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HUGH MELLOR ON

Frank Ramsey on Truth

David Edmonds: *Who was the greatest Cambridge philosopher of the twentieth century? Wittgenstein? Bertrand Russell? G. E. Moore? Hugh Mellor, emeritus professor at Cambridge, wants to nominate a figure virtually unknown outside academia: Frank Ramsey. Ramsey, the son of a mathematician, himself became a mathematician, though his awesome intellectual talents were applied to many areas: he learnt German in next to no time, and translated Wittgenstein's famous book, the* Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, *when he was just 19. He died seven years later, at the peak of his powers. His brother, Michael, who became the 100th Archbishop of Canterbury, said Frank 'was interested in almost everything'.*

Nigel Warburton: *We're going to focus on Frank Ramsey on truth. Could you say something about who Frank Ramsey was?*

Hugh Mellor: Frank Ramsey was born in 903, the son of a mathematics don at Cambridge. He got to know quite a lot of mathematicians, philosophers, and economists in Cambridge—contemporaries of his. Then he studied Maths at Trinity College, Cambridge, and graduated in 923 with the top First in the subject—he was a brilliant mathematician. He won a research fellowship at King's College a year later, and became a University lecturer in mathematics in 926. That was the post he held until he died, just before his 27th birthday in 930, which makes it all the more remarkable how many other things he did in that very short life.

NW: *What else* did *he do?*

HM: He founded a branch of mathematics which is now called 'Ramsey Theory'—don't ask me to explain it, I don't understand it. He founded two branches of economics—Keynes asked him to write articles in the *Economics Journal*. One is a theory of savings, the study of how much of its income a nation should save, and the other is a theory of optimal taxation, that is, if you need to raise a given amount of revenue in tax, how should you do that while minimising the loss of utility to the people who are paying the taxes? Then he wrote an article which is the foundation of modern subjective decision theory. To do this all before he was *27* just shows what a waste it is he died then.

NW: *Why did he die so young?*

HM: He developed the symptoms of jaundice, but it was misdiagnosed as gallstones.

In fact, he had hepatitis, and the combination of hepatitis and being operated on for gallstones killed him.

NW: *We're going to focus on his work on truth. In general terms, what did he say about truth?*

HM: His work on truth is an important part of what he did most of—even though he was a lecturer in mathematics—which was work on all sorts of aspects of philosophy. On truth he developed a theory which has become famous—or notorious, depending whether you like it or not—which is often now called the Redundancy Theory. Most people who wrote about truth thought you needed a theory of what truth is, just as you might need a theory of what stars are, for example, so that you know what you're talking about. But Ramsey's view was that you don't need a theory of truth: the concept, he said, is really redundant. He gave as an example: 'If you say "it's true that Caesar was murdered" that just means "Caesar was murdered".' The concept of truth here is redundant.

NW: *Does that mean he didn't have any time for people who ask 'what is truth?'*

HM: It's true that he wouldn't have been very impressed by Pilate's question. He thought what was more important was to answer the question of what it is to believe one truth rather than another—what's the difference between different truths? What's the difference between *kinds* of truth: for example, between mathematical truths on the one hand, and scientific ones on the other?

NW: *So, he's a kind of zoologist of truth in the sense that he's looking to identify all the different species of truth.*

HM: That's right, and he's also interested in why truth matters. Why, in other words, if you're going to have a belief about something it's a good idea to have a true one.

NW: *One area in which people talk a lot about truth is mathematics. Truths of mathematics seem to be necessarily true. What did he say about mathematical truth?*

HM: He was in Cambridge at the same time as Bertrand Russell, after Russell and A. N. Whitehead had written *Principia Mathematica*, their famous work on the foundations of mathematics, in the 90s. Their view of mathematics was that it consisted of propositions which were completely general, not about any one thing or kind of thing in particular, but all kinds of things. Ramsey thought that wasn't enough. Take a proposition like 'any two things dier in at least 30 ways', which is completely general and, he said, might well be true. But, even if it is true, it isn't mathematics because it *could* be false. So he tried to plug this gap by taking over from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* the idea that a necessary truth, or a logical truth, is one which can't be false: a proposition such as, for example, 'it's raining or it's not', which is going to be true whatever the weather. 'Either it's raining or it's not' isn't a *mathematical* truth, though, because it's not general, it's too

specific.

So, Ramsey's view was that you put the two together, so that mathematical truths are truths which are completely general but also logical, i.e. tautological: they can't be false. That was the way in which Ramsey fixed a defect in *Principia Mathematica*.

NW: *So what you're saying is that for Ramsey '2 + 3 = 5' isn't about adding two apples to three apples and getting five apples. It operates at a very general level. But it's also tautological: so it's the equivalent of saying that A = A.*

HM: Yes, that's right, it can't possibly be false. And it's the combination of those two features—of being completely general and of being necessarily true—that makes it mathematical.

NW: *Obviously, not all truths are mathematical truths. What did Ramsey say about contingent truths, the truths that could have been otherwise?*

HM: He said that what matters about beliefs that *could* have been false is that you want the ones you have to be true; and his question was, 'Why?' Answering that question, he said, will tell you what it is that distinguishes one truth from another.

NW: *Could you give an example of that?*

HM: Suppose I want to go and buy some milk from a local shop. Of course, I'm not going to go until and unless I believe the shop is open. That's the function of belief: a belief that a shop is open and sells milk, combined with my desire to get some milk, will get me to go to the shop. But unless those beliefs—that the shop is open, and sells milk—are true, then I won't get what I went to get, namely milk. So, for Ramsey, what's good about having true beliefs is that if you act on your beliefs when they're true you'll get what you want to get, and if you act on them when they're false, you won't.

NW: *That's surely not true, though, is it, because you can act on false beliefs and by a bit of luck get what you want?*

HM: You never act on just one belief: you act on a combination of beliefs, and if they're all true you *will* get what you want. If two of them are false then they may, as it were, cancel out. But truth is the property of beliefs, says Ramsey, which *ensures* that if you act on beliefs all of which have that property you will get what you want.

NW: *So you can only be sure of getting what you want if you believe true things.*

HM: That's right.

NW: *Now how does that amount to an improvement on what went before?*

HM: Ramsey builds this idea up into a theory which has since been called Success

Semantics, which says that the conditions under which your actions succeed—your shop is open, it has milk, etc.—are the conditions in which the beliefs you acted on are true. If you ask what a contingent belief—the sort we're talking about—is *about*, i.e. what its *content* is, then a standard answer is that its content is its truth conditions, i.e. the conditions under which it will be true.

This makes Ramsey's theory the basis of a semantics which says that a belief 's truth conditions—what it's about, what has to be case for it to be true—are given by the conditions under which any actions it would make you perform will succeed. That's what's meant by saying that the *success* conditions of the actions that beliefs cause are the conditions under which those beliefs are true. It tells you what beliefs are about in terms of how they make you behave and when that behaviour will succeed in getting you what you want.

NW: *The example you gave about getting milk from the shop seems fairly straightforward. If I want milk, I'll go to the shop to get it—- believing that the shop is open, that it sells milk, etc. But with many of our actions it is not absolutely clear to us what our beliefs are. Does it follow from what Ramsey is saying that somebody else might know better than we do what our beliefs are?*

HM: They might well. There's nothing in this theory that says that you have to be conscious of the beliefs you act on; in fact, very often you're not. For example, when I'm about to cross the road I habitually look to the right where traffic might be coming from. I do that without thinking about it; but what makes me do it is my belief that traffic here keeps to the left, so you need to look to the right to avoid being run over. And if that belief were false because I hadn't realised that I was in France, for example, my looking right instead of left might well be fatal.

NW: *But usually when we use the word 'content'— the 'content' of a belief—we're thinking of something linguistic: we obviously use sentences to communicate. But it sounds as if, for Ramsey, a belief doesn't have to be conscious and perhaps doesn't even have to be the kind of thing you could put into a sentence yourself.*

HM: No, it certainly doesn't. One of the virtues of Ramsey's view for me is that it explains how animals have beliefs; when cats learn how to recognize the approach of a dog, they will believe it's a dog, and take appropriate action; if they believed, falsely, that it wasn't a dog, they could be in bad trouble. So there's no presumption that, in order to believe something, you have to be able to put it into language. And even if, like us, you *can* use English sentences to say what you believe, the content of those beliefs isn't given by what those sentences mean: it's the other way round. The theory of meaning that goes with Ramsey's view is that we use sentences to *communicate* beliefs whose content is given by how they enable us to act in ways that will get us what we want. In other words, it's a 'belief first' theory of the meanings of sentences.

The rival theory which—oddly enough, in my view—is more popular, is the

'language first' theory. This says that unless you've got a language you can't have beliefs, which seems to me absurd, and that what a belief is about—its content—is given by the independently established meaning of sentences that express it. For some reason, which is not clear to me, that view, which goes back to Frege, is the dominant view in the philosophy of language and the philosophy of mind.

NW: *Ramsey was an atheist; his brother ended up Archbishop of Canterbury. They both had beliefs about God, different beliefs, how would that cash out in terms of what we've just been talking about?*

HM: One of the things that as a fellow atheist I rather regret is that if the people who believe in an afterlife, for example, are wrong, they will never know. If I'm wrong, I probably will know. This is mildly irritating. But the theory of Success Semantics, as I'm calling it, doesn't say that you have to *know* whether your actions are successful, and sometimes you don't. Suppose you make a will, for example, because you want to leave particular things to particular people, and you believe that they will get these things after you die if you make this will. And they will, if this belief of yours is true. If your belief is false, they won't get them; your will-making action will fail. But either way you won't know. So in this case the truth of your belief, about the legacy of your will, will make your action succeed even though you won't be there to see its success. And the same goes for beliefs about the afterlife.

NW: *From the enthusiasm of your exposition of Ramsey's ideas it's obvious that you think that he was right on many topics. How would you rank him as a philosopher?*

HM: I think Ramsey is one of the philosophical geniuses. If you wanted a musical analogue, it would be Mozart—except that Mozart lived on to the ripe old age of 36. Ramsey was ten years younger than that when he died, having founded a branch of mathematics, two branches of economics, subjective decision theory (also widely used by economists), a new theory of truth, a theory of semantics, and several other things that I haven't even mentioned. Most philosophers at their best do less than half of that in a life three times that long.