

Few scholars navigate different fields as adeptly as Dr. David Schmitz, West Virginia University's first Presidential Chair of Moral Science. He started with biology, obtained an M.A. in economics, and earned a Ph.D. in philosophy. His work consistently addresses practical issues: How can high-minded moral ideals transform into dependable guidelines for daily life? Referencing Adam Smith and David Hume, Schmitz posits that ethics and entrepreneurship thrive together when we begin by evaluating observable long-term success in improving the human condition.

Schmitz's works, including *Elements of Justice*, *The Limits of Government*, *A Brief History of Liberty*, and most recently, *Living Together: Inventing Moral Science*, serve as foundational texts for political-economy courses globally. His public lectures consistently attract audiences far exceeding those typically found in academies. Now, he and his wife, economist Dr. Cate Johnson, are transforming WVU's Social Philosophy & Policy Center into a hub for what he refers to as "practical realism." In this transformation, Dr. Schmitz focuses on the philosophical aspects, while Dr. Johnson brings her expertise in economics to the table. Their journal, *Social Philosophy & Policy*, has a subscription base larger than the membership of the American Philosophical Association. Each themed issue covers topics such as freedom of thought, the administrative state, health policy, profit, and purpose, addressing urgent policy questions with scholarly rigor.

On campus, Johnson and Schmitz pair scholarship with hands-on learning. Students receive micro-grants to test business ideas in their communities, discovering where spreadsheets, supply chains, and social trust converge. If a venture falters, the financial loss is minor, but the lesson about theory versus practice is priceless.

Why does this matter in West Virginia? Many people question the value of higher education, citing grade inflation, ideological silos, and a widening gap between classroom discussions and real-world needs. Schmitz believes universities must restore honest standards, welcome genuine viewpoint diversity, and teach one verifiable truth: society is not a zero-sum game. By restoring honest standards, we can reassure the public of the value of higher education and instill confidence in the next generation of scholars.

You've recently taken on the role of Presidential Chair of Moral Science at WVU. What drew you to West Virginia University, and what are your goals for the Social Philosophy and Policy Center?

A: My wife, Cate, and I have spent years studying Adam Smith — his books and the eighteenth-century Scotland that made them possible. Scotland was once Europe's poorest corner, yet by Smith's time, it was starting to produce towering figures like James Watt, Alexander Graham Bell, and James Clerk Maxwell. Ideas such as interchangeable parts and early assembly-line methods emerged there and sparked the Industrial Revolution.

When we visited West Virginia, we saw a place on the cusp of a similar leap. Young people here can move mountains if they have the right tools, and WVU has the ambition to provide those tools. The offers we received from WVU felt less like jobs, more like callings. We are excited about the transformative potential of our work at WVU and hope to inspire the same kind of leap that we saw in eighteenth-century Scotland.

At the Social Philosophy & Policy Center, we talk about realistic idealism. Each journal issue focuses on a single real-world theme, such as corruption, education policy, international justice, taxation, and ideology. Every workshop starts with where society is, not with a tidy theory. Cate's courses (and courses being designed right now by members of her team) reinforce that idea. Students design real business plans for their communities, receive small seed grants, and learn firsthand how theory meets practice. If a venture fails, they lose a little money but gain an enduring lesson about what is ideal on paper versus what works in life.

You've spoken and written about the importance of institutions that help people live together in peace. How can universities cultivate this kind of moral and civic learning in an age of polarization?

A: Two challenges stand out.

First, grade inflation. From kindergarten through graduate school, an A should signal excellence, not attendance. Once evaluation turns phony, it would better to drop grades altogether than pretend that barely showing up is excellent.

Second, students must grasp that society is **not zero-sum**. History's great leaps in quality of life and life expectancy came when strangers could afford to trust each other enough to be trading partners. Many students, and plenty of professors, still treat neighbors as threats. We all need to learn to see our neighbors not as an alien "other" but as partners in mutual gain.

Universities can tackle both issues by setting honest standards and teaching the economic, historical, and moral evidence that peaceful cooperation is humanity's ultimate survival tool and the great liberator of human potential.

What is the greatest threat to freedom in modern higher education—and what can be done to address it constructively?

A: A steady retreat from standards, whether in grading, conferring PhDs, or hiring. Quota-driven diversity rules have shifted attention from excellence to box-checking. Proper education demands challenge. Students grow when they are dropped into deep intellectual water and see for themselves that they need to learn to swim independently. Rubber-stamping robs them of that test. In a way, it robs them of adulthood altogether.

The remedy is plain, though not easy: recommit to clear criteria, reward genuine merit, and treat viewpoint diversity as essential rather than ornamental.

How does your background in both philosophy and economics shape your perspective on the purpose of education and its relation to the marketplace of ideas?

A: I began in biological sciences, earned an M.A. in economics, and finished my Ph.D. in philosophy. At Arizona, doing graduate work in economics, I found myself in a corridor with a group of scholars who were inventing experimental economics; Vernon Smith later won a Nobel Prize for that work. Even as a master's student, I was treated like a colleague. Professors, knowing of my background in philosophy, would buy me coffee and pepper me with questions: What is an experiment? What is a theory? What is a proof? Can we ever *prove* causation? Those weren't idle philosophical questions, because the professors asking those questions were betting their careers and the future of their field on their understanding of questions like that, so in their minds those were high-stakes questions. I learned more philosophy of science in those conversations than in any philosophy course.

Re-reading Hume and Smith through that lens changed everything. Hume's famous line that we never *observe* causation is an expression of skepticism, but what Hume was being skeptical about wasn't causation but rather our conception of proof. Science advances by proposing simple explanations and letting experience knock them down when necessary. Likewise, his point that you cannot deduce "ought" from "is" was not moral nihilism; it was a call to ground ethics in lived evidence rather than abstract formal logic.

Smith and Hume wanted a moral science—empirical reasoning applied to questions of value. Smith studied tariffs and concluded they hurt the poor. That inquiry later launched the field of economics. My own work tries to reunite empirical humility with moral seriousness.

With the *Social Philosophy and Policy* journal based at WVU, how do you hope the university becomes a national or global hub for serious conversation about liberty, justice, and public policy?

A: A genuine conversation cannot be a monologue, so we are building a community of economists, philosophers, political scientists, and legal theorists who meet in themed workshops and shape each issue together. The journal already reaches about twice as many subscribers as the American Philosophical Association has members, so we know we have an audience.

But the other thing to mention is that we are teachers as well as authors and editors. We are reaching out to the next generation not only with our writings but also face to face, in the classroom. And we have another crucial role as well. Namely, we aren't only teachers. We are also teachers of teachers. So, for example, together with our colleague Dr. Chris Freiman, we just received a grant that will finance the initial launch of a new Ph.D. program that marries business fundamentals—accounting, marketing, supply chain management, and so on—with depth in ethics. Graduates should be able to offer useful perspectives on real problems without sounding naïve or ivory-tower. This is a long-term investment in American education, because

(think about it), today's students are taught by today's faculty. Who is going to be shaping students a generation from now? If we care about western civilization, then today's best faculty need to find a way to pour their hearts into producing the next generation's best faculty. It won't happen by accident. So, that's our plan. We want to make sure that tomorrow's business leaders have training in ethics by moral philosophers who understand ethics but also understand the practicalities of real world business, finance, and management.

What advice would you give to students or young faculty who want to uphold intellectual freedom and open inquiry in their academic careers?

A: Decide to do it and keep the stakes in perspective. Social pressure feels enormous—your hands shake, your voice quivers— but you have to keep in mind that if a supervisor says, “Toe the line or you’re out,” it’s just a job. Your supervisors don’t own you. If you need to find another job, it’s still a free country, and how long would that take? A day? A week? So when the pressure comes, take a breath, stand firm, listen carefully, and insist on reciprocal respect. Imagine you are writing a novel: you are the main character, and now you have to decide which way the story of you is going to go. Every novel comes to an end at some point, but what you get to decide is whether your story is the story of a hero.

The same holds for ethical dilemmas outside the academy. If a boss tells you, “The auditors arrive in twenty minutes, start shredding,” the correct response is, “It’s just a job—I don’t owe it to you to commit fraud.” Unless someone literally holds a gun to your head, it’s not that big a deal. Dial down the panic reflex and make the decision that you will be proud of.

I’ve raised significant philanthropic gifts over the years, and donors tend to respond when they sense genuine conviction. Ask for support only when you genuinely believe; if you get that big grant, you will live that commitment, so don’t even ask unless that commitment reflects who you are at your core.

Looking ahead, what gives you hope about the direction of higher education, and what role do you hope WVU will play in that future?

A: News highlights floods, fires, and academic earthquakes, yet **creative destruction** can be healthy. The world doesn’t need programs coasting on low standards. They will close, even as leaner, mission-driven institutions thrive. WVU largely operates in that land-grant spirit: smaller, nimble, and willing to measure outcomes.

Cate’s work on the nature of an ethical economy, our new faculty, and the energy of West Virginia’s students convince me that something remarkable can happen here. Eighteenth-century Scotland helped launch modern prosperity. Who will make that next giant leap? Why not West Virginia? Check back in 2100—I would not bet against this place.