JAMES RACHELS OBITUARY

James Rachels died from cancer on September 5 2003 at age 62, after being sick for two months. A native of Georgia, Jim graduated from Mercer University and earned his PhD at the University of North Carolina. Afterwards he taught at Duke University, the University of Richmond, and the graduate faculties of both New York University and the University of Miami.

At NYU in the early 1970s, he belonged to a small group of philosophers who started the seminal New York chapter of the Society for Philosophy and Public Affairs, a group that included Tom Nagel and visiting scholars Peter Singer and Derek Parfit. His early book, Moral Problems, was one of the first anthologies in the new field of applied ethics and in its first three years sold over a hundred thousand copies. According to his publisher, McGraw-Hill, his most well known book, The Elements of Moral Philosophy, will sell more copies than any other philosophy text this year, and will be used in one third of ethics classes in North America. McGraw-Hill will publish Jim’s new, completed book, Introduction to Philosophy, posthumously.

As a young man growing up in Georgia, Jim participated in a sit-in protest at a white-only lunch counter at Woolworth’s in Macon. He won a national speech contest as a young man, appeared on ‘American Bandstand’, and met John Fitzgerald Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon. He taught his 9-year old son chess, and two years later, Stuart became the youngest Chess Master in American history. Jim also Chaired the US Chess Federation’s Ethics Committee. Jim twice assisted the APA with its Eastern Division meetings, serving as local host co-ordinator in 1972 in New York City and as Program Chair in 1995. In 1977, he became chair of Philosophy at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, rising 3 years later to become Dean of Arts & Humanities from 1978–1983, then had a one-year stint as acting Academic Vice-President, after which he became University Professor. Jim had a special talent for elucidating complex philosophical issues in deceptively clear language, as many an undergraduate student discovered when he tried to reproduce Jim’s arguments in tests. He was known for mentoring many junior faculty, especially on daily trips out for lunch, which he
initiated when he came to UAB. A wise and gentle man, Jim was confidant to many and reluctant to speak ill of anyone.

His ‘Active and Passive Euthanasia’ was the first piece published by a moral philosopher in the New England Journal of Medicine (1975). Today it is still one of the most reprinted articles in ethics, having been reprinted over 300 times to date. As the New York Times said in its extensive obituary, the piece ‘ignited’ a debate over euthanasia, and ‘helped start an applied ethics movement in philosophy.’ This seminal piece, along with others by Judith Thomson and Peter Singer, gave philosophers issues to talk about in classes that had philosophical heft. His book The End of Life: Morality and Euthanasia (Oxford, 1986) defended humane, humanistic treatment of standards of death and dying. His Created from Animals argued that modern ethics should pay more attention to similarities between human and non-human animals, rather than rigidly separate the two. In Can Ethics Provide Answers? (1997), he reprinted a dozen of his 60 essays from many journals; ones he thought would stand the test of time. He also edited seven books and served as a referee for several academic journals.

Although his writings defended radical positions, especially in impartialist ethics, in person he was neither confrontational nor an activist, preferring to let his writings do this work. He had many close friendships that lasted decades. He loved movies, professional baseball, UAB basketball, competitive mental games, and family gatherings. His family was very important to him and he spent a lot of time with them.

More than anything else, he loved doing philosophy and being a philosopher. In the last months of his life and on the last day of his life, he was writing philosophy, finishing last bits and pieces. Near his last day, he told his sons that, for the first time in his life, he had no unfinished projects in philosophy.

He is survived by his wife of forty years, Carol, and his two sons, David, an English professor at VMI, and Stuart, a philosophy professor at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, two grandchildren, and in Georgia, his parents and two sisters.

The UAB Philosophy has started the Rachels Visiting Scholar Endowment Fund to honour Jim’s life. Contributions for it may be sent to: Philosophy, 900 13th Street South, Birmingham, AL 35294-1260.

GREGORY PENCE