REMEMBRANCE

John Rawls

By Christine M. Korsgaard

These remarks were made at a memorial service for John Rawls, held at Harvard University on February 27, 2003.

My first personal encounter with John Rawls was nearly thirty years ago, in the early spring of 1974. I say "personal encounter" because of course, by then, we had all been reading *A Theory of Justice*, even undergraduate philosophy majors at the University of Illinois. I was a senior that year, and applying for graduate school. Jack was chair, and so it fell to his lot to telephone the students who had been accepted by Harvard, to tell us the good news and ask if we had any questions. But in those days Jack stuttered, and he was worried that his stutter might make him difficult to understand over the phone. I mention that, because it explains how it came about that one day the telephone in my dorm room rang, and I answered it, only to hear the world's greatest living moral philosopher say "This is John Rawls. That's R-A-W-L-S."

So I came here and in due course I became his student. Jack usually taught two lecture courses every year: one on political philosophy, and one on the history of ethics. Like most of Jack's students, I found the model for my own work in his course on the history of ethics. No doubt part of the reason why Jack's students tended to go into ethics was the magnitude of his own achievement in political philosophy. No point in copying it, and no hope in competing with it—and anyway, who would want to, when most of us thought that he had got it mostly right? But it wasn't primarily because of that, I think, that we wanted to do what Jack did in the moral philosophy course. It was more because we felt that in that class we could see more directly how Jack had *become* the philosopher who wrote *A Theory of Justice*, how he had done it. When teaching the classics of moral philosophy Jack would say: "We are not going to criticize these thinkers, but rather to interpret their positions in ways that make the best sense of them, and to see what we can learn from them." Jack had no tolerance for readers who suppose that the great thinkers of the past might be saying something completely muddled, or silly, or unintelligible. Instead he would interpret the text in a way that made it speak with a recognizable human voice, saying things at

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once so credible and so illuminating that we were eager to determine whether we could believe them ourselves. The effect was to make us feel as if the figures we studied had become available for philosophical conversations, as if we could put questions to them and get answers. And we could see how the results of Rawls's own dialogue with the past, the answers to the questions that he put to Hobbes and Kant and Rousseau and Hegel, were embodied in *A Theory of Justice*. As a teacher, Jack was utterly without showmanship. He stood quietly at the lectern, he read his lectures, he sometimes read too fast, and he seldom told jokes (though an impish spirit occasionally made an appearance). And yet he could make the great philosophers of the tradition seem almost to materialize in the room.

We all know that being a graduate advisor, a thesis supervisor, is a role fraught with moral peril. To find the Aristotelian mean between ignoring your students altogether and trying to write their theses for them is hard enough. But the personal side of the relationship adds an alarming human dimension to the ways you can go wrong when you err in one of these directions, producing imitators or disciples or shattered egos. So it's a deeply important fact about John Rawls that so many of his students have flourished. And it's even more important to consider how many of us are women. Among women who had Jack as a supervisor or a reader or a teacher are Elizabeth Anderson, Alyssa Bernstein, Hilary Bok, Claudia Card, Hannah Ginsborg, Barbara Herman, Marcia Homiak, Erin Kelly, Sharon Lloyd, Michelle Moody-Adams, Susan Neiman, Onora O'Neill, Adrian Piper, Sybil Schwartzenbach, Nancy Sherman, and many others. And of course also the late Jean Hampton. I can't resist mentioning here that Jean, who was given to charmingly revealing slips of the tongue, nearly always referred to Jack this way: "Kant…, I mean, Rawls." (I hope she wouldn't mind my telling you that—I don't think that she would.) Why was Jack so successful at advising? Certainly there were men in those days who prided themselves on being enlightened, and went out of their way to be helpful to women students. But Jack was better than that. No distracting or embarrassing consciousness of gender ever betrayed itself in his dealings with us. And more generally, no distracting or embarrassing consciousness of the fact that we were students, and his students, ever betrayed itself. It was not that he ignored our gender or our status as students, but that for him these things had no awkward implications that needed to be ignored. To Jack his students were always simply fellow philosophers, with ideas and theories of our own. We wanted to impress him, of course, but we also knew that we didn't have to earn our standing with him by doing so.

Jack wrote about a society that would realize what he called "a Kantian conception of equality"—a society in which people are equal, and relate to one another as equals—simply in virtue of our common humanity. It is so easy to endorse that ideal, and so hard to realize it, either in the forms of social organization or in our attitudes to others and in the conduct of our lives. In his books, Rawls taught us how a political society might realize that conception of equality, but I think that a parallel conception was also expressed in the way that Jack *did* philosophy. Jack never seemed to be jostling

with others for theoretical position and dominance. He felt no need to patronize his predecessors or to dominate his students. The world of philosophical conversation he created around himself was a company of equals, each with our own projects but also thinking together, just as his political society is a company of equals, each with our own lives, but also living together. The ironic thing is that it is this very fact—that Jack seemed really, and deep down, to regard everyone as an equal—that made *him* seem *so superior* to everyone else. But it was never an oppressive superiority. His modesty and gentleness made it a positive pleasure to look up to him. It is a pleasure I will always enjoy. φ