

James Buchanan: in memoriam

Geoffrey Brennan

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On January 9 this year, James Buchanan died in Blacksburg Virginia, reportedly “after a short illness”. He was 93.

Readers of this journal need no reminder of the content or significance of the Buchanan contribution or a rehearsal of the basic facts of his career. Apart from any other consideration, a full issue of this journal last year was devoted to such things, as a celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of *The Calculus of Consent*. It has therefore seemed to me more appropriate here to mark Buchanan’s death with a rather more personal reflection.

One important fact about the circumstances of Jim’s death is that he was in full possession of his mental faculties to the very end. Last September, Liberty Fund held a small colloquium in Charlottesville—also to mark the 50th anniversary of the *Calculus of Consent*. Jim was present as a participant. I can recall many Liberty Fund colloquia in the past when he had been rather quiet. But on this occasion, he was thoroughly alert and highly energetic—even rebuking the participants at one point for not picking up a mistake that he and Gordon had made in the early pages of the *Calculus*! In short, he was thoroughly active and very much enjoying himself!

To quit this sphere in the manner he did—at 93, without any lingering, and without any diminution of mental faculties¹—would seem to be an enviable mode of exit for anyone. I am sure that if you had asked Jim at age 60 how he would like to die, he would have been more than happy with the circumstances as they turned out to be. Indeed, if you had asked him the same question on his 93rd birthday, his response might well have been the same. Better to go out quietly and quickly than to linger on in gradual decline.

The truth is that Jim didn’t “do illness” well. Whatever his attitude to others’ ailments, he was completely intolerant of his own! Even minor complaints could have him remarking that he “should put a bullet through his head”! And when for a couple of years in his 80’s he

G. Brennan (✉)
Australian National University, Canberra, Australia
e-mail: Geoffrey.Brennan@anu.edu.au

¹Though he did have eyesight difficulties that inhibited his reading—and this was a source of some frustration.

endured a seriously disabling (and slightly mysterious) condition in the legs, the affliction left him seriously depressed. His attitudes to illness were those of a person who had enjoyed excellent health throughout his life: he, more than most, would not have wanted more years unless they could be guaranteed to be good ones—and at 93 no such guarantees are plausible.

In this sense, we might say of Jim's that it was an "optimal" death! And in Jim's vocabulary, there were few higher accolades.

Of course, there is a sense in which every death is optimal. As Frank Knight used to say, to call a situation optimal is to call it hopeless! If you don't have any other options, then what happens *must* be optimal. But for Buchanan, optimality had an additional meaning—something is optimal if chosen from among the realistic options, behind a veil of ignorance. And Jim's death was, as I have suggested, almost certainly very close to optimal in that sense.

I am reminded in this connection of a minor Buchanan incident, occurring sometime during the 1980's. John Head (my dissertation supervisor) had invited Jim to visit Dalhousie University during a Fall in which the Nova Scotia leafage happened to be especially spectacular. After he had been taken on a tour of the nearby forests, John's wife Beatrice asked Jim what he thought of the colors. "*Just about optimal!*" was the Buchanan response. Beatrice was disgusted. "*Optimal? Optimal?*" she said to John afterwards. "*What's wrong with the man? Doesn't he know the words 'fantastic', 'breath-taking', 'amazing'?*"

Clearly, Beatrice had no sense of the full normative force with which Jim invested "optimality". But still, she might have had a point. "Optimality" is not necessarily the final word in the normative lexicon, even if Jim was inclined to make it so. After all, even an optimal death is a *death*. And though we might accept that death is inevitable and that, when your number is up, there is nothing you can do about it, we might nevertheless feel that a bit of "railing against the dying of the light" is in order.

David Hume—the originator of the economic concept of rationality—on being told of the death of a friend, was shocked and upset. The news-bearer, knowing something of Hume's philosophy, pointed out to Hume: "Sir, your sorrow is fruitless!"

"Very true", Hume replied. "And for that very reason, I am sorry!"

The point is worth noting—especially by a profession that is acculturated to think that "bygones are bygones" and that "optimality" is the final word in morality. Sometimes it can be legitimate, even praise-worthy, to be outraged at the constraints under which one optimizes—and perhaps precisely *because* they are constraints. It is surely appropriate to grieve—even at an optimal death!

Of course, in strictly academic terms, the death of a scholar is neither here nor there. Much of what was most significant about Jim for most of the members of the Public Choice Society and the academic world more broadly is still there—in the twenty volumes published by Liberty Fund and the smaller amount of work he wrote over the last decade or so (much of which is collected in his volume *Why I Too Am Not A Conservative*). To be sure, Jim is no longer around to "correct" misinterpretations of his work—or better put, to explain what he thought was in his mind when he wrote it. But as it happens, Jim was not much inclined to revisit his earlier writings—unlike, say, John Rawls (someone who Jim much admired and with whose work he felt a very significant fellow-feeling). Rawls spent his entire life responding to responses and reworking his basic "theory of justice". Jim by contrast, was inclined to let his writings, once written, speak for themselves. I remember on one occasion (at another Liberty Fund conference) an eager young philosopher pointing out apparently inconsistent sentences in the *Calculus* and the *Limits of Liberty*—thrusting the books at Jim, with a triumphant air, the pages open at the offending passages. Jim just looked at him blankly as if he (Jim) couldn't see the point! "So?" he said.

In fact, given Jim's inclination to see each paper/book as an independent effort, it is rather astounding that his work shows such amazing coherence. For what is surely remarkable about Buchanan's work is that it all adds up to a single intellectual scheme—and indeed that statements of what constitutes that scheme are to be found in the very earliest Buchanan pieces.² All the major elements of the Buchanan corpus—the public choice theory, the constitutional/in-period distinction, the contractarianism (politics as *exchange*), the market failure literature (the famous externalities paper with Stubblebine and the theory of clubs), the treatment of public debt and taxation—seem to me to be properly seen as connected, as parts of a single “constitutional contractarian” political theory. There are, to be sure, some elements in Buchanan's work that don't quite fit that scheme. For example, although the subjectivist *Cost and Choice* book grew out of his work on public debt (his first major book, *Public Principles of Public Debt*) and though much of his work on methodology has a subjectivist flavor, I am not convinced that subjectivist element is central to his larger intellectual scheme. And the late career work on the ‘work ethic’ and more specifically on the “increasing returns” aspect of Smith's early chapters in *Wealth of Nations* (significant though that work is, in my reckoning) is essentially independent of the ‘constitutional political economy’.³

The inclination to see his papers and books as independent should not obscure the fact that Jim explicitly and repeatedly returned to particular central questions. But he did so in a manner that was free of any need to defend particular statements made in earlier texts. One of his favorite quotations (one he would often use in class) was a remark of Herbert Spencer's: “*Only by varied reiteration can alien concepts be forced upon reluctant minds!*”

This style of analysis—by “*varied reiteration*”—may occasionally throw up shifts in detailed position, or even contradictions (as noted above) that might better be understood as developments in his thinking, but this should not be regarded as a problem. Each statement stands on its own merits and in its own context, and the sum of the statements provides a means of triangulating the arguments.

In any event, the work is “out there” and the interpreters and re-interpreters can now get to work, uninhibited by the presence of the author looking over their shoulders. And in that (limited?) sense, there will surely be “life after death” for Jim Buchanan.

Jim didn't believe in life after death in any other sense. He was energetically antagonistic to religion in all its forms; and certainly regarded notions of eternal life as among humanity's more ludicrous fantasies.⁴ But he did care about the future.

The story of the “Buchanan riddle” is worth repeating here. Often when a potential “hire” presented for interview in Jim's office, Jim would confront the aspirant with the following riddle:

You have three mutually exclusive options:

1. You will for the next twelve months be *the* economics guru, invited onto television programs and pressed by the press for commentary on all matters “economic”;
2. In thirty years you will win the Nobel Prize (the time horizon was varied according to applicant age);

²The skeptical reader might like to consult Buchanan's 1949 JPE paper “The Pure Theory of Government Finance”.

³The increasing returns insights are also, we might note, quite ‘objectivist’ in character. Buchanan was, on occasion, perfectly capable of playing on both sides of the street in some of the major methodological divides.

⁴I can speak with some authority on such matters. Jim and I crossed swords over religious issues on a (small) number of highly memorable occasions. [See Brennan and Munger (forthcoming) for a couple of relevant anecdotes.]

3. In one hundred years, scholars will look back and say that you had done important work starting a century ago.

Choose!

To those of us who knew Jim's preferred answer, it was amusing to see the interviewee mentally negotiating the possibilities. Some clearly thought that this was a test in discounting, and opted for the first. Some thought it was a test of the understanding of convexity and chose the middle option. But as far as Jim was concerned there was only one right answer—only one approach that regulated the life of the true scholar—and that was the third. Never mind that you wouldn't be around to relish the vindication of the ages or to enjoy the esteem of your colleagues. You would have played the academic game by its own best rules—aspired to what was worth aspiring to!⁵

It is not an easy business to predict the future course of disciplines and economists are not kind to their heroes (as George Stigler was apt to point out), but it seems a fair bet that Jim will himself achieve that third outcome—at least if we “public choice-ers” do not lose sight of our own heritage.

Within Jim's writings, the treatment of the future was on its face ambivalent. At the aggregate level, as his work on public debt attests, he considered it a bad thing if the current generation paid for collective activities at the future's expense, unless the expenditure was one that would yield future benefits. His support for a balanced-budget provision in the constitution is well-known. On the other hand, at the micro-level, he believed in confiscatory estate and gift duties above a low threshold. He had no animus towards the self-made rich, but he did towards the second and later generation members of wealthy dynasties. You could, for example, always induce in Jim minor apoplexy by offering a favorable comment about the Kennedy boys—especially JFK. Although Jim's attitude was visceral, I don't think it was especially personal: it was rather Jim's sense of outrage that Papa Joe had purchased the White House as his sons' play-pen. Jim had inherited from his populist grandfather (Governor of Tennessee in the early 1890's) a set of People's Party prejudices—specifically towards the railway barons and the “Eastern establishment” and indeed to self-appointed elites of all kinds. In this sense, Jim was a staunch egalitarian. In one of his last essays, he refers to his own classical liberal “disposition” in terms of a “propensity to treat others as moral equals, intrinsically deserving equal treatment”. He thought that those who started life with substantial inherited wealth get an unfair advantage in the ensuing race: he believed staunchly in equality of opportunity and he held that inheritance beyond a minimal amount violated such equality. In this spirit, both micro and macro arguments are, of course, versions of a single idea—that each generation, collectively and individually, should stand on its own two feet!

Jim was a man with formidable energies and commitments. His working habits are (rightly) legendary. He would begin every day at the office at around six in the morning and not leave until after five in the evening, Saturdays included. He would routinely work in the evenings after dinner. The only concessions were a reduction to about four hours at the office on Sundays and, in later life, a short after-lunch ‘power-nap’.

He was moreover not just a scholar: he was also an institution builder. The Public Choice Center, the Public Choice Society, the journal, the entire ‘public choice’ movement, had Jim at its core. He had allies of course: most notably, Gordon Tullock and Betty Tillman (Jim's

⁵Many of us who were familiar with this puzzle-exercise, wondered, when Jim won the Nobel Prize, whether he was secretly somewhat disappointed to have won only the second prize. But of course, the options are mutually exclusive only in the thought experiment.

secretary and “Momma Betty” to generations of graduate students and Society attendees). But it was Jim’s drive and force of personality that gave primary impetus to all these related activities. He was the one who “made it all happen”; and we—along with those who will attend the meetings and publish in the journal as long as these things survive—are all his beneficiaries. We owe him much.

There is of course the smaller group of colleagues and ex-colleagues and visitors (many of them on multiple occasions) to the Public Choice Center in its various incarnations, who knew Jim at closer hand, who shared ideas with him and were inspired by him. Here too, Jim’s basic “egalitarianism” was evident. He took every idea at face value, independent of source. He would receive, and comment on, drafts of papers sent to him from people from all sorts of places. I never once heard him ask: Who is this person? What sort of a place is *this* university/college? He believed (with what turned out to be considerable justification) that excellent work could come out of the most surprising institutions and people—and he maintained a constantly open and receptive mind. People who visited the Center had the enlivening experience of being taken on their merits, of being treated as presumptive intellectual equals. It is not surprising that many of them wanted to return many times. For this smaller group, Jim’s passing is an immeasurable loss.

However, as Wordsworth puts it: “we will grieve not; rather find strength in what remains behind”. We will relish the privilege we have had in knowing him. And we shall do our best to emulate what was best in him.

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