

**Review of Cheryl Misak’s *Frank Ramsey: A Sheer Excess of Powers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, 500 pp.**

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It would appear that Frank Ramsey is about to become famous, all over again. In the recent, and excellent, critical biography of Keynes by Zachary Carter (*The Price of Peace*), Ramsey is invisible—the index lists a single reference to him. The mention is that, along with Bertrand Russell, this “young Cambridge philosopher” helped usher Wittgenstein’s groundbreaking *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* into print in English (Carter 2020, 113). This may be the last time Ramsey’s role in the goings-on at Cambridge at this time can be so overlooked. Ramsey appears poised to step once more into the spotlight. And the reason is the new biography by Cheryl Misak, *Frank Ramsey: A Sheer Excess of Powers*.

There is a certain attractiveness to the idea of *genius*. How could Keats have written such a quantity of immortal poetry, and yet have died at twenty-five? In the same vein, we might ask how did Ramsey manage to make major and enduring contributions to so many disciplines, and have died just short of his twenty-seventh birthday? That is the teaser for this book: an up-close and personal look at genius in action. Thus, the book moves in two dimensions: it is a regular biography, but it is also a chronicle of how Ramsey’s ideas developed, and how they influenced (and were influenced by) the major thinkers who were his compatriots at Cambridge University in the nineteen twenties, between the world wars.

Misak asks, rhetorically, how can there be much of a biographical story considering how young Ramsey was when he died? and, how intensely involved must he have been—given the level of his achievement—with purely intellectual pursuits? Yet the biographical portions of the book turn out to be immensely interesting. This is partly because his life was surprisingly eventful, but also because his social and intellectual interactions included a host of vital players of the time: the philosophers Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore, and Ludwig Wittgenstein; the economists J. M. Keynes, Arthur Pigou, and Piero Sraffa; and the mathematicians G. H. Hardy and J. E. Littlewood. One might add to this list a number of indi-

viduals from the Bloomsbury group (in addition to Keynes of course). Despite his youth, Ramsey was on a level playing field and even dominated his interactions with many of these thinkers.

Frank Ramsey was born on February 22, 1903. He was born into a family that Noel Annan, a provost at King's College, Cambridge, called part of the "intellectual aristocracy" (Annan 1955). His father, Arthur Ramsey, was a mathematics Fellow and President of Magdalene College, Cambridge, and his mother, a social reformer, held a degree from Oxford. Arthur apparently was quiet and austere, and curiously (considering Frank's mathematical gifts) not the model for young Frank, while his mother came from an athletic and outgoing family. Intellectual achievement extended through the rest of the children as well: Frank was the oldest; Frank's younger brother, Michael, became Archbishop of Canterbury; Bridget became a physician; and Margaret, an Oxford economics don. The debates between the devout Michael and the atheistic Frank would continue, as friendly banter, throughout their lives. (Unfortunately for Michael, Frank had allies in both of his sisters.) Ramsey's early school years are covered in surprising, and surprisingly interesting, detail. Academically he was marked by a general precocity, perhaps most notably in mathematics, which in his later years was always referred to as the "work" (50, 85, 91) he felt he should be doing, but worried he was constantly neglecting. This was at least partly because his interests ranged so widely; but it also reflected a particularly intense immersion, by his college years, in philosophy (though he was first 'wrangler' in mathematics when his examination was revealed). Philosophy is thus one of the central concerns in the book. Cambridge was a hotbed of philosophical thinking at the time, with G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell already significant presences there, and with Wittgenstein on the horizon. It is Wittgenstein's intricate relationship with Cambridge that has much to do with Ramsey's, and this book's, story.

For the economic reader, there is the interest in Ramsey's relationship with Keynes (and Ramsey's rooming neighbor, Pigou). Keynes saw the promise in Ramsey almost immediately and brought him over to King's College (at Cambridge). In the exclusive economics club that Keynes oversaw (the meetings of which were held in Keynes' rooms), Keynes and Ramsey frequently had the last word. When Keynes had a tricky math issue before him, Ramsey was consulted. Keynes in a letter called Ramsey "certainly far and away the most brilliant undergraduate who has appeared

for many years in the border-county between Philosophy and Mathematics” (112). When Keynes published his book on probability in 1921, it was met with a chorus of praise. Keynes had said in conversation that probability was, at that time, on the level of astrology. He was out to rectify the problem. Bertrand Russell was typical when he called the book “undoubtedly the most important work on probability that has appeared for a very long time”, a book which “it is impossible to praise too highly” (113). Ramsey was not so sure. He reviewed the book, critically. And more than a year later Ramsey presented a paper to The Apostles, where he also offered a differing view of the subject. Ramsey thought Keynes claimed too much for induction (for instance, that it could be grounded in the “limited variety of properties in nature”, 115). He also thought Keynes’ belief in the logical properties of probability was ungrounded. Ramsey reserved this “frequency” basis of probability (Keynes’ emphasis, 117) for physics. But Ramsey was more interested in the subjective side of probability, the side he felt characterized human agency. He would go on to write an important paper on the topic. Keynes rebuffed most criticism of his book, but Ramsey’s troubled him. “Keynes had been hearing from almost everyone that the *Treatise* was a major achievement until it fell apart under the criticism of his favourite undergraduate” (118). From this point on, Ramsey was Keynes’ go-to person for vetting papers for *The Economic Journal*.

Misak is good on these intellectual arguments, as she is a more-than-adequate storyteller regarding the biographical elements. But she is herself a professor of philosophy, and it is the philosophical dimensions that are the true *raison d’être* of the book. The considerable biographical detail will hold the interest even of the casual reader—for instance, one who is merely reading to fill in gaps about the Bloomsbury group. I, for one, found all that material extremely diverting. But for the reader who has even a passing interest in analytical philosophy, or better, pragmatism, the book is a real find. Misak has an argument to make, one she has been honing over the course of several books. (To more fully investigate her arguments, I recommend her 2016 *Cambridge Pragmatism: From Peirce and James to Ramsey and Wittgenstein*, as well as her earlier 2013 *The American Pragmatists*. Both are exciting reads even for the non-philosopher.) That argument revolves around Ramsey picking up on elements from the American, Charles Sanders Peirce, and transforming and building upon them. This incorporating of American pragmatism into Ramsey’s thinking in turn exerted pressure on the analytical philosophy then

practiced at Cambridge (Moore and Russell), striking at the heart of some of their foundational propositions. But, the most interesting dynamic for Misak is Ramsey's influence on Wittgenstein, which she takes to be considerable, even definitive. Ramsey and Wittgenstein had an extended and intensive interaction, over almost all of Ramsey's Cambridge years. It was Ramsey, at the tender age of eighteen, who was tapped to translate Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (a title coined by Moore). He was, apparently, the only person who had the requisite knowledge of German, and the philosophical insight, sufficient for the task. His challenges to Wittgenstein, Misak argues, began to change Wittgenstein's views. And it is one of the tragic dimensions of Ramsey's early death that this influence, which Misak feels was guiding Wittgenstein in a productive direction, ceased to be.

But, as the above paragraph on Keynes and probability hopefully indicates, there is much for the economist in these pages as well. Ramsey published two mathematical papers in Keynes' *The Economic Journal* (in reality, two separate parts of one original lengthy paper). Misak calls them "founding ideas of the sub-disciplines of optimal taxation and optimal saving" (126). They still have currency. One of these papers—"A Mathematical Theory of Saving" (1928)—has been described by Partha Dasgupta as "one of the dozen most influential papers of the twentieth century" (314). It has come down to us as the Ramsey-Cass-Koopmans model. The other—"A Contribution to a Theory of Taxation" (1927)—has been called by Stiglitz "a landmark in the economics of public finance" (2015, 235).

I have given the impression that this is a book heavy on the academics, but that should be qualified. There is a lot of talk about Bloomsbury, and therefore about sexual freedom and the many instances that made up that freedom. There is unhappiness (Ramsey struggled coming into his own, as a sexual person). There is much talk of psychoanalysis, and of extended stays in Vienna to imbibe the same. There is, as anyone who has read Pigou's biography might guess, a great deal of walking in the mountains. There is Arthur's (Ramsey's father) tragic inattentiveness while driving his car. And there is Ramsey living openly with a woman while (mostly) maintaining his happy marriage. So, it isn't all just philosophy.

But the philosophy does make for compelling reading. And for the very academically inclined, Misak asks a handful of specialists to write on topics she feels less confident about, in a series of boxes scattered throughout the text. But on her own ground, Misak generates intellectual

excitement: Ramsey, after completing the translation of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, reviews it. For Misak, that review:

[...] still stands as one of the most important commentaries. Indeed, we will see that Ramsey's persistent objections to the theory of meaning and truth set out in the *Tractatus* were largely responsible for Wittgenstein's turn away from the *Tractatus* and towards what we think of as the later Wittgenstein. This was one of the most important shifts in the history of philosophy. Wittgenstein was himself largely responsible for the way philosophy unfolded in Cambridge and beyond. Ramsey's book, had it been completed, might have reset this major [...] course of philosophy. (xxvi)

So, the story of Ramsey and his influence is still being written. Ramsey's book referred to above didn't appear until the 1990's! The piecemeal publication of many of Ramsey's articles, and his early death, have somewhat dulled his impact. This has resulted in what one theorist dubbed "the Ramsey Effect" (xxv), where one's newly minted insight is found to have been thought of by Ramsey decades before. There is much that hasn't been mentioned. On the personal side, there is the interaction with the obsessed and often distressing Wittgenstein (waiting for his arrival in 1929, Keynes wrote to his wife: "Ludwig ... arrives tomorrow ... Pray for me!", 346). On the academic side, there are connections with the Vienna Circle, and through them or Sraffa or some other conduit, to influence on von Neumann and Morgenstern, and their joint book *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*. One might even wonder if Ramsey's subjective critique of Keynes' probability book had outcomes later, in the psychological and philosophical dimensions of *The General Theory*. But to speculate on these and other questions one must read this excellent book.

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