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Reviewed by Matthew Simpson

Review: *Frank Ramsey: A Sheer Excess of Powers*, by Cheryl Misak

Matthew Simpson

Frank Plumpton Ramsey is one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century. While his work in philosophy, mathematics, and economics is well-known and has had enormous impact on a variety of topics, until now there has been no full biography. Cheryl Misak's *Frank Ramsey: A Sheer Excess of Powers* fills this gap. It will deservedly be widely read, and will be the first point of call for those interested not only in Ramsey's life but also his work. Misak gives us an accessible introduction to Ramsey's many contributions across, as Misak counts them, seven fields of inquiry. It easily achieves landmark status both as a biography of the man and a work in the history of analytic philosophy.

Ramsey has achieved a somewhat mythical status, due to the extraordinary achievements he made in a tragically short life, dying shortly before his twenty-seventh birthday in 1930. Misak's biography covers the whole of his life, her aim being to "articulate [Ramsey's] quality of mind and heart" (xxiv), often interweaving these qualities, as Misak finds Ramsey's character and personality manifesting in his work.[1] Misak covers, in detail, Ramsey's most influential writings, as well as work that will still be unknown to many. She has recruited a number of experts, including eminent economists and mathematicians, to write 'guest boxes', which explain and contextualise Ramsey's ideas, and often chart their influence on contemporary work. We come away with a clear view of Ramsey's work, its place in the intellectual environment of the time, its relation to contemporary debates (many of which Ramsey anticipated or founded), and a vivid picture of the man himself.

Each chapter is generally more focused on Ramsey's life or his work, though the chapters about Ramsey's undergraduate life mix the two more. I will start with the portions of the book focused on Ramsey's life. Misak's copious research—aided especially, as she says, by research done in the 1980s by Laurie Kahn—lets her cover Ramsey's whole life and the lives of his family and friends. We get an image of a kind, genial, modest man, larger than life in every sense. Misak does not shy away from the less pleasant aspects of Ramsey's character and life, including most notably his debilitating infatuation with Margaret Pyke, and his hypocritical intolerance of his wife Lettice's affair with the writer Liam O'Flaherty. Misak succeeds in contextualising all these aspects of Ramsey's character, without excusing them.

The detailed portrait we get of Ramsey includes not just those close to him—his wife Lettice, his parents, friends like Richard Braithwaite—but the academic and social environments he thrived in—Cambridge and Bloomsbury. There is a marvellous chapter on Ramsey's stay in Vienna in 1924, which describes Ramsey's mental anguish and the psychoanalysis he underwent there, as well as delightful stories like Margaret Stonborough—one of Wittgenstein's sisters—taking a box at the opera to celebrate Ramsey's winning a scholarship. Notably, Misak does not neglect the women in Ramsey's life and in Cambridge at the time. While Ramsey had few female friends, Misak gives us full pictures of Lettice Ramsey and Elizabeth Denby—Ramsey's great loves—and the other female figures in his life including his mother, sisters, and daughters. She also highlights the women working in Cambridge, like Dorothy Wrinch, Joan Robinson, and Dorothea Morison (later Braithwaite), and women who are relatively unknown today like the Polish logician Janina Hosiasson.

Let's now turn to Ramsey's philosophical work—readers interested in his achievements in economics and mathematics can

[1] Page references are to Misak's book unless otherwise stated.

learn more about these from Misak's accessible explanations, and guest boxes provide more technical details.[2] Misak wants to set Ramsey's work in its context, which is particularly challenging partly because his work was so ahead of its time, and partly because much of his work was only recognised much later and therefore understood and applied in different contexts. It is fascinating to see how Ramsey anticipated ideas that now exist under different labels, for instance in quantified modal logic as we see in Timothy Williamson's guest box (262–63). Even those familiar with Ramsey will find things they had missed previously, thanks especially to Misak's exploration of Ramsey's lesser known works, and the connections she finds throughout his work.[3] There are several chapters covering Ramsey's personal and philosophical relationship with Wittgenstein, whose personality is done no favours by its juxtaposition with Ramsey's easy-going optimism.

Misak's overarching narrative is that Ramsey was, in a general sense, a pragmatist, concerned with answering philosophical problems with "solutions close to the human ground" (xxxiii). In my view, the elements of Ramsey's thought that Misak characterises as pragmatist form the most interesting philosophical subjects in the book. It is clear that Ramsey embraced some kind of pragmatism to some degree in various contexts. He uses the term "pragmatism" itself a number of times to describe his views, and as Misak shows was influenced by Peirce. Later he begins to give pragmatist theories of certain kinds of judgements: for instance in "General Propositions and Causality" (1929) he takes open generalisations to express inferential dispositions rather than represent distinctive facts. "Facts and Propositions" (1927) and "Truth and Probability" (1926) together provide the groundwork for a pragmatist view of belief which can account for partial as well as full belief.

Misak's interpretation of Ramsey as a pragmatist may sound suspicious to some. For in "Facts and Propositions" Ramsey clearly endorses a version of Wittgenstein's picture theory, for simple judgements at least. Ramsey posits "atomic sentences" in the mind, consisting of names like "a", "R", and "b", each of which "means an object, meaning being a dual relation between them" (Ramsey 1927, 41).[4] Put together in the right way, the sentence means that aRb. This is just a Tractarian picture theory: the belief represents a fact by consisting of components naming those elements and standing in the same relation as those elements. This is not a pragmatist approach: it is a classical representationalist theory. And Ramsey was clearly at home with the general Tractarian approach, given his use of it to explain logical truths (in "Facts and Propositions" for instance) and his attempt to use it to repair the logicism of *Principia Mathematica* (Ramsey 1925). This also explains why in his later work he denies that certain kinds of judgements are propositions: his conception of a proposition at that time was still a Tractarian one.

However, Misak points out that Ramsey applies the Tractarian picture analysis only to an extremely limited class of judgements, perhaps just observation statements. In "Facts and Propositions" Ramsey wants to fill in what he sees as the lacuna in the *Tractatus* regarding logically complex judgements. Both Ramsey and Wittgenstein recognised that words like "not", "and", and "or" are not names for things in the world, so such judgements cannot be given a straightforward picturing account. But Ramsey was not satisfied with Wittgenstein's alternative, as he argues in his critical notice of the *Tractatus* (1923). Instead, in "Facts and Propositions" Ramsey proposes what today we would call a functionalist or conceptual role approach, focusing on the causes and

[2] The philosophical parts of this book draw significantly on Misak's chapter on Ramsey in her *Cambridge Pragmatists* (2016).

[3] Some of the lesser known works can be found in the volumes edited by Maria Carla Galavotti (Ramsey 1991) and by Nicholas Rescher and Ulrich Majer (Ramsey 1991/1930).

[4] For simplicity I refer to Ramsey's works either by their original publication year or the year indicated on the reprinted versions; most of these are reprinted in Ramsey (1990).

effects of logically complex judgements. By the time of "General Propositions and Causality" (1929), Misak argues, Ramsey has extended this pragmatism. He now excludes from the narrow class of picturing judgements open universal generalisations, indicative and counterfactual conditionals, and causal claims. However, unlike the logical positivists, Ramsey does not deny that these claims are truth-apt, or cognitive: "Many sentences express cognitive attitudes without being propositions" (Ramsey 1929, 147).

One of the several interesting questions about Ramsey's work raised by Misak's exposition concerns truth. Ramsey consistently defended the deflationary idea that there is no gap between "p" and "it is true that p". He asserted this in the earliest work Misak discusses—his Moral Sciences Club paper "The Nature of Propositions" (1921), delivered when he was just eighteen years old—and it takes centre stage in his unfinished book manuscript (now known as *On Truth*). This is a fact about the nature of truth itself rather than the truth of certain kinds of propositions, so it seems to apply to all judgements if it applies to any. It is still there in "General Propositions and Causality" where Ramsey says that thinking someone's belief is right or wrong "is simply having such an attitude oneself and thinking that one's neighbour has the same or a different one" (1929, 148).

However, this seems to be in tension with Ramsey's pragmatist leanings, as Misak describes them. Misak points out how Ramsey wants to link a belief's truth with its success or usefulness (see e. g., 259, 387, 403) but not in a straightforward and implausible way: "the success of the action must be connected to the belief being related in the right way to the relevant objective factors" (259). Misak returns to this idea several times, discussing the notion of how well a belief works, whether it is reliable, and whether it is part of our "best system" (409). So we have the idea that a belief's truth has something to do with its success or utility.

So what's the tension here? Well, there is a deflationary reading of the notion of a belief working, or being successful or reliable. A belief that p *works* if and only if p. Misak takes Ramsey to suggest this:

> The good kind of pragmatism, according to Ramsey, holds that when we talk about the usefulness of a belief that *p*, we must consider whether or not *p* (387)

So asking whether a belief that p works comes to nothing more than asking whether p. If this is the right reading, then there is nothing distinctively pragmatist about Ramsey's view—it is just deflationism couched in different language. On the other hand, it is unclear whether any stricter notion of success will adhere to the deflationary principle: i. e., whether using such a notion, a belief that p is true (i. e., successful) if and only if p. It is hard to see how any distinctive notion of success can play any role here, without conflicting with the deflationary principle. This is perhaps what Ramsey wanted: success should involve the belief bearing the right relation to the objective factors, and this is understood in deflationary terms. For this reason, some (e. g., Mellor 2012) have argued that Ramsey's tying of belief to success is better taken as a theory of *what a belief is* rather than what makes a belief true. On this view, Ramsey's pragmatism is solely about belief, and he wasn't in any interesting sense a pragmatist about truth. This is just one interesting question Misak's book raises—philosophers interested in the philosophy of mind, logic, language, science, metaphysics, and even ethics will easily find others to ask.

Frank Ramsey: A Sheer Excess of Powers achieves what it sets out to do: it articulates the quality of Ramsey's mind and heart. It gives us the first full picture of this extraordinary man, a detailed introduction to his work in those seven fields, bound by an overarching narrative. Misak's guide makes reading Ramsey's work even more of a pleasure, partly as it reminds us what a virtuoso

performance we are witnessing. And it raises questions about Ramsey's work that will let us not only understand his work better but apply his ideas and insights to the many contemporary debates to which they are relevant.

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