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Margaret Paul

FRANK RAMSEY (1903-1930)

A sister's memoir

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F. P. Ramsey has some claim to be greatest philosopher of the twentieth century. In Cambridge in the 1920s he single-handedly forged a range of ideas that have since come to define the philosophical landscape. Contemporary debates about truth, meaning, knowledge, logic and the structure of scientific theories all take off from positions first defined by Ramsey. As importantly, he figured out the principles governing subjective probability, and so opened the way to decision theory, game theory and much work in the foundations of economics. His fertile mind could not help bubbling over into other subjects. An incidental theorem he proved in a logic paper initiated the branch of mathematics known as Ramsey theory, while two articles in the Economic Journal pioneered the mathematical analysis of taxation and saving.

Ramsey died from hepatitis at the age of twenty six in 1930. For some geniuses, an early death accelerates the route to canonization. But for Ramsey it had the opposite effect. Ramsey's death coincided with Ludwig Wittgenstein's return to Cambridge after his reclusive years in the Austrian Alps. The cult surrounding Wittgenstein quickly caught fire, and for the next fifty years dominated philosophy throughout the English-speaking world. By the time it subsided, Ramsey had somehow been relegated to a minor role in history, a footnote to an archaic Cambridge of Russell, Keynes and the Bloomsbury Set.

In some ways Ramsey and Wittgenstein had much in common. They were both inspired by Russell's Principia Mathematica and both saw their initial task in philosophy as improving its account of the relation between language and reality. But they had very different philosophical temperaments. Wittgenstein's first book, the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, added a powerful dose of mysticism to his analysis of language, and this gnostic strain became even more pronounced in the neo-idealism of his later philosophy. Ramsey, by contrast, saw the world through the lens of mathematics and fundamental physics. For Wittgenstein science was an enemy that threatened to coarsen the human spirit. For Ramsey it was a friend that could help us understand the place of humans in a world governed by natural law.

Over the last few decades interest in Ramsey has revived, and there are now collections of his published and unpublished works. But so far there has been no full account of his life. We can be thankful that his youngest sister, Margaret Paul, who died in 2002, spent much of her last twenty years piecing together her brother's history. The result, now published with the help of her own family, is a sensitive and philosophically well-informed memoir. (Margaret was herself an Oxford don; another brother, Michael, was the more famous Archbishop of Canterbury.)

One thing the book explains is how Ramsey managed to achieve so much so young. A combination of quite exceptionally mathematical ability and favoured background—his father was President of Magdalene—meant that his reputation preceded him into Cambridge circles. By the time he became a mathematics undergraduate it was generally recognized, not least by Ramsey himself, that he was destined to solve fundamental problems. At the beginning of his second year, he was deemed the only person with enough mathematical logic and German to be trusted with the English translation of Wittgenstein's Tractatus. In the spring term a review of Keynes's Theory of Probability pointed the way to the concept of subjective probability. The following year he published a long

article on the Tractatus for Mind, and then spent a fortnight that summer in Austria discussing it with Wittgenstein himself. At this point he was still some months short of his twenty-first birthday.

Ramsey was by no means all work. As his celebrity grew, so did his circle of acquaintances. Readers of conventional 1920s memoirs will be pleased to find Virginia Woolf, Liam O'Flaherty, Kingsley Martin, Lewis Namier and other luminaries making appearances. Not everybody is shown in a good light, but it should be said that for bad behaviour Wittgenstein was in a league of his own. When Ramsey first met him in Austria, he had given away his vast inherited fortune, and was refusing all offers of financial assistance. This occasioned many practical difficulties, to which he would react like a spoiled child, falling out with well-meaning friends who tried to help him circumvent them. Somehow Ramsey and Keynes managed to remain in his good books and arranged for him to visit Britain in 1925. He turned up shortly after Keynes's wedding to the ballerina Lydia Lopokova. Small talk was not Wittgenstein's thing. He quarrelled badly with Ramsey and reduced poor Lopokova to tears with his furious responses to her friendly remarks.

In 1929 Wittgenstein finally returned to Cambridge for good. He and Ramsey made up their differences and for the best part of a year resumed philosophical discussion. But it is hard to imagine that they would have continued in intellectual harmony for long. Wittgenstein's transcendental hankerings made him impatient with what he saw as Ramsey's 'materialism' and his 'ugly', 'bourgeois mind'. Ramsey for his part was irritated by Wittgenstein's exclusive focus on his own ideas, and felt that 'he is no good for my work'.

Over the past century the philosophical landscape has shifted. The central challenge is now to accommodate mind and meaning within the world uncovered by science, and hankerings for some higher perspective have been marginalized. It is good to be reminded how far Ramsey went in meeting this challenge. Perhaps he can now be restored to his proper place in the philosophical pantheon.