

Isaac Levi Memorial: St Paul's Chapel, Columbia University, 28 Sept. 2019

Isaac Levi: A Memory

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I first met Isaac at the London School of Economics when I gave a talk there in the early 1970s - I've not been able to find out *exactly* when, but it was probably in 1972 when Isaac and Judy were in London. Imre Lakatos had invited me to come to the LSE to talk to a group of graduate students; and of the two topics - A or B - that I offered him, he said he preferred A.

But when I turned up at the LSE, with my notes on A, I discovered not only that he'd advertised B, but that I'd be talking not to a group of graduate students but to the main Popper seminar - which was known to treat outside speakers much as the Roman Coliseum's lions treated its gladiators.

As it happened, Popper himself wasn't there, but many other local and visiting eminences were, including not only Isaac but radical philosophers like Paul Feyerabend. That made having to present - without notes - a talk I hadn't prepared scary enough; and what made it even more so was that I knew its main thesis would be anathema to Popperians.

That thesis, derived from Frank Ramsey, and part of the theory of chance I'd recently published, was this. Roughly speaking, it measured the *chance* of, say, a die landing six by the *degree of belief* in its landing six which you *should* have if that chance was all you knew about that outcome's prospects.

Popperians, as I expected, thought this 'psychologising' of objective chance as outrageous as trying to psychologise logic. They consequently interrupted so fast and furiously that by the end of the - I think - two hour session I'd only got through half my talk, which I therefore had to return to finish off at their next meeting. The only person there who understood, and saw the point of my thesis, and came to my defence, was of course Isaac. And as everyone here will know, when you're under as ferocious an attack as I was, nothing beats having an Old Testament prophet on your side!

That memorable occasion was the start of our life-long friendship, a friendship that was never threatened by our many philosophical disagreements. And that was because Isaac, like Richard Braithwaite, our mutual friend, and my great Cambridge mentor, never confused attacking a view or argument with attacking the person presenting it: a confusion that was all too common then and I fear is even more so now. In that respect, as in others, I found Isaac as steadfast a role model as he was a friend.