counterargument. He’s already thought about what an intelligence critic would say. And he’s also thought about how he might respond to that. I mean, when I see that in my students, I think we haven’t wasted our time.

MR. WEST: Then we haven’t wasted our time.

MR. GEORGE: That student doesn’t need me anymore to probe and prod and question. That student, now this man or woman out there in the world is doing for himself.

MR. PONNURU: So all these years of intellectual exchange and collaboration between the two of you, has either of you changed the other’s mind about anything? (Laughter.)

MR. GEORGE: You’re already baptized. All you need is confirmation, and you’re in. (Laughter.)

MR. WEST: Again, the legacy of Aquinas. I’ve had a great appreciation — I’ve got a greater appreciation from our dialogue. There’s no doubt about that.

MR. GEORGE: Yeah.

MR. WEST: We wrestle over the abortion issue, of course. We’ve been at that for 10 years.

MR. GEORGE: You’re going to be all right on that one. I see the direction that one’s going.
MR. WEST: You’ve touched me. Where else — of course, you’ve already had your focus on poverty, so I’ll always begin with poverty and critiques of capitalist civilization in the form of markets, unregulated and generating too much greed at the top and not enough sensitivity and sympathy for those catching hell, but you already had that even thought you’ve based market-based orientations a bit more than I do — but not a bit more, much more. But other than that, we’ve just had fun. We just had fun teaching together, wrestling with these.

MR. GEORGE: Well, one of the things that people might be interested in about our relationship is in many cases — and this may surprise people — we have the same ends. But we have different ideas about what the proper best means to those ends are. So if you want to fight poverty, which both of us want to do, I’ve been shaped in part here in my thinking by my student, Ramesh Ponnuru, and by Yuval Levine and others.

I’m more inclined in the direction of an empowerment agenda. And I worry about some of the negative consequences of well-intentioned social welfare programs, especially government run. I get less concerned when they’re not government run, especially when they’re run by institutions of civil society like churches and so forth. But I get more concerned because I’ve seen what’s happened to my people in West Virginia and Appalachia — the dependency that has been fostered and people on the left sometimes aren’t willing to admit that, but it’s true. Dependency has been fostered by some of these programs. So I’m looking for ways to empower people.

Now, at the same time, I know there’s got to be a safety net. And, at the end of the day, you know, you can’t rely exclusively on the institutions of civil society. So, I mean, I think that there’s a role for government here. I’m not a strict libertarian. If you look at what’s behind my thinking, it’s kind of fundamentally Christian, you know. We do have to be — Arthur’s made this point, too, Arthur Brooks — that we have to be concerned fundamentally about the least and the last and the lost. The question is “How do we lift them up? How do we protect? How do we lift up?”

And when we’ve debated on these issues before, and I’ve made the point about, well, you know — is there an alternative to the market? Cornel’s less sanguine than I am about the market, but you’ve been the history of socialism in practice, and it’s not good. And you wouldn’t want to do away with the — you realize the market’s got to have a central role. Maybe you regard it as needing greater regulation than I do, but we wouldn’t want to do without a market-based economy. We wouldn’t want a pure command economy.

MR. WEST: Well, we don’t have an example of mass populations in which market-less economies can generate liberty or freedom or democracy. And so we just have to be empirically clear in terms of how do we sustain a commitment to the humanity and decency of poor and working people and then also recognize you’ve got the challenge of large populations tied to international dynamics of the way these economies operate.
I mean, we just had the death of Brother Fidel Castro. Now here is somebody who failed his people in terms of dissent. He failed his people in terms of regimentation. He failed his people in terms of repression. And yet at the same time, he is exemplary in terms of his solidarity with suffering people in apartheid, for example. A hundred and eighty-five thousand health professionals around the world, sending Cubans to support Nelson Mandela and company. Well, that for me is his concern with poor people, but he had a command economy and, therefore, ended up generating dissenting voices suppressed and unable to generate the goods and services needed for the precious Cuban people who had already been subordinated and dominated under Batista and under US-supported earlier forms of neocolonialism and so on.

Now, granted, you know, he’s got the embargo, and they had 630 assassination attempts against him coming out of the CIA and other places, so that had added context but not an excuse for losing sight of the poor as it related to liberties and rights. So in that sense, command economies failed.

So how do you still hold up the priorities of poor people and working people even given these relative failures? Now, we can go back to Chile on the other side: Free market policies under Pinochet failed. Military dictatorship, similar dictatorship under Castro, failed. What did we learn from both of these in such a way that we still have the same kind of priorities that we have, which is to refuse to be callous and indifferent toward the least of these, beginning with orphan, widow, fatherless, motherless, poor, vulnerable, and that comes right out of Hebrew Scripture. That’s Amos. That’s Isaiah. That’s Micah, you see.

And those are the kind of things that you all debate here at AEI, and — what is it? — Brookings right across, and you’ve got Carnegie — this is a hell of a street here. (Laughter.) Right in the belly of the Beltway. Good God.

MR. GEORGE: Back in 2010, I was wandering down the street in Princeton to get a sandwich and something at lunchtime. I ran into Brother Cornel. And I said, “How are you doing, my brother?” And he said, “I’m catching hell.” I said, “Who’s giving you hell? Well, let me at them.” And he said, “It’s the left.” I said, “Why are you catching hell from the left?” You remember? And he said, “Just Google Cornel West and Castro,” which I did.

MR. WEST: Yeah. Big fight. We had a big fight.

MR. GEORGE: And found that Cornel, to his credit, had organized a letter. Ruby Dee signed the letter. There were a few others, but a lot of people wouldn’t sign. Harry Belafonte wouldn’t sign. A number of people wouldn’t sign, condemning Castro’s repression in Cuba. And if you’ve been reading the papers lately, you know, not everybody on the left recognized Castro’s fault. So, you know, that was an example of integrity, integrity.
MR. PONNURU: Well, when I asked that question, I thought it had the potential to take us a little off track. And there’s a lot of geopolitical history that we could go down here. But, unfortunately, I’ve run out of time, and it’s now your turn to ask some questions.

We’ve got people with microphones here, so if you’ll wait after I call on you for a microphone to get to you and then stand up and ask a question in the form of a question. And let me add to our online audience that they can still submit questions by going to sli.do, using the code AEIevent, and submitting their questions for consideration. And we’ll start right over there.

Q: Hi. My name is Jules (sp), and I’m from the School for Ethics and Global Leadership, which is also right down the street. And my question is do you think that an ideal liberal arts education is nonpartisan, is very partisan based on what the teacher’s beliefs are, or incorporates ideology from all different beliefs and kind of goes from the mindsets and ideology of all different political ideologies?

MR. GEORGE: A liberal arts education interrogates all ideologies. In that sense, it’s sort of anti-ideological. The term ideological has two different meanings. One of them is pejorative. Ideology is the opposite of philosophy. It’s thought governed by an agenda as opposed to thinking about what the agenda should actually be. Then there’s a nonpejorative understanding, where ideology is just used as a synonym for philosophy. Well, what is your ideology? What’s your view of life? What’s your philosophy? What’s your ideas about justice and right?

A liberal arts education is anti-ideological in that first pejorative sense of ideological because every position, socialist or capitalist, democratic or monarchical or oligarchic, any political, moral, religious view is on the table for critical examination. That doesn’t mean necessarily hostility, but it means accountability. What’s to be said for the claims being made on behalf of this viewpoint? What’s the historical record, if we have a historical record to examine? What are the pros and cons? What are the reasons? What’s the evidence? What are the arguments?

So in that way, I think it’s necessarily nonpartisan, but it will always engage any point of view. It won’t be simply trying to tear things down. There’s an approach that masquerades as liberal arts education, which just tries to show that everything is wrong. It degenerates into a kind of radical skepticism that’s skeptical about everything but itself. That’s not what we’re talking about here. I mean, if you come into a classroom where Cornel and I are teaching, we might be examining C. S. Lewis’ “Abolition of Man” this week or John Dewey’s “A Common Faith,” or Newman’s idea of a university, or Marx’s communist manifesto. It’s not meant to expose, to unmask the falsehood behind all these views. It’s to engage them, explore them. What does the author have to say?

We sometimes teach Gramsci, the great Italian Marxist, the father of the approach to Marxism sometimes called cultural Marxism. Now, I’m pretty hostile to Marxism, believe it or not. And yet, I approach that text not with an attitude of how can I show the
students this is wrong. I approach that text myself trying to first figure out what can I learn from this guy? He’s a pretty smart dude. He thought about some things. He was a fairly careful thinker. What can I learn from him? It’s that kind of engagement I think that we’re talking about here. Now, at the same time, he’s answerable. He’s accountable.

MR. WEST: That’s right.

MR. GEORGE: As I myself am as a scholar. I put my works out there and not in order to get applause but to be examined, to be engaged. I want the reader to engage them. I don’t want the reader to approach them with utter hostility, but I don’t want the reader to just be looking at them ideologically in that first sense and just affirming and bowing to anything I say. I want to be engaged. And that’s how I would treat an author like Gramsci or Marx himself or really any other author, Dewey, or, for that matter, Lewis.

MR. PONNURU: Or West.

MR. GEORGE: Or West.

MR. WEST: You’d really interrogate that. Really go at it. But I think, again, though, my dear sister, it’s about love, you see, because liberal arts is about the formation of attention. How can we attend to the things that matter — life, death, joy, sorrow, and so forth? And also fall in love with the text, the free play of language, and so on. And you might be deeply conservative and read Pablo Neruda and love him to death and discover he’s a communist. Or if you’re left wing and you read T. S. Eliot and love him to death and discover he is right wing. Well, something else is going on. There’s a human connection that’s taking place because all of us at that point, at our best, are part of the love of truth.

There’s truth in Eliot, but not his deeply conservative conclusions about Jews and royalism and so forth and so on. There’s truths in Neruda, but not necessarily his communist conclusions all the time. It depends on which ones because — I overlap here once in a while with Neruda, even in policy, but he’s too much of a communist. I’m pink. I’m more Democratic socialist. But the point is that ideologically — that’s what I mean by we have fun because we love the quest relative to the subject matter. See what I mean?

You’re in high school, right? Yeah. So good to have you here. You want to be part of that learning how to die, part of that quest early on. You live a good life, good long life. Absolutely. (Laughter.)

MR. PONNURU: I think we can guarantee that very little of this discussion is showing up in any college’s brochure. (Laughter.) I appreciate that question because it does seem to me that we quite appropriately talked a lot about the appropriate mindset, attitude and virtues of students and of administrations. And that question really touched on the duties of the professors and the way they should be approaching these questions, which I think it’s fair to say not 100 percent of professors do.
MR. GEORGE: Some of the best moments in our seminars together — I can think of one in particular. There was a student who for five or six weeks had been using every left-wing trope and every left-wing bit of jargon you can — everything was hegemonic this and —

MR. WEST: Oh, yeah. Had a lot of Foucault.

MR. GEORGE: Yeah. And Cornel said to me, you know, this kid’s in a kind of an ideological, you know, squirrel cage, and he’s going around in circles, and he’s not thinking. We’ve got to shake him up. So this was Cornel, right? It wasn’t me. And I think that’s exactly the right — any teacher who sees a student falling into a kind of intellectual conformism, into dogma, into ideology in that first sense, any good teacher, regardless of whether the teacher happens to agree with the basic outlook or not, is going to want to make that student think — is going to want to question that student’s presuppositions and assumptions and try to break him out of that.

MR. PONNURU: Another question from the audience.

MR. GEORGE: That’s a lot of hands.

MR. WEST: This dear brother’s been trying to get in there a long time.

MR. PONNURU: We’ll go with you then.

Q: Hi. I’m Jeff Bender. I’m a curmudgeon from the ’60s liberal arts era. That was a great question, and it was a long line. So I want to ask, would both of you agree that there’s a huge problem on the campuses today in the lack of diversity of thought among the faculty, and what can be done about it? And I think of a powerful affirmative action program for diversity of thought. I mean, the virtues of liberal arts, it was great to, you know, hear you all talking about that, but what are we going to do with a faculty makeup that’s there today, which I don’t think the two of you are very representative of?

MR. GEORGE: Well, if there’s a problem in the family, if dad’s falling into alcoholism, the first thing you’ve got to do is acknowledge there’s a problem. And until you acknowledge a problem, it’s never going to be dealt with, and many families have experienced this because they’ve — say, in an alcoholism case or something like that, they’ve put off and put off and put off acknowledging we have a problem. You’ve put the problem on the table. It is a problem. There’s a lack of viewpoint diversity. It’s not the only lack of diversity. In many fields, there’s lack of methodological diversity, a field gets dominated by one approach or school of thought or another, but, more generally, there’s a lack of viewpoint diversity. And something has to be done about it.

Now, I don’t know exactly what you mean by affirmative action, but if it’s a case of preference for conservatives, I would be against it. Why do we have the problem? Well, I’ve heard liberal colleagues give several amusing — they don’t know they’re
amusing, but they are amusing explanations. Well, the academic life attracts intelligent people, and conservatives aren’t as intelligent.

Even better, the one I like is, well, you know, academic life is not heavily remunerated. It’s not a well-paid profession. And conservatives really like money more than liberals, and therefore, conservatives go into business instead of into academia. And then there’s the old, gee, I don’t know. Isn’t that funny how there are so few — you know, it’s 95 percent of gifts to political candidates from college faculty have gone to Democrats and 5 percent or less — the 3 percent to the Green Party and 1 percent to libertarians and half of 1 percent to the Republicans.

So what are the real reasons? I think there are three. One is once the problem is in place, you’ve got a relatively hostile environment, and young people realize it’s a hostile environment if they’re not in line with the prevailing orthodoxies and so that becomes a deterrent for going down that path.

Number two, outright, blatant, self-conscious discrimination. Our colleague, Jeffrey Stout, in the religion department at Princeton, who’s a liberal and a nonbeliever, has told me about a couple of cases that he himself personally witnessed of faculty members being denied positions because they were pro-life. Well, you know, that couldn’t be more directly contrary to the stated ideals of just about every university, and yet it goes on.

But I think that is far less common than the third thing. In fact, I think it’s relatively uncommon. The third thing is the more fundamental problem. This is subconscious discrimination. We human beings constituted the way we are, we original sinners, among our problems have a great deal of difficulty affirming the quality of intellectual work that reaches conclusions that we think are wrong. We’re far too tempted to suppose that if we disagree with a conclusion, the reasoning, the argument, the evidence can’t be all that good.

And so, instead of assessing the overall quality of the work, we tend to judge the work by whether it reaches the right or wrong conclusion. That creates a serious problem once you have an orthodoxy on a campus – an ideological or viewpoint orthodoxy on campus, because it becomes self-reinforcing and very difficult to break out of. I know of cases where people have voted against a candidate for appointment or a candidate for tenure believing in their hearts that they were doing it purely on the merits and not on the basis of viewpoint or the conclusions the scholar reached. They could pass a lie detector test saying that their motivations and intentions were pure. And yet the reality is that their failure was a failure to be able to appreciate the quality of work that reached conclusions that they didn’t reach.

So what I think we need is not so much affirmative action in the sense of a set of quota for conservatives as we need to find ways to bring pressure on faculty members because faculty members are appointed by other faculty members. That’s how the system works. A way to bring pressure — if necessary, a kind of shaming — to make people
aware of the problem of conscious prejudice and the even-greater problem of unconscious prejudice. And there’s a movement now trying to do that.

Jonathan Haidt and Nick Rosenkranz and a few other people who founded an organization called Heterodox Academy are using exactly these techniques. Professor Haidt, who is a professor of psychology I believe at NYU. He goes around the country, speaking to academic groups, professional, academic professional societies like the American Psychological Association and so forth, reading them the Riot Act about this lack of viewpoint diversity and calling attention to the very problems that I’ve just mentioned and just forcing them to examine themselves, ask yourself the question: Is it just an accident that there are so few conservative represented, conservative voices? Is it really that conservatives are dumber than liberals? Is it really that conservatives love money and, therefore, don’t pursue academic careers and instead go into business?

Haidt makes the point, if you seriously ask yourself these questions, you’re going to realize those are not good answers — that the reality is we have a problem with conscious and even more fundamentally and broadly unconscious discrimination, and so we’re going to have to make a better effort to appreciate the actual quality of the work that’s being done.

MR. WEST: That’s the key, the quality.

MR. GEORGE: So I don’t want any special privileges for conservatives. I don’t want the standards to be lower for conservatives than for anybody else.

MR. WEST: Right. Right.

MR. GEORGE: I don’t want anybody’s standards to be — I don’t want double standards. I want one standard.

MR. WEST: But part of it has to do with the opening of the university, especially at the highest levels, Ivy League and so forth. From the ’60s, they had to come to terms with very ugly legacies of male supremacy and white supremacy and anti-Semitism and so forth. Once the opening’s occurred with the focus — which ought to be on quality of mind and intelligence and work and so forth — but that was a very protracted process. I mean, the women couldn’t even gain access to the schools until the late ’60s and ’70s, right? The black folk for the most part couldn’t even gain access the same way. And the Jews had just gained access in the ’40s and ’50s with the quotas lifted, even though earlier they had some individual assets, but it was still very ugly.

So this very moment in which you’re trying to open these universities for diversity, it gets reduced to those issues — race, gender, and ethnicity — and diversity of perspective and intellectual orientation oftentimes was pushed back, and you ended up with liberal hegemony in these universities.
Now, I say that because I’m not a liberal. I am revolutionary Christian. You know, where does that fit? It’s hard to place that on an ideological spectrum, you see what I mean? But I’ll have my alliances and so forth. How come you and Robbie are so close? He is my brother. OK. Let’s have a long coffee on that. They don’t understand, and usually, they don’t get at the core of who you are. They don’t get at the core of who I am. But what that means is somehow we’ve got to be open to the diversity across the board, tied to quality at the highest level, including ideologically.

MR. GEORGE: There’s been a re-sectarianizing of the university. Princeton used to be a Presbyterian university. I think Harvard was Unitarian. Yale was Congregationalist. They were sectarian. And then they gradually over time abandoned their sectarian affiliations, except they didn’t. They just replaced it with a new kind of sectarianism, with its own doctrines and dogmas, its own magisterium, its own heresy trials, its own saints, its own heretics, its own sinners. And it’s not good.

Now, overcoming the problems of discrimination that we’ve had in the past — I mean, the idea of a quota on Jews. I mean, Princeton was guilty of that, Harvard was guilty of that. That’s necessary and good.

MR. WEST: The University of Pennsylvania, too.

MR. GEORGE: But treating — imagining that all Jews have the same opinion or all blacks have the same opinion or all women have the same opinion, which goes on far too much in universities. I was with a girl yesterday, an African American girl yesterday, I was meeting with our dean I was mentioning, Rochelle Calahan (ph), who’d been dropped off the black student listserv by one of the leaders of the listserv, herself an African American student, because she was pro-life. She was knocked off. Why? Because being black, the expectation, the enforced expectation was you had to be pro-choice on the abortion question. You couldn’t be pro-life. This is despite the fact that the majority of blacks, more than whites, are pro-life in the country. But among the academic elite, even at the student level, there was this idea that this young black woman had gone away from the community by not endorsing the abortion cause. This expectation that everybody is going to — that if you’re in this group, you’re Jewish, you’re black, you’re female, you’ve got to think this way, is a big problem in universities — a big, big problem.

MR. PONNURU: It’s funny, when we talk about the problem of hiring conservatives at universities, conservatives suddenly become attentive to all the complex and subtle ways discrimination can work, and liberals suddenly forget everything that they otherwise bring to bear on those issues.

I want to ask one of the online questions that has been submitted. And it is from Cecilia Cervantes (ph) of the Institute for Humane Studies, who asks, “Many colleges designed core curricula to help create more well-rounded students. Did that system fail? Is it worth redesigning or reimagining?”
MR. WEST: We’ve been to a number of colleges that have that kind of common core and I think they’ve been highly successful to the degree to which they’ve had some impact, some positive impact on the quality of conversation in those respective institutions — very much so. The question is, again, being broad enough. I mean, one of the problems that these common core Western civilization courses is that they tend to put a premium on tragic writers and downplay the comic writers so that Jonathan Swift and Mark Twain and Nathanael West and Pynchon are pushed to the sides of Dostoyevsky, as if Dostoyevsky is heavier than Chekhov just because Chekhov is comic and Dostoyevsky’s tragic. Or you read Hamlet, and they don’t read about Falstaff. So there’s a sense in which if you’re going to have these common core, it’s got to be broad enough intellectually and, of course, a variety of different voices, from different cultures and different genders and different colors.

MR. GEORGE: This takes us back to the gentleman’s question right here. I think having a core, a well-designed core is a good thing, although I don’t think it should be one that completely pushes aside student choice. There’s just too much now. There’s just too much good stuff for students to read to fit it all into a course, so choices are going to have to be made. And the choices shouldn’t be made exclusively by the university or college. Some of those choices should be made by the students as well. So I wouldn’t want to turn the whole world into a kind of St. John’s of Annapolis, as valuable as I think a service as St. John’s in Annapolis and Santa Fe both perform. There should be such institutions. But I don’t think that all of our institutions or most of our institutions should go down that road.

So I think a modified, qualifies core can be useful because there are some texts that all students should engage. They should become a common currency of our intellectual discourse. The Bible, by the way, should be one of them because without understanding the Bible, you’re not going to be able to understand most of the other great thinkers in the Western tradition with the exception of the pre-Christian Greek thinkers and Roman thinkers and so forth. But the Jewish thinkers, the Christian thinkers — if you don’t understand the Bible, you’re going to miss an awful lot of Shakespeare. But that’s just an aside.

I do think a properly constructed core would be a good thing, but it’s not going to do you any good unless you have the faculty to teach it. And if everything is being taught, let’s say through a Foucaultian lens, then you can just throw away your core because it’s not worth anything. If you have ideologized teaching in that pejorative sense of ideologized, if you have ideologized teaching because you have a faculty with no viewpoint diversity, a faculty that is going to be teaching in an ideological manner, then it doesn’t matter what the students are reading. It’s not going to do the students any good. They might be reading the best stuff. They might be reading Aristotle. They might be reading Shakespeare. They might be reading Augustine. They might be reading Dante. But if their perspective on the author is being colored by a single ideological viewpoint, I don’t know what you’ve accomplished.

Q: To what extent do you both think that’s what we have right now?
MR. GEORGE: Well, most places, we no longer have a core.

Q: No. I don’t mean a core. I mean the teaching —

MR. PONNURU (?): Ideologues.

MR. GEORGE: At just about every university, there are plenty of good nonideological scholars but there are plenty of — most places, plenty of ideological scholars and sometimes whole departments don’t include competing points of view. There are women in gender studies departments where the late and very great Elizabeth Fox-Genovese would not be welcome, even though she was one of the founding mothers of women’s studies. There are women studies departments where unless you conform to whatever that department’s particular feminist orthodoxy is — and, of course, there are many different forms of feminism, but sometimes the ideology is very tight and unless you conform, you’re not part of the picture. Imagine at many women studies or gender studies departments, if you’re pro-life, are you going to have access to that department, no matter how good your work is? Unfortunately, probably not. So the viewpoint-diversity issue is I think very important not only for universities as a whole, but for particular departments.

MR. PONNURU: We have time for, unfortunately, just one more question. So think carefully about what you want to ask. And I’m going to go to you. You’re the great winner here.

Q: Hi. My name is Ivan, also from the School of Ethics and Global Leadership. And my question is how important is a religion when it comes to getting a true liberal education? And do you think you can attain a true liberal education if you are an atheist or you’re not as religious?

MR. GEORGE: Sure. I pointed to the figure of Camus earlier. Camus was not religious in any ordinary sense. He was not — certainly not Christian, not a theist. And yet, he was a deep, thoughtful, self-critical individual. I would in this respect place him way ahead of the person he’s usually thought of in connection with, Jean Paul Sartre, who did not have those advantages — had some achievements but was not in my opinion near the level of Camus because Camus was a self-critical thinker.

But Camus recognized, although he was not a theist, much less a Christian, he recognized that the problem and project of leading human life, as I said earlier, is fundamentally spiritual. He couldn’t find his way — as Chekhov could not find his way to faith, to faith in God, but he knew that the project was a spiritual project. He knew that what he was seeking was a kind of transcendence. He knew that the human person was an individual who transcended his own appetites and could exercise control over those in the name of something higher than those appetites or feelings or emotions.
So, yes. I mean, the advantages of a liberal arts education are available to the nontheist, to the nonbeliever, although for that person, as it was for Camus, belief always has to be on the table as a possibility, just as for the believer, like me or like Brother Cornel, Nietzsche and that powerful criticism of Christianity and belief is also on the table. He’s the specter. He’s the ghost haunting the discussion.

For Camus, it might have been St. Thomas Aquinas or St. Augustine or, indeed, Plato was a very religious thinker. Cornel.

MR. WEST: Absolutely. No. My dear brother, every great atheist is deeply rooted and wrestling with the history of religion because they have to know what they’re rejecting. But every great religious thinker is wrestling with the history of atheism so there’s no accident – Dostoyevsky writes the most powerful critique of Christianity in “The Brothers Karamazov” as a Christian, but the figure who he invokes is atheist because it sharpens his understanding of where he stands when he allows the highest quality critic on the other side to engage him. And that’s part of why we need each other intellectually, you see.

An atheist who walks around saying they’re an atheist and proud that they don’t know anything about religion, you can rest be assured you’ve got some mediocrity being enacted in their argument because they’re not engaging the best. But a Christian who walks around saying that I don’t have to read any secular folk, I don’t have to read an atheist because I’ve got my dogma, I’ve got my faith, it’s going to be pretty shallow.

MR. GEORGE: Yeah. That’s the problem.

MR. WEST: Pretty shallow. And the wonderful line T. S. Eliot has in his introduction to Pascal’s poems, where he says, there’s always a demon of doubt in every faith. What he means by that is the wrestling, like Jacob in the 32nd chapter of Genesis, he’s wrestling with the angel of night to see what kind of new energies, new visions, and new names you end up. And that’s part of what it is to be just intellectually engaged, not an academic. See, that’s just too deodorize a dialogue. We’re talking about something concrete. You are going to the edge of life’s abyss and seeing where you come down, kind of human being you want to be. And you keep that in mind as a high school student, brother, because you want to be open, broadly engaged. Then you come down where you come down. And then 20 years later, you may end up coming down somewhere else.

MR. GEORGE: I’ve said before that embarking on a liberal arts education, a true liberal arts education with that openness of mind, with that intellectual humility, that willing to recognize that one might be wrong, that willingness to engage the greatest that’s been thought and said by the greatest minds, the greatest people, it’s like getting on a train not knowing where you’re going to get off and maybe even not recognizing who you are anymore when you get off that train. Is that a risky business? Is that a pleasant prospect? We like having control. We like knowing who we are. It makes us feel better.
MR. WEST: But it’s like falling in love. When you’re falling in love, when you’re falling in love, something’s going to die in you, but something’s going to be propelled in you. Your egoistic self will be pushed to the side, and a new self intertwined with another self will emerge, put a smile on your face, at least for a moment. It will get bittersweet after a while. (Laughter.) But that’s part of — that’s in the same process. I mean, this issue of love is a very fundamental one.

MR. PONNURU: That is a terrific note for us to end on. (Laughter.) I hope if you take nothing else away from this, that you all leave with envy for those Princeton students who are able to have seminars with these great professors. And I hope you’ll join me in applauding them for their great contribution.

MR. GEORGE: Thank you. (Applause.)

(END)