

Introduction

Stuart Rachels

The papers in this volume were presented at the James Rachels Memorial Conference on September 24th-25th, 2004 in Birmingham, Alabama. On that weekend, Jim's old friends gathered just a few blocks from where Jim had spent his last 26 years writing, teaching, smoking cigars and going out to lunch with his colleagues.

Jim himself chose the conference invitees. He dictated the list shortly before dying of cancer on September 5th, 2003. Looking over the list, I suggested that he add a particular name to it—a famous philosopher whom he liked. Jim shook his head and said, “This is not about inviting the biggest names we think might come; these are the people who meant the most to me in my career, these are my friends.” Everyone on Jim's list accepted his invitation.

Jim died too young—just 62—but what a great life he had. His marriage of 41 years was blissful; he remained close to his children throughout his life; he found his work richly meaningful and felt appreciated in his profession; he painted, bowled, played guitar and performed magic; he gardened, built websites and read books; he sang in quartets, met presidents and ate what he liked; he played in chess tournaments and bridge tournaments; he played tennis, ping-pong and Boggle; he starred in Gilbert and Sullivan plays; he listened to thousands of record albums and CDs; and he watched over 7,000 movies with his wife, Carol. He was, as he once told me, happier than 99% of the earth's inhabitants.

Somehow, this last fact is reflected in his work. James Rachels' essays are warm, sensible, intellectually honest, reader-friendly and devoid of jargon and ideology. Jeff McMahan asked at the memorial conference why Jim's work has so rarely been subject to rancorous public attacks. Not, Jeff said, because it has not been widely read. Jim's books have been translated into eight languages; his essay on active and passive euthanasia has been reprinted 300 times; and *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* is the best selling single-authored textbook in all of philosophy. And not, Jeff said, because Jim doesn't take controversial positions. James Rachels has defended atheism, vegetarianism, active euthanasia, preferential quotas, animal rights, a strong duty of

charity, and the idea that parents have no special obligations to their children. Rather, said Jeff, Jim has avoided vitriol because his writings exude a humanity that tames the angry roar of lions.

This volume contains “Egoism,” the last essay to be published by James Rachels. In it, Jim eloquently rebuts Sidgwick’s claim that the distinction between individuals makes egoism irrefutable. “Egoism” appears as an appendix to the lead article, and not as the lead article itself, for two reasons. First, it is very short, and I don’t think Jim would have wanted it published as a freestanding essay. Second, I hesitated to include it at all, since Jim asked me not to publish any unfinished bits and pieces of his. However, I think he might have forgotten about this one. Publishing “Egoism” as an appendix feels like a fair compromise between publishing it as a freestanding essay and not letting it out at all.

James Rachels’ literary executor is my brother David. David is a novelist and an English professor at the Virginia Military Institute. Soon he’ll design JamesRachels.com, a website devoted to promoting Jim’s work. We hope that work endures.

On behalf of my family, I would like to thank the contributors to this volume. My father, I know, was fond of you all. We also thank Jim’s friend Greg Pence, who organized and ran the memorial conference. Finally, our thanks go to Angelo Corlett, whose support and help in preparing this volume were invaluable.