

OBITUARY

R. B. Braithwaite (1900–1990)

Richard Braithwaite, who was born on 15 January 1900 and died on 21 April 1990, was one of the most distinguished, influential and best-loved of our philosophers of science. He had been a Fellow of King's College, Cambridge from 1924, the Knightbridge Professor of Moral Philosophy in the University of Cambridge from 1953 until his retirement in 1967, a Fellow of the British Academy from 1957 and a Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences from 1986. In 1948 he became one of the Foundation Members of the Philosophy of Science Group, which later became the British Society for the Philosophy of Science, whose journal this is. He addressed the Group's second Ordinary Meeting on 17 January 1949 on 'The relation of theoretical concepts to empirical laws', and was the President of the Society from 1961 to 1963.

Braithwaite did much to foster the development and teaching of philosophy of science in Cambridge. He lectured on it for the Philosophy Faculty, of whose undergraduate course (Tripos) it was and is an important part, and he continued to do so even after his election to the chair of Moral Philosophy. His lectures on probability, in particular, were what inspired several of us to take up that archetypally Cambridge subject—in my case, after being hit by a large die thrown about by Braithwaite, who retrieved it with a roar of triumph when it came up 6. And he was just as keen to involve Cambridge scientists in the philosophy of their subject. In particular, he made it part of the Natural Sciences Tripos by working with the historian Herbert Butterfield to found one of the world's leading History and Philosophy of Science departments: a department of which he remained a strong supporter, and in whose seminars he took a regular and lively part until his failing health prevented him attending them only a few years ago.

Braithwaite's own work was in the great Cambridge tradition of scientifically informed philosophy exemplified by Bertrand Russell, Maynard Keynes, Frank Ramsey and C. D. Broad. Like Russell and Ramsey, he was a mathematician both by training and by temperament, an ability that enabled and shaped his seminal contributions to the philosophy of science and especially to our understanding of the concept of probability that occurs in the laws of modern physical and biological sciences. These contributions culminated in his book *Scientific Explanation*, published in 1953, a classic work on

the methodology of natural science comparable with Karl Popper's *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* and Carl Hempel's *Aspects of Scientific Explanation*.

Braithwaite's philosophical interests were not of course confined to science, although that is what will mostly concern readers of this journal. But all his philosophy was informed by a deep understanding of science that is still too rare among philosophers. Sometimes it was an understanding of the limits of science, as in his 1955 Eddington Lecture, 'An empiricist's view of the nature of religious belief'. Sometimes it was a striking insight into how scientific developments can illuminate seemingly remote areas of philosophy, as in his 1955 Inaugural Lecture on 'The theory of games as a tool for the moral philosopher'. As that lecture showed, Braithwaite was among the first to see the significance for moral and political philosophy, as well as for economics, of modern mathematical theories of games and decisions.

But it was the way Braithwaite philosophized that really inspired the devotion of his students, colleagues and friends. It was not just the clarity and directness of his writing, even when necessarily technical, although that is indeed a model for any philosopher of science. The real revelation was Braithwaite in discussion. That is what made the deepest impression on those of us who were privileged to see and hear it. Braithwaite's intellectual curiosity was boundless, his grasp of issues quick and complete, his comments pertinent, clear, forceful and original. His intense and exhilarating exuberance in argument was a continual refutation of the popular dichotomy of reason and passion. No one could be more cheerfully passionate than he in the disinterested and rational pursuit of truth, and no one was ever less concerned to impress, to dominate, to preach or to be taken for a guru. Nor would he tolerate those traits in others. He was a great scourge of the obscure, the pretentious, the self-important, the sycophantic, the complacent and the slapdash. To all those vices I suppose philosophy is always prone, and to all of them Braithwaite's incisive irreverence was always the perfect antidote. Once, I recall, exasperated by a speaker's attempts to justify the obscurity of his views by analogy with that of quantum theory, Braithwaite exploded: 'Look here, I'm sorry, there's never been anything to be said for quantum theory except the *facts*.' Those of us who learned from Braithwaite that there is nothing to be said for philosophy either except the arguments—and that that is plenty—miss him greatly. We owe it to him, and to our subject, to carry on his good work.

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