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Human Dignity and Higher Education

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The fundamental fact of our time is the gradual encroachment of principled individualism—or unregulated personal freedom—into all areas of our lives. Every moral and communal certainty, except those that can be justified through contract and consent, has been transformed into a question. Every human attachment seems basically voluntary. The great institutions that shape the character of human beings—the family, the church, the community, and the country—are weakened and still eroding. Young people who have grown up in this cultural environment are deprived of what it takes to develop firm moral bearings—and, with them, a sense of purpose. New students arrive at college not knowing who they are or what their lives are for.

Professors, meanwhile, used to believe their primary responsibility was to shape souls: to pass on the truths embedded in a religious tradition or other moral code that should thoughtfully define the lives of educated men and women. At the very least, they believed they had to open students' eyes to the varied forms of human excellence displayed in the greatest works of philosophy and literature: the saint, the sage, the poet, the warrior, the inventor, the entrepreneur, the scientist, the statesman. By means of these models of human greatness, professors could offer guidance to students discerning who they are and what they want to do. But, arriving at college with characters already formed, those students were less in need of direction than are students today. In those days, the real experience of professors was often a kind of blithe irresponsibility that came with moral impotence. They could say what they wanted without the fear of doing much harm—or much good. In many cases, students thought (with good reason) that their professors were basically reinforcing what they already knew from more firsthand—or not merely bookish—communal experience.

College seems to have inherited the job that religion used to do. Today's colleges at their secular best—at, say, Great Books schools like St. John's—approach education by articulating perennial questions of human identity and purpose. But even the Great Books model of education has

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morphed into a celebration of the questions in the absence of real answers. Who can be satisfied with merely reveling in Socratic indecision about who we are and what to do? Great Books education seems to present us with the alternatives of being a self-knowing philosopher or losing oneself in either fundamentalist dogmatism or aimless relativism. But the searcher neither needs nor wants to be told that the point of life is *searching*.

Limitless Freedom—a Hostile Environment

Ironically, at a time when students stand in special need of guidance, professors no longer believe that they are able to provide it. They may sometimes believe that they are charged with liberating students from "the cave" of traditional or religious or bourgeois conformity to think for themselves. But, at least at some level, they must know that their own dogmas of nonconformism or self-creation or promiscuous libertarianism are a large part of the cave of any free and prosperous society.

Americans, as Tocqueville wrote, are Cartesians without ever having read a word of Descartes; methodical doubt is the natural approach of a democrat who believes that "nobody is better than me." But there are no more conformist slaves of fashion than members of a society formed by the doctrine that nonconformity—or merely questioning authority—is the bottom line. The good news, the American democrat naturally thinks, is that nobody is better than him, but the bad is that he's no better than anyone else, and so he has no anchored point of view from which to resist the pressure of anonymous public opinion.

Professors often seem to live fairly traditional lives themselves. In recent decades, they have certainly become more bourgeois or careerist and a lot less bohemian or countercultural. What even the so-called tenured radicals say about liberation is contradicted by their own ordinary habits. But like most Americans, they do not believe they have any right to impose—that is, defend with any authority—their preferences about personal morality on others. They proclaim a principled indifference to the character of students' souls. They do not believe it is the job of specialized scholars to take the place of parents. What scholars know is too narrow, provisional, and impersonal to guide the lives of young people.

Where professors used to be stuck with moral impotence, they now embrace it as a theory that justifies their irresponsibility. Students are free to choose in all areas of their lives in college. They have almost limitless prerogative in choosing what to study; the few requirements that are imposed on them are as broad and flexible as to point them in no particular

direction. In the name of freedom and diversity, little goes on in college that gives students any guidance concerning who they are or what to choose.

In fact, students are often taught that what they do is both completely voluntary and utterly meaningless, that their freedom to choose is both unlimited and unreal. The human person has no real existence in the wholly impersonal nature described by scientists. From neuroscientists, students learn that "the soul" must always be put in quotes, because it doesn't correspond to any material or chemical reality. From biologists they learn that what particular individuals or members of a species do is insignificant, and the flourishing of species is the whole point of all natural reality.

Sometimes students learn that although the self or the "I" is actually an illusion, it is one we cannot live without. According to the philosopher Daniel Dennett, belief in human dignity is indispensable for the flourishing of members of our species, so we should embrace that belief for its beneficial social consequences. We need to call true, the philosopher Richard Rorty explained, those illusions that make us feel free, comfortable, and secure. One way of doing that, he adds, is to disbelieve the scientists when they compare our personal experiences to some objective truth. By always putting "truth" in quotes, we avoid disparaging what we choose to believe by comparing it with some real standard.

Despite the best efforts of talented professors, it goes without saying that students do not really accept that the "I"—the reality of the person each of us sees in the mirror—does not exist. They cannot reduce what they think they know about themselves as particular beings with names and personal destinies to merely useful illusions. The main effect of advanced education, then, is to show each of them how really alone in a hostile environment he is.

And despite all the therapeutic efforts to build inclusive and diverse communities, our colleges are often very lonely places. As the novelist Tom Wolfe has described, the strong and beautiful "hook up"; the clever use their cunning to master the fraudulent art of networking or to become trendy, marketable intellectuals; and the timid and decent are shown the vanity of their slavish moral illusions. Compelled to establish who they are through their success in manipulating and dominating others, they then must distinguish between how they "dress for success" and who they really are, between the self they construct to impress on others and the self that stands isolated behind the construction. All in all, it seems that today's student arrives at college more free—in the sense of lost or empty or disoriented—than ever, and the effect of college, in most cases, is to make him more lost still.

Our colleges do not really deny the reality of personal freedom; they leave intact the two dominant understandings of freedom and dignity in our technological society—*productivity* and *autonomy*. According to Thomas Hobbes, our dignified freedom is displayed in our productivity, in our generation of power in opposition to nature, in what we can do that commands a price. Nature treats each of us with cruel indifference. But we can use our freedom to change our natural environment to make our particular existences more secure.

According to Immanuel Kant, Hobbes assumes that each human individual regards himself as unique and irreplaceable. His dignity couldn't possibly be found in his productivity or price, in being just another natural resource. Our dignity is in our ability to act freely against natural instinct and inclination, and we do so by respecting the dignity of other free beings able to do the same. Our dignity is in our autonomy, in our moral freedom, in our ability to tell ourselves, in freedom, what to do.

Hobbes and Kant are not so very far apart. They both agree that our dignity can only be found in our freedom from nature, and that there is no dignity in living according to nature. For Hobbes, our common political life is an invention by free beings to achieve a level of personal security not given to us by nature. Having achieved that level, each of us is on his own to live as he pleases with no natural guidance. We are free, as Abraham Maslow says, to pursue self-actualization, to discover or invent the "real me" who is more than a mere body. Kant holds that the way to be free from nature or selfish interest and inclination is to act rationally and morally. But today's proponent of autonomy is satisfied to say that anything a free being chooses is dignified. And so the productivity unleashed by technological progress serves autonomy by expanding the number of free choices possible in our lives. Most sophisticated graduates of our better colleges today—those David Brooks calls bourgeois bohemians—take pride in both their productivity and autonomy. They work hard and display their self-fulfillment through their free personal choices. There is no dignity, they believe, in choosing for natural instinct, for being a mere species-perpetuating machine. There is no intrinsic dignity in being begetting or belonging beings, in being social, gregarious animals, in acceding to what comes naturally.

There is no dignity in living well with any of our natural limitations, in living well with death or being grateful for the human goods that depend upon our finite existence in this world. Nature's victory over each of us may be inevitable, but its timing is indefinite enough that there is no need to relax and accept the inevitability of annihilation. What is autonomy for but to rise above the limitations our bodies impose on us? Champions of

radical autonomy have predictably rebelled against all those institutions that our bodily limitations seem to make necessary and good—such as the family, the nation, and the church. The autonomous being aims to live in cosmopolitan detachment from all those particular constraints, to live a free or sort of ghostly existence nowhere in particular.

Productivity and autonomy both point in the direction of "transhumanism"—toward a free existence unlimited by bodily constraints. They are, therefore, both un- and anti-erotic. The experience of incompleteness that animates the various forms of love is undignified. To be free, in the modern techno-view, is to be disembodied, and disembodied *eros* is an oxymoron. Even God became a man to display His personal love for each of us. And even Socrates said philosophy is learning how to die—an impossible prospect, without a body.

The imperatives of productivity and autonomy both suggest that there is dignity in separating sex from birth or death, thereby making it an absolutely free expression of the self. The view put forward by college administrators is that the only limitations to sexual behavior should be safety and consent. A productive being does not allow love to get in the way of work. An autonomous being refuses to allow love, a mere biological instinct, to produce undignified or unfree behavior. Meanwhile, food has become more exciting—a more morally loaded object of desire—than sex. From a health and safety perspective, we're increasingly paranoid, puritanical, and prohibitionist when it comes to food.

To see how fundamentally un-bohemian our alleged bourgeois bohemians are, look no further than the trendy TV show *Mad Men* about Manhattan advertising executives circa 1960. These mad men smoked, they drank martinis day and night, they only exercised when they thought it was fun, they had all sorts of reckless extramarital liaisons. They were *mad*, that is, because they lacked caution in their pursuit of personal fulfillment. Today's sophisticates are in many ways so timid and repressed that the button-down organization men of the recent past look like veritable bohemians by comparison. The erstwhile conflict between bourgeois and bohemian has withered away in the lives of our students and teachers only because productivity trumps autonomy at every turn.

The Origin of the Bourgeois Bohemian

The conflict between bourgeois and bohemian used to be displayed as evidence of the limits of the American idea of freedom. College professors and students, for a while, seemed to be divided between those who aimed to

be productive and those who aimed to be artistically self-fulfilled. Suburbs of the 1950s, as we learn from books and movies like *Revolutionary Road*, were full of people who were boring and desperately conformist, people incapable of living interesting lives. It once was thought that the people who earned the money didn't know how to live, and those who chose *la vie bohème* couldn't even pay the rent. Bohemians criticized universities for producing corporate techno-clones, while themselves often dropping out of college to follow their own lights. Even Bohemian Tories with a genuine concern for living well, such as the conservative Russell Kirk, sometimes dropped out of an increasingly bureaucratized and standardized university system.

The bohemian critics of the 1950s were already making the criticisms of technocratic education for productivity that we make today. The American university lacks a unifying vision of a whole human life, and it was incapable of preparing young people for the art of life. They noticed that only scientific and technical courses were taken seriously as conveying real knowledge. They were the classes all about "facts," while the humanities were all about emoting mere "values." Autonomy or self-actualization was presented as nothing more than whimsical self-indulgence.

The theorists of the 1960s claimed that education for productivity had become obsolete. The techno-conquest of scarcity now allows the surrender of bourgeois discipline for unprecedented liberation of huge numbers of people to "do their own thing." The acquisition of the material means for living a good life had become easy, and so we had become free not to be guided by the necessity of obsessing over productivity in choosing how to live. The Sixties' theorists agreed with the proponents of productivity that there was no returning to the repression and prejudice of the past.

The view of the bourgeois Fifties establishment was that all virtue that doesn't contribute to productivity is repressive or "surplus," and families and religion were reconfigured in a sort of utilitarian direction by the social-scientific brigade of our organization men. The bohemian claim of the Sixties' theorists was that even virtue that served productivity is "surplus," and so reason, freedom, creativity, and love could be liberated from alienating distortions. The true meaning of bourgeois success is that lots of people are now free to be bohemian without experiencing the downsides of judgmental marginalization and material deprivation.

For all of their infatuation with Marx, these radicals missed the irony of his crucial insight: Capitalism makes human beings miserably anxious by turning every human purpose, except those that serve productivity, into a meaningless whim. The radicals made us still more miserably

anxious or disoriented by reducing even bourgeois virtue to nothing. Their view of freedom mirrored Marx's description of the communism to come: Life is nothing but a series of disconnected, unobsessive pursuits that have no meaning beyond immediate enjoyment.

The 1960s intellectual rebellion rightly began against the technocratic view that factual statements always begin not with "I think," but with "studies show"—that real knowledge is always to be expressed impersonally, has nothing to do with who real people are and what they are supposed to do. But by the end of the 1960s, the "studies show" type of courses in the social sciences and humanities were replaced by aggressively personal and merely subjective "studies" courses—black studies, women's studies, and so forth. These courses were based on the premise that human identity is nothing more or less than an assertion of power, and that, as Hobbes says, that there is no truth, only power. "Studies" courses unwittingly reinforced Hobbes's bourgeois lesson: My dignity depends upon my power.

The know-nothing propaganda coming from the social sciences and humanities in the late 1960s never really challenged the progress of science and technology. But the humanities themselves were emptied of much of their real content—which had come from taking virtue seriously as more than just a means to productivity or autonomy. That meant humanities courses became, on balance, less challenging and even less interesting to students as real alternatives to the domination of productivity (or "quantitative assessment") in higher education.

Nor did autonomy in the form of Sixties liberationism actually discredit the virtues associated with productivity. One contradiction of Sixties radicalism was that its new "art of living" (in Herbert Marcuse's phrase) both depended upon and rejected the disciplined habits and social institutions that make possible techno-prosperity. Those radicals naïvely embraced a key error of Marx, who believed that the conquest of nature can occur once and for all, allowing the alienation associated with the division of labor to wither away. But of course the conquest of scarcity continues to depend on people being what it takes to be productive: calculating, inventive, industrious, pleasing; capable of abstract or impersonal loyalty; thoughtful and disciplined enough to defer gratification today for an even better tomorrow; stuck with the anxious stress of competition; and genuinely willing to accept the alienation that comes with the division of labor. And the dignity that comes with practicing the bourgeois virtue is more real, of course, than any associated with merely unobsessively doing one's own thing.

Liberty, Diversity, Dignity

The real lesson of the Sixties is that we cannot dispense with the virtues that empower us to be free from nature for doing what we please when we're not working. The neocons and New Democrats of the Seventies, Eighties, and Nineties taught us that deviance, dysfunction, and the pseudo-profundity of romantic bohemian sentimentalism are self-indulgent and self-destructive vices, at least if they flourish at the expense of personal productivity.

But, from the bourgeois bohemian point of view, there is still much to appreciate about the Sixties' transformations in the direction of autonomy. The steps toward freeing individuals from the arbitrary categories of race, class, gender, and even sexual orientation were progress; so too was the liberation of sexual appetites from pointless guilt, shame, and ignorant frustration, as was even their desublimation in the direction of commodification. From a bourgeois bohemian view, progress in the Sixties included luring women out of the home and into the workplace in the name of both autonomy and productivity, heightened skepticism about traditional religious dogmas, and a new openness—even through the use of soft and safe recreational drugs—to demystified, Aquarian, New Agey forms of spirituality. So, from the perspective of our colleges today, it is clear what was good about the Sixties. That decade's new forms of autonomous self-fulfillment have been safely reconfigured to be perfectly compatible with health, safety, and productivity.

Our libertarian thinkers, like Tyler Cowen, are best at explaining what the bohemian side of bourgeois bohemian now means. Our techno-globalizing world makes it easier than ever for prosperous people to be appreciative and tasteful consumers of the food, music, literature, and art of other cultures without having to actually be dragged into the repressive morality and limited, un-individualistic horizon of any particular culture. Today's bohemian is a multiculturalist, finding self-fulfillment from the perspective of the tourist or hobbyist exploring the huge and diverse menu of good things the world has to offer. That is why the study of world religions has become so popular: It is basically unthreatening fun to learn about all the sundry gods and goddesses without the burden of the love, cruelty, fear, and tough personal discipline that comes with actually believing in them. Such enjoyment is perfectly compatible with the individualistic view that every human endeavor be freely chosen. The free individual, in fact, is free from the puritanical moral obsessiveness that would make a life a "whole." His personal life is characterized by

diverse self-fulfilling enjoyments; he claims not to *have* to know who he is—beyond being a productive being—to know how to live.

While Cowen retains some of the Sixties' confidence that a free society will not only consume but produce high culture, he mostly seems to acknowledge the irony that the globalizing conditions that produce the unfettered consumption of culture will also undermine the real diversity of cultures in the world: the rise of diversity on the individual level tends to flatten diversity on the social or cultural level. We can only hope, libertarians must perversely add, that some people will remain irrational or tribal enough to keep real cultural diversity alive against the forces of individualistic enlightenment. We can appreciate as consumers—but not imitate or even condone as free beings—people who choose an understanding of dignity or significance that is something other than autonomy or productivity.

The End of the Humanities?

The old bohemians meant to be genuinely countercultural, to define themselves authentically as whole artistic or poetic or even religious beings against bourgeois productivity or an empty view of autonomy that is indistinguishable from productivity. They claimed to know who they are and what they are supposed to do with their lives. And they willingly and even irresponsibly sacrificed careerist productivity for personal, self-fulfilled, purposeful happiness. They seemed, like Socrates, to live like parasites off the productive. But we still looked to them for some alternative guidance for what human life is for, believing they might have some insight into human meaning or purpose.

By contrast, today's "postmodern" humanist professors do not even claim to have a holistic view of the "art of living." Stanley Fish, one of our most notable practitioners and defenders of liberal education, sees, in his ironic way, that privileges without responsibility cannot last long. Fish acknowledges that our universities are defined by the "ethic" of measurable productivity and efficiency. The humanities seem increasingly impractical and unaffordable. Higher education, it would seem, need not waste time and money on teaching students how to enjoy tastefully the products of other cultures. They can pursue their hobbies on their own. The faculty member, Fish observes, who "delivers insight and inspiration" is obsolete, because neither he nor his bosses really believe he has the warrant to tell students what to do or how to live.

Fish does not think to blame his own views for this state of affairs: He admits he doesn't believe he teaches anything real, and yet he still

wants what he does to be cherished in its "inutility." Despite himself, he accepts the "business model" of the university administrators: What doesn't generate power or productivity is not real. He doesn't defend the traditional proposition that what we most need to know to live well cannot be measured. In his view, it would seem that professors like himself can and should disappear, because they know no true standard of human significance or dignity that trumps productivity. Because of the emptiness of the autonomous alternative to productivity they promote, humanities professors have just about put themselves out of business.

It is easy to criticize the bourgeois-bohemian product of our colleges and universities for his superficiality. Some critics, such as Allan Bloom, say we're producing generations of emotional solitaries—people unable to be moved to thought or action by love or death. By raising and teaching the young as if they do not have souls, we're producing souls that are flat or one-dimensional. They are not lost or homeless, but all too at home in a world made for emotional tourists, for being at home everywhere because they are not at home anywhere in particular.

These are the best times ever to be young, smart, pretty, and industrious, but the pressure is on to display those qualities so as to avoid loneliness and attain dignified significance. People are full of moral anxiety. They know, for example, that they have the responsibility to raise their kids to be more than productive beings, to have more than just the survival skills required to compete in the marketplace. But, unless they have turned to very personal religion, they have no idea who either they or their kids ought to be or what people should be raised to do.

The End of Humanity?

Somebody might say that anxiety is a small price to pay for maximizing individual liberty: Freedom from nature is bound to have its unpleasant side effects, but surely it is still much better than submitting to the brutish, undignified fate nature has in store for each of us. Yet it is also true that our inability to find a standard of personal dignity or significance to trump productivity might be the foundation for a new birth of tyranny in the emerging biotechnological world.

Consider that a perfectly technological world would be one in which every natural resource was harnessed to maximize the productivity of free beings. Biotechnology, in effect, adds one's own body to the list of natural resources. The philosopher of unregulated individualism, John Locke, said that my body is my property to be exploited at will with security and

enjoyment in mind. Biotechnology promises to make into a reality the transhumanist dream of leaving behind our bodily limitations.

This insight is the source of our enthusiasm today for cosmetic surgery and neurology. It would seem that enhancing the body of a perfectly healthy individual would be a violation of the literal meaning of the Hippocratic Oath; it says, in effect, do not turn someone into a patient for reasons that have nothing to do with health. These days, autonomy seems to trump such traditional concerns. But what are the main reasons that people have themselves nipped, tucked, and Botoxed? To look younger and more pleasing and so to be more productive. To avoid the indignity of being old, alone, and poor. Autonomy is subordinated to dignity understood as productivity.

If there is nothing wrong with such physical enhancement, we will all be pressured to stay young and pretty as long as we can, which will be a lot longer than nature intends. Autonomy, in effect, will be sacrificed to productivity. The same will be true of other potential improvements—to our cognitive abilities, our memories, and our moods.

By way of example, consider a case from the university: the notoriously autonomy-obsessed and unproductive professor. Despite the fact that such professors often drove off students and were too disoriented to publish to their full potential, we used to tolerate their moodiness for two reasons. First, we did not think that they could help it; professors are eccentric by nature. And second, we sort of bought the claim that we all—and profound people especially—have a right to our "natural moods" as an indispensable clue to the truth about who we are. Bad moods especially, such as anxiety, might lead us in the direction of the truth about being and human being. But what if professors could easily find a safe and reliable chemical remedy for their moodiness? Deans might start saying, *We'll keep you around only if you brighten up.* The professor might object—*I have a right to my moods! They lead me to the truth.* But moods, as the dean would surely note, are nothing but random collections of chemicals, and we free beings are not bound by any "natural" reason to privilege one collection of chemicals over another. So we have no reason not to choose the ones that lead us toward being productive, and there is no reason why we cannot call those improved moods true. Autonomy is the justification for allowing moods to be enhanced, but mere autonomy is not going to be enough to trump productivity in defending the free choice of moods.

If we cannot find a standard of dignity or personal significance that is more truthful and secures our significance better than do the standards of autonomy and productivity, then biotechnology, in truth, is not going to

give us a new birth of freedom. It is going to subject us to the lonely and one-dimensional standards of health, safety, and productivity. They will offer us no reason not to enhance the real bohemian and the old-fashioned professor of the humanities out of existence.

Dignity and Higher Education

It is no secret that most of our colleges that give lip service to "liberal education" do not deliver it, and what they do teach exaggerates—not moderates—the undignified confusion of our time. They certainly do not give students the impression that there is much—if any—moral or humanistic *content* (as opposed to *method*, like critical thinking or analytical reasoning) that they need to know. And so they do not give students the impression that their education is about who they are or what they are supposed to do. Moreover, the permissive and indulgent atmosphere of our colleges extends adolescence far more than it serves as a bridge between childhood and adulthood. Our colleges inculcate habits that are positively antagonistic to the formation of moral virtue, and they often undermine the good habits and confident beliefs that students sometimes bring with them to college in the first place.

Charles Murray argues in his book *Real Education* that we should declare the brick-and-mortar college obsolete for most purposes it now claims to serve. The students who go to college in pursuit of a technical career—the overwhelming majority of them—might be better served by a more focused and condensed education that would take much less than four years and wouldn't require "the residential experience." Maybe we should abandon the pretense that the bachelor's degree is the ticket of admission to the world of white-collar work. Students might be less disoriented if they were freed from the fantasy that college can give them a standard of dignity higher than productivity; they might well be better off with—and closer to the truth with—what they have picked up from their family, their church, and their community. Liberal education in a society that has abdicated on most fronts the project of sound cultural transmission couldn't possibly function as the cure for what most ails us.

Murray concludes that liberal education—including real precision in the use of language and real knowledge of what's required for moral choices—might be preserved for those likeliest to assume positions of political, intellectual, and economic leadership in our country. Tocqueville, recall, said something not so different: Those with literary careers—or those charged with perpetuating key distinctions in our language—should study

the Greek and Roman authors in their original languages. That way our language will retain some contact with metaphysical, theological, and moral distinctions that correspond to the multilayered truth about the human soul. Otherwise, our language will continue to become exclusively impersonal, vague in crucial respects, and too technical for us to say anything true about our freedom and dignity. Tocqueville advises us that we need a few excellent universities far more than many mediocre colleges.

But this sort of conclusion is unsatisfying if we believe that every human being has a soul worthy of being educated. Everyone has to live well with the responsibilities given to begetting and belonging beings open to the truth, including the personal truths of love and death. In a time when every claim about truth and morality invites skepticism, religious training and moral habituation won't be enough by themselves to inspire the self-confidence and good judgment required to live lives of genuine personal significance. The traditional claim of liberal education that everyone needs more than a technical education remains true. And surely it must be regarded as true if we are really to subordinate technical progress to human purposes.

Liberal education does exist here and there in our country, and particularly in the smaller liberal-arts colleges. Many of those colleges are inspired to aim high by their vibrant religious missions. Students who choose religious colleges are usually clearer about who they are than many of our lost souls when they get to college, but that doesn't mean that they do not need the kind of intellectual challenge and depth that can only come through higher education. It seems unlikely that in our time—a time without a secular moral code or any real moral consensus—secular colleges and universities can be up to the task of dignified liberal education in any serious way. If that is correct, then the future of human dignity—and of the dignified higher education that can help preserve it—may depend more than ever on our religious institutions.