

At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on April 12, 2005, the following tribute to the life and service of the late John Rawls was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.

JOHN RAWLS

BORN: February 21, 1921

DIED: November 24, 2002

John Bordley Rawls, James Bryant Conant University Professor, *Emeritus*, died at home in Lexington on November 24, 2002.

Rawls's work transformed moral and political philosophy in the English-speaking world and beyond it. His first book, *A Theory of Justice*, published in 1971, offered a deep and ambitious philosophical account of justice, grounded neither in linguistic analysis nor in utilitarian calculation, the two main methodologies of the time. Drawing on the social contract tradition, Rawls argues that principles to govern basic social institutions are justified if they would be chosen under the fair conditions characterized by what he calls the Original Position. This is a hypothetical situation in which the choosing parties are concerned to advance their own aims but willing to cooperate, and have to choose without knowing their own places in society. *Political Liberalism* deepens Rawls's defense of the kind of society described in *Theory of Justice*, by showing how people who disagree about religious and philosophical issues could nonetheless have reason to accept just liberal institutions. *The Law of Peoples* extends these arguments to the international sphere, offering principles of international conduct that could, Rawls argues, be accepted by both liberal and non-liberal peoples.

Although *A Theory of Justice* is a work of academic philosophy, its influence has extended beyond the profession of philosophy, beyond the academy, and far beyond the boundaries of our country. In the academy, Rawls's work has engaged the attention of scholars in economics, political science, sociology, and the law, and stimulated important new lines of inquiry that continue in those disciplines. In the world of public policy and legislation, Rawls's ideas are frequently invoked (though perhaps not always with the subtlety he would have preferred). He has been cited as an authority in more than 60 court opinions in the U.S. in recent years. *A Theory of Justice* has been translated into twenty-seven languages, and 250,000 copies have been sold. Protestors in Tiananmen Square held up copies of Rawls's book for the television cameras, and Indian writers quote him in warning against the neglect of the most disadvantaged as well as the dangers of religious sectarianism.

Jack Rawls was born in Baltimore on February 21, 1921. He was an undergraduate at Princeton, where he majored in philosophy and graduated *Summa cum Laude* in January of 1943. He entered the Army the following month as an enlisted man, and served in the infantry in the South Pacific until 1946. His Division was sent to Japan as part of the occupying forces, and it would probably have taken part in the invasion of Japan, had an invasion been necessary. Later, in one of his few published articles directly addressing a political issue, he argued forcefully that we should not have used the atomic bomb.

As an undergraduate, Jack was interested in religion. His senior thesis was on the origins of evil, and he intended to enter the Episcopal priesthood. But the Holocaust, and his experiences in the war, led him to question and ultimately reject the main doctrines of Christianity.

After the war Rawls returned to Princeton as a graduate student in philosophy. He received his PhD in 1950 and taught at Cornell and MIT before coming to Harvard in 1962. He was named John Cowles Professor of Philosophy in 1975, and James Bryant Conant University Professor in 1979. He retired in 1991, but continued to teach regularly until 1994.

In addition to transforming the subject through his writings, Rawls had an enormous influence on the profession of philosophy through his teaching. He did this most obviously by drawing a large and talented group of people into moral and political philosophy. Also, the way he taught the history of philosophy, and drew on it in his work, inspired many students to work in the history of ethics, especially on Kant. His relations with students and other professional colleagues were marked by a sense of equality very like that expressed in his writing. It is notable that a particularly large number of Jack's graduate students were women, many of whom are now leading members of the profession.

Despite his fame Rawls refused to become a public figure, and declined most public honors and awards. He did, however, accept honorary degrees from Oxford, Princeton, and Harvard. In 1999 he received the Rolf Schock Prize in Logic and Philosophy from the Swedish Academy of Sciences, and was awarded the National Humanities Medal by President Clinton.

Jack met Margaret Warfield Fox, or Mardy, on a blind date in 1948. They became engaged six weeks later, and were married the following year. Jack said later, with satisfaction, that this was "probably the only important decision I have made that quickly in my whole life." Mardy said: "He was an extremely handsome, almost penniless graduate student with an amazing smile and a significant stammer, who danced enthusiastically, but badly. What young girl could resist *that* combination?" Jack and Mardy had four children, Anne, Lee, Alec, and Liz. During the seven years following several debilitating strokes Jack suffered in 1995, Mardy took care of him almost single-handedly, with heroic patience and devotion. Although frequently unable to work, with her help and that of others he managed to complete a number of his important later works.

Rawls proposed the Original Position as a fruitful device for addressing questions of justice. But for him it also expressed a deep yearning for harmony with others. The perspective of the Original Position, he wrote, “is not a perspective from a particular place beyond the world, nor the point of view of a transcendent being; rather it is a certain form of thought and feeling that rational persons can adopt within the world. And having done so they can ... arrive together at regulative principles that can be affirmed by everyone as he lives by them, each from his own standpoint. Purity of heart, if one could attain it, would be to see clearly and to act with grace and self-command from this point of view.”

Respectfully submitted,

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Dennis Thompson
Thomas Scanlon, Chair