

Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy

Volume 7, Number 6

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ISSN: 2159-0303

jhaponline.org

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Steven Methven. *Frank Ramsey and the Realistic Spirit*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. xv + 270 pages. \$84.99 Softcover. ISBN 978-1-349-56123-0

Reviewed by Cheryl Misak

Review: *Frank Ramsey and the Realistic Spirit*, by Steven Methven

Cheryl Misak

Steven Methven's *Frank Ramsey and the Realistic Spirit* is a landmark in the history of analytic philosophy. It is invaluable to the analytic philosopher who wants to understand the past and have it inform the future. It transforms our understanding of one of the most impressive members of the British branch of that tradition. Ramsey's short life (he died in 1930 at the age of 26), is immortalized in a disproportionate number of important innovations in analytic philosophy—Ramsey Sentences, the Ramsey Test for Conditionals, Ramsification, and more. But Methven shows that Ramsey did not just give us piecemeal bits of philosophical brilliance. Those who picked up his ideas (Carnap, Hempel, Lewis, Stalnaker, etc.) didn't appreciate that Ramsey had systematic approach to philosophy. It remains relatively unexplored and compelling today. Methven brings that "grand, rather than miniature" picture to light (2). In doing so, he makes visible a new and improved account of the history of British analytic philosophy. He shows how Ramsey, a paradigm of an analytic philosopher, adopted an approach in which "the philosopher is not an aloof, outside observer of a reality, the perfection of which is transparent and discoverable to transcendent reason, but a creature of the world, bogged down in its glorious mess and furnished with only very earthbound capacities" (5). And this was in the late 1920s, when his friends Wittgenstein, Russell, and Moore dominated Cambridge and when the Vienna Circle, also well known to him, was gearing up. Methven's book thus requires us to rethink one of the important periods in the history of analytic philosophy.

Most striking is the intellectual relationship between Ramsey and Wittgenstein. Ramsey was Wittgenstein's primary interlocutor and influence in the years between the *Tractatus* (which Ramsey translated into English at the age of 18) and what we now think of as the later Wittgenstein. Methven debunks the standard story that prior to 1929, Ramsey was thoroughly immersed in working out the details of the *Tractatus*, and only in the last year of his life did he start to move away from it. He shows us an alternative Ramsey, who from the beginning was putting forward a very different account of philosophy than Wittgenstein. Anyone interested in the development of Wittgenstein's ideas will find Methven's book of paramount importance.

The book is beautifully written, even when it deals with the most technical of topics, and the narrative is set up with convincing care and clarity. Its organizing concept is what Ramsey at one point called his "realistic spirit". Methven characterizes it as a "suspicion of the esoteric, the abstract, the mystical, and the mysterious", and as being set against the "pretence" that certain of our representations are true to the facts, in the way thought by those in Ramsey's philosophical orbit (2, 5). Russell, Moore, Wittgenstein, and the members of the Vienna Circle were realists in that they sought to show how our propositions are connected to the real, mind-independent world. But they were unrealistic in the important sense that Ramsey argued for. They were not focussed on how human beings reason and aim at getting things right. Ramsey objected to the independently existing propositions promoted by Russell and Moore and to the realist (and mystical) elements in Wittgenstein's attempt to correlate signs with objects. He was on the verge of taking on Carnap when he died (see [Misak 2020](#)).

Ramsey sometimes puts his point by saying that philosophy must be "useful". That term has been employed in distinct ways by various philosophers. Before Ramsey, the pragmatist William James said that truth is what is useful. Instrumentalists before and during Ramsey's time were arguing that the meaning of

a scientific theory lies not in its truth, but its usefulness. And after Ramsey's death, Wittgenstein would argue that meaning is use. Methven is excellent on the precise nature of Ramsey's employment of the term. In explaining it, he focuses on the late papers—the 1929 “General Propositions and Causality” and “Philosophy”.

“General Propositions and Causality” deals with law-like open generalizations and counterfactual conditionals. Methven shows how Ramsey rejected two positions as being meaningless—1) the view that relations between universals ground statements of law and 2) Wittgenstein's position in the *Tractatus* that a generalization with an unrestricted domain is an infinite conjunction. Ramsey, in contrast, argued that an open generalization which involves a causal law, such as “All humans are mortal” is not a conjunction of “Russell is mortal”, “Moore is mortal”, and so on, for all past, present and future humans. Rather, it is, in his words, a *rule for judging*, a rule we apply when we encounter a human or think past or future individuals. Those rules are evaluated in terms of how well they stand up to experience.

A counterfactual conditional too can be a cognitive, evaluable, attitude. Counterfactual reasoning is indispensable, for “We cannot blame a man except by considering what would have happened if he had acted otherwise”. Ramsey considered a man who doesn't eat a certain cake, and thinks that were he to eat it, he would be made ill. He argued that we have different “degrees of expectation” as to the outcome, and in disputing about the proper degree of expectation we can “introduce any fact we know, whether he did or could know it”. The fact that we can “dispute with him or condemn him” requires explanation, which is unavailable to those who think of conditionals in terms of strict logic, as opposed to what Ramsey called human logic (Ramsey 1929a, 154–5).

Methven's account of the connection between counterfactuals and laws will enable someone in the future (perhaps Methven

himself?) to bring together this under-recognized aspect of Ramsey's position on laws and counterfactuals with two famous aspects of it. Richard Braithwaite had decided not to include a note, “Universals of Law and Fact”, in the collection of Ramsey's papers he published shortly after his friend's death (*The Foundations of Mathematics and Other Logical Essays*, Ramsey 1931). But Braithwaite alluded to the note in his introduction, and in the early 1970s, David Lewis was “intrigued” and asked if he might see it. In the 1973 *Counterfactuals*, Lewis recounted how Braithwaite had “permitted me to read a short unpublished note, written by Ramsey”, and he went on in that book to expand upon Ramsey's idea and make the view his own (Lewis 1973, 73ff). That famous Ramsey/Lewis position is that the laws of nature are those that belong to the deductive system with the best combination of simplicity and strength. The second well-known part of Ramsey's view of appears in a footnote in “General Propositions and Causality”. He suggested that when someone evaluates a conditional, they are hypothetically adding the antecedent p to their stock of knowledge and then seeing if the consequent q would also be in their stock of knowledge. Robert Stalnaker in 1968 proposed a theory of truth conditions for counterfactuals on the basis of that footnote (Stalnaker 1968). What is now known as the Ramsey Test for Conditionals determines whether a conditional is acceptable, given a state of belief. We add p , hypothetically, to our given body of belief. If the acceptance of p leads to a contradiction within that body of belief, we make adjustments, as minor as possible, within the existing body of belief in order to restore consistency. Then we ask whether q is acceptable in the revised body of belief. What a fruitful project it would be to see how Ramsey's two famous ideas fit with the position Methven excavates.

Methven draws our attention to three contrasts between Ramsey and Wittgenstein. First, Ramsey held that the job of philosophy is not to give descriptive definitions of what we already mean by some term. Rather, we must give normative definitions

of what we ought to mean by a term. What we want is not a “nominal definition” but “an explanation of the use” of the term. The *Tractatus* treats “what is vague as if it were precise” and tries “to fit it into an exact logical category”. Ramsey, on the other hand, sees “the vagueness of the whole idea of understanding, the reference it involves to a multitude of performances any of which may fail and require to be restored” (Ramsey 1929b, 1–2). Statements such as these should excite the Wittgenstein scholar to work out Ramsey’s influence on him.

Second, there is a sharp contrast between Wittgenstein’s attempt at what Ramsey calls un-self-conscious analysis, where we try to divorce ourselves from the phenomena we’re trying to understand, and Ramsey’s self-conscious analysis, where we pay attention to the use of the sentence and the role it plays in our cognitive lives. As Methven so nicely puts it, Ramsey was set against “a perspective on the world which no human speaker can occupy” (39).

The third contrast involves Ramsey’s taking on Wittgenstein claim that his doctrines apply to ordinary languages in spite of appearances to the contrary. Wittgenstein had asserted that “All propositions of our colloquial language are actually, just as they are, logically completely in order” (Wittgenstein 1922, 5.5563). Ramsey thought this declaration was in tension with Wittgenstein’s idea that meaningful propositions are those which mirror the world. Ramsey says in his 1923 Critical Notice of the *Tractatus* that Wittgenstein’s assertion that his doctrines apply to ordinary language

is obviously an important point, for this wider application greatly increases the interest and diminishes the plausibility of any thesis such as that which Mr. Russell declares to be perhaps the most fundamental in Mr. Wittgenstein’s theory; that ‘In order that a certain sentence should assert a certain fact there must . . . be something in common between the structure of the sentence and the structure of the fact.’ (Ramsey 1923, 465)

That is, Ramsey agreed with Wittgenstein that his theory *should*

apply to ordinary language. The wider application increased the interest of his theory. But ordinary language is full of propositions that seem not to share the same logical form as concatenations of objects.

Other riches in this book include illuminating discussions of: how Ramsey’s view is and is not connected to the empiricism of Berkeley and Russell; Ramsey’s rejection of Wittgenstein’s sign/symbol distinction in favour of Peirce’s distinction between types and tokens; the relationship between Wittgenstein, Ramsey and Frege on sense; Ramsey’s relationship with Hilbert and his school; Ramsey’s contribution to solving the *Entscheidungsproblem*; how Ramsey differs from the success semanticists who took him as their inspiration; a Ramsey-informed reading of Wittgenstein’s idea of logical form; and Ramsey and Wittgenstein on identity and propositional functions.

Of all the gems, my favourite is Methven’s discussion of Ramsey’s account of belief as being both representationalist and functionalist. Ramsey famously argued in the 1927 “Facts and Propositions” that belief involves a habit or disposition to behave. He said that if a chicken “believes” that a certain caterpillar is poisonous, it abstains from eating that kind of caterpillar on account of the unpleasant experiences associated with that behaviour. But the chicken’s behaviour has to be

somehow related to the objective factors, viz. the kind of caterpillar and poisonousness. An exact analysis of this relation would be very difficult, but it might well be held that in regard to this kind of belief the pragmatist view was correct, i.e. that the relation between the chicken’s behaviour and the objective factors was that the actions were such as to be useful if, and only if, the caterpillars were actually poisonous. (Ramsey 1927, 40)

On Ramsey’s brand of pragmatism, the success of an action must be connected to the belief being related in the right way to the relevant objective factors.

Chicken beliefs are not “subject to logical criticism”—we are more interested in beliefs that “are expressed in words, or pos-

sibly images or other symbols, consciously asserted or denied" (Ramsey 1927, 40). Such beliefs are not reducible to behaviour, for there is still a mental factor or an internal state involved. In later papers, Ramsey drops examples about chickens and turns to examples of human conscious belief. In "Facts and Propositions", he gives a hint about how his example will evolve: "the importance of beliefs and disbeliefs lies not in their intrinsic nature, but in their causal properties, i.e., their causes and more especially their effects". The "intrinsic nature" of human beliefs might be the mental factor, but the behavioural factor is what is important to us in life and in philosophy.

It's not clear whether Ramsey, had he not died in the middle of writing a book about truth, would have gone all the way to adopting a pragmatist account of truth. But he certainly adopted a pragmatist account of meaning or content, i.e., what it is that makes one belief equivalent to another:

To be equivalent . . . is to have in common certain causal properties, which I wish I could define more precisely. Clearly, they are not at all simple; there is no uniform action which believing "p" will always produce. It may lead to no action at all, except in particular circumstances, so that its causal properties will only express what effects result from it when certain other conditions are fulfilled.

(Ramsey 1927, 44)

Beliefs are individuated by their causal roles (that's the functionalist element of belief), but cannot be reduced to their causal roles (for there is a mental element as well). On Ramsey account of belief, one aspect of belief is a connection to action, another is to report contents of mental states, another is a relation to something beyond us.

Methven argues that Ramsey's mental factors are representational states. He puts two pressing questions to Ramsey—questions about how beliefs can be both representational states and functional states: "How does one move from a characterisation of belief contents, first, in terms of causal role and, second, in terms of top-down referential relations between isolatable signs

and objects to a language?" "What makes it the case that I can know what you believe on the basis of your behaviour and that I can know what you mean by your utterances?" (156). The second question is a recognisably Wittgensteinian one. How interesting it would be to know if Wittgenstein put it to Ramsey in 1929, their year of intense discussion. (There is no evidence either way.) But Methven gives us some direction here. Ramsey answers both questions, says Methven, by starting from the assumption that a community of thinkers have some features in common and he points us to Wittgenstein's interest in *Philosophical Investigations* in how we get trained to use certain expressions. The very possibility of training or learning "is dependent on there being a range of behavioural responses, judgments of salience and recognitional capacities (I shall call these *natural reactions*) shared between members of a community of thinkers" (157). That is, the later Wittgenstein is very much like the middle Ramsey (there being no late work of a person who died at the age of 26).

Methven answers the first question in the negative, raising a bevy of concerns about Ramsey's view and concluding that it is unstable in a deep way. His argument is that it's hard to see how a realism about mental signs, states, or factors in a belief could be a *realistic* theory. Ramsey has required us to focus on the self-conscious experience of having a thought, yet it seems that his theory bottoms out in real constituents of the mind. Methven shows that Ramsey saw a similar tension right at the end of his life, as it arose for his position in the foundations of mathematics. In response, he moved away from the logicism he had adopted as an undergraduate and maintained through to 1928, towards intuitionism. Methven's suggestion is that Ramsey saw that his objections to open generalizations as infinite conjunctions carried over to the mathematical context.

It strikes me that there is a problem with that reading. Ramsey's arguments against generalizations-as-conjunctions and for the idea of generalizations-as-rules occurs in 1929, after his move to intuitionism. I've suggested (Misak 2020), rather, that Ram-

sey's move towards intuitionism was sparked by the kind of problem Carnap identified. Carnap said of Ramsey's attempt to save logicism in "The Foundations of Mathematics": "This happy result is certainly tempting", but "we should not let ourselves be seduced by it", as it smacked too much of "a platonic realm of ideas which exist in themselves independently of *if* and *how* finite human beings are able to think them". Intuitionism, Carnap said, has been called "anthropological mathematics", but Ramsey's logicism might well be called "theological mathematics".¹ This is a nice way of saying that his logicism was not realistic. Ramsey saw that and shifted to intuitionism, which was in line with his human-centred approach.

This small matter aside, Methven makes it clear that the instability in Ramsey's view is profound and of current interest. He argues that it is manifested in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein said there:

F. P. Ramsey once emphasized in conversation with me that logic was a 'normative science'. I do not know exactly what he had in mind, but it was doubtless closely related to what only dawned on me later: namely, that in philosophy we often *compare* the use of words with games and calculi which have fixed rules, but cannot say that someone who is using language *must* be playing such a game.—But if you say that our languages only *approximate* to such calculi you are standing on the very brink of a misunderstanding.

¹The context in which Carnap wrote was that Waismann had employed one of Ramsey's moves, arguing the axiom of reducibility cannot be a logical principle because it is not a tautology. He thanked Carnap in that paper for helping him think through the problem. But in a 1930 symposium (published the following year in *Erkenntnis*), Carnap made it clear that he was sceptical about Ramsey's attempt to fix the theory of types. He said that Ramsey "courageously" tried to solve Russell's problems by arguing that the circles of the set theoretic paradoxes are harmless, not vicious. On Ramsey's account, Carnap explained, when we say "the tallest man in the room", the description is fine as it stands, for the person described already exists. The person is simply singled out, not created, by the description. Ramsey, he said, tried the same tactic for properties: the totality of properties already exists. That was the "theological mathematics" (Waismann 1928; Carnap 1983 [1931], 50).

For then it may look as if what we were talking about were an *ideal* language. As if our logic were, so to speak, a logic for a vacuum.
(Wittgenstein 2009 [1953], §81)

Later in that book, he made his argument that no account of the meaning of an expression or the following of a rule is available to us by introspection. Methven rightly sees Ramsey's thoughts about normativity as connected to Wittgenstein's argument, and delivers a careful and insightful discussion of Ramsey v. Wittgenstein (with Cora Diamond along the way) on normativity and rule-following. Methven considers Wittgenstein's questions:

- What could we possibly be asking for when we ask whether there are better or worse ways of organizing our linguistic and inferential practices?
- How could we tell that our fellow game-players have grasped the same rules and are playing the same game as we are?
- What has gone wrong with someone who, in learning to add 2, performs the operation as we would expect, at every stage before 1000 and then gives an unexpected answer?

Ramsey had identified these issues in his 1923 Critical Notice of the *Tractatus*. As he put it in the 1929 paper "Philosophy", Wittgenstein's claim that language is in perfect order "is like saying it is impossible to break the rules of bridge because if you break them you are not playing bridge" (Ramsey 1929b, 7).

Methven picks up Ramsey's thread and discusses how games and inferences are in part self-conscious rules or psychological laws which must admit of contraventions. Ramsey's argument here is that realist views (in Methven's words) "are normatively inert"—"they offer us no means of detecting or correcting failures in our practices relative to the postulated reality, the very notion of correct or incorrect going on in respect of those practices is rendered a scholastic question, impotent to affect the

things we do or think" (39). There has to be room in a game for making sense of playing it badly or incorrectly. It cannot be an ideal game such that if one makes a mistake, one is playing an altogether different game. The rules that is, make sense of the fact that we can fail to inquire correctly—they are rules for the use of the expression. And here Ramsey's discussion of rule-following circles back to his discussion of generalizations. Grasping the meaning of a generalization is grasping a rule or map. That's how we use generalizations—as rules with which we meet the future. The same holds for inductive inference. We follow ordinary psychological laws, just as we do when playing the game of bridge. There is nothing guaranteed about these laws, nor about our knowing that we are following them.

Methven thinks that in the end, Ramsey cannot answer Wittgenstein's questions. Implicit knowledge of psychological laws will have to be evidenced by how one would react or by what one would say in various situations. Wittgenstein's questions undermine this type of knowledge—these psychological laws, and the knowledge of the subjunctive conditionals (what we would do or say in various circumstances) depend on further psychological laws. Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations go all the way down.

But Methven ends his book by saying, rightly, that Ramsey was interested in *which* rules to adopt, not how to ground our adoption of rules or the meaning of a rule. Our grasp of the rules, as Methven says, remains "cloaked in mystery", but we still might be able to discern which rules are best. The aim of language is not to picture facts "but to order our cognitive lives in a response to a regulative constraint on enquiry captured by the belief that there is one "true scientific system" to which long enough investigation will lead us" (232).² Given such an end, it

²Ramsey himself was happy to say that he got some of his best ideas from the founder of pragmatism, C.S. Peirce, including this one. I am myself not in favour of interpreting Peirce's pragmatism as being about the uniquely determined system at which inquiry is bound to arrive. Peirce only rarely

would seem that there would be better or worse psychological laws that we might adopt governing our practices of assertion. For laws set up expectations in the speaker and the audience, and expectations can fail to be fulfilled.

Another way of saying this is that Ramsey would have argued that it is wrong-headed to search for a bedrock that escapes psychology. He was explicit in the book he was writing when he died that all domains of science, including ethics and perhaps even aesthetics are both "normative" and "definable in (ordinary factual) natural terms" (Ramsey 1929b, 3–4). We must begin with natural terms, such as facts about human psychology, but we will not end with them:

The three normative sciences: Ethics, Aesthetics and Logic begin . . . with psychological investigations which lead up, in each case, to a valuation, an attribution of one of the three values: good, beautiful, or rational, predicates which appear not to be definable in terms of any of the concepts used in psychology or positive science. I say 'appear' because it is one of the principal problems of philosophy to discover whether this is really the case.

(Ramsey 1929b, 4)

The great challenge for the naturalist or pragmatist is how to take seriously the facts of psychology and biology without giving up on the normative, or what is really true or false, or right or wrong. Indeed, it is the challenge of being human.

Cheryl Misak
University of Toronto
cheryl.misak@utoronto.ca

characterizes the pragmatist account of truth in terms of what we are fated to believe, and I think his alternative expression is better: truth is what would be indefeasible, or not defeated no matter how much we were to inquire into the matter. But, as Methven makes clear, Ramsey will have seen Peirce employ the "one uniquely determined system" in the volume of essays to which he had access.

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