Simon Blackburn

Outline of Remarks on Cheryl Misak's *Frank Ramsey*

I propose to start my remarks by praising Cheryl's amazing biography of Ramsey. I shan't make her blush by anticipating just what I shall say, here.

I then propose to sketch the way I have long seen Ramsey as an honorary expressivist, but admitting that in the salient examples – causality and probability – he tends more towards the position later associated with Sellars, and Brandom, which does full justice to the 'rational' aspects of the vocabulary. Of course the minimalist theory of truth, of which he is also an early proponent (beaten so far as I know only by Frege) makes that easier.

I then hope to finish by raising a problem, partly philosophical but partly biographical.

As Cheryl's biography makes clear Ramsey was a good friend of the topologist, codebreaker, computer pioneer and mentor of Alan Turing, Max Newman, who although older than Ramsey was a contemporary as a mathematics undergraduate, and became not only a colleague but a friend. Now in 1928 Newman had published his gem of a paper on Russell's 1927 book *The Analysis of Matter*. Russell (along with Carnap in the *Aufbau* (1928) and Schlick in his *General Theory of Knowledge* (1925)) was seeking to use logic as a tool for relaxing strict phenomenalism such as that in his earlier work (especially his 1914 *Our Knowledge of the External World*). He hoped instead to defend a kind of structural realism, in which, although the raw data of the senses present us just a kaleidoscope of sense data, we can ascend to reference to theoretical entities, although only with an understanding of their relations, or structural properties. Newman denied that Russell could do this.

Any collection of things can be organised so as to have the structure W, provided there are the right number of them. Hence the doctrine that only structure is

known involves the doctrine that nothing can be known that is not logically

deducible from the mere fact of existence, except (" theoretically ") the number of

constituting objects.

Newman, M. H. A. (1928), "Mr. Russell's Causal Theory of Perception", Mind n.s. 37: 137-48.

In the words of Demopoulos & Friedman,

> Newman's problem can be put this way. Russell wishes to turn theoretical terms into
> variables by Ramsification; accordingly, physics becomes the assertion that there exist
> properties and relations having certain logical features, satisfying certain implicit
> definitions. The problem is that this procedure trivializes physics: it threatens to turn
> the empirical claims of science into mere mathematical truths. More precisely, if our
> theory is consistent, and if all its purely observational consequences are true, then the
> truth of the Ramsey-sentence follows as a theorem of set theory or second-order logic,
> provided our initial domain has the right cardinality--if it doesn't, then the consistency
> of our theory again implies the existence of a domain that does.[1]

I think it was right that Russell was using the device of Ramsey sentences, and he replied to

Newman with a letter in April 1928 (published in the second volume of his autobiography,

p. 176) admitting to having read Newman's paper with "some dismay": "it is of course

obvious, as you point out, that the only effective assertion about the physical world involved

in saying that it is susceptible to such-and-such a structure is an assertion about its cardinal

number" Russell suggested that he might consider adding to the pure observational basis

(the kaleidoscope) some notion of "co-punctuality" or spatio-temporal proximity to the

evidential basis, but I believe he never pursued it. [2]

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[1] Demopoulos, William, and Michael Friedman. "Bertrand Russell's The Analysis of Matter: Its Historical Context and Contemporary Interest." *Philosophy of Science*, vol. 52, no. 4, 1985, pp. 621–639

[2] As Marc Champaign points out, Russell had himself described the very same problem in his *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* in 1919, so it is not surprising that he found the point "obvious" in 1927. See *Analysis and Metaphysics*, Volume 11, 2012, pp. 65–74,

It is probably worth pointing out that there are two different problems raised by Newman. One is that the set of structural sentences Russell has left himself with are not empirical or contingent at all – they say nothing about the total world of empirical data and theoretical entities and structures beyond its cardinality. The set is invented, not discovered. The other, not mentioned by Newman but important for subsequent history is that the if the set is consistent, in the sense of having a model, then it has many models, so cannot be said to give the reference of any theoretical term within it. This problem of the indeterminacy of reference is probably more salient in later work in model theory.

Now we come to Ramsey's 1929 paper "Theories", in which the tool now known as the Ramsey sentence for a theory is first introduced. Ramsey was not directly talking about sense data and the physical world, but in more abstract terms about any "primary system" of data, and theories erected to explain them. But it seems likely that Newman's point would apply in just the same way. All the Ramsey sentence can do is provide a structure that (provided the data set is consistent) is bound to be satisfied in any world of equal or greater cardinality than that in which the data exist. Ramsey was at least as good a mathematician as each of them, so why wasn't he either aware of Newman's actual paper, or aware of the result that was obvious to both Russell and Newman? It is after all worth remembering that model theory was quite well advanced by 1928 – Lowenheim's original theorem was published in 1915, and Skolem's additions in 1920 and 1923.

The problem of the reference of theoretical terms that Newman identified needs more material to solve it, as Russell saw. Perhaps an answer may be found in the interstices of "Theories"—it is a dense and difficult paper, well exhibiting what Cheryl singled out as the daunting speed and directness of his writing, the result of the "excess of powers" of her title. Perhaps Ramsey felt he had supplied pragmatist criteria for selecting an intended

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interpretation. Or, he might have been able to make better use of causation or chance or other theoretical relations—more than a pure sense-data empiricism such as Russell's would be happy with, and more than would be found in his "primary system".[3]

But Newman's problem lingered on. Putnam's model-theoretic argument against "realism" is a cousin, as is Wittgenstein's rule-following argument in Kripke's version of it. Quine's work on indeterminacy is so as well, and I have never found Quine's solution of "acquiescing in a home language" to help very much.[4] Lewis has an ordering of more or less "natural" interpretations, which sounds to be closer to pragmatism than structural realism. This might not have troubled Ramsey, but if in "Theories" he took himself to have found an answer to Newman, I think it is a pity that he left it as implicit as he seems to have done. But then such an early death forgives everything.

After thinking about this, I have a rather different suggestion. I think it would actually be quite strange for Ramsey to be drawn (if he was) into the sparsely mathematical landscape of Newman's problem. We can almost hear Peirce asking "whose problem is this?". For Peirce (and Cheryl describes how he was known to Ramsey and his circle) and any pragmatist surely we start "in medias res". This means that our "theoretical" terms are never the pure uninterpreted signs of a formal language, brought into the world without any parentage, orphaned without any interpretation, waiting to be adopted from somewhere outside their home if they are to have a semantic place in the world. Seeing them like this would offend against the cardinal doctrine that Ramsey had actually quoted from Peirce in

[3] This is hinted at, I think, on p. 135 and more explicitly where he describes the referring expressions in theories as referring to "fictions", in the addendum "Causal Qualities", pp. 137–9. Russell later abandoned the puritanical avoidance of more vocabulary with which to link the observational and theoretical, thereby doing something to tie down the reference of theoretical terms, in *Human Knowledge, Its Scope and Limits*

[4] The problem as I put in writing about Peter Strawson's work on intentionality, is that if the indeterminacies are as fundamental as Quine makes out, there is no such thing as a unique home language in which to acquiesce.

notes that he took on Peirce's volume of collected papers, published by Ogden (Misak, p. 144) "Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts". Russell was bent on a foundational project quite foreign to Peirce, but then so are Quine, Putnam, William Craig, and any other theorist exploring the idea that parts of our vocabulary, in science or anywhere else, come into the world naked of any semantic intent. They will have liaisons and histories and bring to mind at least suggestions of ideas. When theorists first starts talking of forces, causes, fields, they already have something in mind, waiting to be refined and made observable and measurable. In my view, this makes it unclear how great a fan Ramsey himself was of Ramsey sentences and their place in the philosophy of science.

Jen Hornsby

Misak on Ramsey on Truth, and on the prospects for a Ramseyian pragmatism

Cheryl's biography of Ramsey is so good, and good on so many fronts, that I won't have time to expatiate on its merits.

Since the conference concerns the nature and value of truth, I start by saying just how right Cheryl is in the matter of what Ramsey thought about the *nature* of truth (or at least about what the project of determining the nature of truth might amount to). I'll end with a comment on a pragmatist theory of truth such as some have wished to see Ramsey as endorsing. That will lead to a suggestion as to how one might think about the *value* of truth.

So: in a first section, I'll say how I think Ramsey's account of truth is best understood. In a second section, I'll make a suggestion about how what Ramsey might have meant in saying that his account of truth is 'in a vague sense' a correspondence theory of truth'. In a final section, I turn to my very considerable doubts as to the possibility of a Ramseyian pragmatic theory of truth. My doubts relate to Ramsey's (in my view mistaken) conception of what it is for a living being to inhabit the world—a conception I take to be shared by many analytic philosophers.

Ramsey Bibliography
1921 'The Nature of Propositions' (read to Moral Sciences Club, posthumously published)
1927. 'Facts and Propositions' *Aristotelian Soc.Supp.Vol.*
1929. 'On Truth' (posthumously published in 1991)
        [1991 On Truth', eds. Rescher and Majer, contains 1921 and 1929,
                Loc. references to which are to the kindle edition]

Ramsey started to dimly discern a positive proposal, which he would continue to develop the whole of his life. [Misak, on 'The Nature of Propositions']

The most certain thing about truth is that 'p is true' and 'p', if not identical, are equivalent. This enables us to rule out at once some theories of truth such as that 'to be true' means 'to work' or 'to cohere' since clearly 'p works' and 'p coheres' are not equivalent to 'p'. [Ramsey, in 'The Nature of Propositions'.]

These concepts do all the heavy lifting for the concept of truth. And in that heavy lifting, pragmatism does some work as well. [Misak, on 'The Nature of Propositions']

Othello, when he believes that Desdemona loves Cassio, cannot have before his mind a single object. [Russell, somewhere or other]
According to philosophers who believe in them, it is propositions which are true or false, …
a belief being called true or false by an extension of meaning, according as what is believed is a true or false proposition. But the existence of such things as these propositions is generally (and to my mind rightly) doubted. [Ramsey Loc.386.]

An account of truth which accepts the notion of propositional [content] without analysis cannot possibly be regarded as complete. For all the many difficulties connected with that notion are really involved in truth which depends on it. [Loc 552.]

A belief is true if it is a belief that p and p, but false if it is a belief that p and not p. [Loc. 491]

[A]ny belief whatever we may symbolize as a belief that p, where 'p' is a variable sentence.

$$x \text{ has a true belief} \leftrightarrow \exists p(x \text{ believes that } p, \text{ and } p).$$

Of the 3 leading types of theories, the Correspondence Theory, the Coherence Theory and Pragmatism, only the first engages with us on the main issue, … and our view belongs undoubtedly to the class of correspondence theories. [Loc. 658]

This talk of correspondence, though legitimate and convenient for some purposes, gives, in my opinion, not an analysis of truth **but a cumbrous periphrasis**, which it is misleading to take for an analysis. To believe truly is to believe that p when p, and there is no need to recast this definition in terms of correspondence. Loc. 673.

I do not *therefore* see how it can be denied that when we say that other people's opinions are true (or false) we mean that they do (or do not) correspond to the facts. [Loc. 1094.]

PREMISE, AHEAD OF THE '*THEREFORE*': If A says B's opinion agrees with the fact, the relation he assumes to hold is one between B's opinion and the fact, not between his own opinions about them.

The fact is we cannot claim truth for our judgments when making them, for if we did, our judgment would be about itself, which is impossible. .. It is .. a fundamental mistake to suppose that in our thinking, except when we are thinking about thought, we use the idea of truth at all; we do not set up truth as a standard and ask ourselves "Are my thoughts about the earth true, do they correspond to the fact?", we ask simply what is what, for instance is the earth flat? And when we try to find out whether the earth is flat, the nature of truth is irrelevant, for we are concerned with the nature of the earth not with that of our thought. The nature of the mental factors in a belief will depend on the sense in which we are using the ambiguous term belief: it is, for instance, possible to say that a chicken believes a certain sort of caterpillar to be poisonous, and mean by that merely that it abstains from eating such caterpillars on account of unpleasant experiences connected with them. The mental factors in such a belief would be parts of the chicken's behaviour, which are somehow related to the objective factors, viz., the kind of caterpillars and poisonousness. An exact analysis of this relation would be very difficult, but it might well be held that in regard to this kind of belief the pragmatist view was correct, i.e. that the relation between the chicken's behaviour and the objective factors was that the actions were such as to be useful if, and only if, the caterpillars were actually poisonous. [Ramsey (1927) p.159)

But without wishing to depreciate the importance of this kind of belief [sc. the chicken's], it is not what I wish to discuss here. I prefer to deal with those beliefs which are expressed in words, or possibly images or other symbols, consciously asserted or denied.

Cheryl Misak

Handout: Misak Reply to Blackburn

1. "there is but one state of mind from which you can 'set out', namely, the very state of mind in which you actually find yourself at the time you do 'set out'—a state in which you are laden with an immense mass of cognition already formed, of which you could not divest yourself if you would."[1]

2. "Let us try to describe a theory simply as a language for discussing the facts the theory is said to explain."[2]

3. "The arbitrariness of the definitions makes it impossible for them to be adequate to the theory as something in process of growth".

   "If we proceed by explicit definition we cannot add to our theory without changing the definitions, and so the meaning of the whole".[3]

4. All "useful theories" must have "more degrees of freedom" than the primary system— the "dictionary alone does not suffice", and neither does the dictionary plus the axioms, unless we are happy with a finite, primary system much less rich than the theory itself. That kind of impoverished system would be of "no use at all".[4]

5. The definitions are not necessary for the "legitimate use of the theory". It is merely "instructive" to show how they could be set out. Part of the instruction was to show how it might be done, "because Russell and Carnap [and others] seem to suppose that we can and must do this".[5]

6. "The chief danger to our philosophy, apart from laziness and wooliness, is *scholasticism*, the essence of which is treating what is vague as if it were precise and trying to fit it into an exact logical category."[6]

7. Any attempt to analyse "This patch is red" into "a theoretical construction" of an infinite class of points on a visual field would be "giving up philosophy for theoretical psychology".[7]

8. "Solipsism in the ordinary sense in which as e.g. in Carnap the primary world consists of my experiences past present and future will not do. For this primary world is the world about which I am now thinking."[8]

9. "He didn't seem to me much of a philosopher, but a very nice man".[9]

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[1] Peirce: CP 5.416, 1905.
[2] TH: 112.
[3] TH: 130.
[4] TH: 122ff; 130.
[5] TH: 120.
[6] P: 7.
[7] P: 4.
[8] NPPM: 66.
[9] KCA FPR 5/5/434

10. "Clearly … *judgement* is involved".[10]

11. Definitions "are to give at least our future meaning, and not merely to give any pretty way of obtaining a certain structure". [11]

12. "[I]f two systems both fit the facts, is not the choice capricious? We do, however, believe that the system is uniquely determined and that long enough investigation will lead us all to it. This is Peirce's notion of truth as what everyone will believe in the end; it does not apply to the truthful statement of matters of fact, but the 'true scientific system'."[12]

[10] TH: 131.
[11] P: 1.
[12] GC: 161.

Cheryl Misak

Handout: Misak Reply to Hornsby

1. x believes something true iff there is a way x believes things to be, and so they are. x believes something false iff there is a way x believes things to be, and so they aren't.

2. "I used to worry myself about the nature of philosophy through excessive scholasticism. I could not see how we could understand a word and not be able to recognize whether a proposed definition of it was or was not correct. I did not realize the vagueness of the whole idea of understanding, the reference it involves to a multitude of performances any of which may fail and require to be restored."[1]

3. "We cannot really picture the world as disconnected selves; the selves we know are in the world. What we can't do we can't do and it's no good trying. Philosophy comes from not understanding the logic of our language; but the logic of our language is not what Wittgenstein thought. The pictures we make to ourselves are not pictures of facts."[2]

4. "This talk of correspondence, though legitimate and convenient for some purposes, gives . . . not an analysis of truth but a cumbrous periphrasis, which it is misleading to take for an analysis". A true belief is one that "corresponds to the facts". But we can't specify that any further than to say that correspondence is the type—"or types, since [it] may be different with different forms of belief"—of relation between thinking that such-and-such is the case and such-and-such's actually being the case.[3]

5. Suppose the human race for no reason always supposed strawberries would give them stomach-ache and so never ate them; then all their beliefs, strictly so-called, e.g. that if I eat strawberries I shall have a pain, would be true; but would there not really be something wrong? Is it not a fact that if they had eaten them they wouldn't have had a pain? … We only regard it as sense if it, or its contradictory, can be deduced from our system. . . . But their system, you say, fitted all the facts known to them; if two systems both fit the facts, is not the choice capricious? We do, however, believe that the system is uniquely determined and that long enough investigation will lead us all to it. This is Peirce's notion of truth as what everyone will believe in the end; it does not apply to the truthful statement of matters of fact, but the 'true scientific system'. What was wrong with our friends the strawberry abstainers was that they did not experiment. Why should one experiment? To increase the weight of one's probabilities . . . [4]

6. To say a man believes in hell means, according to the pragmatists that he avoids doing those things which would result in his being thrown into hell.

   Such conduct will be useful to the man if it really saves him from hell, but if there is no such place it will be a mere waste of opportunities for enjoyment.

   But besides this primary utility there are other ways in which such conduct may or may not be useful to the man or others; the actions from which a belief in hell would cause him to abstain might bring disasters in their train either for him or for others even in this

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[1] P: 1–2.
[2] NPPM: 51.
[3] OT: 11; OT: 91; OT: 19; OT: 90.
[4] GC: 161.

present life. But these other consequences of the belief, whether useful or not, are clearly not relevant to its. . . truth . . . . William James . . . included explicitly these further kinds of utility and disutility, which must obviously be excluded if pragmatism is to have any plausibility, and thought that the truth of the belief in hell depended not on whether hell in fact existed but on whether it was on the whole useful for men to think it existed.

Such absurdities . . . form no part to the essential pragmatist idea, even if they constitute its chief attraction to some minds . . . we shall see that pragmatism has a considerable contribution to make.[5]

7. The "realistic spirit". Philosophy should capture the way we really use the concept of truth. The correspondence theory must be brought on board "in a vague sense". Like pragmatism, it "is not simply to be mocked at". "This talk of correspondence, though legitimate and convenient for some purposes, gives . . . not an analysis of truth but a cumbrous periphrasis, which it is misleading to take for an analysis". Sure, a true belief is one that "corresponds to the facts". But we cannot specify that any further than to say that correspondence is the type—"or types, since [it] may be different with different forms of belief'—of relation between thinking that such-and-such is the case and such-and-such's actually being the case.[6]

8. Belief is a "mental state" with different aspects or "characters", each of which is "of great importance".[7] The first consists of a psychological factor, such as the "the presence or absence of feelings". Other characters are its propositional reference and it's being a habit.

9. [No] particular action can be supposed to be determined by this belief alone; his actions result from his desires and the whole system of his beliefs, roughly according to the rule that he performs those actions which, if his beliefs were true, would have the most satisfactory consequences.[8]

10. He was talking about a simplified system "to which those of actual people, especially the speaker, in part approximate".[9]

11. An open generalization "expresses an inference we are at any time prepared to make". Causal statements and the laws of nature are also "rules for judging", or rules "with which we meet the future", or rules that we "trust".

12. Part of the way that beliefs can express "cognitive attitudes" without being part of the primary language is that they form the system with which the speaker meets the future; they are not, therefore, subjective in the sense that if you and I enunciate different ones we are each saying something about ourselves which pass by one another like 'I went to Grantchester', 'I didn't'.[10]

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[5] OT: 91–92.
[6] OT: 11; OT: 91; OT: 19; OT: 90.
[7] NP: 110.
[8] OT: 45.
[9] C: 104.
[10] GC: 149.