

ISSN 1918-7351

Volume 17 (2025)

Responding to the Liberal Arts Education Crisis, as A Hermeneutic Education Crisis: A Multi-Book Review

College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be by Andrew Delbanco; *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* by Anthony Kronman; *Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation* by Roosevelt Montás; *In Defense of a Liberal Education* by Fareed Zakaria

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Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need

For this bright morning, dawning for you.

History, despite its wrenching pain,

Cannot be unlived, and if faced

With courage, need not be lived again.

—Maya Angelou, “On the Pulse of Morning”

Crisis (n.): early 15c., crise, crisis, “vitally important or decisive state of things, point at which change must come, for better or worse,” from Latinized form of Greek *krisis* “turning point in a disease, that change which indicates recovery or death.”¹

¹ Harper Douglas, “Etymology of crisis,” Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed April 6, 2025, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/crisis>.

Hermeneutics is fated with the liberal arts.² To contemplate the state of the liberal arts education in the U.S. American college today is to, in the same breath, debate the significance and relevance—the utility—of the liberal arts as a praxis, particularly when in juxtaposition to a trade or profession-specific education. Presently and specifically, though unoriginally, there exists a debate regarding the “usefulness” of an education that produces not a career, but a certain liberated mind oriented towards asking meaningful questions as an approach to being in the world. This approach is itself a skill, one that is born from professors teaching students to read in such a way that enables them to ask meaningful questions as they interpret meaning from humanistic books. As the skill is developed, the student begins to interpret not just the meaning of the book, but the meaning of her life. The presence, resurgence, and reoccurrence of the utilitarian debate regarding the liberal arts education is itself a hermeneutic phenomenon of communication, one that identifies the taken-for-granted methods of becoming as that which are in a state of waning interest, and thus in a state of crisis.

What is set into relief is a lack of interest in thinking well as an end in of itself, evident in the recession of interest in liberal arts programs, in lieu of job security and a livable wage.³ Arguments attacking and defending the utility of the liberal arts education have always occurred among “those who understand [it] in instrumental terms and those who see it as an end in and of itself,” and have always taken place in, around, and outside of the college/university.⁴ As the number of voices calling for alarm and attention to the recession of interest in the liberal arts increases, we also find an increase in the addresses that assert the liberal arts are worthwhile. In identifying the liberal arts education as being discernably different from that of a trade or profession-oriented education, we find that the education in question is pertaining to the site of ontological disclosure of meaning, one that is constituted in and of language (communication) and thus always already demanding our interpretation. Consequently, this quality reveals hermeneutics as inextricably intertwined with the liberal arts, for better and for worse. This can be so since both liberal arts education and hermeneutics concern themselves with the nature of being in the world. If we can grant this intertwined condition from the start, then the crisis etymology above brings our attention to the recession of interest in being well and for asking wonderful

² What will be made clear in the pages to come is the ambiguity of this phrase, “liberal arts,” and its synonymous interchangeability with “liberal education,” “humanistic education,” or “the humanities,” to list a few. It is my intention here to add “hermeneutics” to that synonymous use.

³ Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*, 2nd ed. (Princeton University, 2023), 148; Fareed Zakaria, *In Defense of a Liberal Education* (W. W. Norton, 2015), 157. Authors note the shifts towards more “marketable” programs that may result in higher employability success.

⁴ Zakaria, *In Defense*, 42.

questions. This risk makes clear our obligation to the liberal arts, to which we must also respond to today if there is to be a hermeneutics tomorrow. Hermeneutics, as being in and of the liberal arts, are in a decisive state at which change is already underway, a change which indicates recovery or death—the responsibility of which rests upon us. A defense of either is a defense of each other, a defense for that which enables being and living well. Henceforth, a defense of the liberal arts education is a defense of hermeneutics.

Readers of *Analecta Hermeneutica* are undoubtedly familiar with the hermeneutic experience in which one's life is set into relief among past, present, and future horizons incited by the passage from a good novel, a breathtaking art piece, or a memorable poem, and they are not alone. There are numerous textual artifacts in the form of books, anthologies of essays, reports, and research studies authored within the last century that praise the liberal arts education, which is broadly defined as teaching through—and learning from—engaging with humanistic texts/artifacts in the tradition of the trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric). Simply put, the liberal arts transform the way one creates and contemplates meaningful questions by consistently practicing engaging with the humanities and through asking meaningful questions, which changes the way one sees the world. The liberal arts, although undoubtedly hermeneutic, are less often referred to as such. This world-changing quality makes obvious the relationship between hermeneutics and the liberal arts insofar as they are practices of liberation in the form of language, meaning, and understanding. This connection, however, reveals a second, less obvious albeit significant, hermeneutic phenomenon of communication: although there is no approach to the classical texts so often central to a liberal arts education that is not hermeneutical, there remains an absence of defense for hermeneutics among the defenses for the liberal arts. Given the relationship between the two, in addition to the porous and ontological nature of arguments for the liberal arts education, it is reasonable to identify the absence of hermeneutics from the liberal arts dialogue as a hermeneutical phenomenon in as much as the crisis itself.

It is because of the dual hermeneutic phenomenon of communication outlined above, the first being the presence of textual artifacts defending the liberal arts education in response to a crisis and the second being the absence of hermeneutics from that dialogue, that I have chosen to respond to the editor's request with a hermeneutic book review. One which reports on the former phenomenon while addressing the latter insofar as one can review books on the liberal arts education crisis as books on the hermeneutic education crisis in the U.S. American college, thereupon reporting on the crisis while also bringing hermeneutics into the dialogue. The style,

organization, and depth of this review is such so that it will not only aid readers in their selection of one or two books for a closer first read, but also enact a bridge between the liberal arts and hermeneutics, which (if performed well) will enable readers to draw parallel the qualities, characteristics, and futures of both.

In the first half of this review, I follow a more traditional approach. In the second half, I lead tradition astray as I put authors into a dialogue in the pursuit of answering three hermeneutical questions all the while continuing to review them: first, what is liberal education (for); second, how and why are the liberal arts this way; and third, where do we go from here? I have selected for this review four books that put forth a defense of the liberal arts education as a response to the crisis; however, these are by no means all-encompassing of the innumerable defensives and perspectives with which one could investigate the growing defenses of a liberal arts education.⁵ Rather each book offers both overlapping and unique perspectives regarding the outcomes, historical shifts, and problematics of the liberal arts education we know today. It is their book as a whole (the purpose & intents, the collection of history, and the evidenced of crisis) that serves as a “defense” against those arguments that position the product of the liberal arts—a liberated mind—as inadequate or useless. It is adequate, to say the least, that each book reviewed here takes the liberal arts as that which incites the kinds of questions that lead us to wonder, to being-together, and towards living well; to put another way, as the about which college is for.

To this point, I have called attention to two hermeneutic phenomena of communication, the first being the liberal arts education crisis, which is marked by the increase of language, meaning, and understanding for a recession of interest in becoming liberally educated; and the second, the absence of “hermeneutics” from the lexicon constituting the dialogue of the former phenomenon. I have also lightly sketched how a liberal arts education and a hermeneutical education are akin as having

⁵ Other texts that were considered for the review, but remain unselected and thus warrant closer investigation, are: Mark Roche, *Why Choose the Liberal Arts?* (University of Notre Dame, 2010); Richard A. Detweiler, *The Evidence Liberal Arts Needs* (MIT, 2021); and Randall Stross, *A Practical Education* (Stanford University, 2017). Several anthologies were also considered: Jeffrey Bilbro, Jessica Hooten Wilson, & David Henreckson, eds., *The Liberating Arts* (Plough, 2023); Justin Buckley Dyer & Constantine Christos Vassiliou, *Liberal Education and Citizenship in a Free Society* (University of Missouri, 2023); and Julie Christina Tatlock, *Restructuring General Education and Core Curricula Requirements* (Mount Mary University, 2024). Lastly, several texts on the practice of, history of, and alternatives to, modern education were considered early in the formation of this concept: bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (Routledge, 1994); hooks, *Teaching Community* (Routledge, 2003); hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking* (Routledge, 2010); Laura Rendon, *septipensante pedagogy*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2023); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 50th Anniversary Edition* (Bloomsbury, 2018); Richard Brennenman, *Fuller's Earth* (New Press, 2007); Scott Nearing, *The New Education* (New Press, 2007); and Judith Rényi, *Going Public* (New Press, 1993).

the same intentioned outcome (*telos*) to orient one's reflexive habit (*ethos*) in the formation of an active practice (*hexis*). Rendering these two phenomena into communication has made them available for interpretation, which enables a hermeneutical phenomenological inquiry. Largely, the first phenomenon has been addressed by the books selected for this review. This is to say, these books have, in one way or another, made the purpose of liberal arts strange so that we may ask basic questions to make it familiar and understandable. In the explication of the signs, symbols, and meaning each author strives to create transversal comprehension so that conflicts of interpretations can be avoided. In order to address the second phenomenon, to bridge the liberal arts education and hermeneutics over their shared *telos*, which will demonstrated their parallel nature to each other, I have organized the remainder of this book review into three parts. First, in answering what a liberal arts education is for, readers will find my interpretation of the liberal arts education constituted from a place (the college), a process (doing liberal arts), which form a product (having a liberal mind). These are the necessary conditions for transformation of the student into a liberal artist, which enables her to interpret hermeneutically and thus simultaneously (re)create the world and (re)create herself, which is the purpose of college. Second, in answering what are the histories, traditions, and crises of the liberal arts college education, I paraphrase and review selections from each book to assemble for the reader a truncated history narrative. This will provide readers a necessary past horizon situates each authors response into a context as they answer the third and last question: how can we respond to the liberal arts crisis? In this final section, I again paraphrase and review selections from each book as a way of showing where they agree and where they do not. As I conclude in the summary, this review reveals how each book understands the liberal arts to be that which can deliver us to the experience in which we find no mutually exclusive, universal answers to life's most interesting questions, poignantly "what is the meaning of life?"⁶ What we find instead is our being, undergoing the process of becoming, as we pursue wonderful questions. "The real power of hermeneutical consciousness," Gadamer reassures us, "is our ability to see what is questionable," which is the position all four books put forth.⁷

⁶ Each book makes use of, or a variation of, this question.

⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem," in *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, trans. by Richard E. Palmer (Northwestern University, 2007), 85.

What Liberal Arts Education is For

To paraphrase all four authors, the phrase “liberal (arts) education” has a pluralistic meaning that describes a type of trinity—a particular place, a product, and process, with each part being a necessary yet insufficient condition for change and transformation. To illustrate this point, I find that each author draws distinctions among the taken-as-granted words and phrases to, in a hermeneutic phenomenological fashion, disclose meaning and assumptions; however, each author varies in their approach to this task with respect to specific parts of this trinity. Montás primes our attention towards the kind of education being alluded to as a starting point. He writes,

We err fundamentally if we think of education in narrowly instrumental terms—when we confuse it . . . with training. To educate means, literally, to ‘draw out,’ to *educe* from the student something that is already there and whose successful cultivation represents the fulfillment of the highest human good. Education, in this sense, is liberal education—education not for making a living but for living meaningfully.⁸

Clear here is the purpose for a liberal education, to live meaningfully, and that it ought not be confused with job training/professional development. Liberal education is, at its core, a process of becoming liberated, “using the word *liberal* in its original Latin sense, ‘of or pertaining to free men.’”⁹ Yet when Montás, or any author here, refers to such an education, it is not one that happens anywhere or on any specific set of terms. The product of such an education, the liberal mind that can see the world in terms that can be questioned for living meaningfully, happen in a specific place. According to Kronman, some institutions result in more settled goals and outcomes while others enable more curiosity and openness, the latter of which can lead students to be curious, confused, and “can help them confront the question, which comes before all vocational training and goes beyond any answer that such a training can supply, of what living itself is for.”¹⁰ While a professional degree may offer value in (the possibility) job security, a liberal arts program is specifically designed to orient students to open-mindedness and curiosity and to be “a value of a different sort, for it is the very absence of those settled goals that give all vocational education its utility

⁸ Roosevelt Montás, *Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation*, (Princeton University, 2021), 64 (emphasis in original).

⁹ Zakaria, *In Defense*, 42 (emphasis in original).

¹⁰ Anthony Kronman, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (Vail-Ballou, 2007), 39.

that makes the question of what living is for so important.”¹¹ Kronman, in his assertion that place is a necessary component to produce one who can confront meaningful questions, draws attention to the qualities and characteristics of the place all four authors tend to refer to as the site of transformation: a residential, four-year, non-vocational, liberal arts college/program.¹² Delbanco, in his differentiation of specific college places, provides a description of the purpose and intents of one college-place as different from the other university-place. He writes,

[College] is about transmitting knowledge of and from the past to undergraduate students so they may draw upon it as a living resource in the future. [University] is mainly an array of research activities conducted by faculty and graduate students with the aim of creating new knowledge in order to supersede the past.¹³

Delbanco’s assertion here is that the college, a liberal education specific one, is oriented towards producing people as ideas are given to their common stock of knowledge, whereas the university is designed for producing research for consumption. Kronman avers the result of this education as the propensity to ask and answer the most foundational question, “the question of what living is for—of what we should care most about and why,” which is learned through repetitious encounters with the texts, plays, artwork, music, and (an)other, all capable of asking one to change their life.¹⁴ In other words, liberal arts education is a specific place that produces specific kind of person, one who can be with meaningful questions. This person not only possesses the product that is a liberal arts education, but they themselves are the product of the conditions that make up a liberal arts education.

Delbanco relates the substance of the liberal arts, the humanities, to what was once called “liberal knowledge,” or the knowledge that remains through time for “contemplation.”¹⁵ The humanities here can be simplified to “humanistic subjects like

¹¹ Kronman, *Education’s End*, 40.

¹² Kronman, who notes his experiences at Williams College in the 1960s in his introduction, is the only author to have attended a liberal arts residential college. Delbanco, while having attended Harvard University in the 1970s, writes from the perspective as a professor at Columbia University, which is shared by Montás who attended the same school in the 1990s. Zakaria attended Yale University in the 1970s.

¹³ Delbanco, *College*, 2.

¹⁴ Kronman, *Education’s End*, 27.

¹⁵ Delbanco, *College*, 34. Delbanco, in describing the humanities, cites John Henry Newman. Newman describes liberal knowledge as “knowledge which stands on its own pretensions, which is independent of sequel, expects no complement, refuses to be *informed* . . . by any end, or absorbed into any art, in

language and history,” taught traditionally in the trivium.¹⁶ The relationship between “the humanities” and secular/religious/philosophical/political texts narrating humans being in the world is constituted insofar as the former is presupposed of containing the latter. Kronman’s description of “arts and letters,” a tradition “in which students and teachers pursued the perennial puzzles of human existence through the disciplined study of . . . the question of how a person ought to spend his or her life,” has been central to the humanities.¹⁷ In each book reviewed, the process of the liberal arts is an integral, active nature of engaging with the humanities through reading, writing, reciting, reflection, and repetition. The constant practice produces a reflex for interpreting something as something with meaning. This process necessitates a yielding to the something—a purposeful action to slow down, look with intentionality, and allow for time to reflect on your past amid this present something—which can incite meaning from the most unexpected places. Delbanco gives a pointed illustration of finding such meaning in the unexpected in which two student roommates attend a play, yet afterwards only one “finds himself thinking about every aspect of his life in a new way,” and that “the world has been transformed for him while it remains utterly unchanged for his friend. And yet they have heard the same voices and words, seen the same [play].”¹⁸ Delbanco highlights the difference between someone looking *at* something in juxtaposition with someone looking *for* something, the latter of which we can assume is the liberal artist who has been taught reflexively to see meaning in and out of the classroom.¹⁹ Delbanco goes on to describe this happenstance as a mystery that is the intent and purpose of liberal arts education, to (re)create the whole that is a place, product, and process necessary to incite “thinking about every aspect of [one’s] life in a new way.”²⁰ The liberal arts education/program is a place devoted to the undergraduate education in which one practices the process of (and thus leaves with as a product of) the ability to interpret and “articulate communication [that] helps you speak your mind” with the past, present, and future Self.²¹

order duly to present itself to our contemplations.” *The Idea of a University*, ed. Frank M. Turner (Yale University, 1996), 81 (emphasis in original).

¹⁶ Zakaria, *In Defense*, 43.

¹⁷ Kronman, *Education’s End*, 41.

¹⁸ Delbanco, *College*, 49. Delbanco’s illustration begins, “Imagine that two college roommates go out together to see a production of Shakespeare’s great play, *King Lear*,” in which he describes the play and the two students’ differing reaction to it (Ibid.). What I summarize as the same “play,” Delbanco describes as having “heard the same voices and words, seen the same bodies and props moving on the same stage . . . the same aural and visual stimuli,” (Ibid.).

¹⁹ Emphasis added.

²⁰ Delbanco, *College*, 49.

²¹ Zakaria, *In Defense*, 75.

Although each author connects how reading, writing, and speaking, on the humanities/classic books can transform your life by way of leading to you to wonder about your life as it is held up for comparison against the art of human existence, they do not all agree on how this is best accomplished.²² Each author, like the student roommates, offer something unique in their description of the “same” phenomenon that is the liberal arts education. Where Delbanco, Kronman, and Zakaria write from the outside looking in, Montás writes from the inside, taking us with him outward through his firsthand accounts. While Delbanco and Zakaria write with more regard as to where this way of being will take you in the world, Kronman and Montás focus more so on the ways in which the changing of your being changes the world. Consistent in each is the significance of becoming a liberal artist, one who can ask meaningful questions and who can interpret the response, which is also to say one who engages with the world hermeneutically. Seeing that this way of knowing and being in the world does not come from just anywhere, it is relevant to ask, what are the histories, traditions, and crises of the liberal arts education?

The History, Traditions, and Crises of the Liberal Arts College Education

All four books offer a sufficient, and similar, account of historic events that outline the history, traditions, and transformations that have led us to a crisis of the liberal arts college education; however, three of the books—Kronman, Delbanco, and Zakaria—provide a more linear analysis of the historicity that constitutes the liberal arts education. There is noticeable overlap of the historical accounts offered among these books which is, on one hand, due to each interpreting the “same” history from their unique positions; and, on the other hand, is due to each author brining the previously published author into their defense.

Kronman’s book, the earliest of the four (2007), is cited by the other three authors, all of whom make use of his critiques regarding the evolution from secular humanism into the research ideal. This refers to the modernization of research, and the socio-political changes that catalyzed the exponential growth of research, which

²² As will be explored later, Kronman takes a more traditionalist approach in advocating for directed studies and a “common core” of classical texts (see “Appendix: Yale Directed Studies Program Readings” in *Education’s End*, 261-265), whereas the other three authors take a more progressive approach that favors elective studies and more diverse set of readings (see Montás, “Epilogue: Nuts and Bolts” in *Rescuing Socrates*, 214-224). A shared position by all four authors: “most advocates of a core do not consider it [solely] sufficient for a liberal education.” Zakaria, *In Defense*, 60.

transformed the college of old from being a place of student transformation into a research university ecosystem with a primary function to mass produce research as a consumable product.²³ Delbanco's book, originally published second of the four (2012), provides by far the most extensive and comprehensive history of the American college, particularly accentuating prominent details of its birth from America's earliest religious institutions as he delivers to us the deeper meaning of the seminar, the professor, and the changes to their purpose as the college has transformed.²⁴ Zakaria's book was published third (2015), and offers a succinct history, albeit brief by comparison to the former, that draws on both Kronman and Delbanco's books, yet he goes back even further in history and beyond the U.S., which sets into relief the global historicity of liberal education and in which we find recurring traditions and recurring crises of the liberal arts education.²⁵ Montás book, while having been published after Zakaria, makes mention of the former three authors yet only draws upon two of them—Kronman and Delbanco—in his history excerpts that contextualize the liberal education and the crisis that it faces.²⁶

In continuing with the task of this hermeneutic book review, I will review the above-mentioned contributions from each book (though in a somewhat chronological order by starting with Zakaria, then Delbanco, then Kronman) to give inasmuch as possible the “whole” history, which will aid in the following section. Starting from ancient Greece, in which Plato and Isocrates debated the purpose of liberal arts on the grounds of utility for “knowing practically” versus “getting to know philosophically,” Zakaria situates the learning and teaching we concern ourselves as that which is necessary for democracy: citizens.²⁷ Despite this debate, both the Greeks and Romans widely accepted that neither method alone was a sufficient condition for a whole education in forming the citizen.²⁸ Education, eventually formalized into “the seven

²³ Kronman's use of these terms will be explored further in the pages below.

²⁴ Delbanco's book, *College*, was originally published in 2012.

²⁵ Although Kronman and Delbanco also make mention of the Greek roots from which liberal arts developed, they spend the bulk of their attention on the American College.

²⁶ Zakaria is only mentioned in the introduction of Montás' book. “But liberal education has always had formidable defenders. From Plato and Aristotle, to Cicero and Marucs Aurelis, to Erasmus and Galileo, to Virginia Woolf and W.E.B. Du Bois, to contemporary torch bearers like Andrew Delbanco, Martha Nussbaum, and Fareed Zakaria, eminent thinkers have insisted on the value and indispensability of the liberal education.” Montás, *Rescuing Socrates*, 6. Readers may notice, as I have, the absence of Anthony Kronman from that list.

²⁷ Zakaria, *In Defense*, 42.

²⁸ All authors address, to some degree—some with more concern for historically marginalized peoples than others—the power, benefits, and thus influence imposed on the determination of citizenship. Specifically, that those historically in power allowed only certain kinds of people, at certain points of history, to be citizens. More specifically, that Anglo-Saxon/white/wealthy/“West” educated/non-

liberal arts,” which always already included “science and humanities, the theoretical and the practical,” and in which humanistic inquiry and science could be investigated and understood as the constitution of a whole greater than the sum of its parts.²⁹

Zakaria’s book marks beginning of a recurring trend in which historical forces pushing on the utility of the liberal arts education results in the first humanist pendulum in the eighth century. It is there where the division of “the trivium—grammar, logic, and rhetoric—was taught first . . . [and] the quadrivium—arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy—came [second],” and that favor held true for the duration of time in which monasteries were the site of education.³⁰ Zakaria also identifies what is markedly the first pendulum towards science in the tenth through eleventh centuries as Europe’s first universities are formed with emphasis on specialization and research (while still emphasizing religious oversight) following the influence of “the most advanced civilization of the Middle Ages,” Islam, and the “madrasas” in which, for example, mathematics and research innovations resulted in how we have come to know algebra from “the Arab phrase *al-jabr*, meaning ‘the reunion of broken parts.’”³¹ Within a globalizing world context of trade and travel in the eleventh through thirteenth centuries came the need of specialization, “expertise in areas like geography, law, and science,” which came to be found in the developing “*universitas*” where, in addition to translation and study of ancient religious and philosophical texts, specialized scholars taught, researched, and produced both specialized people and specialized knowledge.³² The relevance of this is found in the emerging pattern marked by the third instance of the pendulum back towards humanism wherein the “fourteenth century the balance between practical and philosophical knowledge shifted again” as scholars of the time, “humanists, [who] rejected the . . . [specialized] approach to learning and theology,” demanded European education to return to the traditional Greko-Roman “arts and letters.”³³ Zakaria makes a point in distinguishing two features that come in the following renaissance of

slave peoples are granted citizenship (resulting from some historically enforced systemic oppression), while black/brown/aboriginal/indigenous/slave/non-west-educated peoples are not. Although the topic is outside the scope of this review, it must be remembered that, for as long as there has been a Western conception of education, there has always been *the other* about which one is educated, and always within the context of, and in relation to, power, subjugation, and oppression (emphasis my own). For further discussion, see Montás, “Epilogue: Nuts and Bolts” in *Rescuing Socrates*, 210-213.

²⁹ Zakaria notes that “science” in this time is considered abstract while humanistic knowledge, such as language and history, was considered the concrete, “practical” knowledge. Zakaria, *In Defense*, 43.

³⁰ Zakaria, *In Defense*, 44.

³¹ Zakaria, *In Defense*, 45 (emphasis in original).

³² Zakaria, *In Defense*, 46 (emphasis in original).

³³ Zakaria, *In Defense*, 47.

humanism centuries. The first, this shift towards humanism happens at the college rather than the university; and the second, the European college/university “tradition” being invoked is specifically discernable as an English college tradition. A notable feature of Zakaria’s brief history of liberal education, when compared to the other three, is the way in which he captures the global influence and progression of early Western education as a dichotomy of English/European as far back as the eighth century, which we see come up again as the dichotomies (in which the pendulum swings) between the General/Specialized, Religious/Secular, Humanist/Techno-scientist, and Practical/Philosophical.³⁴

Delbanco brings us to the dawn of the American college, one that developed from the English colleges established in the early thirteenth through fifteenth centuries rooted in religious devotion. These early colleges were partially private, partially public, and held sermons that featured “the lecture—originally a medieval term (derived from the Latin *legere*, to read) for reading aloud and explicating scriptural, patristic, or classical texts by scholars.”³⁵ Delbanco notes another feature dating back to “the Middle Ages, efforts to regulate the right to teach by issuing licenses,” which highlights these early colleges as “retreats for scholars of divinity,” ones that produced licensed graduates who were able to gather by way of this licensure and by way of earning their keep through the instruction of new students (i.e., *undergraduates*).³⁶ In other words, the earliest colleges were made by and for these “preacher-teacher” graduates, who held the means to (re)produce people and knowledge, in which they delivered oratory lectures.³⁷ The most practiced and accomplished of these individuals could deliver powerful lessons from minimal notes and were recognized as professional professors, one’s who could incite faith. What Delbanco accentuates here is the significance of, and the responsibility of, the professor and her deliverance of the lecture as traditions that result from religious education with the liberal arts. She who delivers the lecture,

[S]peaks from inside the subject, with an openness to new discoveries even while moving through an argument made many times before. No good lecture . . . should be closed to second thoughts; it must have a dialogic

³⁴ Delbanco, like Zakaria, makes use of this pendulum metaphor between scientism and humanism. “Today, the pendulum seems to be swinging back toward scientism—a vivid instance of . . . the ‘change of fashion rather than progress’ that characterizes the academic humanities.” Delbanco, *College*, 98. Although Kronman and Montás do not utilize this device, I interpret each book’s presentation of utilitarian dichotomies as indicative of this metaphor.

³⁵ Delbanco, *College*, 60-61.

³⁶ Delbanco, *College*, 36 (emphasis added).

³⁷ Delbanco, *College*, 62.

quality—a spirit of self-questioning that draws the listener into honest inquiry into themselves.³⁸

Delbanco is telling us that she is not simply a professor, but *the* professor, “a term that once referred to a person who professes a faith,” and that she “must always be a professor . . . a person undaunted by the incremental fatigue of repetitive work, who remains ardent, even fanatic, in the service of . . . [her] calling.”³⁹ The college that emigrated to New England in the 1600s is the place in which one lives immersed among community, a process in which new knowledge/discoveries were professed in the lecture, and a product with which one received the skills that come with the “study [of] not only scriptural texts and commentaries, but also history and natural philosophy—a . . . triumvirate of humanities, social science, and natural sciences.”⁴⁰ Delbanco exposes a deep connection to hermeneutics, which has traditionally been employed by theologians in the interpretation of religious texts. The very art that (re)produced the prominent education leaders who structured and modernized the earliest American colleges was inherited from liberal artists, one’s that drew their inspirations, interpretations, and responses, from a source and authority that enabled speaking with confidence and conviction: her faith. However, as the college evolved so too did its role in society writ large, which affected the intents and purposes for the students as well as the role and authority of faith—and the professor—in the classroom.

Kronman annotates the developments of the American college, and the evolving liberal arts education, into three historical phases, which I will summarize here both for the readers benefit and because all other authors invoke aspects of these phases in their defense. First, “the age piety,” Kronman says, “begins with the founding of Harvard . . . and lasts until the Civil War,” and represents the college Delbanco described previously.⁴¹ The age of piety is marked by distinguishing qualities of directed, rigid studies of the Western Canon of texts, by authority of teachers underpinned by theological and spiritual assumptions, and by the absence of “[t]he distinction between faculty and administration,” which were primarily one in the same.⁴² The end of the antebellum college in the age of piety is marked by, in Kronman’s summation, the transition of teachers from theologian scholar to secular

³⁸ Delbanco, *College*, 62.

³⁹ Delbanco, *College*, 66 (emphasis added).

⁴⁰ Delbanco, *College*, 41.

⁴¹ Kronman, *Education’s End*, 46.

⁴² Kronman, *Education’s End*, 54.

scholar, relying on the humanities themselves as that which can produce an “art of living” through an education that still required a generalized, directed, rigorous study of the classic texts that could produce, “understood . . . in aesthetic terms . . . the cultivation of the senses that reacts with pleasure to beautiful things,” as well as “understood . . . more intellectually, as the mastery of a set of ideas.”⁴³ In other words, where Delbanco highlights the ways in which the professor’s faith in her lectures is what allows her to deliver, Kronman not only agrees but adds that, when the teacher lost her faith, she too lost her ability to profess.

Second, “the age of human secularism,” follows the aforementioned age from the 1860s through the 1960s. Kronman describes human secularism as the set of assumptions that presupposes the humanities as “the disciplines best equipped to provide [preparation for life]” in that they define “a philosophy of humanistic education” as the source from which teachers derive their ontological and epistemological authority from in place of theology.⁴⁴ Human secularism is in place for nearly a century before it begins to experience the division of outcomes that marks another, and yet the “same,” pendulum between the aesthetic and the intellectual. Kronman asserts the death of human secularism comes from the introduction of the “research ideal,” or what could be understood as the reintroduction of the European university’s model from which the American college originated, and came about from “[t]he German university of the early nineteenth century . . . [which] institutionalized the idea of research and gave it . . . authority and prestige,” as that which undercut the authority of the humanities while also encouraging specialization-based studies over general liberal studies.⁴⁵ This leads to the third and present age described as the age in which “the research ideal and the demands for political correctness” as that which transformed the college into something that has rebuked its roots (and can be referenced henceforth within this review as the age of the research ideal).⁴⁶

Kronman asserts that the age of the research ideal is evidenced by three shifts in liberal education (though not necessarily in this order). To start with, the push to include “modern” texts in the “core” of the arts and letters traditions occurs, which presented students “[o]n the one hand . . . the ancient model of virtue and order; on the other, modern ideas of individuality and creative freedom;” second, the research ideal promoted the introduction of an *elective* system for classes where only a *directed*

⁴³ Kronman, *Education’s End*, 72-73.

⁴⁴ Kronman, *Education’s End*, 74.

⁴⁵ Kronman, *Education’s End*, 59.

⁴⁶ Kronman, *Education’s End*, 74. Kronman leaves this third age, about which we are in, unnamed despite devoting the majority of his attention to it.

course of study system had ever been, the former leading to individuality and freedom to pursue specialization in knowing and as a vocation; and third, as the beginning of the displacement of liberal arts colleges by undergraduate students, who began to favor research universities in which specialty and profession-specific undergraduate studies could be pursued.⁴⁷

What emerges from this history is, as Zakaria identified, the liberal arts education utilitarian debate, one that is a reoccurring event in which the crisis we face today (re)emerges as a tradition in and of itself. For as long as there has been education, it seems, there has also been a disagreement over what kind of education is best fitting to meet the needs of the people in any given time period. As the liberal college shifted into a research university, and the purpose of the professor shifted from preacher-teacher to producer of consumable specialized research, so too did the people begin to interpret the function of college as not that which creates a person who can ask meaningful questions, but as that which produces a particular skill or profession of value.

The transformation of college into a research university ecosystem, as a phenomenon, is posed by all four authors as that which dislocated the liberal arts education, disenfranchised the professor, and has directed the interpretations of intents and purposes for higher/secondary learning, which has affected the ways we have come to contextualize the modern-day American college and problems there within. What each author makes clear in their offering of the history and traditions is that, if we are to defend the liberal arts, our hope is laden in this history. As we look back upon higher education traditions in which an undulating pendulum has swung between era-specific utilitarian dichotomies, which inevitably appear as the liberal (philosophical) education juxtaposition with the specialized (practical) education, we may ask ourselves: what swings it back towards the liberal arts found within humanities? In other words, we have found ourselves here once before and, as Maya Angelo informed us at the start, we need not live it again should we have the courage to engage in conversation with our inherited past. With this history reviewed, we can understand to some degree how we have arrived at this state of the liberal arts, and what remains is each book's position regarding where we go from here.

⁴⁷ Kronman, *Education's End*, 84 (emphasis added).

Responding to the Crisis

Montás writes, after recounting his reading of Augustine's *Confessions*, "I did not know where I would go, but I had been re-oriented and somehow clarified, somehow acquainted with the terms on which I would count my life as authentic."⁴⁸ The liberal arts education, as we have come to know up to this point, invites us to seek out the authenticity of our lives. If I have successfully drawn parallels between the liberal arts education and a hermeneutic education as both significant and in crisis, then readers may clearly see their intertwined fate: the liberal education that results in a praxis of asking questions, and interpreting responses, that enable us to contemplate possibilities for living authentic, meaning-full lives was once the point of college, but now is at risk for loss. While this appears tantamount to a meaning-full education apocalypse, it is important to remember the liberal arts has faced this crisis of utility once before. "One benefit of looking into the past," Delbanco writes, "is to be reminded that apocalyptic prophecies are more often wrong than right."⁴⁹ Each author has, up to this point, made an adequate defense of the benefits for a liberal mind. What remains is the exploration of just a few problems and solutions for a liberal arts, and hermeneutics, of tomorrow as we face this crisis yet again.

Kronman, in his analysis of the age of the research ideal, finds liberal arts education, and its teachers, are faced with an issue incited by multiculturalism; political correctness; and the progressive practices/policies that have developed from diversity, equity, and inclusion; all of which he attributes as coming about from the research ideal.⁵⁰ He posits that the teachers of the humanities writ large are not positioned as an authority capable of withstanding the pendulum between inclusion and exclusion whilst "the research ideal continues to define [their] attitudes and ambitions," and thus cannot contemplate life's most meaningful questions with their students.⁵¹ He makes clear that he is not refuting "the values at the heart of the research ideal—the celebration of originality, the demand for specialization, the ethic of supersession," but that "their tendency to occupy the whole of the humanities and to dictate the exclusive terms on which the worth of everything that is done in them is measured," is what

⁴⁸ Montás, *Rescuing Socrates*, 48.

⁴⁹ Delbanco, *College*, 151.

⁵⁰ Kronman refers to "secular humanism" as the kind of education that promotes deep reflection, whereas I have taken the liberty to continue referring to that quality here as "liberal arts education."

⁵¹ Kronman, *Education's End*, 248.

obfuscates the capacity and possibility for meaningful conversations in and among the humanities to occur.⁵²

Kronman asserts that the political correctness culture of the humanities is “enforcing a deadening uniformity of opinion,” which can result in mandatory inclusion becoming no better than mandatory exclusion.⁵³ Another quality pertaining to the student he takes issue with is the academic self-election path (that gives one the freedom to select only class pertaining to their profession) as one that emboldens avoidance of that which can cause one to look inward, whereas the direct studies is that which puts one into conversation with the self by placing the other, the uncomfortable, the strange, in dialogue with the self. Despite several of his arguments conflicting with the other three authors, namely and pointedly with Montás and Zakaria as potential benefactors for policies he dismisses, he still finds company with both on the subject and significance of our attention, and its endangerment from “our addiction to technology and the equation of truth with science.”⁵⁴ Kronman continues, “[w]e live in a narcotized stupor, blind to the ways in which our own immense powers and the knowledge that has produced them cuts us off from the knowledge of who we are.”⁵⁵

With the loss of this connection to ourselves we have also lost the connection to each other. In Kronman's view, the teachers of the liberal arts must be able to assert themselves as the authority in a room, and students must be able to sit in that room with people they both do and do not agree with and have the supported freedom to navigate life's most challenging, unanswerable questions. If the teachers of the humanities continue to rely on the research ideal for authority, and students continue to embrace opting-out of material/people/ideas that are not aligned with their (current) preconditioned biases, the crisis of the liberal arts—which is a crisis of connection to self in Kronman's view, and a crisis of hermeneutics in my own view—is terminal.

Zakaria takes a primary issue with the rigor and structure of modern-day liberal education programs. “The solution to the problems of a liberal education,” Zakaria writes, “is more—and better—liberal education.”⁵⁶ In Zakaria's reflections of his own experiences, he identifies the skills and value to students that develop from requiring students to give attention to reading—and finishing—books. Reading whole books

⁵² Kronman, *Education's End*, 248.

⁵³ Kronman, *Education's End*, 255.

⁵⁴ Kronman, *Education's End*, 257.

⁵⁵ Kronman, *Education's End*, 257.

⁵⁶ Zakaria, *In Defense*, 105.

based in the humanities, such as those found on a common core or directed studies program list, allow us to “confront the realities of the world we live in and [become] educated in a way that addresses them, rather than pretend that these challenges don’t exist.”⁵⁷ Zakaria writes that the “the subjects that often define the liberal arts—the core humanities—have in particular become less structured and demanding,” which not only hurts the student in the development of their rigor, but also removes the opportunity to be transformed by a book.⁵⁸ He also highlights how the rigor for teachers and students is endangered by the demands of research.

The teacher who is aimed towards generating research in lieu of requiring rigorous work from the student, which would necessitate additional labor in the form of grading, feedback, etc., asks less of the student, and thus the student is forsaken for the production of specialized consumable knowledge. Over time, the teacher becomes less practiced and thus less capable, as Kronman described, in facilitating a liberal education. Zakaria does not shy away from naming himself as among those who lack the authority and skill necessary to teach one how to form the skills of the liberal artist. He writes,

Because of the times we live in, all of us, young and old, do not spend enough time and effort thinking about the meaning of life. We do not look inside ourselves enough to understand our strengths and weaknesses, and we do not look around enough—at the world, in history—to ask the deepest and broadest questions.⁵⁹

Zakaria goes on to describe how, as a teacher, taking a path that required less work for himself through giving higher grades (rather than awarding for merit), a path that demands less rigor from his students and himself, was positively reinforced through incentivization by the sociopolitical structure of the American college. From this perspective, the college/university as a whole can be seen to forsake the production of the student as a liberal artist for the incentives that come with high grades, high enrollment, and an optimal (profitable) ratio of research value generated to teaching course load delivered. Zakaria, who drew great value from his own liberal arts undergraduate studies, suggests like Kronman a return of rigor, high expectations, and structure.

⁵⁷ Zakaria, *In Defense*, 62.

⁵⁸ Zakaria, *In Defense*, 103.

⁵⁹ Zakaria, *In Defense*, 169.

“Liberal education lives in the questions,” Montás writes, “not in the answers.”⁶⁰ The primary problem to be addressed in his view is the lack of consideration for taking deep, self-reflective inquiry, seriously as an end goal of the college education. He states,

Liberal education is not possible without a recognition that inquiry into the life of virtue—that is, into the best and most excellent life for a human being to live—is not a futile endeavor but, in fact, leads to a deeper self-understanding and, in this sense, a fuller life.⁶¹

A factor contributing to the recession of interest for this fuller life by students is the research ideal described by Kronman that emphasizes production of a professional career and specialized research in lieu of a liberal education. Montás, in a passage describing his self-reflection through Freud, identifies the perceived lack of value for such classical texts in the professional setting as evidence for “the erosion of humanistic learning . . . [which] is directly linked to the rise of the ‘research university’ . . . and the dominance of . . . ‘the research ideal’ in higher education.”⁶² In his summation, one can learn from the humanities the same skills that are purported to only be available through specialized, profession-specific classes; however, the former contain more in skills and benefits (as the curiosity and question asking that allow one to access the self) and the same cannot be said for the latter. Montás goes on to describe how one can learn from literature analysis, as well as psychoanalysis, by learning to look inward where, upon learning to read one’s self you realize that, “[i]n liberal learning, the act of knowing transforms us. In knowing something about ourselves, we become something else; the thing that we know is changed by our knowing it.”⁶³ The college, or rather the university that has replaced it, demotes transforming the self from the start by framing messages to student recruits—and their parents paying the bill—through lenses of “employability” rather than internal self-discovery. The return on investment an education ought to have, and the job market salaries they ought to expect with the degree, especially when taken into account the rising costs of the university research ecosystem, leads one away from philosophical

⁶⁰ Montás, *Rescuing Socrates*, 192.

⁶¹ Montás, *Rescuing Socrates*, 192.

⁶² Montás, *Rescuing Socrates*, 124.

⁶³ Montás, *Rescuing Socrates*, 132.

wonder and towards the practicality of knowing just when one can (expect to) pay off the tuition bill.⁶⁴

In Delbanco's closing chapters he addresses the question: what is to be done? Readers may find several of his arguments of interest since, as is with his book on the whole, he offers numerous entry points and with extensive evidence to support his claims that range from critiques of the classroom to the greater financial infrastructure that makes college (un)attainable. Of particular interest is his addressing the role of teaching, as compared to training, and the role of the professor, as the teacher, and how "one obvious thing to do is to try to produce more teachers who care about teaching."⁶⁵ A liberal arts education is delivered to the student by a practitioner of the liberal arts, a professor, and she teaches it with accomplishment when she herself believes it to be an act of liberation and when she models to the student that it takes practice and attunement so that, when the time should arise that she can no longer guide them, she need not worry as the student has received the gift of her tutelage.

In this way traditions of rigor and high expectations matter because it is the repetition of the motion, not the end product, that is the task to be achieved. The teacher that cares for her student's transformation challenges them, holds them to a higher standard of accomplishment, and gifts them accountability when they struggle not because she wants to see them fail, but because she knows they are capable of success through her own practice of perfecting the art of liberation herself. Without teachers who can give themselves over to teaching, who can fully invest in the art of liberating students through the humanities, we will continue to rely on instructors who merely train students with education in such a manner that supports the instructors' primary job as a researcher and/or faculty administrator. This manner of instruction leads students to contemplate their career choices more so than their own lives, and far more so than deep, profound, unanswerable questions. Delbanco writes in his closing,

Certain habits of mind—distinguishing between arguments and opinions, admitting self-doubt, rethinking assumptions—are imperative for collective life. If these habits are not nurtured in the college classroom, where else will they be found?⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Delbanco also makes this point (*College*, 27). Zakaria similarly describes how he "chickened out" of the Yale Directed Studies program. "I panicked at the idea of committing so completely to something that seemed so impractical." Zakaria, *In Defense*, 38.

⁶⁵ Delbanco, *College*, 166.

⁶⁶ Delbanco, *College*, 201.

In his addressing the need for a liberal arts revival, one that promotes curiosity and wonder by way of restoring those capable of inciting such habits—the professor—he asks to be critical of where we might find such a person who may lead us to wonder, if not the college. It is an ethical address, in my interpretation, to those who recognize that a true teacher illuminates the practicality of the liberal arts in their teaching of it to others, and who also recognizes that our classrooms have become dim. If we are to start somewhere, perhaps it is best to begin with those who bestow meaning onto those who inherit it to ensure that they do so with aim and purpose towards being well.

In Summary

What can be concluded from this review is that each of these books ultimately suggests a renaissance for the love of learning the unknown and the abstract by way of curious question asking and inciteful interpretation, knowing that the process of asking and answering again and again results in deep self-reflection, which can change the world both inside and outside of the self. “They called such an exploration *philosophy*, which means ‘love of wisdom,’” and it is the transformation that one undergoes after inheriting this love for wisdom as that which makes a liberal education worth defending as the purpose for college.⁶⁷ In these books I found their defense for asking beautiful questions as a defense for a praxis of hermeneutical engagement with the world. Each book offers hermeneutic questions as having the most utility not because they are unanswerable, but because to contemplate them is to actively participate in the process of becoming. In other words, “such an education is not to provide answers to these fundamental questions, but to bring them to life . . . [and] instill habits or reflection and inquiry that can serve as guides for [being],” since a condition of being is the fact that we are always already presented with a question that demands our interpretation, and therefore we must choose to prioritize an education that enables one to perform this task or risk a future of poor interpretations that will affect our collective being.⁶⁸ The liberal education is the summation of the place it is offered, the process one must go through, and a product that is produced under the necessary conditions.

⁶⁷ Zakaria, *In Defense*, 139 (emphasis in original).

⁶⁸ Montás, *Rescuing Socrates*, 110.

“Today,” Kronman writes, “increasingly few teachers . . . believe they have the competence or duty to offer their students an education in the meaning of life,” to which Zakaria both agrees and adds that students today do not want to be directed towards this outcome in lieu of the freedom to elect their own.⁶⁹ Delbanco would add that “[g]oing to college was an exercise in self-examination, self-discipline, and self-abnegation. Or so, at least, it was supposed to be.”⁷⁰ Montás not only agrees with Delbanco, but would insist that, because he has come from the college in the last century where the crisis has also been prominent, that it has been for some—and can still be—that place.

⁶⁹ Kronman, *Education's End*, 87; Zakaria, *In Defense*, 62.

⁷⁰ Delbanco, *College*, 74.