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James Rachels, 62, Ethicist Who Ignited Euthanasia Debate, Dies

By ANAHAD O'CONNOR

Dr. James Rachels, a philosopher and medical ethicist who wrote some of the most influential works on euthanasia, arguing that the legal distinction between killing and passively allowing a patient's death had no rational basis, died on Friday at a hospital in Birmingham, Ala. He was 62.

The cause was cancer, said his son Stuart.

In 1975, Dr. Rachels's most widely debated article, "Active and Passive Euthanasia," was published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*.

Euthanasia then was generally condemned and terminally ill patients rarely refused medical treatment. Dr. Rachels, who spent much of his career as a philosophy professor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, broke ground by arguing that actively killing a patient with a terminal illness was no worse morally than letting the person die by doing nothing.

If withholding treatment meant passive euthanasia for a patient near death, he wrote, then the patient might as well be killed by lethal injection or some other painless form of active euthanasia.

Both methods led to humane deaths, he argued, and directly killing patients might save them from hours or even days of suffering.

"In the early 70's, the idea of refusing treatment was not generally accepted, and active euthanasia wasn't even a question," said Dr. Hugh LaFollette, a philosophy professor at Eastern Tennessee State University and a former colleague of Dr. Rachels's.

"He argued that if you buy the idea of turning off a respirator, then you should accept active euthanasia," Dr. LaFollette said. "But in that climate it was completely radical. It was the first essay in the philosophical community that openly advocated active euthanasia."

The article put Dr. Rachels at the forefront of the euthanasia debate. Along with Dr. Peter Singer's 1975 book, "Animal Liberation," the paper helped start an applied ethics movement in philosophy that focused on polarizing issues like abortion, animal rights, suicide and cloning.

In 1991, in "Created From Animals: The Moral Implications of Darwinism," Dr. Rachels argued that animals should not be treated inhumanely in experiments simply because they were less intelligent than humans.

Dr. Rachels argued that the issue was not the animals' intelligence but their ability to suffer.

Born in Columbus, Ga., in 1941, James Rachels earned his bachelor's degree from Mercer University

and his Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina. He taught at several schools, including Duke and New York University, before becoming chairman of the philosophy department at Birmingham, where he spent the last 26 years.

He wrote 5 books and 85 essays. His 1971 textbook, "Moral Problems," sold 100,000 copies over three editions and was a staple of many college philosophy courses.

In addition to his son Stuart, of Birmingham, Dr. Rachels is survived by his wife, Carol; another son, David, of Lexington, Va.; two sisters, Cindy Withrow of Atlanta and Jean Holt of Columbus, Ga.; his parents, James and Velma Rachels of Columbus; and two grandsons.

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