

Kristján Kristjánsson's Acceptance Speech for an Honorary Doctorate at The University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht, January 2024

Dear Colleagues,

I will begin by taking this opportunity to thank the Board for the Conferral of Doctoral Degrees, the Executive Board of the University, and my Promotor, Professor de Ruyter (whom we all know as Doret), for the honour bestowed upon me today. This is definitely the greatest recognition that I have received in my academic career, and one for which I am enormously grateful. The only other recognition which comes close is that of 'PhD supervisor of the year', conferred on me last summer by students across the whole College of Social Science at the University of Birmingham. To receive such plaudits, first from the student population and then from colleagues in academia, is a stroke of good luck that most academics can only dream of. So I repeat my sincere thanks to you and your great university.

Rather than outlining my academic work here – I will be doing that at a seminar tomorrow – I want to use this opportunity to pay tribute to some of the people who have contributed to my being here by facilitating my life trajectory in so many ways. Following William James, I like to call them 'ferments' – analogous to the chemical that converts humble liquids into alcohol. Those are the role models, the movers and shakers, who nourish your spirit and spur you on to greater things. I honestly believe there are many academics in my field of moral education, moral philosophy, and moral psychology with greater talent and intelligence than me who would deserve to stand here today. However, we are all the beneficiaries or victims of what Bernard Williams called 'moral luck'. I have been blessed

with unusual moral luck in my academic life, and much of it is due to the ‘ferments’ who have helped me grow.

My first ferments were my parents. My father was a poet of national repute and the editor of a weekly political paper. Our home was like a railway station with artists, writers, and politicians coming in and out, and the door was never locked. I listened to endless debates about art, politics, and philosophy as a child and got the impression that this is what grown-ups talk about all the time. Unfortunately, that was not the case, as I subsequently found out. In spite of having little financial capital, my parental home provided me with what Bourdieu would call the ‘symbolic capital’ required to enter the tough and unforgiving world of academia later, without falling prey to an ‘imposter syndrome’.

After completing a bachelor degree in philosophy in Iceland, I decided to teach for a few years in a secondary school while completing my postgraduate certificate as a teacher. Some people would consider those years to have been wasted; I do not. My students, only a few years younger than me, acted as my ferments; and I also gained the street-cred required later to speak to teachers and other professionals about the rough and tumble of their work. Teachers hate nothing more than experts, who have never entered classrooms except as students, telling them what to do.

I did not realise when I chose the University of St. Andrews as the place to pursue my masters and doctoral studies in moral philosophy that it was acknowledged as having the best philosophy department in the U.K., even better than Oxbridge. Still being economically poor, I basically chose it because it offered me the best scholarship! I learned a lot there, and the professors who taught me acted, once again, as my ferments.

I will now skip over many years, during which I lectured at universities in Iceland, mainly in education and nursing departments – turning next to the person who comes closest to having been an academic saint, Professor Terry McLaughlin at Cambridge (who sadly died

much too early). Terry basically saw his mission as being that of a ferment for others, and he devoted his life to acting as a guide and motivator to younger academics. Collaborating with Terry increased my confidence, and he encouraged me to try my luck on the bigger international stage.

This led to my applying for a professorship in the newly founded Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham, and later for the editorship of the *Journal of Moral Education*. What a stroke of pure luck! Here was finally a centre that actualised all that I had ever dreamed of in academia by building a bridge between education, psychology, and philosophy, in the service of character: the good character of students, professionals, and society at large. Again, if not because of this Centre I would probably not be standing here today; and I need to acknowledge the role of one more ferment: the great academic entrepreneur Professor James Arthur who – while something of an elephant in a China shop – has the incredible talent to spur other people on to great academic achievements. He also has the uncanny knack of simply snapping his fingers – and, lo and behold, generous amounts of funding money fall like manna from the heavens! Since joining the Centre in 2012, I have travelled widely internationally and have had the chance to interact constructively with many of your distinguished academics, such as Doret, Wouter Sanderse and Wiel Veugelers.

One final name I need to mention is that of David Carr, the father of character education and virtue-based professional ethics in the U.K. (who is turning 80 in a couple of months' time). Those of you who know David are aware that he is something of what the Brits call a 'Marmite character' who does not take any prisoners. But to me he has from the very beginning been exceedingly kind and generous and pushed me successfully out of my comfort zone. Along with the people mentioned above, and many others who I have not had time to refer to here, David is a ferment who has turned my humble liquid into spirits...

Dear colleagues. Doret encouraged me to say something about the reasons for my academic focus of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics and where I see my career heading from now. I think the former would take up too much of your time here. If you are interested, there is the seminar tomorrow to which I contribute about professional ethics and which gives you a clear sense of my academic orientation and its motivations. I will just end by saying something about my future aspirations. Of course, no one knows how the wheel of fortune for health and longevity turns. However, if luck is on my side there, I feel I want to repay some of the debt owed to my ferments by becoming more of a ferment myself. I have already become something of a mover and shaker in the field of character-and-virtue research through my consultancy work with OECD, the Kern Family Foundation (the biggest character charity in the USA), and my Dean's Fellowship at Boston College, while still holding a 50% professorial position at the now slimmed-down Jubilee Centre. However, I want to do more to move the baton forward to a future generation of character-and-virtue researchers. I love nothing more than working with postgraduate students and other budding academics, seeing in them the glow of interest that was being ignited in me when I was their age. Although I originally trained as a mainstream philosopher, my interest in life has always been more that of an educator. I like to see people around me mature and grow. For that process to take place, we need ferments. I hope I can increasingly act as one myself.

Thank you.