

Ramsey, Frank Plumpton (1903–1930), mathematician and philosopher, was born on 22 February 1903 at 71 Chesterton Road, Chesterton, Cambridge, the eldest of the two sons and two daughters of Arthur Stanley Ramsey (1867–1954), President (i.e. Vice-Master) and mathematics tutor of Magdalene College Cambridge, and his wife Agnes Mary Wilson (1875–1927). He was baptised at Horbling Church, Horbling, at Easter 1903, and remained a Christian until he rejected religion in his teens.

As a child Ramsey lived with his parents in ‘Howfield’, Buckingham Road, Cambridge. He was educated at Winchester College (1915–1920) and Trinity College Cambridge (1920–1923), where he read mathematics, winning an entrance Scholarship, and becoming a Senior Scholar in 1921 and a Wrangler (i.e. best candidate) in the University’s Mathematical Tripos in 1923. In 1924 he became a Fellow of King’s College Cambridge (only the second non-Kingsman to do so), and in 1926 a University Lecturer in Mathematics, a post he held until his death. On 21 August 1925 he married Lettice Cautley Baker (1898–1985), psychologist, at the St Pancras Registry Office in London. They lived in Cambridge, first in a flat in Hoop Chambers, Bridge Street, and then, from about April 1927, at 4 Mortimer Road. They had two daughters.

Ramsey was tall (6'3") and bulky, short-sighted, wore steel-rimmed spectacles and appeared clumsy but was not – he was for example a good tennis player. He produced his extraordinary output of major contributions to mathematics, logic, philosophy and economics by working for about four hours a day, mostly in the mornings, since he found it too exacting to work longer. His afternoons and evenings were often spent walking and listening to records. He listened a lot to classical music, both live and recorded, went to the opera in London, and was a keen hill-walker. He was a quiet, modest man, easy-going and uninhibited, with a loud infectious laugh, his tolerance and good humour enabling him to disagree strongly without giving or taking offence: for example with his brother Michael, whose ordination (he went on to become Archbishop of Canterbury) Frank, as a militant atheist, naturally regretted.

Ramsey’s main interest in mathematics was in its foundations, his ‘The

foundations of mathematics' (read to the London Mathematical Society on 12 November 1925) being the culmination of the reduction of mathematics to logic undertaken in Russell's and Whitehead's *Principia Mathematica* (1913). On mathematics itself he published only eight pages, 'On a problem of formal logic' (read to the London Mathematical Society on 13 December 1928), but this has since become the basis of a branch of mathematics known as Ramsey theory.

Ramsey also worked on economics, encouraged by his friend and contemporary John Maynard Keynes, who edited *The Economic Journal*. His economics papers, 'A contribution to the theory of taxation' (1927) and 'A mathematical theory of saving' (1928), published there, founded two branches of the subject – optimal taxation and optimal accumulation – which took off in the nineteen-sixties and seventies.

Keynes also helped to persuade King's College to make Ramsey a Fellow, despite his attacks on the concept of probability (as an *a priori* measure of the extent to which evidence supports a hypothesis) developed in Keynes' *A Treatise on Probability* (1921), which is still influential. After criticising this concept so effectively that Keynes himself abandoned it, Ramsey worked out his own ideas on the subject in 'Truth and probability', written at the end of 1926. This classic paper, only published after his death, laid the foundations of modern subjective interpretations of probability, and related theories of games and decision making, foundations which were not rediscovered and built on until the nineteen-forties.

Ramsey's real vocation, however, was philosophy, influenced especially by Russell and the early Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), which he was the first to translate into English from the original German. But he later encouraged Wittgenstein to reject its key doctrines, such as its claim to have *shown* a relation, of language to the world, which cannot be *stated*: for, as Ramsey remarked in 'General propositions and causality', written in 1929, 'What we can't say we can't say, and we can't whistle it either' (Wittgenstein was a famous whistler).

Ramsey's own work in philosophy, besides the pieces mentioned above, included

published papers on ‘Universals’ (1925), and ‘Facts and propositions’ (1927), and notes on ‘Universals of law and of fact’, written in 1928, ‘Theories’ and ‘Knowledge’, written in 1929. Like his work on economics and probability, all these notes and papers were way ahead of their time. ‘Universals’, for example, challenges the *a priori* status, still unquestioned by most philosophers, of the distinction between universal properties (like being wise) and the particular entities (like Socrates) which have them.

‘Universals of law and of fact’ has had more, if still belated, success. In it Ramsey advocated a new theory of what distinguishes laws of nature like ‘All men are mortal’ from universal statements that are only accidentally true. This theory, which Ramsey himself rejected a year later in ‘General propositions and causality,’ is now widely accepted as the best account of natural laws in the empiricist tradition of David Hume. ‘Theories’, similarly, has revolutionised our understanding of how scientific theories – identified with what are now called their ‘Ramsey sentences’ – are related to the laws and observations they explain.

‘Facts and propositions’ is no less famous for its new and still contested reduction of the analysis of truth to that of belief, via the fact that e.g. (Ramsey’s example) ‘It is true that Caesar was murdered’ means no more than that Caesar was murdered. It also anticipates much later and equally contentious theories of the mind by trying to define our beliefs by how they make us act – just as his fragmentary note on ‘Knowledge’ does by equating knowledge with true beliefs that have been reliably formed, as opposed to ones their holders could justify.

Several of Ramsey’s papers were prepared for publication only after his death, in *The Foundations of Mathematics* (1930), edited by his friend R. B. Braithwaite. All the philosophical works mentioned here are contained in his *Philosophical Papers* (1990), edited by D. H. Mellor, which also includes his work on the foundations of mathematics and a bibliography of his writings.

The present influence of Ramsey’s work in mathematics, logic, economics and philosophy makes it hard to understand why it took so long to be taken up. There

seem to have been several reasons for this. One is that he was no controversialist, and never pressed his own views. Another is the sheer difficulty of the topics he tackled and his original and unorthodox conclusions and arguments. A third is the fact that the very simplicity of his writing tends to conceal its originality and importance. And finally, those in Cambridge who understood his ideas and might have developed them were, for many years after his death, seduced into following the more charismatic character and enigmatic doctrines of Wittgenstein. Now, however, Ramsey has come into his own, and is recognised as the founder of whole areas of mathematics and economics besides major theories in philosophy.

After a long attack of jaundice, Ramsey died on 19 January 1930 in Guy's Hospital London of a combination of the undiagnosed hepatitis that had caused his symptoms and the effects of an operation designed to deal with their supposed cause. He was buried with his mother and father in the St. Giles' and St. Peter's Burial Ground (now the Ascension Parish Burial Ground), All Souls' Lane, Huntingdon Road, Cambridge.

J. M. Keynes, *A Treatise on Probability* (1921).

F. P. Ramsey, 'A contribution to the theory of taxation', *The Economic Journal*, 37 (1927), 47–61.

F. P. Ramsey, 'A mathematical theory of saving', *The Economic Journal*, 38 (1928), 543–9.

F. P. Ramsey, 'On a problem of formal logic', *Proceedings of the London Mathematical Society*, 30 (1929–30), 264–86.

F. P. Ramsey, *The Foundations of Mathematics and other Logical Essays*, ed. R. B. Braithwaite (1930).

F. P. Ramsey, *Philosophical Papers*, ed. D. H. Mellor, (1990).

A. N. Whitehead, and B. Russell, *Principia Mathematica*, (1913).

L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, (1922).

Contributor: David Hugh Mellor: name to appear as D. H. Mellor

Words in article: 1264.

Sources Sheet

MATERIAL USED IN THE PREPARATION OF THE ARTICLE

- 1 *D. H. Mellor, 'F. P. Ramsey', *Philosophy*, 70 (1995), 243–62.
- 2 *F. P. Ramsey, *Philosophical Papers*, ed. D. H. Mellor (1990).
- 3 R. B. Braithwaite, Introduction to F. P. Ramsey, *The Foundations of Mathematics and other Logical Essays*, ed. R. B. Braithwaite (1931), ix–xiv.
- 4 D. H. Mellor, L. Mirsky, T. J. Smiley, and Richard Stone, Introductions to F. P. Ramsey, *Foundations: Essays in Philosophy, Logic, Mathematics and Economics*, ed. D. H. Mellor (1978), 1–16.
- 5 Private information.

ARCHIVAL DEPOSITS

Named collections of MSS, papers ...

Ramsey Papers, Special Collections Department, Pittsburgh University Library.

Ramsey Papers, Modern Archive, Library of King's College Cambridge.

Comment: The Pittsburgh papers are professional, the King's papers personal.

Important deposits of MSS, papers ...

Ramsey letters in the Sprott and Keynes collections, Library of King's College Cambridge.

Microfilms of the Pittsburgh collection, MS 6634–35 and 8602, Cambridge University Library.

Comment: The Cambridge University Library microfilms include a few manuscripts of published material not in the Pittsburgh collection.

Sound archives

'Better than the stars', a Radio biography of F. P. Ramsey written and presented by D. H. Mellor in 1978, with contributions by Ramsey's relatives, friends and colleagues: Ua.1.73 (transcript), CT1507 (sound cassette), Cambridge University Library.

Comment: Most of the material in this broadcast has been reused in the article 'F. P. Ramsey' listed above.

LIKENESSES

Mrs Lettice Ramsey, photograph, date not known, Philosophy Library, Cambridge University, reproduced on jacket of F. P. Ramsey, *Philosophical Papers* and used as a frontispiece to D. H. Mellor, ed. *Prospects for Pragmatism: Essays in memory of F. P. Ramsey* (1980).

WEALTH AT DEATH

Not known to me.

Information Sheet

NAMES AND TITLES

Main name: Ramsey, Frank Plumpton

No variants or titles

BIRTH and BAPTISM

Sex: Male

Birth: 22/2/1903, 71 Chesterton Road, Cambridge, UK (parents' home).

Source: Mrs Jane Burch (daughter) from birth certificate.

Baptism: Easter 1903, Horbling Church, Horbling.

Source: Mrs Margaret Paul (sister) from father.

LIFE and CAREER

Education: Winchester College (1915–20), Trinity College Cambridge (1920–23)

Spouse: Ramsey, Mrs Lettice Cautley, *née* Baker (1898–1985); married 21 August 1925, St Pancras Registry Office.

Source: Jane Burch from birth, marriage and death certificates.

Places of settled residence:

Childhood: ‘Howfield’, Buckingham Road, Cambridge (with parents).

Married: (a) Flat in Hoop Chambers, Bridge Street, Cambridge to about April 1927;
(b) 4 Mortimer Road, Cambridge.

Comment: Information from Jane Burch who recalls her mother saying that they moved to Mortimer Road ‘when you were six months old’.

Religious affiliation: Church of England until his teens; thereafter none.

Comments: Reported by his wife and brother (Lord Ramsey, later Archbishop of Canterbury) to have been religious until he rejected religion completely in his teens.

Geographical and/or ethnic interest:

by descent: White, British (father grew up in Batley, Yorkshire).

by place of birth: Cambridge,

by habitual residence: Cambridge.

by professional association: Cambridge.

Comment: Father’s place of childhood reported by Jane Burch.

DEATH and BURIAL

Death: 19/1/1930 Guy’s Hospital London.

Cause: (1a) Cholangitis, (1b) infection of smaller bile duct, (2) Hepatitis.

Source: Jane Burch from death certificate.

Comment: Death followed an operation based on a misdiagnosis of the cause of jaundice and resulted from the combined effects of hepatitis (its actual cause) and complications following the operation.

Burial: 21/1/1930 (?), St Giles’ and St Peter’s Burial Ground (now called Ascension Parish Burial Ground), All Souls Lane, Huntingdon Road, Cambridge.

Source: of date, Margaret Paul (who however originally thought the burial was at Golders Green Cemetery); of place, personal inspection of inscription on tombstone of grave shared with mother and, later, father. Jane Burch did not know either date or place of burial.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Name for publication: D. H. Mellor.

PERSONAL

Surname: Mellor.

Forenames: David Hugh.

Title: Professor.

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION

Post: Professor of Philosophy.

Institution: Cambridge University.

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

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New Dictionary of National Biography: Ramsey, Frank Plumpton