

WHAT USE IS INSTRUMENTALISM? CONSERVATIVE PRAGMATISM IN LIBERAL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This article summarizes four archetypal responses—the reactionary, conservative, pragmatist, and presentist—to the real or perceived threat to liberal learning in higher education. I advocate a balance between the conservative and the pragmatist responses. A conservative pragmatist response resists the canonical rigidity of the reactionary; responds to the ever-evolving social demands and practices that help frame the perennial questions of liberal learning, but values the poetry of conversation and the disengagement demanded by such a conversation, even if social problems initiate the reflective inquiry. The conservative pragmatist response highlights the perennial and the evolutionary, the universal and the particular, and the end in itself and the instrumental in liberal arts education.

INTRODUCTION

The utilitarian and consumerist model of higher education undervalues the importance and worth of the liberal arts in higher education, both globally and locally. Globally speaking, it does not take long to flip through a national newspaper or to click through the *Chronicle of Higher Education* to find *either* some call for the academy to train students for the current set of jobs available, especially for which there is high demand, low supply, and a national need, *or* critical responses to such a call. Andy Delbanco wrote in *The Chronicle Review* (2009) of the problem, citing our “need to respond to the public demand for some demonstrable *utility* in what we teach: literature, history, philosophy, the arts.”¹ How many of us have received an article in our inboxes or mailboxes from a colleague or department chair that equips us with the bullet points of a departmental defense against the attack that our discipline has no utility in the real world of jobs, including charts showing how much money liberal arts majors make or how well they score on the GRE or LSAT?²

Locally, my university recently grouped all of the liberal arts into something called “behavioral analytics,” where historians, philosophers, and English professors

were charged with writing grants over issues, including cyber security, that strike those of us in the humanities as dangerously presentist, scientific, and vocational. Next, the topic for a faculty workshop was “From classroom to careers: Best practices in helping students articulate liberal arts skill sets and value their educational experiences.” Skeptics bristled at the title, “from classroom to careers,” even before reading the postcolon subtitle. Many of us suspect that there is a hidden premise embedded in this topic—we, as liberal arts faculty, have a job to do: prepare students for careers. Put less charitably, liberal arts education is, at best, job preparation, at worst, job training. I think this is wrong, and the liberal arts must respond thoughtfully to the reduction of liberal learning to job training.

The message seems to be that the liberal arts are under attack from STEM. The vocational, professional margins of the academy have eroded its center. At worst, we fear administrators aiming to fold sociology into social work, economics into business, and make philosophy and political science pre-law functionaries. Eleonora Belfiore argues that such rhetoric of gloom and the rhetoric of “impact” go hand-in-hand. As “impact” discourse grows, so does gloom. And as the crisis in the humanities feels more acute, the impact of the humanities becomes a defense strategy.³ If there is an actual call for vocational education at the academy, (and it is not a creature of our own paranoia or self-doubt), and if the grant money flows not our way, but to those who contribute something to cyber security, we must survey the available responses to this cultural push for the liberal arts to become vocational.

The question driving this inquiry is: *what utility is there in demonstrating the utility of the liberal arts?* In what follows, I will summarize four archetypal responses—the reactionary, the conservative, the pragmatist, and the presentist—constructing a continuous spectrum of potential models. The two archetypes at the poles of the spectrum, the reactionary and the presentist, are less convincing than the two middle positions, conservative and pragmatist, which offer a balance between taking from the past and responding to the needs of the future. It must be admitted, then, that my conclusion is somewhat contained in the schema I deploy to investigate the problem, although I find valuable elements in each of the four models. That said, I will advocate a balance between the conservative and the pragmatist responses, one which continues to do what we do well, eschewing recourse to utilitarian justifications, one which refuses a rigid canonical fetishism, but one which is responsive to student interests and needs within an evolving liberal arts curriculum. A conservative pragmatist response resists the canonical rigidity of the reactionary; responds to the ever-evolving social demands and practices that help frame the perennial questions of liberal learning, but values the poetry of conversation and the disengagement demanded by such a conversation, even if social problems initiate the reflective inquiry. Fusing the conservative and pragmatist responses highlights the perennial and the evolutionary, the universal and the particular, the end in itself and the instrumental in liberal arts education.

REACTIONARY RESPONSES

Many voices and symbols could be used as representative of a reactionary response to this vocational push in liberal arts education. Here I will illustrate three in an attempt to create a continuous spectrum from the reactionary to the conservative responses. First, Roger Kimball, editor of *The New Criterion* and author of many polemical attacks on the state of higher education, would respond to the question that is my title, “What Use is Instrumentalism?”, by answering “no use at all.” Education in the humanities is not for anything else, not a means to an end, and surely not a vocational end.

Kimball is skeptical of the contemporary harelike rush to solve social problems and, at the same time, he laments the absence in western culture of the repudiation of the taboo.⁴ These two thoughts are two sides of a coin. To Kimball’s thinking, the thought that we can and should bring academic reflection and public policy to bear on, to his mind, such small social problems emerged contemporaneously alongside our historical path toward moral relativism. Over time, every cultural issue became relevant fodder for our reflection, could be theorized about, rationalized, historicized, placed in a social context, and given a social function. Every cultural form—video games, celebrity life, reality TV, advertisement—was put up for academic grabs. Once this sort of relativism of academic importance is achieved, then theories of fairness and justice could be brought to bear upon them, and radical academics—“tenured radicals,” as he calls them in one book title— could write in service of public policies whereby the smallest of social ills might be eradicated.⁵

In the face of such relativism, Kimball laments the absence of our unreasoned repudiation of the taboo. To reject the taboo, according to Kimball, is to refuse to reflect on some forms of culture because they are taboo, outside the sphere of or not worthy of our rational reflection. Leo Strauss refers to these forms as “vulgarity” and “mass culture.”⁶ Pornography, for instance, might have, in some golden age of moral stability, been considered taboo. But now we have *Porn Studies*, an academic journal dedicated to the cultural form of pornography. We, in the once exalted academy, now give genetic accounts of pornography, reflect on gender and racial stereotypes in pornography, and wax Marxist and Foucauldian on porn as a cultural form, and, as Kimball mourns, it “passes for humanistic research and scholarship.”⁷ We can give academic papers on why gaming culture marginalizes female gamers. We can expand the domains of justice and fairness from the big issues to the small, all in service of the radical political agenda of the far left. One of Kimball’s greatest enemies is the method of deconstruction in literary and art criticism, which he calls a “sham.” He is not alone in registering an attack on the humanities because of the predominance of postmodern French thought. The self-image problem for the humanities is part of an attack on postmodern culture studies referred to as “intellectual gobbledygook” by Roger Scruton,⁸ “academic bullshit” by G.A. Cohen,⁹ and “pretentiously opaque and obscurantist,” by Terry Eagleton.¹⁰

This line of research in the humanities is also seen to be expressly politically left. The criticism is that this research does not offer debate, but only membership and indoctrination.¹¹ The hallowed halls of liberal arts education, once the great curators of the best of the best, now read its own canon against itself deferring interpretation in unintelligible “prof-speak” under the supposition that artistic greatness is a mask covering white male privilege, repressed sexual impulses, or social hierarchy and classism. We have, as one of Kimball’s book titles states, “raped the masters.”¹²

Somehow, according to Kimball, the once great institution of higher education became polluted and corroded by external forces. And new external forces lurk at the gates of the ivory tower—the need for more STEM education and job training in the academy. What is the archetypal reactionary response? Return to the canon. Curate the best of the best in our disciplines. And refuse some forms of culture and some calls to transform ourselves into job trainers, as, if not taboo, beneath us.

Leo Strauss offers another reactionary posture to the current instrumentalism in defense of liberal education. His reasoning is as follows: Liberal education is literate education in or through letters; it is education in and toward culture.¹³ We need literate education as a necessary condition for democracy, whose ideal is that of a universal aristocracy of wise citizens.¹⁴ But this ideal is not currently possible, both because the idea of culture has become relative, and because of the prevalence of electoral apathy and “mass culture.” Liberal education must be the “counterpoison” to the vulgarity of mass culture.¹⁵ To help serve as the antidote to mass culture, we must engage in a brave conversation with and between the “great books.”¹⁶ We must be courageously open to the possibility that our contemporary worldview is not superior to that of the great minds, and we must be bold enough to enter into a conversation with those great minds. Only in this way can we “break through the noise, the rush, the thoughtlessness” of mass culture.¹⁷ The remedy to the vulgarity of mass culture renders us more humble and modest, but it is a bold venture.¹⁸

Strauss’s definition of liberal education shares with Kimball an implicit acceptance of the canon of great minds, but his image of a conversation is a welcomed step toward the conservative response discussed below. We should not only curate the canon, but be active in a dialogue with it, which suggests that our contemporary situation might inform the way we converse. However, if Strauss were to respond to the vocational pressure in liberal education or to the erosion of liberal education from STEM fields, it would be less responsive and more of a retreat to the great books of the historically accepted canon, and because of this retreat, it is reactionary.

The third theorist helping fill out the archetype of the reactionary response to the current potential crisis in liberal education is Roger Scruton, who is clear that education is an end, and not a means.¹⁹ Only in a “bureaucratic state” could education be thought of to serve ends such as economic growth or unemployment reduction.²⁰ Among the discourse of those viewing education instrumentally is

the ever-present reference to the “relevance” of education. Contemporary administrators often ask teachers to make what they teach relevant, a presentist demand. Educators need somehow to transform the irrelevant canon into something presently digestible by highlighting its connection to something the student, the grant funders, or the bureaucratic state finds currently significant.²¹

Scruton’s object of attack in light of the discourse of relevance is the “studies” degree. He draws a caricature of such a degree, “Football Studies.” In this course of study, a student learns the sociology of football, engages in a class analysis of football culture, reads the psychology at work in the playing of football, and engages in “wetter” inquiries into football and the unconscious.²² While conceding that football studies might constitute a straw argument, Scruton registers his attack on women’s studies, gay studies/queer theory, sports studies, and media studies (and, I imagine, would extend it to environmental studies, poverty studies, Africana studies, and religious studies). Scruton likens the studies degrees to the study of holes, where one could articulate the common features of all sorts of holes, in shirts, in the earth, in black holes, and in key-holes.²³

The problem is that these studies are, according to Scruton, not disciplinary. These meta-degrees create “experts without knowledge,” and his most searing critique is of the degree in education and the creation of schools of education. This emphasis on education as a degree creates a mass of bureaucrats, “educationists,” who both offer no critical reflection on an identifiable field of study and are responsible for the relevance revolution, which he thinks is the problem in liberal education, not the solution.²⁴ To the current vocational push in liberal education and the current demands that the liberal arts be potentially STEM-relevant, Scruton offers another reactionary response—an approving description of how conservatives reacted by advocating for more independent and private school education. His critique of meta-disciplines is an acclamation of traditional disciplinarity, which demands an identifiable field of study, which entails a canon of study, much like Kimball and Strauss. The reactionary response refuses to see liberal education as instrumental, and it retreats to the sanctuary of traditional disciplinarity and great books curricula.

CONSERVATIVE RESPONSES

If Kimball’s and Scruton’s polemical attacks on the state of higher education, at least in part, offend those in the liberal arts who stress the importance of humanistic reflections on race, gender, sexuality, and other issues of social justice, as well as those who are deconstructionist, Foucaudian, or Marxist in their theoretical approaches, then we need to move down the spectrum to a more moderate, albeit conservative, response to the prospect of an erosion of liberal arts education. Here I use the term conservative not as equivalent to anything politically right wing, but as a methodology, and one best characterized as *skepticism of rationalism*. The conservative skeptic, for our purposes, is doubtful that any preconceived blueprint for practical activity,

from politics to education, is the most effective tool for undertaking practical endeavors. Scruton's self-image is certainly conservative in this way, and for this purpose he serves as a bridge from the reactionary to the conservative. However, Scruton's version of conservatism, in education and in other cultural institutions, universalizes the conservative sentiments, takes them as first principles, and thus falls into the rationalist trap that suggests these principles could serve as a blueprint for education.

The rational planner might suppose that a present survey of vocational needs in our country or region would provide the fixed end to which our education must serve as a means. Institutions external to our college—from the White House, to corporations, to grant-funding institutions—by having one finger on the pulse of the present survey of job needs and one on the pulse of education, are in a constant state of anxiety whenever the two pulses' beats are out of sync. This anxiety is not new. As Timothy Fuller wrote, "Anxiety over the state of American education is inherent to the American Republic."²⁵ Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the debate took place between two camps. On one side are those critical of traditional liberal learning by virtue of the progress of science and the expansion of democracy. The tacit worldview of this pole is that the human condition is an endless readjustment toward perfection, the endless quest for techniques to improve our health, welfare, and social equality. Education, for this side of the debate, must serve present and future ends. On the other side are those who view education, as Kimball and Strauss do, as the learning of the perennial truths found in the Western canon of great books, which requires a disengaged and utterly noninstrumental attitude. The new does not supersede the old, which must be preserved, curated, and engaged in a humbling conversation.

The English philosopher, Michael Oakeshott, represents the archetypal conservative response. But Oakeshott rejected the dichotomy between the traditionalists and the progressives. He was a thoroughgoing skeptic of rationalism in practical activity, and he wanted to preserve in education the disengaged interval in learning where students ask questions about their own existence, purpose, and meaning. In such a disengaged interval, they can survey the great thinkers who posed such questions and reflect on the vast array of offerings to find meaning in their pursuits. But as a deeply historical thinker, Oakeshott understood that any answer to these perennial questions could not constitute universal truth. Each of us, based on our unique, particular situation, must continually ask these questions as they are articulated in novel ways based on the dynamics of social and historical evolution.

Oakeshott describes the politics of rationalism as one which assumes the character of an engineer, whose purpose in forwarding educational policy is the solving of problems. This type of political engineer uses the tool of "reason" to surmount a series of crises whose only character is the failure to satisfy the felt needs of the moment, such as the need for vocationally trained students. The circumstances of society's problems, from unemployment to a dearth of STEM-

educated graduates, provide the crises, but the circumstances themselves never aid in the solution. Rationalist educational policy planning is a politics of perfection and uniformity.²⁶ By rejecting the particular circumstances as providing the tools to enable people to flourish in unique ways, rationalist politics has no place for variety and attempts to impose a “uniform condition of perfection upon human conduct.”²⁷ (The rationalist adores one-size-fits-all assessment plans, for instance.) The circumstances of our current crisis include the push toward STEM or the vocational tug at the soul of liberal learning, but our particular circumstances—for instance, the unique strengths of each department or college—do not provide the tools toward a resolution, according to the rationalist model of which Oakeshott is so skeptical.

Oakeshott claims that the rationalist reduces technical and practical knowledge, both of which are involved in most human activities, to the technical and claims that practical, traditional knowledge is no knowledge at all. The reason for this is that the rationalist is consumed by a quest for certainty.²⁸ Perhaps the prevalence of rationalism in education accounts for our need to defend the liberal arts against the charge that they are unempirical, unrigorous, and “subjective.”²⁹ Another by-product of the rationalist scheme of practical activity is that it converts habits and traditions of behavior, which are unconscious, built up over time, adaptable to circumstance, and never quite finished, into rigid systems of abstract ideas—ideologies. These ideologies serve as the plans for using technical knowledge to achieve present ends. The result is that “the life of society loses its rhythm and continuity and is resolved into a succession of problems and crises,” and “all sense of what Edmund Burke called the partnership between present and past is lost.”³⁰ Oakeshott would reject the current calls to conform to present needs, much as he would reject the demand that tests could be standardized for all. As another British philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, wrote: “No system of external tests . . . can result in anything but educational waste.”³¹ He thought that no rigid curriculum, which is not modified by the individual teacher for the needs of particular students, should be permissible.³² The same can be said of pedagogical methods: simplifying teaching methods into “fail-safe” technical functions threatens to undermine the valued variability in teaching that would enable genuine learning.³³ The experimentalist and the rationalist pedagogues are very much at odds.

The confusion between the pressure groups calling for vocational education, such as the foundation and government grant-funding institutions and the actual educational institutions, the universities, ends in a change in focus from the *qualities* we seek to foster to the *techniques* needed to serve present, vocational ends. Being self-aware of the qualities and so-called soft skills that are the by-product of, not the blueprint for, a traditional, liberal education would help us self-assess our success in teaching these, to some extent. W. E. B. Dubois referred to these as, “intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the relation of men to it,” always keeping in mind, following Aristotle, the difference

between “the means for living” and “the object of life.”³⁴ Such broad sympathy is what Michael Bérubé had in mind when he characterized those educated in the humanities as “less inclined to pathologize disability, more sympathetic to the argument that many disabilities are disabling chiefly because our built environments and social policies make them so, more willing to revise my beliefs and my expectations every time my child [with Down syndrome] accomplishes something our doctors never imagined to be possible for him.”³⁵

For Oakeshott, the debate over the content of liberal education was misguided and ended in a false dichotomy of pluralistic confusion and canonical dogmatism. Oakeshott’s primary metaphor in liberal education was that of a “conversation,” and, as with Alfred North Whitehead, an “adventure in ideas.” What qualities do we want our students to embody when they engage in such an adventurous conversation, and what romantic possibilities do we think such a conversation might disclose? In the end, such a conversation is emancipation, for Oakeshott. This archetype wants our students to be free, and job training, in contradistinction from conversation, is a limitation as much as it is a preparation. But, it must be said, the archetypal conservative response to such pressure is a nonresponse: we must continue to keep doing what we do well. We need not limit the canon to a fixed list of universally accepted greats, and our role is not just curator, but facilitator of the conversation, which Oakeshott (1962) said provides the “voice of poetry in the conversation of mankind.”³⁶

Recently, Michael Raposa has offered two images of the conservative ideal in liberal arts education. Two philosophers, Henry David Thoreau and Charles Sanders Peirce, help maintain continuity in the spectrum of responses to the present crisis. Raposa, moving us closer to a pragmatist response, writes that “Inquiries in the liberal arts ought never to be classified as having no practical purpose; rather, such inquiries are distinguished by the fact that their purposes are multiple and indeterminate, and so cannot be readily specified in advance.”³⁷ Raposa offers Thoreau’s activity of “sauntering” as representative of the type of inquiry in which the liberal arts engage.³⁸ Sauntering is not a mere walking from point A to B, but an endeavor in which purposes emerge within the course of the activity. They are not predetermined as a blueprint beforehand, but the activity is not entirely arbitrary either. Rather, a “subtle magnetism” in nature attracts one who saunters. The intellectual saunter is attuned to the features internal to its inquiry, which are generative of its own purposes.³⁹

Raposa analogizes this activity to “musement,” the form of meditative thinking highlighted by Peirce. This “pure play” of the mind, once again, is not arbitrary, but bound only by the purposes that emerge in the “communication between self and self.”⁴⁰ While the rational planner offers purposes as a blueprint in education, both of these activities, sauntering and musement, offer a picture of a “developmental teleology,” where purposes emerge in the activity of inquiry, rather than being conceived prior to the inquiry and needlessly confining it. Raposa’s central claim is that these two images show us what the liberal arts do. If this is correct, then

printing syllabi with “learning outcomes” on them, as our rationalist administrators demand, misunderstands the activity of liberal education, whose telos develops in the process of inquiry. Further, if the learning outcomes are tailored to present STEM or vocational needs, then the course of study in the liberal arts becomes detrimentally confined and thoroughly illiberal, in Oakeshott’s sense of liberation.

PRAGMATIST RESPONSES

Offering Peirce as representative of the third conservative helps construct a continuous, not discrete, movement down the spectrum of responses, as he is one of the founders of American pragmatism. Fundamental to our understanding of the pragmatist response to external pressure is an understanding of a pragmatist theory of inquiry. The essential features of our existence and experience are both stable and precarious. In stable conditions we act out of habit, but when our habits are disrupted, our involved situation is pervaded by uncertainty, irritation, and precariousness. This is the indeterminate situation. Our first step in inquiry is to establish a problem, which involves the testing of hypotheses and the empirical work to determine their worth. The second step is to hypothesize a solution. Testing solutions means more empirical work and experimentation until we resolve the problem at hand and return to our preferred state of equilibrium and habit.

I am doubtful that there was ever a habitual state of repose in liberal arts education, but perhaps there have been phases lacking constant disruption and indeterminacy. Our current state seems more precarious, as we are repeatedly told to find grant money from institutions funding STEM or by the presentation of a topic whose premise is that we need to be job trainers. As Alasdair MacIntyre stated, “It is liberal education, not job training.”⁴¹ Nevertheless, we must establish the problem. This inquiry must be communal. Is the threat real or supposed? Is the premise as nefarious as the reactionary response would suggest? Are we really under attack, as some suppose?

I think, given a problem, regardless of its scope, the pragmatist archetype—John Dewey—has a response serving as a potential model. The historicist leaning of the tradition of American pragmatism would certainly point out that universities have always been a response to a social demand of some sort, whether the training of lawyers or clergy, or to knowledge production in the sciences, or the special place and time for students to participate in a disengaged conversation of humanistic learning. Our current historical situation suggests that there is a new social demand, and we must respond in some way to such a demand. The organism of the university must adapt to its environment, or it will not be fit for survival.

Dewey spent his career attempting to show the wrong-headedness of dichotomies of all sorts—theory and practice, mind and body, fact and value, the school and society. The university and society are not distinct hermetically sealed entities, but are marked by continuous, fluid interactions. Asking how the college of liberal arts can work in an interactive way with the communities which surround

it, including the STEM community and an environment needing certain skills in various vocations, is a very live option for the pragmatist archetype. However, we need not merely prepare students for a fixed social end, to serve their community in a preconceived way, but rather to enable them to reconstruct imaginatively their communities and social institutions, proposing new ends and purposes. Those Kimball denigrated as tenured radicals perhaps merely desire to habituate students into the skill of imaginative reconstruction, thinking of ways to remake the world anew instead of churning out vocationally prepared victims of the world's present ills.

We need to balance responsiveness to novel social demands with resistance to the gesture that we churn out graduates prepared to fill a role in the status quo society. In order to do that, we must point out the values that underlie the calls for the humanities to defend themselves. The utility we are asked to defend is often equated with impact and value, but such an equation is already a premise founded on a particular set of values, largely those of economic growth and return on investment. The discourse of utility is interrelated with the discourse of "employability."⁴² The pragmatist is open to the role of contemporary social needs informing the study of liberal arts, but part of the study of liberal arts is the imaginative reconstruction of values, including the equation of the value of liberal learning with its marketability on the most proximate job market.

Another relevant binary to the pragmatist paradigm is that of the student and the curriculum. Dewey thought we needed to find the excluded middle between a curriculum that succumbed to the spontaneity of present student interests and one that imposed a rigid, teacher-centered curriculum upon the student. For Dewey, the student brings with her the experiences and needs from which the curriculum must emerge. In *The Child and Curriculum*, Dewey argued that the methods of education focusing on the curriculum emphasized the rational, organized, expansive, and disciplined aspects of learning, while those focusing on the student emphasized the emotional, holistic, narrow, and self-interested aspects of learning.⁴³ Dewey's goal in these lectures was to show that the dichotomy was flawed from the start. Rather, the curriculum should be seen as a natural outcome of student interests and needs. We must begin with student interests, as the active precedes the passive in the student's learning, but those interests contain the problems whose reasoned, disciplined, and organized inquiry must help her resolve.

Dewey maintained that the process of inquiries of a practical sort is continuous with those described as intellectual. However, while some practical inquiries endeavor only to return us to a state of habitual activity, others, such as those in education, attempt to foster further inquiry. Dewey summed this up by stating that "the aim of education is to enable individuals to continue their education—or that the object and reward of learning is continued capacity for growth."⁴⁴ The premise that liberal education should be job training makes the mistake of supposing that education ends when school ends. It forgets that graduation is a commencement,

and that a genuinely liberal education will enable the student not to fulfill one social need but to continue her growth and to adjust to her ever-evolving social situation.⁴⁵ One of the criteria Dewey used to identify a good aim in education was that the aim must represent a freeing of activities. And Dewey thought that “the only freedom of enduring importance is freedom of intelligence.”⁴⁶ Education must end in “a freedom which is power: power to frame purposes, to judge wisely, to evaluate desires by the consequences which will result from acting upon them; power to select and order means to carry chosen ends into operation.”⁴⁷ Framing purposes and directing actions by weighing the worth of their consequences are stages in the process of inquiry, which education must embody.

However, given that student interests and needs must provide the tools of the curriculum to some extent, and given that many students will be interested in and are in college—not for some romantic conversation with the history of humanity, but because they will *need* a job—how can we, as liberal arts educators, respond appropriately to those demands? Perhaps these needs could serve as constant denotative reference points in our teaching of skills: that cover letters and personal statements need to be well-written, or that successful personal statements require the reflection we value in liberal education. For instance, a student who has read Immanuel Kant understands the complexity behind the question “Who am I?” upon which she must reflect in a personal statement to a professional or graduate program. Access to oneself is, after Kant, indirect. Knowing this, at least, might give a student cause to proceed reflectively and critically, resisting the easy, simple, or uncritical answers and instead disclosing the nature of the question itself in her attempt to answer it. I think we need to inquire how to respond, not merely to a real or perceived external pressure, but to real and present student demands, to deliver on the need to help students articulate their liberal arts skill set while valuing their educational experiences.

PRESENTIST RESPONSES

It is tempting to use Booker T. Washington as the archetypal apologist for vocational training and as representative of a presentist response to these external pressures. Washington advocated educating African American students in skilled labor at the Tuskegee Institute, and in so doing, represented, to some, acquiescence to present conditions of racial disenfranchisement and social segregation. Like our students who need jobs when they graduate, and unlike DuBois, Washington had to make a payroll, and this influenced his thinking to some degree. However, Bill Lawson actually characterizes Washington’s response as pragmatist, not presentist. He wrote, “People need to view Washington as a pragmatist, in the John Dewey sense of pragmatism, when you’re really working to solve a significant problem.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, I doubt many liberal arts educators have anything against vocational education. Many of us would be advocates of increased funding to vo-tech schools, especially the types of educational programs that can be nimble enough to evolve quickly with changing social demands.

But the question for us is how much liberal arts education, however conceived and articulated by us as its practitioners, should adjust to external pressures? Therefore, the archetypal presentist response for our purposes is the *cyber security service* model. We ask, where is there a need, and where is their grant money to be had? We then, as history professors, for instance, pause from archival research, our attempts to disclose the world historical importance of the French Revolution, or the pervasiveness of a Cartesian worldview, and find that thing in our discipline that could possibly address this pressing need for cyber security and write the grant our administrative overlords wanted in the first place. Despite the extreme archetype at this end of the spectrum, writing grants in areas of cyber security is a real, not just a straw, option for liberal arts educators. And, I think, despite the extremes at the edges of my spectrum, each of these four archetypal responses has its merits.

CONCLUSION

The question at the heart of my inquiry is: *What utility is there in a utilitarian response to these real or perceived threats to liberal learning in higher education?* The pragmatist and presentist responses are certainly more utilitarian. The reactionary and conservative responses are much less interested in demonstrating use-value and more secure in pressing on with the tasks of curating the great works of the traditional canon or carving out a space and an interval for students to disengage, saunter, and self-reflect in the pure play of musement. But the reactionary responses of Kimball, Strauss, and Scruton, in their fetishizing of the canon, are actually ahistorical in that they fail to see that the canon has always been contested and has always evolved, that universities have come in and out of fashion as the place where knowledge production takes place. By insisting that questions of race, gender, and poverty are too small to investigate, and by refusing to engage some pervasive cultural practices intellectually, Kimball's model actually promotes the professionalism of which he is so critical. It is a professional risk to inquire into pornography and professionally safe to till the soil of the greats. Adding to the tomes of Plato scholarship seems more careerist than risking a publication in *Porn Studies*. The liberal mind is an open mind, and I think Strauss, in his fear of the vulgarity of mass culture, and Scruton, in his attacks on the "studies," have blocked the path of inquiry that liberal education seeks to open.

Oakeshott's model seems much more attractive in several regards. First, it does not demand canonical rigidity in that it refuses to suppose that any particular articulation of the recurrent, reflective questions asked by the liberal arts could suffice as universal. As our social and historical particularities, each asks perennial questions from distinctive contexts and in novel and unique ways. Second, the model of conversation, rather than training, is a refusal to reduce practice to technique. By following the Socratic archetype of dialogical philosophical inquiry, it values the variability inherent in conversational approaches to reflective learning, much as Thoreau's sauntering and Peirce's musement involve the developmental teleology at

work in each. The conservative, as Oakeshott argues in his political writings, values pluralism in private life and in educational pursuits. While the rationalist politician favors a teleocratic regime and operates with a utopian politics of faith, the conservative favors a nomocratic regime and operates with skepticism toward utopian and teleocratic blueprints for politics. The same holds for a conservative philosophy of education. The standardized test, the rubric, and predetermined student learning outcomes treat the by-products of liberal learning as fixed goals to be applied universally as preconceived purposes. Ever-shifting social demands cannot provide the blueprint for such a rationalist model of education any more than Kimball's rigid canon should.

However, Dewey's pragmatist model adds to, without overturning, Oakeshott's response *qua* nonresponse. First, Dewey reminds us that establishing the problem is a significant step in inquiry. We need to do the empirical work of identifying the problem before we rush to solve the problem lurking in any hidden premises. Second, Dewey emphasizes the transactive relationship between the university and the society, such that whatever disengaged interval the place of liberal learning represents, it does not represent an interval in a vacuum. Both the students and the faculty come to the place of learning from unique, involved situations and bring with them the qualities, interests, and problems such situations give rise to. The disengaged, reflective learning that takes place also returns denotatively to the social situations outside the school. Moreover, the meaning and value of such reflections are found in the consequences of their social functions, regardless of whether or not the value can be quantitatively measured. Even if the value was measured accurately, the pragmatist, *qua* conservative, would not suppose that it should be universalized and imported to all liberal arts education without special attention to the unique qualities of each involved situation of learning. The increase in responsiveness by the pragmatist is not a turn to rationalist education, which promotes the teleocratic and utopian model that Oakeshott resisted. Rather, the responsiveness is to student interests and needs, which are the product of their transactive relationship to their social environments, *and* a response to the social problems which in part constitute the situatedness of the place of learning. The present job needs of a given epoch may even signal a problem demanding inquiries involving the liberal arts rather than providing the liberal arts with a fixed goal to be achieved instrumentally and unreflectively. The intellectual freedom Dewey promoted emphasized the framing of purposes, not the molding of oneself as means to achieve fixed ends.

A conservative pragmatist response resists the canonical rigidity of the reactionary, responds to the ever-evolving social demands and practices that help frame the perennial questions of liberal learning, but values the poetry of conversation and the disengagement demanded by such a conversation, even if social problems or student interests initiate the reflective inquiry. Fusing the conservative and pragmatist responses highlights the perennial and the evolutionary, the universal and the particular, the end in itself and the instrumental in liberal arts education.

NOTES

1. Andy Delbanco, "A New Day for Intellectuals," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 13, 2009, <http://www.chronicle.com/article/A-New-Day-for-Intellectuals/21359>
2. See Wilson Peden, "The Myth of the Unemployed Humanities Major," *The LEAP Challenge Blog*, November 11, 2015, <http://www.aacu.org/leap/liberal-education-nation-blog/myth-unemployed-humanities-major>; Physics Central, "Best Majors for GRE Scores in 2013: Philosophy Dominates," *Buzz Blog*, July 29, 2013, <http://www.physicscentral.com/buzz/blog/index.cfm?postid=5112019841346388353>; Bouree Lam, "The Earning Power of Philosophy Majors," *The Atlantic*, September 3, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2015/09/philosophy-majors-out-earn-other-humanities/403555/>; Debra Cassens Weiss, "Physics, Math Majors Get Top LSAT Scores; Poli Sci Majors Are Average," *ABA Journal*, September 1, 2009, http://www.abajournal.com/news/article/physics_math_majors_get_top_lsats_scores_poli_sci_majors_are_average/
3. Eleonora Belfiore and Anna Rosser Upchurch, eds., *Humanities in the Twenty-First Century* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 26.
4. Roger Kimball, "The Tortoise and the Hare Reconsidered," *Michael Oakeshott Association* (Keynote Address, Colorado Springs, CO, September 28, 2013).
5. See Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals* (New York: Harper Row, 1990). I grant that Kimball's s is a nonstandard use of the word "taboo."
6. Leo Strauss, "What is Liberal Education?" *Academic Questions* 17, no. 1 (2003): 31–36, esp. 36.
7. Roger Kimball, interview by Carl E. Olson, *Ignatius Insight*, n.d., http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2005/rkimball_intrvw_aug05.asp
8. Roger Scruton, "Culture Matters," Lecture given at the symposium on "The Importance of Culture," organized by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI), Belmont Abbey College, Belmont, NC, October 15, 2004.
9. See G. A. Cohen, *Finding Oneself in the Other* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 108.
10. Terry Eagleton, *Figures of Dissent: Critical Essays on Fish, Spivak, Žižek, and Others* (London: Verso, 2003), 158–59.
11. Belfiore and Upchurch, *Humanities in the Twenty-First Century*, 26.
12. See Roger Kimball, *The Rape of the Masters: How Political Correctness Sabotages Art* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2004). Kimball laments on the drift in art history away from teaching the "aesthetic substance of art" to the subsumption of aesthetic substance to theory and politics.
13. Strauss, "What is Liberal Education?" 31–32.
14. *Ibid.*, 32.
15. *Ibid.*, 32, 36.
16. *Ibid.*, 35.
17. *Ibid.*, 36.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism* (South Bend: St. Augustine Press, 2002), 135.
20. *Ibid.*
21. For a critique of the call to relevance in education, see Seth Vannatta, "The Logic of Relevance in Independent School Education: A Pragmatic Critique," *Contemporary Pragmatism* 10, no. 1 (June 2013): 113–30.

22. Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism*, 135–36.
23. *Ibid.*, 137.
24. *Ibid.*, 136.
25. Michael Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, ed. Timothy Fuller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), viii.
26. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, 9.
27. *Ibid.* And I argue that the reactionary retreat to canonical disciplinarity falls into this trap of uniformity as well.
28. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, 16.
29. Jan Parker, *Humanities in the Twenty First Century*, 54.
30. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, 27–28.
31. Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education* (New York: Free Press, 1929), 13.
32. *Ibid.*, 14.
33. Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, xvi.
34. W. E. B. DuBois, “The Talented Tenth,” in *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative Negroes of To-day* (New York: James Pott and Company, 1903), 33–34.
35. Michael Bérubé, “The Futility of the Humanities,” in *Humanities in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Eleonora Belfiore and Anna Rosser Upchurch (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 66–76, esp. 72.
36. Michael Oakeshott, “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1962), 197–247.
37. Michael Raposa, “Pragmatism and the Spirit of the Liberal Arts,” *The Pluralist* 10, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 64–79, esp. 65.
38. *Ibid.*, 66.
39. *Ibid.*, 67.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Alasdair MacIntyre, “The End of Education: The Fragmentation of the American University,” *Commonweal: A Review of Religion, Politics, and Culture* CXXXIII, no. 18 (October 2006): 4.
42. Belfiore and Rosser, *Humanities in the Twenty First Century*, 31–32.
43. Dewey, *MW* 2: 275.
44. Dewey, *MW* 9: 107.
45. Susan Ashley, a history professor at Colorado College of thirty years, recently remarked that students educated in the liberal arts have a remarkable ability to switch careers. Face-to-Face Correspondence.
46. Dewey, *LW* 13: 39.
47. Dewey, *LW* 13: 41.
48. Bill E. Lawson, in *Uncle Tom or New Negro? African Americans Reflect on Booker T. Washington and Up From Slavery 100 Years Later*, ed. Rebecca Carroll (New York: Harlem Moon, 2006), 9.

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