

COLLOQUY

A CONVERSATION WITH GUTENBERG COLLEGE



Winter 2023

2 Humbly Offered Hazards
of Historical Study
-by Gil Greco

4 Great-Book Review
-by Eliot Grasso

6 ChatGPT
-by Chris Swanson

On the Cover...

The cover photo of the 19th Street sidewalk that runs along the south side of Gutenberg College was taken in February 2003 by Gutenberg senior (now Gutenberg tutor) Brian Julian. He took the photo below in January 2023. It shows the changes twenty years later, with some trees gone and others grown up.



Congratulations!

At the Junior Tea each fall, Gutenberg honors the students who successfully complete all their two-year exams at the end of their sophomore year and awards them a Greek New Testament. This year, students took learning Greek to heart and dressed in togas! Congratulations to James Hall, Isabelle Steen, Emily Grose, and Emma Hollmann.



Humbly Offered Hazards of Historical Study

Gil Greco

At the end of their sophomore year, Gutenberg students must take an oral, comprehensive exam on Western Civilization as part of their “two-year” exams. Of all the two-year exams, the Western Civ exam changes the most in its content from student to student (although the format is the same for everyone) because it is designed to find the scope of each student’s understanding of history. Each student sits down with a panel of tutors who take turns asking the student questions. Sometimes these questions are easy for the student to answer; sometimes they are designed to show the student his or her weaknesses.

At the end of *my* Western Civ exam, for example, one tutor told me that I was particularly weak at understanding history. He was right: while I had felt confident when talking about philosophers and their thoughts, I wasn’t sure how to connect the situations and events of the past with each other. I took it as a clear indication of what I needed to work on. But in the decade since I graduated, I have realized that learning history isn’t exactly the same sort of work as understanding philosophers, and I’d like to share some of what I have learned in the hope that it will help you further your own study of history.

The simplest way I can explain the realization I have had in my post-Gutenberg years is that I did not understand how I related to history. For quite a while after I graduated, I held what I think is a very common assumption in our culture about how history works: I believed that the way to be sure you were understanding history accurately was to read historians who focused on “just the facts.” I believed there were “honest” historians, who were willing to look at “*all* the facts,” and “dishonest” historians, who were not willing to do so. Unfortunately, the study of history is more complicated than this picture assumes, and trying to study under these false premises led to misunderstandings I had to unlearn. Since these are separate issues, I will start by explaining why the study of history is more complicated than looking at “just the facts,” and then I will discuss some common problems not understanding that complication creates.

How Studying History Is Complicated

It’s important to understand that though I love books and think my own continued education will always be a part of my life, I am not a specialist. Some Gutenberg graduates have gone on to get doctorate degrees in various fields related to the sorts of things they learned at Gutenberg (philosophy, literature, history, etc.). I am not speaking for those people. Instead, I am what I will call a “generalist lay scholar.” I think most Gutenberg students who don’t go on to higher degrees end up being “generalist lay scholars.” That doesn’t mean they don’t pursue more specialized interests; it just means that what they study is bound by the limitations of being a lay person. In many cases, this means they don’t have privileges at research libraries or special collections, and they can’t afford to have as comprehensive a library of scholarly texts as specialists who are afforded those resources by their institutions. They might subscribe to a scholarly publication or two,

but not *all* of them. They might shell out \$60 for a recent monograph by a university press, maybe quite often, but they can't afford to buy everything of note in a particular field. Being a "generalist lay scholar" means, particularly for history, that what I have access to is more limited than studying philosophy or literature.

If I want to study Polanyi's view of science or the Apostle Paul's teaching in 1 Timothy, all I have to do is take the relevant book off the shelf, read it, and apply my own interpretive abilities to the project of understanding the author.¹ If I want to know about daily life in ancient Rome, on the other hand, I'm dependent on the work of other people. Probably the most informative thing in my personal library at the moment is my second-grade son's book on ancient Rome. That book traces its claims to some mixture of popularly received knowledge and, hopefully, the work of professional historians. It may be reliable, or it may not be.

Here's what I want to emphasize: I am not the one interacting with the pottery shards, bits of cloth, and the ancient Roman equivalent of tax returns from which we derive the picture of how ancient Romans lived their daily lives. I am beholden to the work of professional historians and researchers who have had to make judgments about what the artifacts of a given time period meant. And, in general, I am even a further layer removed from making these judgments because I am often not hearing from the profes-

The simplest way I can explain the realization I have had in my post-Gutenberg years is that I did not understand how I related to history.

sional historians themselves but rather from lay historians, popular historians, or people who write textbooks using the researchers' work. These second-layer interpreters take the professionals' work and make it available to a more popular audience. Over time, a consensus view of "the facts" is built up by all of these different layers of judgment.

If I read Polanyi or Paul, I have to make judgments as I'm interpreting what they are saying. When I read history writing, on the other hand, there is a second level of interpretation between me and the historical events. Since the information I receive about history is second- or third-hand, I have to do the further work of assessing whether the interpretation that led to the current work I'm reading is reasonable. As a generalist lay scholar, I don't have access to the evidence from the past (those pottery shards and tax returns), so I have to rely on my ability to assess how trustworthy the interpreters (if possible, including the professional historians) are.

I want to pause for a moment to acknowledge that at some level I have to trust somebody somewhere. Sometimes generalist scholars who reject consensus views about the subjects they have studied in depth will say silly things about the untrustworthiness of specialist institutions in general. This could seem plausible because they have read the work of specialists and sometimes those specialists are wrong, and sometimes those generalist scholars genuinely understand enough about the topic to tell that those specialists are wrong. Specialist institutions have a lot of financial and political resources that are

(Continued on page 4)

¹ If the work is translated from another language, I might look up the tricky bits of the text in the original language if I know it, or I might look at a few translations (where available) if I don't. As a generalist, I do have to know enough about the books I read in translation to know when there's a slant to a translation I'm using, but I am reliant on someone else interpreting the work for me. As we shall see, this is not all that different from what I do when I study history.



COLLOQUY

A CONVERSATION WITH GUTENBERG COLLEGE

WINTER 2023 • VOLUME 5, NUMBER 2

Editor Robby Julian

Colloquy team Eliot Grasso, Brian Julian, Chris Swanson

Cover Photo Brian Julian (Class of 2003)

Other Photography Erin Greco (Class of 2010), Robby Julian, Donovan Snider (Class of 2023), Elizabeth Steeb (Class of 2009)

Layout Robby Julian

Proofreaders Bob Blanchard, Karen Peters (Class of 2012), Walter Steeb (Class of 2009)

Colloquy [kol-uh-kwee] is published quarterly by Gutenberg College.



Gutenberg College offers an outstanding four-year liberal arts education in the Great Books tradition in an environment respectful of biblical Christianity.

President Chris Swanson, Ph.D.

Vice President Eliot Grasso, Ph.D.

Academic Dean Thomas (Charley) Dewberry, Ph.D.

Website gutenberg.edu

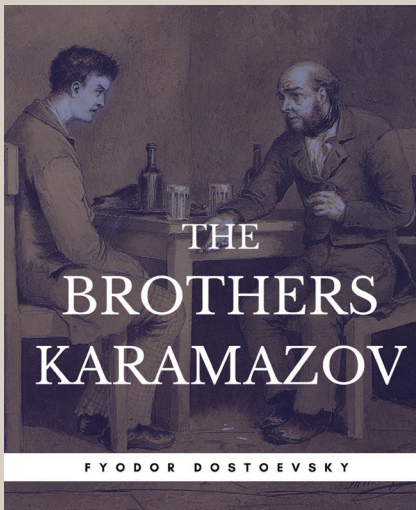
© 2023 Gutenberg College, Inc.

Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the following credit line is used: Reprinted by permission from **Colloquy**, a publication of Gutenberg College, gutenberg.edu.

Subscription free upon request.

Visit gutenberg.edu/colloquy to subscribe.

Gutenberg is supported primarily through individual, tax-exempt contributions.



Great-Book Review by Eliot Grasso, Ph.D.

Immediately following the death of his own young son, Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky embarked on his final novel: *The Brothers Karamazov*. The story's action is motivated by inheritance money that the wealthy, womanizing father (Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov) withholds from his eldest son, Mitya. Subsequently, Fyodor Pavlovich is murdered by an unlikely assassin.

Between the narrative pillars of the homicide and the ensuing courtroom drama is a profound elaboration of existential themes presented through the three Karamazov brothers: Alyosha, Ivan, and Mitya. Into the mind and mouth of Alyosha, Dostoevsky places questions like “What does it mean to believe?” and “How should a Christian live in a corrupt and fallen world?” From the mouth of rational skeptic Ivan, the reader encounters questions such as “Is the church doing what it says it's doing?” and “How can God allow suffering if He is truly good?” The sensualist brother Mitya—accused of his father's murder—wrestles with the tension between faith and temptation.

At the core of the novel is an exploration of the words of Jesus in John 12:24: “Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.” What must die in each of us before we can produce good fruit is a question that Dostoevsky takes seriously.

Humbly Offered Hazards of Historical Study Continued from page 3

not available to the generalist, and I assume concentrating those resources means there are fewer specialists in general. Furthermore, because those financial and political resources are desirable for other reasons than their ability to help specialists further human knowledge, they can have a corrupting influence on the people who end up in specialist positions. But while it can be tempting to say that specialization should be abolished so that generalism can thrive, that sentiment is self-defeating. Just because specialist institutions are corruptible doesn't mean every specialist institution is corrupted. It does mean that as a generalist reliant on those specialist institutions, I need to be discerning about who can be trusted.

Problems that Can Arise

The layers of interpretation and the distance between us and historical events make the work of understanding history very complex. If I fail to see that but proceed with the belief that understanding history can be simple, then I can unwittingly get into trouble. For example, if I operate under the belief that “honest historians” are the ones willing to look at “all the facts,” then I may become susceptible to a form of spurious history writing that is focused on identity rather than truth. If I am not aware that I am trusting someone's interpretation of the facts, then I will believe that “the facts” are what is really the “consensus” of that second level of interpretation—which may be reliable or not. One of the ironies of the generalist who doesn't like specialist institutions is that he will often trust a second level of interpretation more readily than he will trust the people who have the resources to actually study evidence from the past. As we've seen, those specialists are corruptible (though not necessarily corrupted), but the responsible generalist ought to practice discernment of the second level of interpretation as well as the first.

When I referred above to “a form of spurious history writing that is focused on identity rather than truth,” I mean that the history is focused on identifying the author—and probably the author's readers—with an *idealized* past (and often with an idealized group from that past). The flavor of “identitarian” history I was susceptible to I will call “Manichean” history, which is largely an optimistic identification of the historian's audience with the “good guys”—as opposed to the “bad guys”—of the past. Another flavor of “identitarian” history I have read plenty of—but have never been as impressed by—is what I will call “cynical” history. This flavor of history wants to condemn most events and persons of history because they do not live up to a set of standards that the historian and his audience share.


The “Manichean” historian is interested in identifying himself and his audience with the “good guys” of the past—maybe Socrates and Plato as paragons of the wisdom of Greek antiquity, heroic Romans like Marcus Aurelius, or perhaps the Founding Fathers of the United States. What is important to the Manichean is that these figures of the past realized some sort of ideal that typifies how things should be now but aren't. The Manichean historian and his audience are cast as the inheritors and re-establishers of a lost historical legacy. The trouble is this: “the ideal” that this historical legacy is supposed to represent is one already embraced by the historian and his audience—but not necessarily by the historical figure.

The “cynical” historian, on the other hand, wants to show that no one has ever lived up to the cynic's moral standards. Surprisingly, this actually makes cynical history just a more concentrated form of a Manichean history. To read a cynical history is to read about almost nothing but the shortcomings, vices, and sins of *every* group. Implicit in this sort of history, however, is the cynic's view that he is beyond the petty squabbles of all these different groups. A cynic still believes in “good guys,” but he believes that these good guys can only offer judgment in cynical histories. Cynical scholarship appeals to those wanting moral superiority.

I am sure that there are other kinds of identitarian histories, but the Manichean and the cynical are the most common I have observed. From these two, we can see how the study of history can become mired in ideological grievance, further complicating the

study of history. If I believe—based on “just the facts”—that those in my group are the inheritors of the legacy of the good guys of the past and then someone else believes—also purportedly based on “just the facts”—that everyone (including my group and my “good guys”)—is rotten, then there will be trouble forming a consensus about what “the facts” are at this remove from history. Since the identitarian historians and their readers are ultimately interested in preserving their supposed inherited identity or their own sense of moral superiority, they will not refer their issues to further investigation by specialists in a position to look at the evidence.² As such, if consensus will be formed, it will be formed factionally, so that there are now two sets of “facts” that are, in fact, two different ways of doing secondary interpretation.

If I am going to be a student of history who values the truth rather than a particular ideology, I have to become familiar enough with these sorts of disputes so that I can at least understand where the secondary interpreters I am reading are coming from. If I am aware that when I read a work of popular history or a textbook, I am not just “reading the facts,” then I am in a much better position to be discerning about what the truth of the matter is.

In the end, deciding what history means is part of the Great Conversation, and if I have the tools to enter into that wonderful dialogue in general, then I have the tools to do it in the little aside called “History.” I just need to listen patiently. There’s still a lot I don’t know to follow all the ins and outs of the Conversation, but realizing these obstacles and seeking to approach my study with humility, I hope I have grown since my sophomore exam all those years ago. If you’re at all interested in the “history” corner of the Conversation, I hope what I’ve said here will help you as you’re listening, too. 

² On the one hand, this may be just as well for the corruptible specialist, since if he were consulted he might either already have sympathy for one side of the argument or decide to profit by becoming mercenary. On the other hand, since the consensus is not dealing with the same issues that an honest specialist is dealing with, it may not be worth the specialist’s time to address the argument, especially considering how intransigent the parties might be. Remarkably, however, sometimes honest specialists will try to practice more popular history to educate everyone involved. They do care about truth, after all.

Gil Greco graduated from Gutenberg College in 2012. He was chair of Literary Studies at Faith Christian Academy in Kansas City, Missouri, and now teaches integrated humanities to middle and high school students through Kepler Education’s online platform. Gil is the host of “The Gutenberg Podcast,” and he and his wife, Erin, are currently the Residence Program Managers at Gutenberg College, where they live with their three sons.



Scholarships

Gutenberg College has two special scholarships for outstanding students. Both are donor supported and recognize founders of the College.

The **David W. Crabtree Scholarship** provides \$1000 per year to a student who takes seriously the issues raised, thinks about them, and allows the truth to change the way he or she thinks about life and how to live.



The **Ron Julian Memorial Scholarship** provides \$1000 per year to a student who best exemplifies Ron’s passion, character, and desire to pursue biblical truth.



To support these scholarships, go to: gutenberg.edu/give.

Listen to Gutenberg’s New Podcast!

“I cannot recommend ‘The Gutenberg Podcast’ enough. Gil does a great job of interacting with Gutenberg tutors on Western Civilization topics and literature that they are walking through with the freshmen and sophomores. The conversations are a blend of background information and the natural outgrowth of dialogue between the participants. As one who has been reclaiming her own education, I have found the podcast highly informative.”

—Pam Lee, Enrollment Director





Buckle your seat belts. The newest computer technology, Artificial Intelligence or AI, has hit the mainstream. In November, a company called OpenIO launched a website application called ChatGPT (Generative Pre-trained Transformer). This program generates conversational responses to all sorts of inquiries and is quite popular. When I went to the website, ChatGPT displayed a cute poem (written by ChatGPT) about why I couldn't use the website because it was already at capacity.

What does ChatGPT do? It can write music, poems, student essays, and articles, analyze computer code, and play simple games. And when taking tests, ChatGPT is more likely to provide better answers than the average test taker.

How does it work? ChatGPT depends on AI technology, which is extremely good at finding acceptable patterns in various situations by “learning” what patterns are good and what patterns are bad. To do this, programmers input a question or challenge, like “What move should I make in this game of chess?” The AI then produces a command, like “Move a particular pawn one square ahead.” The output is then graded as better or worse by comparing that move to similar moves of good chess players. Depending on the grade, the AI program (misleadingly called a “neural network”) is tweaked. When this same process is repeated—for example, by having the program play chess millions of times—then it “learns” successful patterns or moves.


ChatGPT is a complex form of AI that uses regular language questions about any topic as the input, not just chess questions. During the training phase, the program receives a question and produces a written answer. It compares that answer to other writings that it can access and receives some human editorial corrections. It then grades itself according to those standards of writing and modifies its neural network. Rinse and repeat. A gazillion times. For example, suppose you need a *New York Times* editorial on ChatGPT. The program has already trained on the *New York Times* editorial archive and incorporated examples of acceptable patterns. It has learned the stylistic guidelines for *New York Times* editorials. It has also learned about ChatGPT by comparing the sentences it produced in training with other sentences where “ChatGPT” has been used in print. Its neural network is optimized to accept the input parameters and spit out the article.

How well does it work? The great strength of all AI is also its weakness. It finds patterns within the set of “acceptable” results that are provided. However, the results it learns from are always limited. It has no ability to make connections to a much broader context. In other words, it has no real understanding. For instance, an AI self-driving car can “recognize” a stop sign in many situations since it has been given lots of stop sign images to process. However, if a tree branch partially blocks the sign (a sim-

ple problem for a human driver), the AI system can't recognize the stop sign since it has not had a chance to “learn” about that situation.

Similarly, ChatGPT cannot go much beyond the examples it has to work with because the program has no real understanding or judgment. If you tell it to write a *New York Times* editorial about St. Augustine's social media account, it will create an article on the subject. On the other hand, if the question is more reasonable and there were ample resources available on the topic during training, ChatGPT does a reasonable job creating essays and reports. It makes report writing easier.

In one sense, this is nothing new. Technology has always aimed at accomplishing our tasks more efficiently. Roads, microwave ovens, manufacturing machines, phones, and word processing programs all make life “easier.” However, each new technological advance changes the way we go about living and reframes our relationship to the world around us. With the invention of backhoes and other such devices, many more workers spend their days sitting in front of a screen instead of exercising their bodies. Medical technology hides the reality of death from our daily lives. Phones and TV addict us to entertainment.

ChatGPT, like other technologies, enhances or replaces tasks we do, similar to the way that a backhoe replaces the person with a shovel. But it also changes us. It creates new problems and new modes of interacting with each other and the world. Students can use ChatGPT instead of learning to write and organize their thoughts. Our society may slowly diminish its creative skills by taking computer shortcuts. Easy answers that “look good” may exacerbate our culture's interest in appearance over truth. Technology changes us. It may make things easier, but it does not always make things better. 

Chris Swanson is the president and a tutor at Gutenberg College where he teaches science and leads discussions in *Microexegesis*, *Western Civilization*, and the *Great Conversation*. He holds a Ph.D. in Physics from the University of Oregon.

2023 Education Conference: Faith and Learning

August 11 & 12

Information & Registration: gutenberg.edu/edcon

In the last few centuries, the intellectual world has slowly but steadily abandoned Christianity, offering alternate secular perspectives to life's most important questions. As a result, Christian educators have become suspicious of "academia" and often seek to protect children from secular learning. In this conference, we will explore the dual goals of pursuing learning and promoting faith. How do we foster faith, encourage an interest in truth, model confidence and humility, and avoid rebellion—all while embedded in a hostile world? Because truth is faith's greatest ally, we can embrace open and honest inquiry, trusting God to turn hearts to Him.



Susan Wise Bauer
Well-Trained Mind
Academy



Wes Callihan
Author & Teacher



Andrea Lipinski
CiRCE Institute



Eliot Grasso
Vice President & Tutor
Gutenberg College



Chris Swanson
President & Tutor
Gutenberg College

2023 Summer Institute: God is Alive

July 20-22

Information & Registration: gutenberg.edu/si

Over a century ago, Friedrich Nietzsche famously declared that God is dead. He observed that Western culture no longer accepted the idea of God, and he noted that its values and practices would eventually reflect this. We now live in a world that conforms in many ways to his prediction.

But as Christians we know—even if the culture doesn't reflect it—that God is very much alive. What difference, then, should this make in the way we think and act? At Gutenberg's 2023 Summer Institute, we will examine several aspects of our world and our lives—science, ethics, psychology, community—and we will consider the ways a belief in God should impact our thinking about them. Why are some differences we see between Christians and non-Christians so pronounced? In what ways might we be absorbing views that implicitly reject God? How can we be encouraged by recognizing God's relevance to every area of our lives? Join us July 20-22 for book discussions, talks from Gutenberg tutors, good food, and great conversations.



COLLOQUY WINTER 2023



1883 University Street
Eugene, OR 97403

541.683.5141 | office@gutenberg.edu
gutenberg.edu

Return Service Requested

NONPROFIT ORG
US POSTAGE
PAID
EUGENE, OREGON
PERMIT NO. 594

March 1 Deadlines:

ADMISSION for Fall 2023 (Regular Decision)
gutenberg.edu/admissions

RESIDENCE PROGRAM for Fall Housing
gutenberg.edu/rp

Join the Conversation!

PREVIEW DAYS

gutenberg.edu/preview

April 14-15

Gutenberg College is a place for students who want to think deeply, learn in community, and grow in faith and character. At Preview Days, Gutenberg opens its doors to high school students and transfer students who are considering Gutenberg's bachelor's degree program in liberal arts.

You will meet tutors who have devoted their lives to learning and helping others learn, discuss works by great thinkers, fellowship with a community of caring people who work together in pursuit of goodness, and learn how you can become a Gutenberg student. Join us at Preview Days to discover if Gutenberg is the college for you!

YOUNG PHILOSOPHERS DISCUSS

POP CULTURE

MARCH 2
2023

FREE WILL

IN MARVEL'S LOKI

MAY 11
2023

LOVE

IN POP MUSIC

An online discussion for high school students:
gutenberg.edu/yp