

Liberal Arts Education: What's The Point?

April 16, 2019

Graham Chapel at Washington University in St. Louis

Speakers: Marie Griffith, Robert George, Holden Thorp, Cornel West

Provost Holden Thorp:

Good evening, everyone. It's great to see such a terrific crowd here for this very special evening. I'm Holden Thorp, I'm the Provost of Washington University and it's an honor to welcome you to this event put on by the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics where we're going to have the true privilege of hearing from Robbie George and Cornel West as they inspire us to fight on to protect the liberal arts education. We could not have asked for two better folks to help us learn new ways that we can protect education for democracy and deep scholarship and all the things that are so important to us at Washington University and other great universities around America. We have to thank our great leader of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics, Marie Griffith, who is here to be your Emcee for this evening so let's give our thanks and our welcome to Marie Griffith. [applause]

Professor Marie Griffith:

Thank you so much Holden and good evening everyone! It is indeed a great honor to be hosting tonight's very distinguished guests, Professors Robert P. George and Cornel West. I want to publicly thank the Veritas Forum for co-sponsoring this event and also to give a shout out to the Kairos students here at WashU who, along with our own Religion and Politics minors, had the opportunity for a great lunch with Professors George and West today. Students are always at the center of what we do at the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics and that's part of why tonight's rich discussion is so relevant, not to say timely, for all of us.

So, let me briefly now introduce our speakers. Robert P. George is the McCormack Professor of Jurisprudence and Director of the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton University. He is also a visiting professor at Harvard Law School. He has served as chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and as a presidential appointee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. Professor George has also served on the President's Council on Bioethics and as the U.S. member of UNESCO's World Commission on the Ethics of Science and Technology. He was a judicial fellow at the Supreme Court of the United States where he received the Justice Tom C. Clark Award. A Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Swarthmore College, he holds the degrees of JD and MTS from Harvard University and three degrees from Oxford University in addition to 19 honorary degrees. He is a recipient of the US presidential citizens medal and the Honorific Medal for the Defense of Human Rights of the Republic of Poland and is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and Baylor University has recently named its new Washington D.C. based program: The Robert P. George Initiative in Faith, Ethics, and Public Policy. Professor George is the author of many influential books, including: *Making Men Moral*; *Civil Liberties and Public Morality*; *In Defense of Natural Law*; *The Clash of Orthodoxies*; and *Conscience and It's Enemies*. He is also the co-author of several books on marriage, abortion, and pro-life ethics, among other topics. And, he is also the editor of numerous volumes on both natural law and constitutional law. His articles and review

essays have appeared in numerous law review journals and he has also written frequently for The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, First Things, The Boston Review, and The Time Literary Supplement.

Cornel West is a philosopher by training but far, far more than that, he is a prominent and provocative Democratic intellectual whose learned thought and work are both as deep and comprehensive as any intellectual across humanistic fields. He is Professor of the Practice of Public Philosophy at Harvard University and also holds the title of Professor Emeritus at Princeton University. He has also taught at Union Theological Seminary at Yale, a prior stint at Harvard, Dartmouth College, and the University of Paris. Professor West graduated Magna Cum Laude from Harvard in three years and obtained his MA and PhD in Philosophy at Princeton. He has written twenty books and has edited thirteen. He is best known for his classics: *Democracy Matters* and *Race Matters*, which recently celebrated the 25th anniversary of its debut with a new edition and I should say that book as well as Professor George's *Conscience and Its Enemies* are both on sale at the WashU bookstore. Professor West's memoir, *Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud*, and his dialogic book, *Black Prophetic Fire*, have also received much critical acclaim. Dr. West is also a frequent guest on the Bill Maher Show, Colbert Report, CNN c-span, and Democracy Now, among other venues. He made his film debut in *The Matrix*. [laughter and applause] And, was one of the two commentators on the official trilogy that was released in 2004 and he's also appeared in over 25 documentaries and films, including *Examined Life*, *Call and Response*, *Side-walk*, and *Stand*. And lastly, but not leastly, he has made three spoken word albums, including: *Never Forget*, collaborating with Prince, Jill Scott, Andre 3000, Talib Kweli, KRS1, and the late Gerald Levert. His spoken word interludes were featured on Terence Blanchard's *Choices*, The Cornel West Theory *Second Rome*, Raheem DeV Vaughn's Grammy-nominated *Love and War* masterpiece, and most recently on Bootsy Collins' *The Funk Capital of the World*. [applause] In short, Cornel West has a passion to communicate to a vast variety of publics in order to keep alive the legacy of Martin Luther King jr. A legacy of telling the truth and bearing witness to love and justice.

Okay, the accolades of both of these scholars could go on through to tomorrow if not next week, but I will stop there, and, without further ado ask you to join me in welcoming Professors Robert George and Cornel West. [applause] We'll have a conversation - whoops we got to turn our mics on. We're gonna have a conversation here for about an hour and then we will open it up to Q&A. We'll have a couple of students walking around with mics to take your questions so be thinking as we talk. So, I just want to welcome both of you. This is such a pleasure and I guess for the sake of full disclosure I should note that I served as your colleague when all three of us were teaching at Princeton in the early aughts. I was a great admirer of yours Robbie and I was in particular proximity with you, Cornell, as your colleague in Princeton's religion department. So, it really is – I say a lot of polite things on this stage...and I mean them! [laughter] This is a true and genuine, personal pleasure to welcome you both here. Now, you, Robbie, come from the Roman Catholic tradition. I think we can call you a Roman Catholic traditionalist and a conservative. You call yourself that. While, you, Cornel, come from the progressive Protestant Christian tradition and I think you'd accept the descriptor 'progressive' and in certain meanings of that term, at least. And, even, Democratic socialist, which you've called yourself. So, many people, I think, would be surprised that you two are such close friends and colleagues so I just

wanted us to start maybe by asking each if you to say briefly how you got to be friends and such close colleagues and what that friendship has meant to you over the years?

Professor Robert George:

Well, that is a question, Marie that we've been asked before but we've never had quite as special an opportunity to answer it as we have tonight and I'll explain that cryptic sentence in just a minute. But before doing that I want to thank you and your wonderful team and the Danforth Center on Religion and Politics and the Veritas Forum for the opportunity to be at this very distinguished university. It's a real joy and I know I speak not only for myself, but for Cornel, to say what a joy it is to be here with all of you. We greatly admire what you are doing in the Center and Provost we greatly admire what you're doing in the university; especially, to hold up the cause, the much battered and maligned cause, of liberal arts education. So, we're here because we want to support that – that's the fundamental reason. We're very grateful for the opportunity to be here. Now, if I say things that are even wilder than what I usually say it's because I had dental surgery yesterday and I'm on these very powerful painkillers. [laughter] Tonight, I'm the guy in *The Matrix*. [laughter] But, Cornel will correct anything – he always does – Cornel will correct anything that I say that's wrong. Now, why do I say it's such a special evening to answer the question of how our friendship, our fraternal bond, was created? Well, we had known each other at Princeton, slightly, in the 1990s. We'd been in faculty seminars together, discussion groups over at the Center for Human Values at Princeton University. I always admired Brother Cornel. When we'd be in these seminars, even when he was giving the wrong answers, he was giving exactly the right questions [laughter] and getting right to the bottom of things and pushing aside the ephemera and the trivia and the superficial to get at the heart of the matter and I admired that from the start. You can't be around this guy for very long without realizing you are in the presence of a very deep thinker and anyone who's committed to the life of the mind recognizes a soul mate in that. And, so we fell in love – that's the long and short of it. [laughter] Now, although we had known each other slightly, it was a particular day, around about 2006, when during my office hours, Marie, I got a knock on my door and I answered the door and there was a student – a wonderful student, one of my best students – a young man named Andrew Perlmutter. He was a religion major and I'd had him in his courses. Turns out that Cornell had had him in his courses. I said, "Andrew, what can I do for you?" And, he said, "Well, Professor George. I'm involved in a new student project here at Princeton. We're going to create a new magazine on campus, a magazine of culture and politics and the arts called *The Green Light* and in every issue we want to feature an interview of one professor by another professor. And, I said "Well, Andrew, that all sounds wonderful. Congratulations on the new magazine. Have you raised the money for it?" He said, "Oh, yes! This is Princeton – we've raised the money." [laughter] So, I said "That's fine, wonderful. How can I help?" He said, "well, we've reached to Professor Cornel West to ask him to do the first interview – be the interviewer for the first issue and we invited him to suggest someone that he would like to interview and he said he'd like to interview you." Now, I said, "Well, Andrew, I'm very honored. But let me get this right. I want to make sure I understand correctly. You asked Professor West who he wanted to interview – he could interview any member of this distinguished faculty – and he said he wanted to interview me!?" And, Andrew said, "that's right." And, I said, "Well, I want you to

send a message back to Professor West. I want you to tell Professor West that Professor George said, 'but it is I who should be seeking baptism from you!'" [laughter] To which Andrew responded – Andrew is a religion major and a wonderful student, A++ student. He wasn't quite up on the scripture side of things. [laughter] He responded by saying, "huh!?" [laughter] And I said, "Well, you just tell him, tell Professor West, that's what Professor George said. And he said, "Okay, I will...but will you do it?" And I said, "Well, I would absolutely be honored to do it." So, the appointed day came and here came to my office over in Corwin Hall, Brother Cornel and Andrew and a photographer and, man, that photographer earned his pay. He must've taken 2000 pictures, he was snapping. We were yakking and he was snapping. And, I tell you we hit every issue. We talked about everything. It wasn't an interview; it was a Texas Death Match of some sort. We were really rocking and rolling over all the deep issues, contemporary political issues, music, you name it. We were getting into everything. Now, the interview was supposed...he had one of these old-fashioned cassette tape recorders. The interview was supposed to last for as long as we were supposed to have the tape, which I think was an hour or maybe two hours or something like that. Well, anyway, we went on for four hours, even after the tape had run out. Photographer still snapping, the tape had run out. At which point, I looked at my watch and I said, "well, Brother Cornel, this has been so wonderful. We really need to get together more often to chat. We need to make this a regular thing." And he said, "Well, Brother Robbie, that would be wonderful. We really need to do that." And, I said, "Well, why don't you walk me down to my car, I'm just parked down here on Prospect Avenue." He said, "Well, yeah!" So, we walked down together and got to my car and I stood there with my hand on the door handle for about a half hour while we went on back and forth. [laughter] And, then, just providentially, I think the Holy Spirit was involved in this, perhaps. We got a note – the senior members of the faculty got a note from Nancy Malkiel, who was the Dean of the College in those days, responsible for our undergraduate curriculum. And, she said to the senior faculty, "you know we need more of you to teach freshman seminars. Freshman seminars are a very important part of our program and we don't have enough senior faculty teaching. We promised our newly admitted students or the students we're trying to attract at Princeton, trying to get them to not go to WashingtonU, we attract them by saying 'oh, you come and you're immediately, even freshman year, be working with senior distinguished members of our faculty.' And, the problem is, that's not really happening so much. So, we'd appreciate some of you senior people being willing to teach freshman seminars." Well, the lightbulb went off over my head. And, I thought, wouldn't it be wonderful if Brother Cornel and I could get together every week for a freshman seminar and teach 16 or 18 of these wonderful, bright young men and women. So, I got in touch with Brother Cornel and said, "I don't know if you've looked at your mail" – Cornel sometimes misses those things [laughter] - he's busy, he's busy! He's got Bootsy on the phone, he's got all kinds of stuff so...[laughter] So, I said, "you know, we really oughta do a freshman seminar together." He said, "oh, Brother Robbie, that's a great idea. Let's do that, what should it be about? So, I had the idea, "well, let's do a kind of 'great books approach.' We have twelve-week semesters at Princeton. Let's do a book a week. You pick six of them and I'll pick six of them and let's pick books that were important in our own intellectual and spiritual odysseys and no secondary sources. We're not going to teach theology classes. We want the students to actually engage the authors in as direct a manner as possible. So, we ended up teaching Sophocles

Antigone, Plato's *Gorgias*, St. Augustine's *Confessions*...and all the way – Marx and Hayek and John Dewey, C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*. And, it was just a wonderful experience and for that experience and then we just want on to do it. Then we were taking our show on the road and then we started writing together and it's just been a beautiful, wonderful thing. Something far beyond a friendship, I have to say, for one I'm so grateful. [applause] And, for all that we have Andrew Perlmutter to thank. [laughter] And, if anything we have done is of any value to anyone one in this room, I would ask you to join me in thanking the parents of Andrew Perlmutter for Andrew Perlmutter. They are here! Mr and Mrs. Perlmutter! [applause] He's off getting rich in the Silicon Valley. Tell him to remember Princeton. Brother Cornel...

Professor Cornel West:

Brother Andrew, he's a very special brother, very much so. But I want to begin first by saluting you, my dear Sister Marie. What a magisterial scholar you are. What a visionary administrator you are. Of course, you are a magnificent colleague. And with you and Brother Leigh! I can't imagine a more high-quality duo committed to the life of the mind in The Academy than Marie and Leigh. Let's give it up to both of them! [applause] That's so truth...I'm telling the truth. I want to salute my dear Brother Holden, here. He's from John Coltrane country, North Carolina. Loneliest Monk country...we were talking about those two giants but his leadership as well as his beloved wife, Patti. Fannie, new faculty member here. I see my dear Sister Valerie, distinguished theorist that she is. Sister Deborah, Sister Sandy, all of you all who are facilitated are coming. We have a good time wherever we go. [laughter] We could be off – he'd have a little coffee; I'd have a little cognac. Talk for hours. Our families are so very close, they're melted together in that way. That's why he...it's not really a... just a friendship. He's really my brother. I love this brother and I think that all of us need to recognize the ways in which love and respect are not reducible to politics. That you can revel in somebody's humanity even when he's wrong sometimes. [laughter] Indeed, and you can learn from somebody you have disagreement with. But most importantly, my dear brother has enriched my life in a magnificent way. Not just intellectually, but morally, spiritually. My beloved daughter, Zeytun, in many ways. My niece and he's an uncle. And I could go on and on. But I think given where we are now in the culture, it's really going to be more and more a question of: will we muster the courage to think for ourselves, to hope for ourselves, and to love for ourselves. You see, we should never ask anybody for permission as to who you love or ask people for permission as to what you think! Or ask people permission for what you hope for. You see I come from a people hated for 400 years and taught the world so much about love. You can't love unless you're free. You can't be free unless you're willing to be courageous and take a risk and be vulnerable. To go to the edge of life's abyss and then decide who you are or what does it say, what we tried to do: find our voices. That's why with jazz; can't be a jazz woman – in fact we just lost we, Nancy Wilson – unless you find your voice. But we live in a culture with too many echo chambers. Copy this, conform to this, adjust to this, accommodate to that. Where are the originals? Not the copies, but the real things who think for themselves and live for themselves and hope for themselves. Now, we know that you can't do that without tradition, traditions are inescapable and unavoidable. But tradition is something that you both must recover and you must recover from. [pause] Just let that sit for a while. [laughter] I know we at Washington University – spirit

of T S Eliot and his grandfather up here. Yeah, hello William Greenleaf Eliot, that's for real. But most importantly, it's about trying to come together at the deepest human level and Latin *humatio* which means burial – we are beings on the way to burial. Do we have the courage to think to love, to laugh, to connect the way we decide to do it based on integrity, honesty, decency, and generosity? It's one of the greatest achievements in life is to be a person of integrity. And I come from the prophetic legacy of Jerusalem so I'm not that impressed by Alexander the Great. My conception of greatness is he or she who is willing to serve, sacrifice, try to empower and enable others. To begin full and end up empty because you've emptied yourself with your cultivated gifts to make others and the world better than what you found it. That sounds so simplistic but it is profoundly subversive in our historical moment and it never ever goes out of fashion. Truth, beauty, goodness, love, justice. Integrity – no matter what the fads of fashion, those never go out of fashion and if we can't recover those then we slide down a slippery slope to chaos. And all the polarization, all of the balkanization, all of the hatred and contempt and envy and resentment and so forth and so on, how we push it back, Brother Robbie and I, just out of both love and friendship decided to take this on the road. We've been on chocolate sides of Dallas with Erykah Badu's kids and her school. We've been on vanilla sides of town sometimes in very high places with big money. Same challenge: integrity, honesty, decency, what kind of human being you going to be before the worms get your body.

Griffith:

Well, I think you're already talking about...[laughter] I think you're already talking about the values that we really want us to get into and I want us to get into this question of liberal arts education because I know you both have a lot to say. And you've got a room here filled with students, and faculty, and people who care deeply about education, so I guess I would ask you all since you did teach a course together so maybe you'd want to talk about that, but really more broadly, what you do see as the point and purpose of a liberal arts education.

George:

Well we've talked together on a number of occasions – it wasn't just a one-off thing. Once Andrew brought us together, we kept it rolling. What's the point of liberal arts education? It's not to make you rich. That probably doesn't surprise you. [laughter] It's not to make you impressive at cocktail parties with your knowledge on Shakespeare and your ability to quote Sophocles. It's not to give you high status or standing. Now, there's nothing wrong with any of those things. I like entertaining cocktail party conversations. I want you to get a great job and make a lot of money – remember WashU. [laughter] Did I get that right?

Griffith:

Yes! [laughter]

George:

And, in itself, there's nothing wrong with seeking to elevate yourself, seeking to be respected, to have high standing, to be a person who has influence – use it for the good. But those are not the fundamental purposes of a liberal arts education. Now, I'm going to put it to

you in the polite way, Cornel's not going to be so polite. [laughter] Here's the polite answer... The purpose of a liberal arts education is to enable a learner – enable you and me – to enable an examined life. Purpose of a liberal arts education is to unsettle us; to cause us to question our beliefs and to form our beliefs based on reflection, a liberation, reasoned judgment. Which means we must always be open to the possibility that we are what? Wrong! Which means we have to recognize – that's the hardest part of all – our own fallibility. Now, if I asked – and I won't do it, I don't want to put anybody on the spot – if I ask is there anybody in this room who is certain that he or she is not wrong about anything you believe? [laughter] No hands would go up. You all recognize your fallibility. We, up here, recognize our fallibility. I know right now that I'm wrong about some things... Cornel keeps telling me that. [laughter] But here's the problem: I don't know which ones they are; there's a little paradox here. If you take me through all of my beliefs, each one I hold under the description of being true. That's why I believe it! If, I didn't believe it was true, I wouldn't believe it at all and yet, I know, they can't all be right. I know have to be wrong about some things. So, how do I deal with that? Well, if I value truth above opinion, if I value truth in the way Socrates values truth and teaches us to value truth: as being so precious that we are willing to give up the complacency of being settled, the ease of being settled, to get at the truth. Then, what I need is an interlocutor. He may be a living human being; he may be someone I'm reading in a book. I need someone who will challenge me, who will unsettle me. And, not just in the trivial beliefs, the secondarily important beliefs, but in my deepest, most cherished, even identity-forming beliefs. Now, that's hard. That's hard to open yourself up to that examination and self-examination and that's because we are naturally complacent and comfortable with our opinions. We build our sense of self outside of those opinions. We build communities with other people who are like-minded and share opinions and we value those relationships and we don't want to put them at risk. We want to be seen as a team player and a right-thinking person whether that is actually a right-thinking person or a left thinking person. We want to be a person who thinks the correct things for our group and we certainly have difficulty imagining what it would be like to be the kind of person who disagrees with us because we kind of don't like those kinds of people. We think there's something wrong with those kinds of people. So that recognition of fallibility is critical to one of the values that we need to lead the examined life, which is what liberal arts education is all about. And that is the virtue of humility, intellectual humility. The recognition – not just notionally: “yeah, I must be wrong about something” - but the deep, existential conviction that I could very well be wrong, I am certainly wrong about some things, I may very well be wrong about important things. The kinds of things that are so important that we wrap our emotions tightly around them. Notice that about us human beings. All of us. We wrap our emotions very tightly around our convictions. Now, in itself again, that's not a bad thing. If we didn't have some emotional commitment to our convictions, we would do anything. You know, we wouldn't get the baby fed, get the children off to school, we wouldn't pursue our vocation or our calling in life, we wouldn't work for causes we believe in. So, there's nothing wrong in principle with having our emotions wrapped around our convictions, even fairly tightly. But if we wrap them too tightly, we become dogmatists. We become tribal. We tend to think anybody that disagrees with me or my group or my tribe or my clan is either a fool or a fraud; in any event, it's a bad person, and we demonize. Now there's something else we need; we were talking about this

earlier today. There's something else we need if we are to have that virtue of courage, which we need if we are to lead the examined life. Another virtue that has got to be imparted by a true liberal arts education, and that's the virtue of courage. Not the courage to face somebody else but courage to confront yourself. The courage to be your own best critic. The courage to render yourself vulnerable to changes even in deep conviction. And this means you actually have to buy into an old adage that is profoundly true but very difficult really to believe, and that is the adage that 'it is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.' That means we're not after happiness! The point of a liberal arts education is not to make you happy, at least in the modern, contemporary sense of happiness that connotes a pleasant state of mind and a smile on your face, that might be induced by the stuff I'm taking right now, valium or something like that. [laughter] Or getting on Bob Nozick's experience machine, remember than Cornel? The experience machine gives you all of the pleasurable experiences but you don't actually do anything. No, that's not the goal. Now, if we take the richer, older conception of happiness, what Aristotle called *eudaimonia*. The flourishing of the human being an all-round, integral fulfillment of the human being. Now, we're getting closer to it but that means we're willing to lead a life in which we don't rest complacently. Where we're challenging and being challenged. Where we're challenging ourselves and being our own best critics and we don't have the satisfaction of having a dogma. Now, this is not against religion, there's a place for religious beliefs, but it means that even your religious beliefs have to be open to question. We can't shut down the person that wants to challenge them – even on the basis that my most fundamental identity is formed by my religion. We need to be open even about things like that. We could be wrong. Now, some people hear Cornel and I say what I'm saying and they say: "that's elitist...that kind of education, that kind of pursuit of the examined life, trying to give students more than information and skills that will prepare them for a career, but something more, what Cornel calls *paideia*, deep education that immerses them in the great existential questions of meaning and value." That's elitist because after all who but the top sliver can afford that. Yeah, they get to go to WashingtonU or Princeton or Harvard or Stanford or Yale or Williams or Swarthmore – yeah, they can. But what about the great mass of people, even those who go to college? What about those who go to community colleges? Well, I want everybody to lead the examined life. Now, I know that not everyone can have an education, can afford an education, can afford the time or the money to go for a true liberal arts education, the sort that's offered here. But, there's no reason why even at our community colleges, even in our high schools, that we cannot impart on our young people more than vocational skills, more than information and skills. Those are important, those are valuable, getting a job is important, I want that to happen to you. I want you to have a good job, I want you to have high status, all that stuff but there can be more for everybody. But it takes a commitment on the part of the intellectual class and on the part of the leadership class in any society to say we are going to make that available even if, in limited ways in most cases, we are going to make that available in all of our colleges and universities. Even in community colleges, a student that might be doing a vocational course in something like nursing, which is a wonderful profession, still has distribution requirements in things like humanities and social sciences. Every single one of those courses should contribute to making that individual a lover of wisdom, a philosopher of the literal sense, a lover of wisdom, *philosophia*, a lover of wisdom, and a lifelong learner and a critical thinker and his or her best critic. Now, what are we experiencing now in

higher education? Well, the economics of it, the overall economic system, the pressures that we are experiencing from those who support higher education, god bless them, we love them, what'd we do without them, the pressure of parents, the pressure sometimes kids bring on themselves, is to instrumentalize, professionalize, move in the direction of vocational education. I notice sometimes, even when you have people defending the humanities, they will defend them by instrumentalizing them. They'll say "well, you should be a philosophy major, or an English literature major, or a history major...those are good even though they are not tied directly to vocations because they will teach you to be a critical thinker and that's what the investment banks and the hedge funds are looking for." Now again, if you want to work for a merchant bank or an investment bank, that's fine. I'm not here to criticize that. But, again, that's not fundamentally what liberal arts education, humanistic education is all about, that's not fundamentally its purpose. The purpose truly is the examined life and the examined life is not just the life for guy's with PhDs who teach courses and un around the country teaching – it's for plumbers and carpenters and nurses and insurance salesmen and corporate executives and hedge fund managers and everybody. And by the way, as hard as it is not to instrumentalize our liberal arts education we shouldn't instrumentalize it even to things that are especially noble. Say, well if I'm a philosophy major that will teach me to be a critical thinker and then I'll be a better social justice activist. Fine, be a social justice activist – that's great – but don't instrumentalize your education. You need to be wrestling and being challenged by Plato and by Shakespeare and by Jane Austin. It's not instrumentalized to anything. Now, we Americans have a lot of trouble with this and a lot of our success has been because we tend to be very practical people. We have a kind of utilitarian approach to life and it's paid off big time economically and we shouldn't look down on that and say it's a bad thing or deprecate it. But we need to keep it in perspective. We need to sharpen up our ability to think about what the ends should be and not just think about means, no up our ability to think about what the ends should be and not just think about means, not just think about instruments. We're great at instrumental reasons – that's wonderful – but how do we think about the things that are not instrumental, the things that are intrinsic in their value? Like, truth and love of truth. Like, friendship. Like, the critical appreciation of art and music. Like, the development of profound skills whether in ballet or chess or football or a range of other sorts of things. What about faith, religious faith, faith in God? What about those things that are not reducible to means to other things but are the ends to which other things are means? It's hard for us to give that up but a liberal arts education well-done will help us to do it. It will give us information, it will give us intellectual skills, but it will also impart to us and inculcate in us virtues like humility, virtues like courage, that will enable us to take on the tough but ultimately most rewarding task of all: of living the examined life.

West:

Absolutely...Liberal arts education is fundamentally about learning how to die.

George:

I said I'd put it politely. [laughter]

West:

Because, it raises the question: what is a good life? It raises the question: what does it mean to be human? What kind of person will I choose to be in my short time in time and space?

And no-one gets out of time and space alive. That's one death sentence. And learning how to dies, and we talk about this all the time in our classes, learning how to die is mustering the courage to examine yourself, criticize yourself, mustering the courage to examine your society, and criticize your society, and the world, and there is no growth, no development, there is no maturity without that kind of examination. And when you let a certain assumption go, a certain prejudice go, that's a form of death. Just let the bell ring for a little bit. [laughter] I appreciate that timing. [laughter] Because rebirth, renewable, regeneration, intellectual amore awakening – that's what a liberal arts education is about. We live in a culture that has reduced wisdom to smartness. Everybody wants to be so smart. [laughter] It's true. You can hardly watch television. Watch the number of times focal television uses the word “obviously.” Obviously, obviously, obviously, obviously, obviously. That is a signifier that they're part of the smart set because most of us not obvious at all. We're looking for an argument. Let the phones be smart, we got to be wise. *Philosophia*. Love of wisdom. The greatest of all early modern European philosophers, Montaigne said “to philosophize is to learn how to die.” He or she who learns how to dies unlearns slavery. How do we be free? Well part of the challenge here is James Baldwin's letter to his nephew. Most powerful sentence for me in that letter is “don't, be afraid.” That's what he tells his young person. It reminds me of Mary Ellen Pleasant, the first Black woman millionaire before Madam Jay Walker. She gave John Brown almost a million dollars to live on for ten years and she used to start every lecture: “I'd rather be a corpse than a coward.” Or Martin Luther King jr.: “I'd rather be dead than afraid.” We live in a culture of not just escalating greed and hatred but fear and the manipulation of those fears, usually to scapegoat the most vulnerable, like our brothers and sisters on the border or poor people or working people or brown or balck or red or gays or lesbians or trans. Any vulnerable people is so easy to do that because it doesn't take any courage to do that. The courage has to come in a Socratic way; raising the questions such as you are willing to give up certain assumptions in order to learn how to live. Now I come out of the prophetic legacy of Jerusalem. What Paul says: Christians must die daily. That was eulogy of Dorothy Day for Martin Luther King jr. April 5th 19866, Catholic worker. Martin Luther King jr. Learned how to die daily. What was it about that brother? He wasn't a God, he wasn't a deity, but he questioned himself, he grew, he matured, and he loved enough to learn how to empty himself, to donate himself, to give himself when he was in the coffin the doctor said ‘this is the body of a 69 year old’ and he was only 39 years old. It was like the end of an Al Green concert. What a brother can't walk or breathe because he's given it all. We just lost Brother Nipsey. He learned how to die before he died because he gave so much. He grew, he read, he learned how to laugh and love and sacrifice. That reality, getting weaker and weaker, that's why they talk about liberal arts education is not some abstract academic conversation for the chattering classes who want to feel as if they're so smart on the way to being rich. No. Liberal arts education means whether in fact we actually are going to be able to sustain the best of our traditions and keep alive a fragile experiment in democracy against the backdrop of our empire, the backdrop of predatory capitalism, the backdrop of our white supremacy and male supremacy and so forth. That's what's at stake. That's what's at stake. And when you think about piety and piety is not uncritical difference, the dogma, it's not blind obedience, the doctrine, going back to Plato's *Euthyphro*, on the John Dewey, on the George Santayana, is keeping track of the sources of good in our lives and what we fall back on, our dependence on those rich, deep,

courageous voices of the dead. And they die twice if we don't keep it alive because their afterlives are no longer operating in us. It's like standing in front of your mother's coffin and you got to ask yourself the question: 'now, who am I really?' All that love she put in me, how are the best of her afterlife be operative in my life? Will I love the truth in beauty and goodness at the level she did and if I didn't, I failed? That's alright, I failed. Beckett is right. Try again, fail again, fail better. That's the lapsed Protestant Irish Brother Samuel Beckett. He understood what it is to learn how to die in order to learn how to live better and the only way we do it is by means of example. We can't just pontificate and transmit propositions to people. It's like the conclusion of a practical Aristotelian syllogism. It's not a proposition. It's a life lived. It's a way of being in the world. It's in actions, deeds, practices, always fallible and finite but still trying to make available this courage that Brother Robbie's talking about and we can't do it alone. I mean we've got these myths in America about being self-made. I say yeah, I guess you gave birth to yourself too. [Audience laughs] Oh you just don't know, I've been independent for a long time, okay okay alright, picked up your language too on your own. [Audience laughs] So childishly American. Fetishizing this autonomous individualism, individuality back to jazz, voice crucial different from childish individualism. Individuality always comes from a woman's womb, a love of family, and community, and mosques, and synagogue, church, music, and sports and so forth, and teachers and professors and brothers. Falling back to be accountable and answerable so that this issue of liberal arts is probably one of the most fundamental of our time, but this is true for every generation because every generation consists of human beings and this is where Brother Robbie and have deep philosophical debates about this because I'm very Kierkegaardian and uh...well just say Kierkegaardian or Chekhovian, very uh, Wallace Thurmanian, which is about how wretched we really are. What it means to be the kind of primates with language obsessed with power and status and honor and territory, and of course as a Christian we just call this sin and keep moving, just call it sin and just keep moving, keep moving [audience chuckles]. But there's also a dignity and a sanctity because we're all made in the image and likeness of God, which means we have potentiality, which means no moment of our wretchedness fundamentally defines fully who we are. And it provides us with the possibility of brothers and sisters of different colors and genders and nations and sexual orientations. Because they're made in the same image and likeness no matter how stuck they are at a particular moment. Liberal arts education – how do you learn how to live? And if we end up like Hamlet, one of the smartest of all literary protagonists in the history of the modern world but never learns how to love. Meaning what? Can't share, no vulnerability, can't take a risk, no joy, just pleasure. And so much of culture is a joyless quest for insatiable pleasure. Oh, that's so much of American culture these days. Manipulation, titillation, stimulation, superficial spectacle, and our young people unfortunately are bombarded with it every day and that's one of the differences between Brother Robbie and even us. I think you're much younger than we are but you're right on the edge in terms of the generation. This younger generation, good God I just don't know sometimes how young brothers and sisters of all colors really make it in this market driven culture obsessed with spectacle and image and money money money and status, and not really able to sustain those long deep connection that produce joy rather than pleasure. The enduring realities of what it is to be human. Even in music you can see it, ya know. My God if I was lookin for a sound track for black freedom and worker freedom and women's freedom, poor people's freedom, where would

I go? Give me Curtis Mayfield, give me Luther Vandross, give me The Dramatics and the Delfonics, because there's a sweetness and a tenderness that's integral to learning how to die in order to learn how to live. And that sweetness and tenderness is more and more being lost. It's all about control, conquest, subordination, those can try a little tenderness. That's not say my name, say my name, say my name [audience laughs]. Very different orientation of the world in terms of how you live your life. Liberal arts education is inseparable from wrestling with those questions and every human being has to come to terms with it. I don't care how many STEM courses you take; I don't care if you're on the block in the alley or living high in some gated community, you have got to come to terms with death in various forms, disease, disappointment, disillusionment, despair, despondency, catastrophe is on its way to your house. And you gonna have to come to terms with forms of catastrophe; then you discover who you really are, no matter how much money you have, no matter how much status you have, how much education in the narrow formal sense you have. And so, thank God that you all are wrestling with this, but Washington University has a very rich history of raising these kinds of questions, but Washington University itself needs to be Socratized too. It needs to be questioned too; it needs to be critically interrogated too. It needs to be pushed, pushed, pushed in a public sphere where we can agree to disagree intensely. And yet still end up recognizing the human beings who disagree. It's not deities on the top and demons below; it's human beings who are disagreeing and you also discover that you have a number of things you do agree about.

Griffith:

Well thank you both for these answers. I want to ask you one more question before we open it up and it really follows....

West:

Yes, yes, yes.

Griffith:

Um, and I think it's on a lot of people's minds which is campus protests and the various campus protests that there have been. We talked about this a little earlier today, but I wanted you to have a chance to talk about it with our audience. In 2017, one of the big campus protests was when Charles Murray was shouted down at Middlebury College. I'm sure a lot of folks remember that and the two of you issued a joint statement after that which really supported free speech on campus and that's been a very strong position you both take even despite your disagreements. And there have been a lot of different types of campus protests. WashU had a protest of sorts that played out in the student newspaper over conservatives and are they welcome on campus. A lot of the protests have to do with racism I think and folks who really don't want racist speakers coming. Um, I just wanted to give you all a chance to talk briefly about campus protests, you know what's behind some of those and, you know, how can we move beyond this impasse that we seem to be at.

[Church bells ring in the background]

West:

We can wait for the bells again...

Griffith:

It's gonna be a long time...we've got eight chimes to go

West:

Eight chimes!?

George:

You may have figured out we're not good at briefly...

West:

Lord, Lord, Lord....

[Audience chuckles]

George

I wanna say that I agree with an awful lot of what Cornel said, especially the true parts. I just thought, that was great. [audience laughs] I'd problematize some things, but the idea which, you know, I tried to put in the polite sense leading the examined life, and Cornel brought home with learning to die, being the point of a liberal arts education. When you get hold of that deep truth you're there. You're there. And then it's, from that point forward, it's just the Socratic enterprise of carrying it out. Now, uh, at Middlebury not only were two speakers, Charles Murray and the progressive professor Allison Stanger who was his interlocutor for the evening, not only were two speakers shouted down, not only were they not permitted to express their views and make their arguments, not only was the audience denied the opportunity to hear these competing points of view, Allison Stanger was assaulted and suffered a concussion and other injuries from which she has been recovering for two years. I just happened to be with her at a dinner in Washington DC last week and she has now fully recovered but that's two years and she only recovered recently. She was very severely injured and we eggheads, we professors, intellectuals, rather like our heads so brain injuries are really bad from our point of view and it was a terrible thing that happened. Now, Cornel and I put out the statement; I believe it was March of 2017 and it was about campus free speech and protests, but it was also about civic life. The statement was called, um, Democracy, Truth Seeking, and Freedom of Thought, and Expression. We think that democratic norms, as well as the norms of truth seeking that governs a university require that there be robust free speech, not because people have some abstract autonomy based right to say whatever they want; it's not some dogmatic doctrinaire libertarian argument; no! We believe in the importance of free speech both for the conduct of republican democracy and for the truth-seeking enterprise at university for the simple reason that without freedom of thought, freedom of expression, freedom of discussion, you cannot seek the truth and you cannot run a democracy. You can run other kinds of public orders; you can have a despotism; maybe you'll be lucky, it'll be a benign despotism, what you cannot have is a

democracy; what you cannot have is what our Founding Fathers preferred to use the term republican to denominate; republic, a republic, uh, now why is that the case? Well it's the case because both democracy, or republican government, and truth seeking require the dialectical engagement of truth seekers and of citizens. They both require that we seek the truth, that we seek justice together, knowing that in the nature of things these are difficult issues on which reasonable people of good will disagree and there's no hope at getting to the truth of the matters if the interlocutors are dogmatists, if they're not open to challenge, open to correction, open to changing their minds, if they're not exhibiting those virtues that I indicated earlier and that Cornel indicated are at the heart of liberal arts education both what we're trying to practice and what we're trying to teach our students to practice as lifelong learners. It just won't work. Now, does that mean we're against protests? No, we say in the letter that right to protest is sacrosanct, because that's free speech too. Now, that doesn't mean the right to shout down somebody so that person can't be heard, that doesn't mean the right to hold signs up so that the speaker's, uh, visage is blocked and you can't see him, no that's not free speech, but the right peacefully to protest, that is sacrosanct, where would we be without that? Think of King's protests, in Albany and in Birmingham and in places like that. But we also say this in the letter, and let me commend it to you for reflection this evening, now you might not agree with it but I ask you to think about it. If you're protesting, if that's your focus, if you're out there chanting, and going around with signs and so forth, what you can't be doing at the same time is listening, so if there's somebody with something worth saying, you're going to miss that something. And it will be especially a bad loss for you if what you miss is something that would have challenged your fundamental beliefs on this issue or that, or in that domain or this. That's what you need, that speaker who was challenging you, that speaker's not your enemy, that's your best friend, if you value truth above opinion. If you would rather get to the truth even if that means abandoning opinion that you're complacent with that makes you somebody in your group that is part of the, uh, agreed upon principles of this friendship or something like that, but if you really are Socratic, if you're a truth seeker, that's your friend, you regard that person as a friend who's challenging you. John Stuart Mill, whom Cornel and I have both admired and taught, points out that there are really three possibilities when people disagree. One is that, uh, I'm wrong and let's say Cornel's right...

West:

I like that idea...

George:

You like that one...?

[Audience laughs]

West:

At least for the moment...at least for the moment

George:

Well, in that case, if by listening to his argument, I'm moved from error to truth or nearer the truth, he's conveyed, he's given me the greatest benefit anybody could have, if truth has the value that Socrates and that I and that Brother Cornel think it has. What a gift that is. Now there's another possibility - I'm partially right and partially wrong and he's partially right and partially wrong. Well in that case I still want to listen, not protest, I still want to listen, I still want to not just tolerate and hear, I want to actually listen and engage so that I can move the part that I'm in error in over into the truth column. But then there's that third possibility, I'm right and he's wrong. Now why should I tolerate his speech, more than tolerate, why should I listen to, why should I engage him if I'm confident I'm right about this? Mill has a very important point here and it's so often missed. Even if I am right, I will benefit from deepening my appreciation of why I am right by listening to the arguments advanced by an intelligent, well-informed, well-disposed person who doesn't see it the same way I do. He might be able to move me from merely knowing that something is the case to knowing or knowing more deeply why it is the case, how it is the case, what the larger, deeper, maybe even lasting significance of it being the case is. I'm benefited even if we're in a conversation where he doesn't move me at all, I remain confident that I'm right, he still deepened my understanding. This dialectical dialogical engagement has deepened my understanding so there's absolutely nothing to lose. So, then the question becomes, well, aren't there limits though, aren't there limits to free speech? Well there are some limits obviously. Incitement is one of them. Incitement of violence is a limit. And are there borderline cases? Absolutely. We all know that there are borderline cases. In our jurisprudential tradition and in the jurisprudential traditions of other nations that we regard as basically free nations where political freedom is respected, the tendency is to err on the side of freedom. But there are limits. But incitement means something pretty immediate, that is immediate risk created by the speaker that the mob is gonna go out and attack the corn farmers; that was the classic, you know the classic case of the corn farmers have the corn, the mob is hungry, uh, I get up and I incite the mob to attack the corn farmers and they go out and they kill a couple of corn farmers. That's, that's incitement, that's what our law understands as incitement, that's what our philosophical tradition ordinarily means by incitement. So yes, there are limits. But there's another limit that's important but more subtle. Um, you want high quality interlocutors; there is no value in listening to a demagogue. Alright, there is no value in listening to a ranter or a shouter, rather that person is on the right or on the left. So, in our statement, Cornel and I pointed out that we should be prepared to engage and to engage respectfully; anybody who's prepared to do business in the proper currency of intellectual discourse, a currency consisting of evidence, reasons, and arguments. If a person is prepared to do business in that currency, we should be willing to engage, even on issues where we're absolutely sure we're right, even on issues that we think are terribly terribly terribly important, even on issues where we think fundamental justice is at stake, even on issues we think life and death is at stake. I need to listen to my colleague, Cornel's former colleague, Professor Griffith's former colleague at Princeton, Peter Singer, even when he defends a position on the morality of killing newborn infants, infanticide, not just abortion, infanticide. I need to listen to him and defend his right to advocate his view on our campus which I have done when the disability rights people have come to Princeton and chained themselves to the gates and demanded that Professor Singer have his tenure revoked and be terminated at the university because Professor Singer is not a demagogue; he's not a shouter and

a hater. I think he is profoundly wrong on the permissibility of killing newborn infants or severely cognitively disabled people or what have you. And yet, I have learned more from engaging with Peter, listening to his arguments which are serious, trying to figure out where the defect, if there is a defect in those arguments, where that defect is, trying to formulate my own responses to his very probing questions. I've learned more than I have from people on my own side than just talking with people on my own side. His challenges have educated me as they educate our students. Now do I hope everyone will adopt his view? No! Adopt my view. Don't kill babies. But, do I think he has a right, and not, just again, an abstract right, do I think he contributes something to the intellectual enterprise? Do I want him to be protested? No, I want him to be listened to. Here's the problem. We tend to assume that people who disagree with us about fundamental matters, about life and death matters, about matters of existential importance, matters of fundamental justice human rights, they disagree with us they must be bad people. They're not just wrong; they're demonic. We demonize and that means we close our minds. And we lose and the educational process loses. I hope hear at Washington University you are confronted, you students, whether those of you who are progressives and those of you who are conservatives and those of you who are in the middle and those of you who don't fit anywhere on the spectrum, I hope you're confronted on a regular basis not just by visiting speakers but by members of your faculty representing a wide spectrum of views. If you're progressives, I hope there are conservatives here who will confront you. If you are conservatives, I'm guessing there are some progressives who will confront you. But if you're not being confronted and being challenged even in your fundamental beliefs or if you're being allowed to be complacent, Provost is sitting right up here, you may want to ask him for your parent's money back, because you're not being educated, not in the liberal arts ideal sense of education that Washington U and Princeton and Harvard and these other places profess to be committed to. The truth of the matter is, and here is the profound difficult thing for all of us to believe because we're so invested in our own convictions, we have wrapped our emotions so tightly around our convictions. The fact of the matter is, on all the interesting issues certainly today, reasonable people of good will can and do disagree. There are arguments to be made on the competing sides and if we just define hater or bigot or bad guy or fool or ignoramus or elitist so broadly, whether we're on the right or the left, we define those things so broadly that we exclude anybody who doesn't basically agree with us, we have fallen into conformism, group think. We've given up on the Socratic enterprise; we're wasting our time; we're going through the motions of a liberal arts education.

West:

Absolutely. Just a brief note and then we'll open it up for voices because we want all and response. But I think Brother Robbie's point about quality is very important. Very important, indeed. That the, uh, Washington University for example, you've only got a set number of weeks each and every semester. You have a semester system rather than a quarter? [Griffith nods] Each and every semester. So, let's say somebody says well we want to bring in a right-wing brother or sister. Fine. Bring in the most sophisticated right-wing thinker who has arguments that are gonna push people. You don't have three years to have quality mediocrity and then just down right dumbness. You don't have time for that. You want to be able to engage the most powerful perspective from the right, same is true from the center, same is true from the left. So, you have

to be able to cultivate capacities for judgement to bring in the voices that will present the kind of argument that will unsettle others. And one does not in any way have to accept conclusions to learn something from someone in arguments when they disagree with you. And take, for example, the curriculum itself. We were talking about the debate here about whether conservatives are welcome or not. You say, just wait a minute. Conservatives welcome...Are you reading Plato at Washington University? You can't get more right-wing than Plato. We're not gonna ban Plato just because most of us would disagree with his conclusions. It is his free play of mind, the quality of the arguments, the give and take that we engage in; he's not gonna end up with democratic conclusions; he's gonna end up with freedom conclusions. The man was right wing in the most fundamental way. Dostoevsky, my God, one of the finest of the finest of the finest, shot through with anti-Jewish hatred. Hard to find a Russian writer, except Chekhov, who's not shot through with anti-Jewish hatred. Do we stop reading Dostoevsky? We keep track of that evil and also see his free play of mind in *Brothers Karamazov*, *Crime and Punishment*. David Hume, probably the finest English philosopher in the language that we speak, white supremacist, and used by intellectuals to defend the confederacy. Does that mean we lose sight of the free play of mind in David Hume because he's deeply white supremacist? I can go on and on and on. Our own Declaration of Independence, what does it say about our precious indigenous brothers and sisters? Savages, savages, savages. Bluh, shame on you Brother Thomas Jefferson two hundred and some years later in retrospect. Does that mean we can't learn anything from a slave holder like Thomas Jefferson? Of course we can but we can stay in contact with the evil of what is said about our indigenous brothers and sisters, let alone what he said in action with black people. And always keep in mind what will they say about us 100 years from now. Where were they giving impending ecological catastrophe? Where were they giving impending nuclear catastrophe? Where were they giving grotesque levels of wealth inequality? Where were they when you moved into the chocolate side of town and saw those increpid schools and indecent housing and levels of unemployment and underemployment and on and on and on? Where were they? What I do love about the younger generation at your best is that at least you're on fire; you're not numb; you're not callous; you're not indifferent. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel used to say, "Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself." Become the whole way of life, but all these defense mechanisms that do not allow us to care; the indifference is the one trait that makes the very angels weep William James used to say. At least the folk, the young folks say we're on fire. But then the question will be that fire for protest, which we affirm unequivocally but affirm in such a way that it doesn't violate other people's, not just right, but their voice. I come from a people that says lift every voice, that's James Weldon, that's Rosamond. That's James Weldon Johnson and Rosamond Johnson. See that's, that's the tradition of a people in America, enslaved Jim Crow, James Crow, terrorize, stigmatize, traumatize, and yet the end is what? Lift your voice. That's for everybody, to lift their voice. And like a finger print, there's only one voice and one finger print each one of us get. But we must be accountable; we must be answerable, and right now, we all need to be accountable and answerable in this dialogue with the other folk...

George:

Let me add just one thing to what Cornel said there because it's so important. It's important that no one think that in 100 years, people are gonna look back and condemn the stuff I or you think should be condemned already. If you think it's ecological disaster, and so forth and so on, we have to be open to stuff we believe passionately, maybe even believe justice requires, what if in 100 years it's the failure to defend the child in the womb that they look back on and say how could that barbarity have been permitted? We don't know. The conservative has been wrong about some important things. I'm a conservative but I need to acknowledge and recognize, Barry Goldwater led the conservative movement against the Civil Rights Act of 1964. He wasn't a racist; Goldwater had integrated his own family department store before anybody else did, but he was badly mistaken, reading the Constitution in far too narrow and crabbed a manner to exclude that kind of legislation to protect basic civil rights. The progressive movement has been wrong too. Equally profoundly wrong. In the 1920s and 30s before Hitler gave eugenics a bad name, who embraced it? Hook, line, and sink her, the progressive movement fell for it. Oh yes, progressive movement in its major foundations, in its educational institutions, we can start at Princeton; Princeton was in the thick of it, the mainline churches, denominations, all went for it. They look back now and say how could we have done it. Or they look back now and say well...it wasn't us. But look at some wonderful books on this subject, Christine Rosen's *Preaching Eugenics*, about the way that the liberal mainline churches went for eugenics. Tim Leonard, our colleague at Princeton has a wonderful book on the way that the progressive movement in general went for eugenics. Now that doesn't mean we have to constantly beat our breasts if we're progressives or if we're conservatives about the past wrongs. No. You know, acknowledge it, don't try to hide it, don't sweep it under the rug, but move forward, but let it be a reminder that we might be wrong about the stuff we deeply believe in and even the stuff we think justice requires. Let's just not be dogmatists. And I say a final word to the conservative, if there are any conservative students, my fellow conservative, I want to say a word to you. And that is it's very important even if you feel challenged, even if you're in a minority, even if you feel there are double standards, it's very important that you not think of yourselves as victims; do not adopt that mentality. Rather, simply assert your right to engage your fellow students and your teachers on fair terms of debate where business is done in that currency that I indicated: evidence, reasons, and arguments. Be willing to defend your position with reason, not just your right to hold the position; be prepared to defend it, be prepared to answer a challenge if a progressive says but how can you believe this, well you should have an answer. If you believe it, you should have an answer to that. And if there is an imbalance, Mr. Provost and other university leaders, it really isn't the conservative students who are getting the short end of the stick. Because if there is that imbalance, if there is unfairness toward conservatives, that's bad and should be fixed, but that's not depriving them of an education because they are being challenged every day. And that's good, that's how education happens. The people getting the short end of the stick are the progressive students, who are being allowed to rest comfortably, complacently in the convictions: we got it all worked out, we're on the right side of history, we got all this right. Nobody's challenging. If you're not challenging them, you're not educating them. So, I have a message for both those on the conservative side and those who are responsible for the curriculum and the general educational policy here.

Griffith:

Mhmm. Mhmm. Thank you.

West:

Mhmm. Mhmm.

Griffith:

I think the fairest thing I can do here is to ask two students, I'm gonna ask for students and we're gonna pick one over here and one over here and ask you both to ask your questions. Is that fair?

West:

Sure, sure.

Griffith:

That's about as fair as I can do it. And then ask you all to respond. So, I see you, okay. Sydney....wait for the mic please. And I see you. Okay, so just give it a second. Please be concise or I will have to interrupt you. [Audience chuckles]

Audience Question 1:

Hi, I'm Eliza, I'm a third-year law student here and I went to Williams so thanks for the shout out.

George:

I'm having trouble hearing. Say that again.

Audience Question 1:

Should I talk louder? Is this good?

George:

Yeah that's fine.

Audience Question 1:

Okay. Yeah I'm Eliza. I'm a third-year law student here. So, I've been looking a little bit at your views on abortion and I find them really troubling as a pro-choice woman and someone who's just starting out my career. I can't really imagine many things more burdensome than an unplanned pregnancy and being forced to carry that pregnancy to term. And we all know about the health risks of pregnancy and the fact that it, you know, you have to discontinue your education and it's expensive and all those things. I guess I'm just wondering why you believe that someone like me should have to carry an unwanted pregnancy to term and why you think that your belief should trump my constitutional rights?

Griffith:

Ok. Thank you and stand up please the person...okay you got the mic? Great.

Audience Question 2:

Sure. Absolutely thank you for taking my question. Um, tonight you taught us that the purpose of liberal arts is to live an examined life and that people and perhaps even this university must learn how to die in order to live. Well, sir, we are here tonight at a university that is deeply active in the very darkest corners of Wall Street and military profiteering, private prisons and weapon sales override our liberal arts education here. Among our board of trustees is Andrew Taylor, who is the majority shareholder of Sentry Group, a prison consignment company. Then there's the trustee Scott Francher, the Boeing executive, whose company builds the weapons used against Yemeni and Palestinian children. Furthermore, this university refuses to pay a living wage to employees camped right now in the Brookings Quad to demand fair compensation and a living wage. Could you two, and especially you, Dr. West, because I've followed your work for so long, could you address how one might navigate a liberal arts institution, or liberal arts education, with an institution so toxic to democracy. Do you have any words for the WashU administration responsible for this toxicity and would you publicly endorse a campus wide campaign for a \$15 minimum wage, fossil fuel divestment, and an overhaul of the board of trustees?

Griffith:

Okay thank you both for your excellent questions.

[Audience claps]

West:

Overhaul of the whole board?!

Griffith:

And I guess brief answers will have to suffice but please...

West:

Should I go first? [Audience laughs] You said overthrow the whole board, uh? [Audience laughs] Alright, brother. I like your fire but let's just look at your conclusions here for a second. That we are involved in a very intense struggle at Harvard trying to convince the administration that they ought to engage divestment of fossil fuels as well as prison industry, not because we're involved in some kind of project of purity. All of these institutions of higher learning that have high endowments are going to be inextricably involved with various kinds of industries that need to be morally scrutinized and often called into question from my point of view. So, the question becomes in fact which ones at what particular moments, you see? Because even the ones that you talked about, there's a whole host of others too. Why? Because our system itself is so grounded in various structures of domination. It's grounded in profit making and a profit making that's very difficult to allow for thick moral criteria in terms of what one invests in. And so, one must move in a wise way that accents the degree to which Washington University, for example, would

say, in this instance, we're going to be ethical thermostats rather than just thermometers reflecting the climate of what it is to be an investor. That's a serious question. There needs to be public forums that allow voices to be heard from the vantage point of those who are perpetuating and reproducing this institution because if in fact we follow fully on the logic, I'm not sure that Harvard and Princeton and Washington University could really exist if they didn't....[soft clap from the audience]...well, yeah, yeah, exactly, they wouldn't exist if they couldn't invest in something that's gonna be tied to various kinds of struggles of domination. The whole world capitalist economy is like that, right? Now if one wants to overthrow the whole capitalist, global capitalist economy, which is another dialogue, we'd have to have a lot of coffee on that. [audience laughs] But you know, and I can understand it, you know, because I don't want to democratize across the board, but you and I know that there's some positive things about having a Washington University. And the question becomes can Washington University be true to its own motto: strength through truth? Does it have the ability to be truthful about its own will to survive and thrive? That's the Socratic question. Now they can come back and say well, we go all the way back to 1853, whenever it was, we've always had people on our board who were big money makers and profiteers that allow for these wonderful moments of experiences. [Directed at student] And you are a student at here at Washington? [muffled reply from student] A graduate student? Well would you say that you have had some salutary and sublime moments of experience with students and faculty here at Washington University? [muffled reply from student] No, not, no, no commentary, just yes or no. [Audience chuckles] [muffled reply from student] So, in other words, you've had some of those experiences but not at the expense of the kind of barbaric consequences that you perceive in that regard? But then it's a different conversation though, brother, because if you're saying well, it's an all or nothing truth that Washington University has to go as opposed to be critically examined, aspects called into question, then we're in reform zone; if you're in the revolutionary zone, which I can appreciate, but it's a different zone. If you're in the revolutionary zone, you want to overthrow the whole thing, the board and everything, I say, well, that's a different kind of project now. [Audience chuckles] That's a different kind of project. Wanna be honest about that. But the fact that your voice and those who are with you would still be in solidarity with some of the things that some of us are doing in a much more reformist spirit which is to make sure fossil fuel, prison industry, a whole host of other kinds of industries, are made accountable to the students and the larger public if they're gonna be involved in certain kind of investment decision. We did the same thing with South Africa, we did the same thing with Tobacco companies, we did the same thing with a whole host of different companies in the past. I know this is a long question and you and I know we can go on and on and on about this. But to have a serious, candid, honest conversation about these kind of issues about investment decisions, I think are very important; that's what it is to take seriously the legacy of Socrates within the context of Washington University. Very much so. [Audience claps]

George:

I think it's very very important and I've said this all evening, that we form our positions on all issues but most especially on the most fundamental issues, the deepest issues of human rights, questions of life and death, fundamental questions of liberty, that we form them based on

a consideration of the very best arguments that have been made on one side of the question and the very best arguments that have been made on the other side of the question. I've tried to do that in forming my own opinion about abortion, as well as about euthanasia and other issues. I've written books, such as my book *Embryo: A Defense of Human Life*, in which I've outlined my view, defended my views, precisely by engaging the best arguments on the other side. And so, to form my view, I have read carefully and considered the arguments in favor of your position that have been advanced by people like Mary Anne Warren, Judith Jarvis Thomson, Jeff McMahan, Peter Singer, whom I've already mentioned. Those are powerful arguments; they need to be met. Now, I hope that you agree with me, although we disagree about abortion that it's very important to form our opinions based on a consideration of the best arguments that have been made by the best thinkers on both sides of the question. Do we agree about that?

Audience Question 1 Responds:

Yeah, I think so.

George:

Okay, good. So, uh, who have you read on the prolife side of the question? Have you read Elizabeth Anscombe's writings? Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's writings? [Muffled reply from the audience member] Have you read any of my writings? [Audience chuckles] No, no. It's really important that we not be dogmatic, that we not frame the issue in a way that already builds the conclusion into the premises. Your views against my constitutional rights. That kind of rhetoric sets up the answer that you've already presupposed. It technically begs the question, what in philosophy the fallacy *petitio* principle, if I persuade you to do nothing else, I hope I persuade you to go off and look at writings like those in which Elizabeth Fox-Genovese explains, one of the founding mothers of women studies, explains how she moved from the prochoice position to the prolife position. Read the powerful essays of Elizabeth Anscombe. Read Patrick Lee's book on abortion and unborn human life. And see if you're left right where you are. Now if you are, that's fine. We will just disagree, at least for now, but you'll have an opinion that's based on a serious engagement with reasonable people of good will who see it differently from you.

Griffith:

I'm sorry, we're past time...

[Audience claps]

West:

Already?

Griffith:

Um, let me, I want to invite all of you to join us and continue these conversations with our guests. We have a lovely reception in Umrath Lounge, in Umrath Hall a couple buildings away. And thank you all so much for being here and let's thank our distinguished guests.

[Audience claps]

--