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

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REVIEW ARTICLE

Cheryl Misak, Frank Ramsey: A Sheer Excess of Powers, Oxford University Press, xxxvi + 500 pp., £25.00 hb

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Cheryl Misak's *Frank Ramsey: A Sheer Excess of Powers* has already gained a lot of attention and well-deserved praise. It is the first comprehensive Ramsey biography, and its level of ambition is remarkable. As Misak writes in the preface, she has 'tried to satisfy all the parties interested in Ramsey for one reason or another' (p. xxx). His personal life and intellectual achievements are covered in impressive detail over 500 pages of sparkling prose. Misak is a great storyteller. This will remain the standard biography of Ramsey for the foreseeable future.

Among the book's many strengths are the lively and rich descriptions of the Cambridge milieu into which Ramsey grew up and in which he spent virtually his whole life (with short intermissions, including a rather miserable public school experience at Winchester College, and a six-month trip to Vienna in 1924 to get psychoanalysed by Freud's student Theodor Reik). We get to know the Bloomsbury group from the perspective of a man in his early twenties, who is initially confused by their sophistication, snobbery and free love, but is soon integrated into the circle. The characteristic mixture of intellectual acumen, programmatic nonconformism, cockfighting, sexual adventurousness and unreflective self-satisfaction which characterized academic societies such as the Heretics and the Apostles at the time is described in considerable detail and with delightful irony. John Maynard Keynes is generously portrayed, and his importance to Ramsey as a mentor and interlocutor is made clear—as is the significance of the wider research environment at the Cambridge School of Economics, which, besides Keynes, included such luminaries as Arthur Pigou and Piero Sraffa. The mathematics community, in which G. H. Hardy and J. E. Littlewood were the leading figures, was another important setting: Ramsey's undergraduate degree was in mathematics, and he did his daily teaching work as a mathematics fellow at King's college. Even more important were the philosophers: G. E. Moore at his vigorous peak, exacting, intense and sometimes explosive in discussion, but also willing to admit his own confusions and

mistakes; Bertrand Russell, living in London and hence less of a personal interlocutor, but still a crucial influence; Richard Braithwaite, three years older and a good friend, who published the first collection of papers by Ramsey a year after his death. And then, there was Wittgenstein—the thinker whom Ramsey took to be the greatest philosopher alive.

Ramsey's first encounter with Wittgenstein's philosophy struck as deeply as such an encounter possibly can. At his most formative age, merely eighteen years old, Ramsey was commissioned by C. K. Ogden to translate the *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung* into English. As Misak convincingly shows, the translation is Ramsey's through and through. If there is a co-translator, it is Wittgenstein himself, who made several important adjustments of Ramsey's initial text. We must now once and for all stop calling it 'the Ogden translation'; it is Ramsey's work.

In addition to this remarkable feat, Ramsey went on to write his famous critical review of the book, which displays a profound and comprehensive engagement with Wittgenstein's early thought. For the remaining years of his life, Ramsey would continue to reflect on and critically discuss Wittgenstein's philosophy. The two men met a few times in Austria, and after Wittgenstein's return to Cambridge in 1929—the year before Ramsey died—their ongoing philosophical conversation intensified in very frequent discussions. As Wittgenstein writes in his preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*, Ramsey's 'always certain and forcible' criticism helped him recognize mistakes in his early thought to a degree which he was 'hardly able to estimate'.

Misak spends large parts of the book trying to understand the exchanges between Ramsey and Wittgenstein and the mutual influence that the two men had on each other. Unfortunately, her discussion of these matters is marred by a rather crude and often misleading account of Wittgenstein's ideas. As rendered by Misak, the *Tractatus* preaches a form of empiricist foundationalism, according to which 'science is built up deductively from a foundation of logic and experience' (p. 394). Allegedly, this foundation is expressible in a primary language that consists of simple observational propositions, and the project of the *Tractatus* is an epistemological 'attempt to secure foundations for knowledge' (p. 368). Misak's Wittgenstein defends a system utterly detached from real-life human speech and inquiry, in pursuit of 'the holy grail of infallibility' (p. 278). His system is also meant to provide the ultimate criterion of meaningfulness, and anything that falls outside of it is nonsense. In case this viewpoint looks disappointingly austere, the saying/showing distinction is supposed to come to the rescue, by making room for something ineffable beyond what can be meaningfully said. Misak's Wittgenstein holds 'that there is something inexpressible yet important—that we can peer through the boundary of thought, glimpse the unsayable, and stand in awe of it' (p. 400).

This is an account with which very few *Tractatus* scholars would agree today (be they 'resolute' readers or not). Still, it provides the background of Misak's overall story about how Wittgenstein and Ramsey influenced each other:

> At the beginning of the intellectual relationship between Ramsey and Wittgenstein, the direction of influence was very much Wittgenstein imparting his vision of the logical structure of the world to Ramsey. At the end, it was the other way around, with Ramsey imparting his pragmatism to Wittgenstein.
>
> (p. 375)

According to Misak, it was Ramsey who made Wittgenstein think of meaning in terms of use, even if Wittgenstein explicitly linked the two only after Ramsey's death: 'Perhaps once the person who kept urging the move was dead, Wittgenstein could drop his defenses and take on the suggestion' (p. 366; cf. also p. 376). Also, in Misak's tale, Ramsey saw earlier than Wittgenstein that

> Wittgenstein's dumping of all propositions that go beyond the primary language into the bin of nonsense is far too crude. We need to think about the natures of various kinds of propositions that are not strictly true; the 'multitude of performances' of philosophy, ethics, generalizations, counterfactual conditionals, scientific theories, and so on.
>
> (p. 363)

This story seems plausible only because Misak's account of the *Tractatus* completely disregards how central the notions of *Gebrauch* and *Anwendung* are already in that work, and indeed, how closely tied these notions are to the distinction between saying and showing. In order to recognize the symbol in the sign, we need to consider its significant use (3.326), and a sign that is useless is meaningless (3.328). Showing is not something that goes on beyond language, but happens in the application of signs (3.262). The significance of these and many other connected paragraphs has been a central issue in *Tractatus* research over the last three or four decades, but there is no trace of these discussions in Misak's account. Another point that has been brought to the fore in recent research is that the author of the *Tractatus* is much more open to varieties of use than Misak suggests. Even if the use of propositions as pictures is the central one, his acknowledgement of the different roles played by definitions, mathematical equations, scientific laws, and so on shows that there is no crude 'dumping' of the sort suggested in the passage from Misak just quoted.

The problem is not just that Wittgenstein gets misrepresented. The more important point in the present context is that this misrepresentation makes it difficult for Misak to do full justice to the depth of Ramsey's critical engagement

with Wittgenstein's work. On her story, Ramsey is initially gripped by the foundationalism and logical absolutism of the *Tractatus* (even if he never accepts its alleged mysticism), but soon develops a totally opposite, fallibilist, down-to-earth, pragmatist viewpoint—a viewpoint which Wittgenstein then takes over and develops in his own way, but only after Ramsey's death, and without sufficient acknowledgement of the original source. This plot makes it very hard for the reader to understand how the exchanges between Ramsey and Wittgenstein could have been so rewarding to them both. As Misak describes it, Ramsey's pragmatism remains underdeveloped. It is heavily influenced by Peirce and by Russell's *Analysis of Mind* and has a vaguely behaviourist flavour. Meaning is associated with use, where the notion of 'use' is cashed out in instrumentalist terms (purpose, utility). Truth is associated with successful action, but the exact nature of this association is somewhat obscure. It remains unclear exactly which elements of this view Misak thinks were usurped by Wittgenstein—the details required to substantiate such a story of appropriation are missing from her account. Conversely, is it not very easy to understand why a genius like Ramsey would have seen Wittgenstein as such a valuable conversation-partner, given that his Austrian friend pigheadedly held on to his strange and decidedly nonpragmatist absolutism and mysticism.

Misak's account is a missed opportunity, for she is surely right that Ramsey's significance for Wittgenstein's philosophical development has not been sufficiently well understood and appreciated. However, the first crucial step towards such understanding must be to realize and acknowledge that the *Tractatus* already contains some important seeds of Wittgenstein's later developments, and that Wittgenstein's and Ramsey's relation was not mired in the stark and overly simplistic absolutism-mysticism vs. fallibilism-pragmatism antagonism which Misak foists upon it.

Even if her story about the Ramsey–Wittgenstein exchange plays a central role in Misak's biography, I do not want my misgivings about it to overshadow the fact that her book is in many ways a truly brilliant piece of work. Ramsey's achievements in mathematics, probability theory, economics, decision theory, and philosophy are nowadays relatively well known, but seeing them all listed and described here is nonetheless baffling. It boggles the mind how a man who died before he turned 27 could do all this pioneering work. Misak patiently describes Ramsey's accomplishments in accessible ways and has in some cases asked experts to write short guest boxes for readers who can digest deeper and more technical presentations. As she emphasizes, the most remarkable thing about Ramsey's achievements is how enormously fruitful they have turned out to be: many of his papers constitute founding documents for whole areas of contemporary research.

The story about Ramsey's private life is equally well told. In the preface, Misak recounts how, when she had already done plenty of work on the book, she discovered what she describes as a 'goldmine'. She found a letter from Laura Levitt Kahn to Max Newman written in 1982, in which Kahn told Newman

that she was working on a biography of Ramsey, asking if he had recollections of Ramsey to share with her. It turned out that Kahn never finished the planned book, but that she had collected material that would have been impossible to gather today, including interviews with people who knew Ramsey well: his widow, siblings, friends, colleagues, and Wittgenstein's nephew Thomas. Kahn willingly helped Misak retrieve and make use of this material. Misak has used it wisely to provide her beautiful portrait of Ramsey with an unforgettable directness and nerve. She also gives memorable accounts of many people around him who are less well known, but whose fates and personalities are deeply moving: his wife Lettice Cautley Baker, his second great love Elizabeth Denby, his brother Michael Ramsey (who eventually became Archbishop of Canterbury), his mother Agnes Ramsey, and many others.

At the end of 1929, Ramsey suddenly fell ill with what was at first taken to be ordinary jaundice. When it refused to go away and instead got worse, he went through surgery, upon which it was discovered that his liver and gall bladder were seriously infected. The operation did no good, but probably worsened his condition, and he died only a few days later. Misak discusses what might have been the cause of death and argues that Leptospirosis, or Weil's disease, is the most probable answer. If so, Ramsey probably caught it while swimming in the river Cam, something he loved doing. It would be a misunderstanding of the nature of his creativity to think that one can reasonably speculate about what he might have achieved and where life might have taken him, had it not ended prematurely in such a cruelly random fashion. Misak's biography shows how grateful we should be for the few years he was here.