

Frank Ramsey: A Sheer Excess of Powers. By Cheryl Misak. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. xxxvi; 544 pp. \$32.95.

Written by Cheryl Misak, a noted specialist of pragmatist philosophy, this is the first book-length academic biography of Ramsey. Drawing not only on the available primary and secondary literature, but also on rich archival and testimonial sources (some of them new), Misak aims at offering at the same time “an account of [Ramsey’s] life” and “an introduction to his work” (p. xxx). The two aspects—as the preface puts it: “the heart” and “the mind”, or “Frank” vs. “Ramsey”—are seamlessly presented, in full detail, throughout the book.

The first part is dedicated to Ramsey’s life prior to becoming a mathematics undergraduate at Cambridge. Ramsey’s time on boarding school in the harsh, antiquated world of Winchester College is particularly striking. The second part of the book is centered on Ramsey’s time as a Cambridge undergraduate prodigy. There, one learns about his formative interactions with Russell, Wittgenstein, or Keynes, as well as the six months he spent in Vienna being analyzed by one of Freud’s disciples. The third and longest part of the book is dedicated to the exceptionally productive last five years of Ramsey, the Cambridge don. This is where the readers of this journal will find presented and discussed (in Chapters 12 and 15 especially) Ramsey’s now celebrated contributions to decision theory under uncertainty, the theory of optimal taxation, and growth theory. In particular, Misak establishes that Ramsey’s interest for economics actually came from his interest in social issues—if not socialism simpliciter (p. 88)—and the improvement of the human condition. She details how his decision theory grew from a critical reaction to Keynes’ 1921 *Treatise on Probability* (p. 118). Later, Keynes was regularly to use Ramsey as a “sounding board” (p. 305). Ramsey helped Sraffa devise the system of simultaneous equations he needed (p. 305), as well as Pigou with some other pieces of mathematics (p. 306). Setting decision theory aside, Pigou’s work turns out to have been the main influence behind Ramsey’s research agenda in economics (p. 322)—a conclusion already presented in those terms in Duarte, 2009. To Ramsey, that research agenda was all but a distraction from his work on the foundations of mathematics.

Misak’s critical apparatus is carefully designed. Her unsigned endnotes, to which all supporting references are confined, may not be the easiest to use for tracking sources or appreciating scholarly progress. On the other hand, their arrangement greatly contributes to making the main text so highly readable. The name and subject indexes are well done. Finally, particularly original are the 21 guest boxes which Misak invited 19 specialists to contribute on various aspects of Ramsey’s work. (A minor complaint: I would have found it natural to have these boxes numbered, and listed somewhere.) Typically these guest boxes are clear, and together they present Ramsey’s wide-ranging contributions in more detail and precision than the main text—presumably: any single author—can provide.

Misak's book is most compelling as a portrait of the man behind the work. This portrait is extremely well documented. It is evidently empathetic, but also critical or at least nuanced when need be; see for instance p. 163-164, on a rare whiff of antisemitism in Ramsey's correspondence, and p. 228-231, on retrograde opinions he came, equally rarely, to express on women. Beyond the perceptive portrait of the man, Misak also contributes a lively snapshot of the ebullient Cambridge (or perhaps one should say "Keynesbridge"; p. 113) milieu during the 1920s. This snapshot should prove valuable to non-Ramsey scholars as well.

Misak's historical perspectives on and presentations of Ramsey's work, on the other hand, are reliable but on occasions somewhat less compelling—at least as far as economics, including decision theory, is concerned. Overall, I found missing a reflection on the progressive mathematization of the discipline (say, from Cournot to Debreu) and where Ramsey fits in that long-term process. Despite its promising title ("The Role of Mathematics in Economics"), the sub-section p. 325-330 does not, in my view, contain the required discussion. There are some historical approximations, too. For example, Misak's claim (p. 268) that Ramsey "was the first on record, in that Moral Sciences Club meeting [on November 1926], to propose a definition of probability as a numerical representation of an individual's subjective degree of belief" is debatable; see, e.g., Borel, 1924, p. 332-333. Incidentally, Borel came up with the idea (which, admittedly, he did not develop nearly as much as Ramsey) in a review of Keynes' *Treatise*; i.e., his insight had the same critical origin as Ramsey's. Misak's reproach (p. 274) that von Neumann and Morgenstern did not credit Ramsey with having previously discovered their result strikes me as misconceived. This is because (notwithstanding the fact that today's mathematicians can see the proofs of both of these and still other results as variations on one same fundamental argument from convex analysis) there are significant differences between decision theory under risk, von Neumann and Morgenstern's problem, and decision theory under uncertainty, Ramsey's problem. As a last example, Misak's suggestion (p. 276) that "in 1957 Davidson and Suppes ran experiments at Stanford to see if they could verify Ramsey's formal theory, and established the discipline of experimental economics" is questionable on several counts. Considering only the claim to some precedence, see contra, for instance, the famous Mosteller and Nogee, 1951 paper, which Davidson and Suppes themselves present as motivating their own work. I picked these specific examples not just because they fall within the expertise of the readers of this journal. Carefully considered, they also convey the sense that Misak's presentation of Ramsey may be more sophisticated psychologically, than it is historically, and that her narrative choices may not have totally avoided the risk—or rather the temptation, when presenting such a genius—of having Ramsey loom slightly larger than he actually did, fairly or unfairly, in the real history of ideas.

But such an all-encompassing project had to show some weaknesses and the foregoing qualms are minor, given the main goals Misak set for herself.

She succeeded in delivering a wonderfully vivid account of Ramsey’s life as well as—not a minor feat—an organic overview of his trailblazing contributions to philosophy, economics, and mathematics. Her work will prove extremely valuable not only to anyone interested in Ramsey, but also to anyone interested in the history of these three disciplines and their intersection.

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References

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