Plenty of liberals—and not only liberal college professors—believe there is a conservative conspiracy afoot to destroy higher education in this country by means of online education (MOOCs, or “massive open online courses”), testing regimes that measure the acquisition of “competencies,” and other insidious plots and plans. Paranoid hysterics aside, there is some truth to the thought that hostility toward our accustomed forms of higher education is growing, and growing serious. That hostility is not conservative, however. It is best described as libertarian. Conservatives, in fact, are as devoted as any liberal to the beautiful, seemingly useless, and deeply truthful tradition of liberal learning. And so today, conservatives often find themselves allying with liberals against the libertarians who want to deconstruct those parts of our tradition that allegedly fail to prepare students for the competitive global marketplace of the twenty-first century.

A Marxist might say there are two kinds of antibourgeois professors in America: the reactionaries and the radicals. The reactionaries can be ignored, in the Marxist view, because they stupidly defend as true the repressive illusions of a “traditional” past that have been discredited by historical progress. The reactionaries, in the Marxist view, see human beings as more than they really are: as more than material, productive beings determined by their place in the division of labor. Radicals, on the other hand, point to a future where the division of labor, and History itself, has come to an end. Human beings will finally be free from being defined by the alienating work required by members of their productive class. They will be free to do and, as result, to be whatever they please. And this vision of the future, radicals think, is more than a comfortable illusion.

From the perspective of the reactionary, what the radical shares in common with the libertarian is the view that liberal education, having been emptied of its real or communal content, is nothing but a private whim or a hobby. For the Marxist radical, once History

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ends, life will be nothing but one arbitrary lifestyle choice after another. For the libertarian, our common life is still defined by our continuing need to be productive, but the time left over—and the money we earn—is devoted to pursuits that essentially have the status of hobbies.

Conservatives, however, deny that the contents and the activity of liberal education are whimsical or arbitrary. We ally with nonradical liberals who share our desire to protect the moral substance of liberal education from being dissolved by market forces.

Conservatives are not reactionaries, however. In a way, we are postmodern. We conservatives embrace a world that has benefited from both premodern and modern experiences, although we don’t think there is anything historically inevitable, or even likely, about the emergence of such a world. A genuinely conservative standpoint avoids the spiritual and aristocratic excesses of the medieval world and the material and democratic excesses of the modern world. In the conservative view, human beings can flourish as material and spiritual beings—or, more precisely, as whole persons. We think that true human progress is personal and relational; it takes place over the course of particular human lives in the direction of wisdom or virtue or truthful human responsibility. We think it is quite possible to educate persons for both work and love, to be both techno-productive and relational in every sense of the word. That should be the goal of any higher education worthy of the name.

From this authentically postmodern perspective, conservatives agree with many libertarians in condemning the way the humanities are often (although not always) taught in the contemporary American academy. Respect for texts is replaced by trendy theory, the open-mindedness of philosophy is replaced by strident ideology, disciplined reflection is replaced by angry activism, the guidance of tradition is replaced by relentless liberation from oppression, the search for God and the Good is replaced by dogmatic relativism, scientific inquiry (and an appreciation of its limits in grasping the whole truth about who we are) is replaced by scientism (or its opposite: scientific truth is replaced by blather about Western logocentrism), and human dignity is replaced by the class-based struggle for self-esteem in the context of identity politics.

We conservatives also agree that there is a great deal of truth to the libertarian (or bourgeois) view that most people—perhaps all people—should live more responsibly than the great novelists, philosophers, and thinkers studied in the tradition of liberal learning often did. Socrates is really no role model when it comes to indispensable “family values,” not to mention a work ethic.

But when conservatives read about libertarian think tanks concerned with the affordability and productivity of higher education, we fear that those two concerns are really the libertarians’ only educational goals. And these are not enough. So while conservatives join libertarians in being indignant about tenured professors who self-indulgently believe they can be as annoying or as “deconstructive” as Socrates without sharing the self-discipline that was the source of Socrates’s wisdom and virtue, we are not so indignant as to oppose tenure in the name of productivity and “accountability.” The species of the tenured conservative is much rarer and more endangered in our world than is the tenured radical. And it is the tenured conservative who is most likely to be the gadfly we need to awaken us to how little we really know about ourselves these days.

Hearkening to the libertarians, Repub-
Libertarian governors in some southern states are now focusing on ways to deliver degrees at the lowest possible cost. They want to apportion educational resources to various departments and disciplines in state universities according to the single standard of the salaries offered to graduates of those departments. Such a tactic would surely starve “gender studies”—but it would also starve philosophy and literature and art history.

For our most libertarian governors, the “disruptive” thought is that our colleges should become discount job-training centers—and nothing more. That means that most of the requisite skills and competencies can more efficiently be acquired online. The conversational and bookish romance of liberal learning, these libertarians believe, does little more than support unproductive illusions that underwrite an inefficient allocation of resources. Such self-indulgent illusions are a major cause of our outrageously unsustainable higher-education “bubble.” For conservatives, however, this exclusively bourgeois or libertarian perspective fails to recognize a genuine value in truly higher education as such.

Conservatives have long been moved by Alexis de Tocqueville’s Democracy in America, the best book ever written about democracy and the best book ever written about America. Tocqueville observed that America is a pretty much an exclusively middle-class country, and that “middling” orientation affects every feature of American lives. One result, Tocqueville claims, is that he could not find real higher education in America in the middle of the nineteenth century. Might it be the case that there never was a place for liberal learning in America?

The good news about being middle class is that everyone is free. Nobody is compelled to work for the benefit of someone else. The bad news is that everyone has to work for himself. No one is given the aristocratic leisure that comes through commanding the work of others. The most unfriendly way of putting this Tocquevillean insight is that Americans are free like aristocrats to work like slaves. But another way of putting it is that, in America, everyone is a being with interests. Nobody is above and nobody is below pursuing his self-interest, rightly understood.

Middle-class education is education for people who are nothing more or less than beings with interests. But, as Tocqueville knew, such middle-class vocational education should not be confused with higher education. Higher education—liberal learning—is for beings who are more than beings with interests. It is for those who are restlessly impelled to know the truth about who we are and what we are supposed to do as beings with souls. For conservatives, therefore, a major problem of democracy is that, as Tocqueville says, metaphysics and theology—and art, literature, and theoretical physics—lose ground to the pervasive pragmatism of democratic life. The problem with democratic education, in other words, is that it aims to fulfill the needs of human beings, but it understands human beings as something less than what they really are.

When I teach Tocqueville, I ask students what features of his description of American life no longer ring true today. The students point to his praise of the exemplary chastity of American woman, as well as to the close American connection between love and the almost unbreakable bond of marriage. They also say that he was wrong about the absence of higher education in America. Just look at how many of our young people are in college today! But it is not very difficult to see that much of what is on offer in American colleges today is really only vocational training,
not higher learning. If it’s about textbooks, PowerPoint, MOOCs, multiple-choice tests, group projects, “experiential” learning, and assessable competencies, it isn’t higher education. That is not to say it’s not education we really need. But it is not all the education we need.

Surely, moreover, Tocqueville wasn’t completely right about Americans having an exclusively middle-class education. There are aristocratic and religious sources of the American experience that he may have unrealistically minimized—the sources of what have been, historically, America’s outstanding institutions of liberal education. But Tocqueville might respond that those remnants of aristocracy and Christianity in America are unsustainable over the long run. What there is of authentically higher education in America might be expected to wither away. Consider what has happened to our “general education” programs. The number of students choosing “traditional” majors in the arts and sciences continues to drop steadily. Also dropping steadily is the number of residential colleges proudly displaying the liberal arts “brand.” And some of those that are keeping the “brand” (in the brochure and on the website) are dispensing with the liberal arts substance.

So one obvious difference between conservative and libertarian descriptions of American universities today is that conservatives say they have become too vocational or too exclusively middle class. But the libertarians assert that they are not vocational enough. What is to be said in favor of that libertarian view? It is true that too much of what goes on in our colleges is neither vocational education nor higher education. Here we could mention gender studies and various other “studies” majors. We could add how worthless the business major has become—not enough math and careful writing and too much pseudo-psychology and “working in teams.” And then there is “service learning” and “civic engagement,” which are simply further means of detaching allegedly liberal education from both usefully vocational education and genuinely higher education.

Having said all that, we conservatives still insist that the middle-class “vocational” impetus in the university is stronger than ever, and stronger than it should be. And so we defend genuinely liberal education as having a privileged place in our colleges and universities. Liberal learning is the true countercultural agenda of higher education. It is an indispensable correction to the reductionist excesses that accompany thinking of ourselves too exclusively as a middle-class people.

Countercultural in this context does not mean some variant of 1960s self-indulgence. A worthwhile human life, it’s true, is rarely complete or properly responsible without meaningful and productive work. But it’s also true, as Allan Bloom reminded us, that each of us is meant to be more than a clever, competent specialist. To be human, to live in the truth about who we are and what we’re supposed to do, is most of all to live responsibly in life and with death.

According to Tocqueville, higher education involves reading serious books in the meticulous or “leisurely” way in which their authors intended them to be read. It’s about reading the great Greek and Roman authors in their original languages. Higher education involves thinking of literature, art, and music as more than “industries” and more than forms of recreation. Liberal learning is also about theoretical physics, about understanding nature not as a resource to be manipulated but as a wonderful order that the human mind is meant to come to understand joyfully.
We conservatives, therefore, follow Tocqueville in loving and respecting science as much as, or even more than, liberal or libertarian pragmatists and social engineers do. We are less likely to insist, in fact, that scientists should be funded only if they can do something for us—make us healthier or wealthier. There is nothing wrong with being healthy and wealthy, but we also long to be wise. We conservatives cannot help noticing that the middle-class techno-university of the libertarians does not respect science for what it really is.

In some immediate or obvious sense, there is no one less productive than a theoretical physicist or a mathematician, no one who cares about money less. There is also no one who has less respect for the pretensions of the libertarian economist. For the young natural scientist Socrates (not to mention the more mature conversational Socrates), the economist is a sophist. Sophists know some useful things, and so they often deserve the money they command. But they know much less than they think they do, which is why their theory of education reduces each of us to less than what and who we really are. The economists don’t know who we are when it comes to being more- or (for that matter) less-than-sensible “utility maximizing” actors. And so they really don’t know, for example, what Solzhenitsyn means when he says the line between good and evil goes through each of our hearts.

But we conservatives also think that physicists know much less than they think they do. As Walker Percy observes, the physicist can explain everything—except the physicist himself. The cosmos might be the home of the human mind. But the problem remains that even the physicist is more than a mind. He’s also more than a body, and more than some combination of mind and body. The real mind-body problem is that the person for whom it is a problem is neither a mind nor a body.

As Tocqueville says, there’s nothing more strange and wonderful and genuinely mysterious than the being who truthfully understands himself to be caught for a moment between two abysses. More wonderful than what the physicist can know through his science is knowing the knower himself. We wonder not because we’re minds but because we’re whole persons, because our eros and willfulness, our fears and our anxieties and our singular pride, animate our minds. As the philosopher-pope Benedict XVI reminded us, *logos is personal*. As far as we know, *logos* can only be found in *persons*.

Physicists these days often become “new atheists” because they can find no room for persons—including a personal God—in the cosmos they can deterministically comprehend. But that is because they’ve made the mistake of forgetting to wonder whether they have left room, in their conception, for themselves. The young Socrates, they’ve forgotten, changed his “method” because he saw there was *truth* in the poetic criticism of his self-forgetfulness. Socrates’s new method was a dialectical or conversational inquiry into who we are as particular beings facing predicaments unknown to the other animals or, of course, the stars. Once Socrates changed the focus of his wonder, he knew that he no longer knew enough to live in atheistic certainty, and even that he didn’t know enough to develop a comprehensive theory of education that corresponds to the whole truth about who we are.

So for conservatives, liberal education or the highest part of education is the search for who we are as more than technological or determined beings. We begin with the thought that a determined being couldn’t be a technological being; the determined beings—the other animals who live by
instinct alone and so are perfectly content with the lives they’ve been given by nature—don’t use their freedom to impose their wills on nature. We add that we cannot pretend to be indifferent to or wholly ignorant about what our freedom is for. We know we are not only free beings, but also relational and truthful beings, and we cannot live either authentically or happily in relativistic denial of what we can’t help but know.

Libertarians seem to join conservatives in criticizing most of our professors these days for their relativism. The humanities professors seem unable to defend what they teach as real. Aside from being against racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism (each of which is just about impossible, these days, not to be against), the professors themselves regard the claims made by and on behalf of great cultural accomplishments to be merely “values” or opinions. So beyond telling their students not to be racists, sexists, classists, or heterosexuals, our professors think they have no warrant to tell them who they are or what they must do. For any clueless young person looking for guidance in “the art of living” as more than a productive being, such professors have nothing to offer.

Our libertarians are equally opposed to racism, sexism, and so forth. They think of middle-class people as free individuals, and our middle-class country as a meritocracy based on productivity. And so our libertarians think they have no need of the Great Books to know what the politically correct humanities professors know. A woman, just like a man, is a free individual. A gay person, just like a straight person, is a free individual. What’s the big deal? Given that our humanities professors can’t bring themselves to defend any standard that trumps the productivity of free individuals, our libertarians cannot help but objectively dismiss their “values.” There is, in fact, nothing being taught that is more important than money. And the way to end pointless educational controversy is by focusing on that fact. Higher education should be the cheapest possible way of teaching people how to make as much money as possible.

For the libertarian Tyler Cowen, for example, the money we make can be used, if we want, to consume rarefied cultural products. The great thing about living in our global market is that we now have a huge menu of choices when it comes to those products. Cowen himself, a world-class “foodies,” mainly values the culinary products of various cultures, and as a free and prosperous individual he can consume those products without being saddled by the cultural illusions about place and morality that were responsible for their creation. Education in a free country distinguishes between cultural illusions and market reality. And that’s why education in a free country should be about competencies and skills.

Cowen contends that libertarians should be proud of their defense of religious liberty. And to some extent they should be. Free individuals, as they describe them, should be free of the faith-based or ideologically based animosity that has so often been directed against Jews and other religious minorities. But Cowen can’t really defend religion (or any other profound or noble cultural “product”) as a positive good, as a reflection of real truths about who we are. He admits that his individualistic standpoint is ultimately destructive of cultural diversity. The wonderful cultural products he enjoys originate in the thought and imagination of peoples embedded in the way of life of a particular culture and who understand themselves as more than interest-seeking individuals, and so as less than entirely free.

Libertarian individualism destroys cul-
tural diversity through its allegedly truthful claim that no one should be chained to some cultural repression of the individualistic truth about who we are. Cowen, in fact, is sure he knows the best and most truthful way of life for human beings, and so he is the furthest thing from a relativist. He “knows” that the self-consciously liberated individual in the midst of prosperity lives far closer to the truth than the hunter-gather natives of Papua New Guinea or the Amish farmers of Lancaster or the immigrant Catholics who squandered their time and treasure to build faux-medieval Gothic churches in Newark and Brooklyn.

The problem is that people like Cowen can only consume—because they can’t produce—great or beautiful culture. So he’s stuck with saying what to us conservatives is plainly incredible: the actual building of a Gothic church doesn’t represent anything truthful about who we are; it was driven by beautiful illusions that for us produced valuable commodities. This same, impoverished libertarian view would likewise apply, for example, to the Great Books.

It should be noted that our libertarians have led the experts—our mainstream class of public intellectuals—to proclaim that the era of relativism is over. They have embraced, in their own minds, the moral authority of science. And it is that moral authority—science deployed to defend the truth about free beings with interests—that is the main threat to liberal education today. The “relativism” of the humanities in the age of multiculturalism was merely the prelude to their complete negation. This libertarian point of view has now become the point of view of most liberals, who are increasingly less “radical” and more “bourgeois.”

The world for these “liberal libertarians” is divided into those who accept the authority of science alone and those who do not. So they will have nothing to do with biblical morality as having any empirical warrant. They might remain “spiritual,” but that’s to protect their emotions against the oppressive authority of institutional religion. Our experts also disdain the sovereignty of the subjectivist and self-indulgent 1960s. To go with your feelings on anything important would be stupidly dangerous for a being with interests. Our experts readily lump Evangelical Christians together with 1960s postmodernists and tenured radicals, with everyone who says that scientific authority is just another “worldview” or some instrument of “logocentric” domination.

So our cutting-edge experts are no longer concerned with self-esteem movements and the other trendy enthusiasms of a generation ago. Our experts are now intent to discredit any education—such as gender studies—that is about affirming one’s identity or dignity. What’s important is not whether your kid feels good about himself but whether he really knows something useful. Kids need what it takes to flourish as productive members of society, and that means acquiring real skills, productive habits, and being astute about the forces that really rule the world.

To the extent that relativism means “If it feels good, do it,” it is increasingly out of fashion. The most recent studies show that somewhat traditional morality—stable marriages and “tough love” parenting—is returning to the lives of prosperous and sophisticated Americans. So relativism, for our experts, has been replaced by what David Brooks, among others, has labeled the new empiricism. All moral controversies are really empirical ones. If you know the scientific facts, then you know who you are and what you’re supposed to do. Knowledge, as Socrates said, is virtue. Virtue has become tied to a kind of technocratic optimism.
based on “technological solutionism.” This optimism is based on a sober realization about what must be done to sustain and enhance one’s personal freedom by fending off the risk factors that lurk throughout our hostile environment.

In short, in the field of education, the bestseller by Allan Bloom has been displaced by the self-help of *Freakonomics* (2005). Ingenious popularizing economists claim to show us that self-interested activity as measured by the empirical study of economics can resolve all the mysteries of life and show us what we’re supposed to do in every situation. Even studies about “empathy”—an allegedly selfless or altruistic quality that scientists tell us we’re given by nature as social animals—explain how it can be made to work for me.

The true morality is using what we know through science in the interest of free beings who work. So the true morality is doing what’s required to maximize my productivity in the service of my health, wealth, safety, and comfort. The true morality is my pursuit of happiness, but on the understanding that that pursuit shouldn’t get in the way of doing what’s reasonable in being healthy, wealthy, and safe. In other words, the true morality is that first taught by the sophists: those with wealth, power, and freedom have what it takes to be happy. Never mind the studies that show that the correlation between wealth and even health and happiness is very, very weak. And never mind Nietzsche’s profoundly traditional observation that happiness is far more about the “why” and not the “how.”

Knowledge of the true morality, which is based not on discredited superstitions about “souls” but on scientific studies about bodies, produces a new judgmentalism. We used to think only the good die young. Now we think it’s only the stupid and self-indulgent. The risky behaviors of the poor and unenlightened are stupid—therefore immoral. Among these behaviors is taking out huge student loans to pursue fairly worthless college majors—including all the majors oriented around the human soul. Many economists—who are, admittedly, not consistently libertarian (having become liberal libertarians in the mode of Mayor Bloomberg)—now favor using policy to “nudge” people toward more reasonable behavior when it comes to smoking, drinking huge amounts of soft drinks, not saving, having unsafe sex, not exercising, buying health insurance, etc. Government policies that make it easy to get into debt in order to go to college are examples of nudging in the wrong direction.

Our nudging can be genuinely moral—or not repressively puritanical—because we know better than ever what human choices are most likely to produce bad outcomes. And it’s the science of nudging that justifies the paternalistic exceptions to libertarian autonomy. People are just bad at calculating what’s best for them. Being unskilled in the science of probabilities, they just don’t (yet) have the self-knowledge that leads to virtue.

Against the nudgers you might say that it’s none of your business how I live my life. You can insist that you can consume mass quantities of real Coke, stuff your face with refined carbohydrates, smoke those cigarettes, get diabetes, have a couple of heart attacks, and die young if you want. But it’s not just your business! Who picks up the tab for your children if you’re not productive? And then there are the bills for your constant (and what should have been needless) health care. You need to be nudged not because I care for you but because I don’t want to be burdened by you. I want you to do your part as a middle-class individual free to work and be responsible for yourself.
We see more and more libertarian nudging in “higher education.” Consider the proposal to incentivize students to choose the most productive majors. These are, of course, the STEM majors: science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Tuition for these majors at state schools should be lower, it is argued. Intelligent students should be nudged in productive directions, and there’s nothing wrong with the taxpayers subsidizing their acquisition of useful skills. There’s also the thought that these fields focus on real—as opposed to ideological—learning. One piece of evidence of their seriousness is their resistance to grade inflation. Answers are right or wrong; they’re about skills and facts and not mere opinions or values. That’s one reason among many that trained engineers are in such great demand, while graduates in the various “studies” majors are pretty much not.

No libertarian would deny that students should remain free to choose history or literature—but they should be charged appropriately for their extravagant preferences. Professors in those liberal arts fields might object that what they offer should cost less, because what they do is more cost efficient. Salaries are low, and there’s generally no need for equipment. But the libertarians’ moral and scientific point is that students should be nudged away from wasting their time and money on classes that might actually make them worse, classes that would cause them to confuse leisurely hobbies with real work. These are the best times ever to be a bourgeois bohemian—to live a balanced life with room both for being productive and for enjoying “the art of living.” But anyone who thinks that being bourgeois isn’t more real and doesn’t come first is a fool.

We conservatives do admit that libertarians have good reason to object to the leisurely or aristocratic “credit hour” approach of our colleges and universities. You have to put in a certain amount of time—rather than acquire a particular array of skills—to graduate. “Competency based” education is supposed to encourage both colleges and students to acquire all the relevant skills in as little time as possible. Competence, however, shouldn’t be confused with excellence, and surely higher education means aiming higher. But “excellence” turns out to be a murky justification for what is basically a luxury cruise. That aristocratic experience used to be the credential that privileged students needed to find secure careers in, for example, corporations and law firms. The privileged used to move from one institution—from one bubble, we might say—to another.

But those privileged positions aren’t there anymore. The very idea of a career in a particular place has little or no future. That idea has gone the way of tenure and unions. Corporate and employee loyalty are just about gone, and so workers are going to have to be flexible in adapting their productive capabilities to whatever employers are going to need at any particular time. All American workers are increasingly going to be “independent contractors,” selling their time for whatever the market will bear. What people need today aren’t pedigrees but skills. The good news is that America is, more than ever, a meritocracy based on productivity. The bad news is that you can’t get by on credentials; you actually need skills.

Meanwhile, studies show that, outside the STEM majors, students are studying and learning less than ever. The luxury cruise that is the residential liberal arts college has all the disgusting characteristics of aristocratic decadence. It’s increasingly all privileges divorced from corresponding responsibilities. So the main things students are picking up in college are bad—meaning antiproducive—habits. Here’s what’s really
going on in our so-called liberal arts colleges, according to our libertarian critics: lazy, tenured professors with an undeserved sense of entitlement (because they have neither the “work ethic” nor the skills to be productive) are giving lazy and unskilled students with an undeserved sense of entitlement ridiculously high grades just to soak them for another semester’s tuition.

The proudly disruptive Nathan Harden (with his *College Fix* blog focused on how stupid and depraved liberal arts colleges are now) boldly predicts the near disappearance of the residential college over the next generation or two. He explains that when young men and women remember their college experience these days, they value “the unique social experience” of “liv[ing] among one’s peers” and “practic[ing] being independent in a sheltered environment.” They also remember “form[ing] meaningful friendships,” and some add “explor[ing] unique extracurricular activities,” not to mention the ample opportunity for easy hookups and toga parties. They think of college as a four-year “summer camp,” free from having to bother with “many of life’s daily necessities like cooking and cleaning.”

This picture is meant to be repulsive in at least three ways: Those young adults are too old to be in camp. This camp has no rules beyond safety and consent, and so is missing the character development encouraged by, say, the Boy Scouts. The people running the camp are overcharging their customers by pretending that what they offer has some useful educational benefit.

Harden, like most libertarian critics, points to the study *Academically Adrift* (2010) that shows that the first two years of college provides “no significant gains in knowledge” for many or most students. So he wants us to consider, with “unvarnished honesty,” the possibility that our colleges have become so bad that “an online setting could scarcely be worse.” Harden doesn’t think that he has to refute the conservative proposition that online education is surely inferior—and especially worse for the soul—than talking about real books in small classes with *intellectually* engaged professors who take truth and virtue to be serious and life-transforming forms of inquiry. That “teaching method” only benefits the best students who arrive at college already prepared to make the most of it. How many of them are there? And you can’t find that kind of teaching much of anywhere these days. Given that liberal education—or what Harden calls “passionate learning”—has just about disappeared, it’s silly to worry that it doesn’t really translate online. Insofar as there are “passionate” professors left, they’re mostly angry ideologues who are free-by-tenure to rant like maniacs and who can only make your kids worse.

We conservatives have to begin by showing that the libertarian critique of higher education is an exaggeration, an exaggeration in the service of a moral science that aims to demonstrate that liberal education is not now nor was it ever real. It allegedly flourished under aristocratic premises that we moral scientists now “know” were based on unjust illusions. Its destruction is part of the entirely deserved triumph of the view that the whole point of education is to serve our meritocracy based on productivity. The destruction of traditional liberal learning is part of the complete victory of the middle-class point of view that we’re all beings with interests, and nothing more.

We conservatives can see, of course, that there’s some truth—sometimes a lot of truth—to the criticism that what remains
of liberal education is about aristocratic privileges without an aristocratic sense of responsibility. But we also see that privileges without a real sense of responsibility is also the characteristic vice of our increasingly libertarian meritocracy as well. Deserving what they have according to the middle-class standard of justice, our libertarian meritocrats believe they have no responsibility to those who do not have the true science of middle-class self-knowledge required to live well. Thinking quite mistakenly that they simply deserve what they have, they lack the gratitude required to practice truthfully the virtues of generosity and charity. They lack what genuinely distinguishes the most admirable of Americans. They think too little of themselves—and too little of their fellow persons. And that is because they have been failed by what now passes for higher education: for example, by the Princeton that has become far more about “networking” and “assortive mating” than elevating souls. Our meritocrats really don’t know what they’re supposed to do with their money and power. They don’t know their duties to their friends, their families, the unfortunate, their country, or God. And it is true that higher education is to blame, at least in part, for confusing nudging with generous and charitable concern for the souls of others.

But we conservatives don’t believe it’s just our ruling class that needs a liberal or genuinely higher education. We remember that Tocqueville found two sources of universal education in America. The first is the middle-class imperative that everyone work for himself. The second came from the Puritans, who thought that everyone should be educated to read the Bible—to read for himself about who we are as more than technoproductive beings. It’s from the Puritans that we received our egalitarian political idealism, the view that every human being should also be a citizen, that everyone needs to know and act upon the truth that sets us free. It is from the Puritans—from Christianity—that we get the thought that America should be an aristocracy of everyone. And so it is the Puritans who also remind us of the degrading atheism—the atheism of the sophists—that really animates the wholly libertarian view of education.

It is probably from St. Augustine that we get our most truthful understanding of who we are as persons. Even when our faith in the personal God fades, the human person remains, the being open to the whole truth about being personal. Following Plato and the Platonists, Augustine says there are two ways of life—one devoted to contemplation and the other devoted to action. Aristocratic Platonism, of course, is the view that contemplation is for the few, and action—or work—is for the many. The middle-class and libertarian view is that work is for us all, and contemplation is self-indulgent illusion. The Christian or personal view, the conservative view as well, is that both work and contemplation are for all of us.