

Some thoughts on life before retirement

Blacksburg Books, March 8, 2025

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As the son of a truck mechanic and a nurse, an intellectual life was not on my radar growing up.

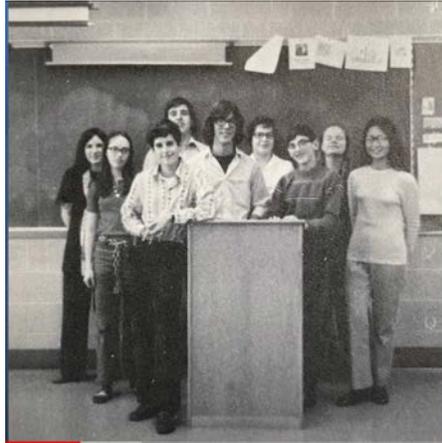


My parents recalled that I wanted to run a gas station “over the hill and around the corner”. As it happens, my grandfather ran a gas station in the 1940s!



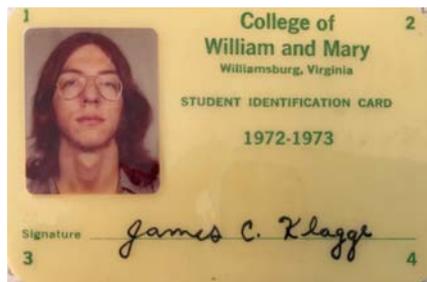
When I was a little older, knowing that my father was a mechanic, it somehow occurred to me that I should be a mechanical *engineer*. But the mechanic genes never really took hold in me. (Though I did pump gas for the night shift on the Ohio Turnpike the summer after my sophomore year of college.)

In 8th grade I was introduced, by an English teacher, to policy debating, and so in high school I joined the debate team.



This was a fortunate and consequential choice, as it put me in close contact with Bob, Mike and Paul—three people who were smart and interesting, and who did model for me the sort of intellectual person I might become. The debate team took up much of my time, and led me to suppose I should become a lawyer.

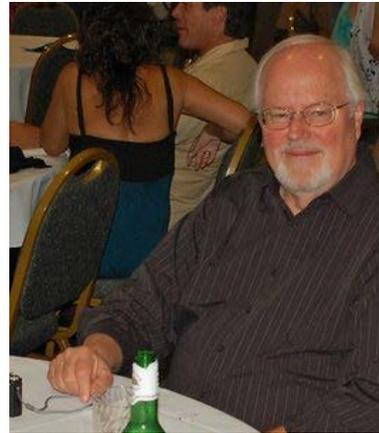
When I looked for a college, a good debate team was my leading consideration. That and the desire to move far from home—not rejecting home, but seeking an adventure. My parents urged me not to go *too* far away, and said I should stay within 500 miles. Drawing a circle with radius 500 miles around Cleveland Ohio left Williamsburg just 5 miles outside the line. But since my parents loved Colonial Williamsburg, the College of William and Mary turned out to be OK.



This was a lucky choice in that it had a fine Philosophy Department, about which I had no prior inkling. I loved the year-long History of Philosophy survey I took as a freshman. And when it came time to register for classes the next year, the only Philosophy class with space left was a somewhat advanced course called “Contemporary Philosophy” where I read Bertrand Russell’s “Philosophy of Logical Atomism” lectures under the tutelage of Jesse Bohl.



He inspired me to want to be a professor, and my dreams of law turned to philosophy. I loved the Debate team and my coach Pat Micken

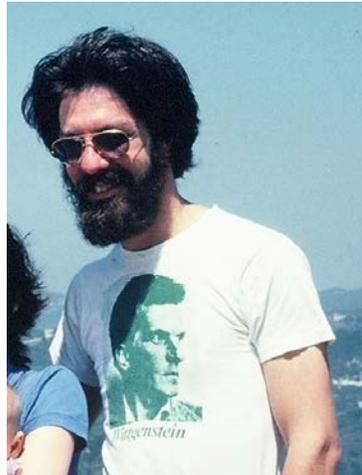


but debate took up too much of my time. So I soon decided that for the sake of my GPA and my future I should focus on my classes. But the debate coach and my philosophy professor had done me the favor of taking me seriously and spending real time with me. That meant a lot. Perhaps that only really happens at a small liberal arts college like William and Mary, but it stuck with me, and I have tried to engage with my students in what ways I could ever since.

When applying to grad school in the mid-1970's, I was warned that job prospects would be tough—but of course it was nothing like it is now! While rejected by Harvard and Princeton, I was happy to be accepted by UCLA, UC Berkeley and Pitt. My hippy friends thought I was crazy to turn down Berkeley for LA, but that turned out to be a good choice. And it would be another adventure, as I had never been to California. As a college graduation present my parents passed on to me our family van, so off I went.



At UCLA I was attracted by the likes of David Kaplan, Alonzo Church, Tyler Burge, Philippa Foot and Rogers Albritton. My mentor Jesse Bohl had also taught a seminar on Wittgenstein which, unbeknownst at the time, set me on a course that would eventually dominate my research—



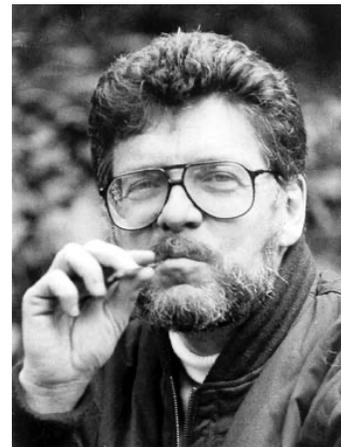
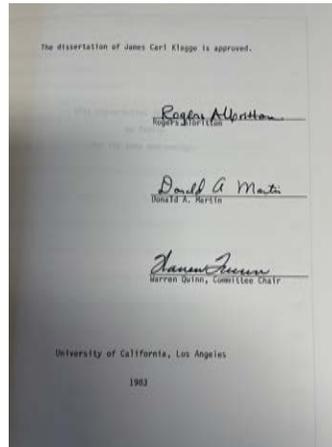
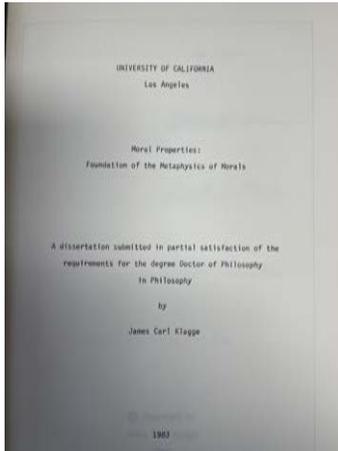
but in the meantime, philosophy of language and logic were my focus. Oddly enough, it was often the visiting professors rather than the regular faculty that most interested me—John McDowell, Colin McGinn, David Pears, Jonathan Lear, Aryeh Kosman. (I don't know that departments have visiting prof's so often anymore.)

During grad school I maintained close contact with my high school debate friend Bob, who was deep into Christian community activism in Chicago. In fact, I spent two summers during grad school working there.



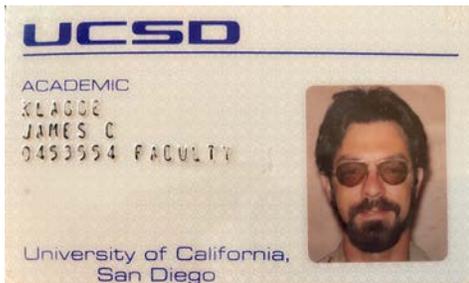
I began to wonder whether my future lay in academia, or in Christian activism, or both. I needed some help thinking this through, so I talked to the only Christian I knew in the Philosophy Department—Bob Adams. “Could I do community activism work and academic philosophy?” His advice was unequivocal: if you want to get into academia you have to do that *first*. And I took his advice.

For my dissertation I applied my logical interests to moral philosophy and wrote a defense of moral realism.



This launched a series of publications on supervenience in mind and morals that ultimately got me tenure. My dissertation supervisor was Warren Quinn. He did not turn out to be much of a mentor, and tragically ended up killing himself a few years after I graduated.

In the meantime, the job market was as bad as I was warned. My first APA convention I had four interviews—Columbia University, Bates College, University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, and University of Denver—but no call-backs. With a wife and an infant daughter by this point, that was a problem. But a chance interview at the Pacific APA in March turned up a one-year job offer from UC San Diego—really quite a nice opportunity, even if temporary!



And in fact, it eventually got renewed for a second year. I took teaching my classes very seriously—I even wrote out all of my lectures by hand. I spent about 60 hours a week at work—between teaching and research. The teaching prep served me well through the years. But it took me a few years to eventually wean myself off my hand-written scripts.

The biggest intellectual event while at UCSD was the arrival of Patricia and Paul Churchland—the infamous neuro-scientific eliminative materialists. They gave me a lot to think about, which led to my first publication on Wittgenstein—“Wittgenstein and Neuroscience.”

But I was soon on the job market again. I’ve been on the market three times in my life, those first three years, and despite having several interviews each time, I only ever had one offer each year—this time from Virginia Tech. I was glad to move to Blacksburg. Not

only was the cost-of-living a huge relief after San Diego, but during college I had spent three summers doing community development work in Appalachian eastern Kentucky. So I liked Blacksburg's rural location. And the university itself surprised me, since it hadn't had much of a reputation when I was back in Virginia previously.

The newly formed Philosophy Department of 13 faculty was quite impressive, including Larry Laudan (well-known philosopher of science) and others, such as Nick Smith (in Ancient Philosophy) and Eleonore Stump (in Medieval Philosophy), who would both go on to distinguish themselves as Presidents of the APA in later years. And soon we were joined by the inimitable Majorie Grene.

An odd coincidence was that other members of the department



included Bill Williams, who had graduated from William and Mary in 1956, and Joe Pitt, who had graduated from William and Mary in 1966. I was therefore a natural, having graduated from there in 1976! Not only that, but the three of us had all taken our seminars on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* from the same professor—Frank MacDonald. Any of my own students who have taken advanced classes from me know that I require a “reaction paper” to each week's reading. That originated from Frank MacDonald, who in turn adopted the practice from his own Kant professor—C.I. Lewis, at Harvard. So that venerable tradition of “reaction papers” dates back now some 100 years! Another member of the department early on was a Visiting Professor in 1986-7, Alfred Nordmann, who turned into a friend and collaborator.



Our work together has covered 3 co-edited books that appeared in 1993, 2003, and 2023!

One qualm I had about my new position was that the job description included teaching *Engineering Ethics*. So I dutifully taught two sections of Engineering Ethics my first quarter here (Fall of 1985), and the other person hired along with me, John Christman, did the same during Winter Quarter. To our surprise and relief, the national accreditation board for engineering soon removed the requirement of a course in ethics, and the college quickly withdrew the course, never to be taught again! And I was fortunate that after that, *all* the classes I have taught over the years are ones I *wanted* to teach. Ironically, thirty years later, I created and taught a new course—Ethical Perspectives on AI—that covered at least some of the same territory as Engineering Ethics!

The first ten years I was here we had only undergraduate teaching in Philosophy.



But one perk was that team-teaching could occasionally be arranged. I team-taught a Humanities course on the Classical Age with Nick Smith, an Honors course on Virtues and Vices with Eleonore Stump, and a Business Ethics class with the head of the Management Department. Then in later years I team-taught two ASPECT grad seminars. I always found these very enlightening—especially since I could get a close-up look at the teaching styles of others, who were always better teachers than I was. In 1994 we instituted an MA program in Philosophy. Besides giving us a chance to teach grad seminars, it also provided us with TA's and the inevitable “large-lecture” courses.



I have taught 21 of these over the years, and while my small-liberal-arts-college roots rebelled at first, I have actually enjoyed teaching them. While I'm a natural introvert, large lectures offer an opportunity to step out of that trait, and *perform*. Anyway, it has been a nice change of pace for me.

The 1990s were a challenging time for me. The decade began with a divorce, which led to a reorganization of my life, as I became sole caretaker for two children every *other* week, and also a rethinking of my priorities. For one thing, I started running long distances—eventually running a marathon in 2000 and 16 more after that.



Among other things I entered local politics. It was then that I met N.L. Bishop.



I ran for school board in 1995, when Virginia first allowed elected school boards.



I won a 4-year term, and then another 4-year term, serving as board chair for 3 years.



For these 8 years Wat Hopkins and I took turns driving to biweekly school board meetings together, and Mary North joined us in 1998. Being a philosopher in the public eye, I sometimes got asked what my “philosophy” was. I soon came up with an answer that reflected my experience: “Never oversimplify!” I also found the love of my life in 1994!



These things slowed my research somewhat. But somehow, I did get promoted to Professor in 2001. And I might add that I did that without any teaching reductions or research leaves—my first one coming in 2006.

Since we moved our department offices recently, I took that opportunity to sort through my files, including a file for every course I've taught here. It turns out I've taught 180 courses, enrolling now over 8000 students at Virginia Tech. That included 35 courses during summer school—a burden I regularly took on to supplement my less-than-impressive salaries over the years! I finally quit that when my youngest child finished college! And if you had ever asked me before 2020 if I would like to teach a class on-line I would have said: "Hell No!" Yet, come March of 2020 we were all learning how to use Zoom, and by April we were teaching all on-line because of Covid.



For all its many downsides, I have to admit it turned out better than I feared. I have been employed by Virginia Tech since 1985.



Tech as an institution never really impacted my life in those early years. But 1999 was different. For one thing, that was the year that Michael Vick became Tech's quarterback, and took Tech to the national championship football game in January of 2000. Though the Hokies lost, he brought national attention to Virginia Tech in a way it had never had before, and that attention brought lots of student applications. I have to say that the quality of students attending Virginia Tech noticeably increased thereafter. I hate to say it, but it was because of football and not because of the quality of academics! A humbling thought for a professor.

Thereafter, Hokie Pride became a big thing—originating with sports, but extending beyond that to campus as a whole. I never really understood the Hokie Pride "feeling" though, until April 16, 2007, when the tragic shootings occurred here on campus. This brought national attention of a different kind. But as much of a tragedy as it was, the

campus community came through this, and I came to feel that the notion of “Hokie Pride” meant something after all. I guess that’s when I became a Hokie too—after 22 years here.

Another thing that happened in 1999 was that I got a grant to organize a large conference on campus—on Wittgenstein and Biography—



and another grant to travel to Europe to do research that summer. Tech helped make both those things possible. The opportunity to do research on Wittgenstein’s papers at the Wren Library at Cambridge provided benefits for me for the next 20 years, including material in my two recent books. Between the conference and the research, I made a number of personal connections also, including meeting Duncan Richter at our conference at VT, and Alois Pichler at a conference in Austria. In addition, at that same conference in Austria, I met Wasfi Hijab—Wittgenstein’s last student. While I didn’t get to know him well, I did establish a connection which, over 15 years later, led to me editing his long, disorganized and unfinished memoir of Wittgenstein. This, still in progress, is likely my last *big* project.

Another way that Virginia Tech as an institution impacted me was with the opportunity I got to teach abroad at their Center for European Studies in Switzerland. This was for a semester in 2004, right after I finished my second term on the school board and shortly after my youngest child headed off to college. I was with 32 students for four months,



teaching and travelling—to Rome, Venice, Vienna, Prague and Munich. As well as broadening my world, this added to my personal philosophical contacts—meeting Brian McGuinness in Sienna and Allan Janik in Innsbruck.

Now we come to my time as chair of the Philosophy Department—for 6 years from 2007 to 2013.



When I started, we had a full department of 13 faculty. Then the Great Recession hit. We also had a faculty person who had a split appointment come back to a full-time appointment—*without funds* for a full-time *salary*. So the department was in the red within 4 months of my reign. It felt like I was fighting a rear-guard action the whole time I was chair. We fended off an attempt to combine us with STS. We lost faculty through the usual attrition, whether better jobs or failed tenure. By my last year, we had just 8 regular faculty lines, 3 of whom were *on leave*, and 7 visiting professors. So at our department meetings there was me and at most 4 others. Rather sad, and a lot of work. But it did make me think about lost faculty members from the department over the years. We could create an impressive top 20 PhD program with 13 or so of the top folks who have moved on to other departments in my time here!

To wrap this up,



it has been the people at Virginia Tech that have meant the most to me—faculty and students. From Steve Gillespie, who was an undergrad student in the 90’s, to some of you here, my students have always inspired me. From Nick Smith, who was my closest colleague in the 80’s, to...well, I better not name names. The best thing about my current colleagues is that finally we don’t have *any conflicts*—I hope I don’t get any dissent on that!

So, thanks to you all for celebrating my long and fulfilling career here. And I had to end with this. (You have to know that my grandfather name is “Jeddy”.) This is my theme song, written and performed by our then 4-year-old grandson Kent. I’m sure you know the tune, so please sing along:

The Jeddy on the bus says “Wittgenstein, Wittgenstein, Wittgenstein”
The Jeddy on the bus says “Wittgenstein”
All through the town!

