

JMB's Gift to Me: Lifetime Learning after a Rough Start

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It was with great eagerness that I looked forward to Jim Buchanan's public finance course in September 1963. It was his and Gordon Tullock's *The Calculus of Consent* that had convinced me to enroll in the Ph. D. program at the University of Virginia. During the fall semester of my final year (1962-63) at the University of Southern California, I took a class from Richard Bilas, who had just started as an assistant professor at USC, having finished his Ph. D. at Virginia the preceding spring. He and I got along well from the start. When he asked if I had thought about graduate school, I explained the quandary I felt: I liked the logic that I found in my economics classes, but I liked the material I found in my political science classes. Bilas suggested I look at *The Calculus of Consent*, asserting that if I did so I would see that I could study economics at Virginia while dealing with political science material. I followed his suggestion, determined he was right, and moved to Charlottesville shortly before the fall 1963 semester began.

Shortly before the mid-September start of the semester, all students had to meet with Leland Yeager, the Director of Graduate Studies, to get their programs of study approved for the coming year. First-year students who came directly from their bachelor's programs had a fixed program for the first year. This meant that for the fall semester, I would have taken history of thought with Coase, price theory with Nutter, statistics with Vining, and math econ with Ferguson. In light of my math background, however, Yeager said I could skip

math econ and take something else. Instantly, I said I would take Buchanan's public finance class.

I approached that class with great enthusiasm, as you might imagine. I had divided my time the preceding summer mostly between studying French to prepare for one of the two language exams that were required in those days and reading works by Buchanan, including the original, 1960 version of his public finance text. While I passed the French exam, it appears as though I did not understand the ramifications of what I had been reading from Buchanan. While sitting excitedly in class that day, I saw Buchanan glance at his roll sheet. He looked into the room as if looking for someone in particular, then said: "Mr. Wagner, what's wrong with the American tax system?" I felt an adrenalin rush.

After my summer's reading which included even some items by Roy Blough, who was Buchanan's dissertation supervisor at Chicago, that question was written for me, or so I thought. The movie *Paper Chase* had not yet been made, but if it had I would have felt like Jonathan Hart responding to Professor Charles W. Kingsfield. Instantly I began reciting things I read that summer about simplifying the tax system by reducing exemptions and deductions and such things. Buchanan seemed to be paying close attention to me, which pleased me hugely. When I finished, he responded: "Mr. Wagner, you have no business answering a question like that. We are democrats here and not monarchists." I had no idea what Buchanan meant by this, but I knew I did not answer his question well, so I slouched low in my chair until the period ended.

As the period was ending, Buchanan assigned the first of the several essays for us to write that he would assign that semester. He started his explanation of the assignment by saying he had heard that “if a grasshopper or fly (I don’t recall which insect he referred to) were multiplied nine times in all dimensions, it wouldn’t be able to get off the ground and might even collapse under its own weight. There is a problem of dimensionality here. The size of government has similarly multiplied several times this century. There is a problem of fiscal dimension here that is surely worth exploring. For your first assignment, write an essay on ‘the problem of fiscal dimension’.” Forgetting my embarrassment from earlier in the period, I raised my hand and asked: “Mr. Buchanan, could you give us some idea of what you are looking for in this essay?” Instantly, he shot back: “Mr. Wagner, if I knew what I was looking for, I wouldn’t care to hear what you think about the topic.”

I left the classroom in silence, and went home to ponder whether graduate school was for me. By morning I had, with wonderful counsel and solace from my wife, put that class behind me and started thinking about the problem of fiscal dimension, as well as working on my other classes. The next class session opened with some discussion of the essays we wrote during the week, though I kept quiet and was relieved not to have been called upon. During that period, Buchanan kept making references to “slipping around on the Pareto welfare surface,” and similar formulations about which I knew nothing. I knew I could not let my know-nothingness persist, so I pushed aside my memories of the previous class period and asked: “Mr. Buchanan, could you explain what you mean by

slipping around on the Pareto welfare surface?” He responded nonchalantly by saying: “Read “On Welfare Theory and Pareto Regions,” by Ragnar Frish , published in *International Economic Papers*. Once you do that it will be clear to you.”

Within a day or two, I started the morning sitting in the Alderman Library reading “On Welfare Theory and Pareto Regions.” I was still sitting there at lunch time, and skipped lunch to continue reading because I did not yet understand what I was reading. Frisch’s paper, dense with abstract formulations, was the most difficult thing I had read to that point in my life. It took until late in the afternoon before I could say that I understood what I had been struggling to read. While this gave me a sense of accomplishment, it also inspired an epiphany about how Buchanan approached his teaching. Buchanan wasn’t there to give an alternative presentation of what was already published. He was there to learn, and we were there as participants in this adventure in learning. If something was already written, we could read it on our own. If we couldn’t or if we weren’t willing to make the effort, we should think about doing something else with our lives.

My day spent wrestling with Ragnar Frisch is nothing compared with wrestling with the devil for 40 days. All the same, however, it set my life on a different path from where it had been headed. I had always been a kind of bookworm, along with a normal adolescent interest in girls and sports, while also doing well in school with modest effort. It would have been around 1960 or 1961 when, while sitting in a doctor’s waiting room, I read a magazine article written by the President of the University of Minnesota, Meredith Wilson, (not to be

confused with the author of *The Music Man*) about the joys of a career in college teaching. What I took away from that article was that teaching wasn't highly paid but it offered much leisure to do as you wished. I was never highly materialistic; for instance, the only jewelry I have is a wedding ring, a watch, and a tie tack. I went to Virginia with that attitude at the core of my consciousness, looking forward to three years of study, after which I would be a college professor with plenty of time for golfing, fishing, bowling, hiking, and the various other leisurely pursuits I was always ready to try.

But after that day wrestling with Ragnar Frisch and reflecting on Jim Buchanan's approach to the classroom, I recognized that I got intense joy out of wrestling with ideas and trying to develop new articulations to replace long-standing articulations. While Jim Buchanan is known throughout the world for his scholarship, I hold him in particular esteem for showing me that the classroom could be a place of mutual learning where your position as instructor is one of *primus inter pares* and not one of an expert passing on knowledge to novices. Sure, Buchanan passed on knowledge, much of it, but he did so always in the context of searching for alternative ideas to articulate. If something has been written, a student can read it. Starting from that point of departure, the classroom is an arena for searching for new ideas to articulate. While we typically think of ideas as macro entities, they are constituted through ordered strings of micro units of thought. Ideas have a combinatorial quality, which means that the universe of potential thought is immense in relation to what is currently known. For instance, there are some 635 billion ways a string of 13 cards can be drawn

from a deck of 52 cards. There is literally an inexhaustible fount of ideas awaiting articulation. Some of those might not be interesting or sensible, I realize, but a career as a university professor can provide an arena for lifetime learning. This I learned from Jim Buchanan during that fall of 1963, and the course of my life was changed forever from that initial encounter, and for this I will be forever grateful.