One curious and disturbing feature of elite liberal culture today is the persistence of a debility we might call Chronic Intellectual Adolescence. The narcissism and naïveté of adolescence, its implacable though ill-informed moralism, its smug grandiosity and political silliness: all are thriving in the work of many prominent figures who, chronologically, left the heady years of their teens behind long ago. We had reason to reflect on this phenomenon recently when the October/November issue of Boston Review crossed our desk. This special issue of the bi-monthly “alternative” paper is devoted largely to a debate about education and political identity. Entitled “Patriotism or Cosmopolitanism?” the exchange opens with an essay by Martha C. Nussbaum, the well-known feminist professor of philosophy, classics, and comparative literature at Brown University who is also a member of Boston Review’s editorial board. Professor Nussbaum’s essay, which comes down firmly on the side of cosmopolitanism and against patriotism, is followed by twenty-nine brief responses from a politically diverse group of prominent intellectuals including Hilary Putnam, Nathan Glazer, Harvey Mansfield, Benjamin R. Barber, Richard Sennett, Michael Lerner, Sheldon Hackney, Judith Butler, Leo Marx, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. These responses, which range from enthusiastic endorsements to stinging repudiations of Professor Nussbaum’s argument, are in turn followed by her rejoinder. A future issue of Boston Review will carry additional responses.

It is a remarkable performance, by turns intellectually formidable and jejune. The essence of the jejune quality is first hinted at in the editor’s note, which suggests that earlier debates about “education and political identity” were deficient because “both sides assumed a primary commitment to a group smaller than humanity.” Yes, we stopped short, too: after all, what could it mean to have a “primary commitment” to “humanity”? We know what it means to have commitments to family, friends, to particular institutions, ideas, and nations. But humanity? Can one really be said to have “primary commitment” to something so vague and abstract? The editor of Boston Review clearly hopes so, and he has enlisted Martha Nussbaum to argue the case.

Professor Nussbaum’s essay, “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism,” includes many references to Stoic philosophy and other learned sources. But her main point is a familiar variation on an old utopian idea. She seems to think it a pity that mankind should have arranged itself into peoples and nations because such divisions have tended to hinder the recognition of our common
humanity and “the substantive universal values of justice and right.” Thus she urges her readers to abandon patriotism for the ideal of “world citizenship.” Like many utopian ideas, Professor Nussbaum’s nostrums can sound marvelous when stated abstractly. We are certainly all for recognizing our common humanity and “the substantive universal values of justice and right.” As antidotes to the ethnic particularism advocated by radical multiculturalism, such ideals may seem to have much to recommend them. But what, really, do they mean? The answer depends very much on the political vision that informs them. Reading Professor Nussbaum’s essay, it soon becomes clear that, in her hands, such ideas are primarily weapons in an ideological battle—a battle whose agenda was set by the political radicalism of the 1960s.

Professor Nussbaum is suspicious of rampant nationalism. Well, so are we all. But she early on says that Americans have frequently given “the fact of being American a special salience in moral and political deliberation,” as if vicious and exclusionary nationalism have been special problems in America. The truth is, of course, that—until recently, anyway—American society has been a great model of how to foster a healthy patriotism without ideological nationalism. Professor Nussbaum finds patriotism “morally dangerous” and recommends instead “the old ideal of the cosmopolitan, the person whose primary allegiance is to the community of human beings in the entire world.” What sort of “allegiance” would that be? What sort of “community” do human beings tout court make up? Quoting Diogenes, she looks forward to the “world citizen.” But what can that mean? Our dictionary defines “citizen,” first of all, as “a person owing loyalty to and entitled by birth or naturalization to the protection of a given state.” A given state, mind you. By forcing together the words “world” and “citizen,” Professor Nussbaum would have us believe she has created a vital new category; in fact, she has merely conjured up a conceptual centaur, a philosophical freak.

Something similar is going on in Professor Nussbaum’s idea of politics. Hitherto, she notes, we have been used to distinguishing between “a politics based on ethnic and racial and religious difference and a politics based on shared national identity.” For Professor Nussbaum, such thinking is not grand or ambitious enough: “What we share as both rational and mutually dependent human beings was simply not on the agenda.” Again, it sounds splendid. Who wants to speak against “what we share as both rational and mutually dependent human beings”? But where do politics come into the equation? As Professor Nussbaum must know, politics means first of all that which has to do with the polis, the city, a particular place that exacts particular duties and confers specific privileges. One recalls Hannah Arendt’s observation, in The Origins of Totalitarianism, that “The Rights of Man, supposedly inalienable, proved to be unenforceable … whenever people appeared who were no longer citizens of any sovereign state.” Professor Nussbaum quotes Seneca praising the idea of a human world not confined by national boundaries and says that “it is this community that is, most fundamentally, the source of our moral obligations.” But to speak of this global abstraction is to use “community” in a decidedly Pickwickian sense. Professor Nussbaum wishes us to “give our allegiance to what is morally good—and that which, being good, I can commend to all human beings.” A noble sentiment, but
one that is basically religious or philosophical, not political—though, to be sure, it can be used for political purposes.

Professor Nussbaum addresses us from a lofty philosophical plane. But her proposals, as she acknowledges, would entail “large-scale economic and political consequences” of a very concrete nature. We get a hint of the kind of politics she has in mind when she assures us that “our nation is appallingly ignorant of most of the rest of the world” (unlike the rest of the world, we wondered?) and that a study of family life elsewhere “can show us, for example, that the two-parent nuclear family, in which the mother is the primary homemaker and the father the primary bread-winner, is by no means a pervasive style of child-rearing in today’s world.” So, on the one hand, we “should recognize humanity wherever it occurs, and give its fundamental ingredients, reason and moral capacity, our first allegiance and respect.” But, on the other, we should act to promote the agenda of late-twentieth-century feminism as it exists in affluent American universities.

There is a distinct aroma of Chronic Intellectual Adolescence pervading Professor Nussbaum’s entire essay. But it is especially noticeable in her peroration, which also gives us a sense of the moral tenor of her cosmopolitan ideal. Speaking in glowing terms of how her ideas might influence “the formation of public policy,” she concludes with the story of the courtship and marriage of “the Cynic cosmopolitan philosophers Crates and Hipparchia” from Diogenes Laertius. She quotes a lengthy snippet in which the happy couple are finally united and set out on life together: “Adopting the same clothing and style of life [Hipparchia] went around with her husband and they copulated in public and went off together to dinner parties.” Professor Nussbaum hastens to tells us she is “not exactly recommending Crates and Hipparchia as the marital ideal for students in my hypothetical cosmopolitan schools.” Which leads us to ask, exactly what is she recommending?

Among the many responses to Professor Nussbaum’s proposals, the response of the Harvard political scientist Harvey Mansfield deserves special mention. Professor Nussbaum insists that “the accident of where one is born is just that, an accident,” and therefore one’s allegiance to one’s native country must not trump one’s allegiance to “humanity.” But as Professor Mansfield observes, while it is an accident that we are born in one place rather than another, it is not an accident that we are born in a particular place. Hence he argues that the most effective cure for “noxious patriotism” is “not cosmopolitanism but democratic government.” Why, he wonders, does Professor Nussbaum “ignore the liberalism and the constitutionalism of the country in which she lives?” She touts the Stoic ideal of cosmopolitanism, but that ideal was not “intended as the basis of politics. It didn’t care about global hunger, ecology, women’s liberation, abortion, or any other of Professor Nussbaum’s causes.”

In her rejoinder, Professor Nussbaum contemptuously dismisses Professor Mansfield’s criticisms. But two things are particularly noteworthy in his response. The first is his invocation of the liberalism and constitutionalism of the Founders: why does Professor Nussbaum pass over in silence that fertile and beneficent political tradition, which is after all her tradition?
And the second noteworthy thing in Professor Mansfield’s response is his citation of Professor Nussbaum’s political causes. Professor Nussbaum presents herself as proceeding on the high-minded plane of philosophical principle. She is interested in the “universal,” in “what is morally good,” “that which, being good, I can commend to all human beings.” But in fact, she acts as a political partisan, and her lofty rhetoric is all in the service of a political program.

We were given a vivid glimpse of what this might mean in practical terms in the Fall 1994 issue of *Academic Questions*, a quarterly publication of the National Association of Scholars. In the lead essay, “‘Shameless Acts’ in Colorado: Abuse of Scholarship in Constitutional Cases,” the Oxford legal philosopher John Finnis discusses several cases in which false testimony has been given in cases involving constitutional litigation. He devotes most of his long essay to Professor Nussbaum’s sworn testimony in *Evans v. Romer*. In this case, which came before Denver District Court last year and is now on appeal, the plaintiffs (for whom Professor Nussbaum testified) sought to invalidate a Colorado state constitutional amendment that prohibited any official body in Colorado from adopting a law or policy that grants homosexuals “minority status, quota preferences, protected status or claim of discrimination.” The state asked Professor Finnis to testify, *inter alia*, about “the political-philosophical arguments for a legal scheme such as Britain’s or Colorado’s, in which private homosexual acts between consenting adults are no crime but are discouraged by the law and public policy in other ways, and … about the rational moral basis for judging that such acts are bad for people and ought to be discouraged.” His affidavit included a lengthy discussion of law and public policy in classical Athens, and “the positions of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle on the morality of homosexual and other non-marital sex acts.”

In her sworn testimony, Professor Nussbaum asserted that in classical Greece “same-sex romantic relationships, attachments, and sexual conduct were highly regarded…. Such relationships were never considered shameful…. Prior to the Christian tradition, there is no evidence that the natural law theories regarded same-sex erotic attachments as immoral, ‘unnatural,’ or improper.” Professor Nussbaum further testified that Professor Finnis was mistaken in holding the contrary and that he was “tripped up by things that are not in the Greek.” Professor Finnis cited many passages from classical authors in his affidavit. The one passage that Professor Nussbaum focused on comes from section 636c of Plato’s *Laws* in which Plato’s spokesman (in the translation that Professor Finnis quotes) says that homosexual acts are “contrary to nature” (*phusin*) and that “those first guilty of such enormities (*tolmêma*) were impelled by their slavery to pleasure.”

Asked under cross examination whether there might be legitimate scholarly disagreement about this translation, Professor Nussbaum replied that while “there are some reasonable disagreements about meanings of words, … the issues that I’ve raised with Finnis are—they’re not a disagreement. Those sentences just are not there in the Greek.” According to Professor Nussbaum, *tolmêma* is morally neutral and so the passage “those guilty of such enormities” ought to be translated as “those who first ventured to do this.” Professor Finnis acknowledges that this is indeed a possible translation of the passage in question, but notes that the issue is whether the
common translation (Professor Finnis was quoting from the Loeb Classical Library translation) “falsifies or substantially misrepresents” the passage or the thought of Plato. Professor Nussbaum insists that it does. The word *tolmêma*, she testified, never conveys any “nuance of guilt.” To support her case, she referred the court to “the following meanings in Liddle [sic], Scott, *Lexicon of the Ancient Greek Language* [sic], the authoritative dictionary relied on by all scholars in this area: ‘an adventure, enterprise, deed of daring.’”

That might seem to clinch the case in Professor Nussbaum’s favor. But if one turns to a current edition of Liddell and Scott’s *A Greek–English Lexicon*, one will find the following definition for *tolmêma*: “adventure, enterprise, daring or shameless act.” What happened to “shameless act” in Professor Nussbaum’s dictionary? Simple: she went back to the edition of 1897 (or perhaps an even earlier edition: it was first published in 1811) for her citation. The current edition of this standard reference work, revised under the direction of Henry Stuart Jones in the 1910s and 1920s, was completed in 1940; a 153-page Supplement, incorporating many corrections, was added in 1968; the work has been reprinted many times since. As Professor Finnis notes, once this edition was completed, “the old eighth edition of 1897 was of course abandoned by scholars as entirely superseded.” Moreover, Professor Finnis points out, Professor Nussbaum’s insistence that *tolmêma* and its cognates are always morally neutral and non-pejorative is “in substance a falsification even of the 1897 edition entry for *tolmêma*,” as an example from Aristophanes that follows the definition she cites makes clear. In sum: The Liddell, Scott, Jones lexicon of 1940/1968 is indeed “the authoritative dictionary relied on by all scholars in this area.” But the quotation Professor Nussbaum put before the court is from a dictionary that, in Professor Finnis’s words, “is not authoritative or relied upon by all scholars, or indeed any scholars.” Professor Nussbaum’s own published works refer to the current edition of the lexicon regularly, though when questioned about this she asserted that “I use the edition without the supplementation by Jones.” It is all the more curious, then, that while the version of her affidavit filed with the defendants refers to the “Liddle, Scott, & Jones” lexicon, the ampersand and the word “Jones” have been whited out in the version filed with the court.

All this may seem needlessly arcane, especially in a case that will naturally incite heated debate. But what Professor Finnis has laid bare in his meticulously detailed account is a pattern of misrepresentation on the part of Professor Nussbaum that amounts to a “wholesale abuse of her scholarly authority and attainments.” Her fudging of the meaning of *tolmêma* is merely one of many such misrepresentations that Professor Finnis anatomizes. For example, in sworn testimony, Professor Nussbaum asserted that “the terms tendentiously translated ‘according to nature’ and ‘unnatural’ or ‘contrary to nature’ actually refer (in my own expert opinion and the consensus of recent scholars such as Price …) to ‘birth’ and not ‘nature’ in any normative moral sense.” But in *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle*, the work by Anthony Price to which she refers, the phrase *para phusin* is translated precisely as “unnatural.” She claimed that the scholar Sir Kenneth Dover, author of *Greek Homosexuality*, supported her interpretation of Plato, but in fact Dover has confirmed in writing that “it is certainly my opinion that the Socrates
of Plato and Xenophon condemned homosexual copulation as such.” She claimed that David Cohen, one scholar on whom Professor Finnis had relied in framing his affidavit, was unreliable on Greek philological matters because he “is not a classicist. He has never been employed by a department of Classics, and is not a member of the American Philological Association… . He is a Professor in a department of Rhetoric, with a degree in law.” But according to Professor Finnis, Cohen studied both Greek and Sanskrit before taking a Ph.D. from Cambridge in classics; he holds a split professorship at the University of California at Berkeley in rhetoric and classics; and although he is not a member of the American Philological Association, he delivers papers at its meetings. These are facts that Professor Nussbaum must surely have known, since Professor Cohen recounted them to her personally in a conversation they had in 1992.

Professor Nussbaum grandly recommends that we follow the “morally good.” But what conception of the good can she have when simple honesty is beyond her?