

Chapter 29

F. P. RAMSEY

I. RAMSEY AS AN ECONOMIST¹

The death at the age of twenty-six of Frank Ramsey, Fellow of King's College, Cambridge, sometime scholar of Winchester and of Trinity, son of the President of Magdalene, was a heavy loss—though his primary interests were in Philosophy and Mathematical Logic—to the pure theory of Economics. From a very early age, about sixteen I think, his precocious mind was intensely interested in economic problems. Economists living in Cambridge have been accustomed from his undergraduate days to try their theories on the keen edge of his critical and logical faculties. If he had followed the easier path of mere inclination, I am not sure that he would not have exchanged the tormenting exercises of the foundations of thought and of psychology, where the mind tries to catch its own tail, for the delightful paths of our own most agreeable branch of the moral sciences, in which theory and fact, intuitive imagination and practical judgment, are blended in a manner comfortable to the human intellect.

When he did descend from his accustomed stony heights, he still lived without effort in a rarer atmosphere than most economists care to breathe, and handled the technical apparatus of our science with the easy grace of one accustomed to something far more difficult. But he has left behind him in print (apart from his philosophical papers) only two witnesses to his powers—his papers published in the *Economic Journal* on 'A Contribution to the Theory of Taxation' in March 1927, and on 'A Mathematical Theory of Saving' in December 1928. The latter of these is, I think, one of the most remarkable contributions to mathematical economics ever made, both in respect of the intrinsic

¹ From *The Economic Journal*, March 1930.

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importance and difficulty of its subject, the power and elegance of the technical methods employed, and the clear purity of illumination with which the writer's mind is felt by the reader to play about its subject. The article is terribly difficult reading for an economist, but it is not difficult to appreciate how scientific and aesthetic qualities are combined in it together.

The loss of Ramsey is, therefore, to his friends, for whom his personal qualities joined most harmoniously with his intellectual powers, one which it will take them long to forget. His bulky Johnsonian frame, his spontaneous gurgling laugh, the simplicity of his feelings and reactions, half-alarming sometimes and occasionally almost cruel in their directness and literalness, his honesty of mind and heart, his modesty, and the amazing, easy efficiency of the intellectual machine which ground away behind his wide temples and broad, smiling face, have been taken from us at the height of their excellence and before their harvest of work and life could be gathered in.

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II. RAMSEY AS A PHILOSOPHER¹

Logic, like lyrical poetry, is no employment for the middle-aged, and it may be that we have in this volume² some of the best illumination which one of the brightest minds of our generation could give, though he died at twenty-six. I do not think that there is any book of equal importance for those who would think about fundamental matters in a modern way, and the circumstance that much of it is tentative and inconclusive and not finally corrected is no impediment in a subject where an author's vanity in giving his finished work a rounded surface is pure deception.

Seeing all of Frank Ramsey's logical essays published together, we can perceive quite clearly the direction which his mind was taking. It is a remarkable example of how the young can take up the story at the point to which the previous generation had

¹ From *The New Statesman and Nation*, 3 October 1931.

² *The Foundations of Mathematics*. By F. P. Ramsey. Kegan Paul. 15s.

brought it a little out of breath, and then proceed forward without taking more than about a week thoroughly to digest everything which had been done up to date, and to understand with apparent ease stuff which to anyone even ten years older seemed hopelessly difficult. One almost has to believe that Ramsey in his nursery near Magdalene was unconsciously absorbing from 1903 to 1914 everything which anyone may have been saying or writing in Trinity. In the year 1903, in which Frank Ramsey was born, Bertrand Russell's *Principles of Mathematics* was published, giving a new life to formal logic and seeming to bring new kingdoms within its scope. This book raised certain fundamental problems without solving all of them satisfactorily, but for the next seven years Russell and Whitehead were more concentrated on the technical problem of exhibiting in their *Principia Mathematica* the actual links between mathematics and formal logic than on strengthening the foundations on which they were building. But meanwhile Ludwig Wittgenstein had been attracted to Cambridge by the desire to talk with Russell, and Wittgenstein was wholly occupied with the fundamental matters of logical analysis. His *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* was mainly worked out before the war, but it was not published until 1922, by which time Frank Ramsey was on the scene, aged nineteen, to assist in the preparation of an English version and to expound its obscure contents to the world. To-day, Russell is recognising that each period of life has its appropriate avocation, and that the fundamental exercises of logic are not for those who have reached their sixtieth year. Wittgenstein is wondering if his next book will be finished before time's chariots are too near, and Ramsey, alas! who entered into their harvest as easily as a young lord into his estates, is dead.

The first part of this book, comprising papers which have been previously published, consists in tackling fundamental problems at the point at which the work of Russell and Wittgenstein had left them. They are handled with great power, and at the same time elegance of treatment and lucidity, and probably with success.

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The second part, which has not previously been published, deals with probability and associated subjects, starting from a criticism of my *Treatise on Probability*, which was published in 1921. This latter part had not been published because it was fragmentary and not completely satisfactory. But it is of the greatest interest both in itself and as showing in some detail how far his mind was departing, in pursuance of certain hints thrown out in the first part, from the formal and objective treatment of his immediate predecessors. The first impression conveyed by the work of Russell was that the field of formal logic was enormously extended. The gradual perfection of the formal treatment at the hands of himself, of Wittgenstein and of Ramsey had been, however, gradually to empty it of content and to reduce it more and more to mere dry bones, until finally it seemed to exclude not only all experience, but most of the principles, usually reckoned logical, of reasonable thought. Wittgenstein's solution was to regard everything else as a sort of inspired nonsense, having great value indeed for the individual, but incapable of being exactly discussed. Ramsey's reaction was towards what he himself described as a sort of pragmatism, not unsympathetic to Russell but repugnant to Wittgenstein. 'The essence of pragmatism', he says, 'I take to be this, that the meaning of a sentence is to be defined by reference to the actions to which asserting it would lead, or, more vaguely still, by its possible causes and effects. Of this I feel certain, but of nothing more definite.'

Thus he was led to consider 'human logic' as distinguished from 'formal logic'. Formal logic is concerned with nothing but the rules of *consistent* thought. But in addition to this we have certain 'useful mental habits' for handling the material with which we are supplied by our perceptions and by our memory and perhaps in other ways, and so arriving at or towards truth; and the analysis of such habits is also a sort of logic. The application of these ideas to the logic of probability is very fruitful. Ramsey argues, as against the view which I had put forward, that

probability is concerned not with objective relations between propositions but (in some sense) with degrees of belief, and he succeeds in showing that the calculus of probabilities simply amounts to a set of rules for ensuring that the system of degrees of belief which we hold shall be a *consistent* system. Thus the calculus of probabilities belongs to formal logic. But the basis of our degrees of belief—or the *a priori* probabilities, as they used to be called—is part of our human outfit, perhaps given us merely by natural selection, analogous to our perceptions and our memories rather than to formal logic. So far I yield to Ramsey—I think he is right. But in attempting to distinguish ‘rational’ degrees of belief from belief in general he was not yet, I think, quite successful. It is not getting to the bottom of the principle of induction merely to say that it is a useful mental habit. Yet in attempting to distinguish a ‘human’ logic from formal logic on the one hand and descriptive psychology on the other, Ramsey may have been pointing the way to the next field of study when formal logic has been put into good order and its highly limited scope properly defined.

Ramsey reminds one of Hume more than of anyone else, particularly in his common sense and a sort of hard-headed practicality towards the whole business. The reader will find many passages which convey the peculiar flavour of his mind, the expression of which—though not included by him amongst the purposes of philosophy!—was a delightful thing.

October 1931

III. A SHORT ANTHOLOGY

Most of Ramsey’s writings, as published in the posthumous collection *The Foundations of Mathematics*, in the *Economic Journal*, and in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, are very technical. But amongst his notes, not published in his lifetime and none of them polished for the press, which have been brought together

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at the end of *The Foundations of Mathematics*¹ are some aphorisms and fragmentary essays from which I give below a few selections, because they may convey a little of what I have called above 'the peculiar flavour of his mind'; though nothing will ever fully convey to those, who never came into direct acquaintance with the workings of his intellect and personality as given to one in a single joint impression, why Mr Braithwaite could write with justice that his death deprived Cambridge of one of its chief intellectual glories. Let me also quote what Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson wrote of Frank Ramsey and of C. P. Sanger, another scholar of Winchester and Trinity, who died, though in his maturity, nearly at the same time:

It does not become a Cambridge man to claim too much for his university, nor am I much tempted to do so. But there is, I think, a certain type, rare, like all good things, which seems to be associated in some peculiar way with my alma mater. I am thinking of men like Leslie Stephen (the original of Meredith's Vernon Whitford), like Henry Sidgwick, like Maitland, like one who died but the other day with all his promise unfulfilled. It is a type unworldly without being saintly, unambitious without being inactive, warm-hearted without being sentimental. Through good report and ill such men work on, following the light of truth as they see it; able to be sceptical without being paralysed; content to know what is knowable and to reserve judgment on what is not. The world could never be driven by such men, for the springs of action lie deep in ignorance and madness. But it is they who are the beacon in the tempest, and they are more, not less, needed now than ever before. May their succession never fail!

1. *Philosophy*

'Philosophy must be of some use and we must take it seriously; it must clear our thoughts and so our actions. Or else it is a disposition we have to check, and an inquiry to see that this is so; i.e. the chief proposition of philosophy is that philosophy is nonsense. And again we must then take seriously that it is non-

¹ Published by Messrs Kegan Paul in 1931 under the editorship of Mr R. B. Braithwaite. I am indebted to the publishers and the editor for permission to reproduce here the passages which follow.

sense, and not pretend, as Wittgenstein does, that it is important nonsense!

‘In philosophy we take the propositions we make in science and everyday life and try to exhibit them in a logical system with primitive terms and definitions, etc. Essentially a philosophy is a system of definitions or, only too often, a system of descriptions of how definitions might be given.

‘I do not think it is necessary to say with Moore that the definitions explain what we have hitherto meant by our propositions, but rather that they show how we intend to use them in future. Moore would say they were the same, that philosophy does not change what anyone meant by “This is a table”. It seems to me that it might; for meaning is mainly potential, and a change might therefore only be manifested on rare and critical occasions. Also, sometimes philosophy should clarify and distinguish notions previously vague and confused, and clearly this is meant to fix our future meaning only. But this is clear, that the definitions are to give at least our future meaning, and not merely to give any pretty way of obtaining a certain structure.

‘I used to worry myself about the nature of philosophy through excessive scholasticism. I could not see how we could understand a word and not be able to recognise whether a proposed definition of it was or was not correct. I did not realise 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. Logic issues in tautologies, mathematics in identities, philosophy in definitions; all trivial, but all part of the vital work of clarifying and organising our thought.’¹

¹ *The Foundations of Mathematics*, pp. 263, 264. In these quotations there are small omissions here and there which I have not in every case indicated. I hope readers will be led on to consult the full text of the original.

2. *Philosophical thinking*

'It seems to me that in the process of clarifying our thought we come to terms and sentences which we cannot elucidate in the obvious manner by defining their meaning. For instance, theoretical terms we cannot define, but we can explain the way in which they are used, and in this explanation we are forced to look not only at the objects which we are talking about, but at our own mental states.

'Now this means that we cannot get clear about these terms and sentences without getting clear about meaning, and we seem to get into the situation that we cannot understand, e.g. what we say about time and the external world without first understanding meaning, and yet we cannot understand meaning without first understanding certainly time and probably the external world which are involved in it. So we cannot make our philosophy into an ordered progress to a goal, but have to take our problems as a whole and jump to a simultaneous solution; which will have something of the nature of a hypothesis, for we shall accept it not as the consequence of direct argument, but as the only one we can think of which satisfies our several requirements.

'Of course, we should not strictly speak of argument, but there is in philosophy a process analogous to "linear inference" in which things become successively clear; and since, for the above reason, we cannot carry this through to the end, we are in the ordinary position of scientists of having to be content with piecemeal improvements: we can make several things clearer, but we cannot make anything clear.

'I find this self-consciousness inevitable in philosophy except in a very limited field. We are driven to philosophise because we do not know clearly what we mean; the question is always "What do I mean by x ?" And only very occasionally can we settle this without reflecting on meaning. But it is not only an obstacle, this necessity of dealing with meaning; it is doubtless an essential clue to the truth. If we neglect it I feel we may get into the absurd

position of the child in the following dialogue: "Say breakfast." "Can't." "What can't you say?" "Can't say breakfast."

'The chief danger to our philosophy, apart from laziness and woolliness, is scholasticism, the essence of which is treating what is vague as if it were precise and trying to fit it into an exact logical category. A typical piece of scholasticism is Wittgenstein's view that all our everyday propositions are completely in order and that it is impossible to think illogically. (This last is like saying that it is impossible to break the rules of bridge, because if you break them you are not playing bridge but, as Mrs C. says, not-bridge.)'¹

3. *Is there anything to discuss?*

'Science, history, and politics are not suited for discussion except by experts. Others are simply in the position of requiring more information, and, till they have acquired all available information, cannot do anything but accept on authority the opinions of those better qualified. Then there is philosophy; this, too, has become too technical for the layman. Besides this disadvantage, the conclusion of the greatest modern philosopher is that there is no such subject as philosophy; that it is an activity, not a doctrine; and that, instead of answering questions, it aims merely at curing headaches. It might be thought that, apart from this technical philosophy whose centre is logic, there was a sort of popular philosophy which dealt with such subjects as the relation of man to nature, and the meaning of morality. But any attempt to treat such topics seriously reduces them to questions either of science or of technical philosophy, or results more immediately in perceiving them to be nonsensical. . .

'I think we rarely, if ever, discuss fundamental psychological questions, but far more often simply compare our several experiences, which is not a form of discussing. I think we realise too little how often our arguments are of the form:—A: "I went to

¹ Op. cit. pp. 267-9.

Grantchester this afternoon." B: "No I didn't." Another thing we often do is to discuss what sort of people or behaviour we feel admiration for or ashamed of. E.g. when we discuss constancy of affection it consists in A saying he would feel guilty if he weren't constant, B saying *he* wouldn't feel guilty in the least. But that, although a pleasant way of passing the time, is not discussing anything whatever, but simply comparing notes.

'Genuine psychology, on the other hand, is a science of which we most of us know far too little for it to become us to venture an opinion.

'Lastly, there is aesthetics, including literature. This always excites us far more than anything else; but we don't really discuss it much. Our arguments are so feeble; we are still at the stage of "Who drives fat oxen must himself be fat", and have very little to say about the psychological problems of which aesthetics really consists, e.g. why certain combinations of colours give us such peculiar feelings. What we really like doing is again to compare our experience; a practice which in this case is peculiarly profitable because the critic can point out things to other people to which, if they attend, they will obtain feelings which they value which they failed to obtain otherwise. We do not and cannot discuss whether one work of art is better than another; we merely compare the feelings it gives.

'I conclude that there really is nothing to discuss; and this conclusion corresponds to a feeling I have about ordinary conversation also. It is a relatively new phenomenon which has arisen from two causes which have operated gradually through the nineteenth century. One is the advance of science, the other the decay of religion, which have resulted in all the old general questions becoming either technical or ridiculous. This process in the development of civilisation we each of us have to repeat in ourselves. I, for instance, came up as a freshman enjoying conversation and argument more than anything else in the world; but I have gradually come to regard it as of less and less importance, because there never seems to be anything to talk about

except shop and people's private lives, neither of which is suited for general conversation. . .

'If I was to write a *Weltanschauung* I should call it not "What I believe" but "What I feel". This is connected with Wittgenstein's view that philosophy does not give us beliefs, but merely relieves feelings of intellectual discomfort. Also, if I were to quarrel with Russell's lecture,¹ it would not be with what he believed but with the indications it gave as to what he felt. Not that one can really quarrel with a man's feelings; one can only have different feelings oneself, and perhaps also regard one's own as more admirable or more conducive to a happy life. From this point of view, that it is a matter not of fact but of feeling, I shall conclude by some remarks on things in general, or as I would rather say, not things but *life* in general.

'Where I seem to differ from some of my friends is in attaching little importance to physical size. I don't feel the least humble before the vastness of the heavens. The stars may be large, but they cannot think or love; and these are qualities which impress me far more than size does. I take no credit for weighing nearly seventeen stone.

'My picture of the world is drawn in perspective and not like a model to scale. The foreground is occupied by human beings and the stars are all as small as threepenny bits. I don't really believe in astronomy, except as a complicated description of part of the course of human and possibly animal sensation. I apply my perspective not merely to space but also to time. In time the world will cool and everything will die; but that is a long time off still and its present value at compound discount is almost nothing. Nor is the present less valuable because the future will be blank. Humanity, which fills the foreground of my picture, I find interesting and on the whole admirable. I find, just now at least, the world a pleasant and exciting place. You may find it depressing; I am sorry for you, and you despise me. But I have reason and you have none; you would only have a reason for

¹ 'What I believe.'

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despising me if your feeling corresponded to the fact in a way mine didn't. But neither can correspond to the fact. The fact is not in itself good or bad; it is just that it thrills me but depresses you. On the other hand, I pity you with reason, because it is pleasanter to be thrilled than to be depressed, and not merely pleasanter but better for all one's activities.'

*28 February 1925*¹

¹ Op. cit. pp. 289-92.