Special Issue 3

Ramsey's Ontology

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ANNA-SOFIA MAURIN AND NILS-ERIC SAHLIN

Some ontological speculations:
Ramsey on universals, particulars and facts[*]

Proem

Ontological questions are at the core of much of Ramsey's writing, whether on numbers, probabilities, the status of theoretical terms or general propositions and causality. But to say that Ramsey *has an ontology*, or that he subscribes to a particular type of metaphysics, is to depart from historical fact. In his papers Ramsey argues for and against the theories of his friends and colleagues; he develops ideas and theories of his own, and doing this he tries things out, moves from one position to another. In one paper he doubts the existence of facts and propositions (see Koslow's paper in this volume) in order to explore the consequences of that position, while in another, facts and propositions are the groundwork for his explorations.

One of his many impressive contributions to philosophy is his analysis of the problem of universals.[1] His paper "Universals", which denies any fundamental distinction between universals and particulars, surmounts serious objections to a realist view of universals and, at the same time, solves several long-standing problems about them, dismissing other venerable enigmas as nonsense.[2] Various reasons for making the distinction between universals and particulars – psychological, physical and logical – can be advanced. Ramsey argues that logic justifies no such ontological distinction. Allusion to the grammatical subject-predicate distinction will not do, since "Socrates is wise", with the subject "Socrates" and the predicate

"wise", "asserts the same fact and expresses the same proposition" (p. 12) as "Wisdom is a characteristic of Socrates", with subject "wisdom" and predicate "Socrates".[3]

Moreover, there is, he argues, no essential difference between the (in)completeness of universals and that of particulars. "Wise" can, for example, be used to generate propositions not only of the atomic form "Socrates is wise", but also of the molecular form "Neither Socrates nor Plato is wise". But "Socrates" can also be used to generate propositions of both these forms: e.g. "Socrates is wise" and "Socrates is neither wise nor just". There is therefore a complete symmetry in this respect between individuals and basic properties (qualities). As Ramsey succinctly puts it,

> the whole theory of particulars and universals is due to mistaking for a fundamental characteristic of reality what is merely a characteristic of language (p. 13).

And Ramsey argues that there can no more be complex universals – e.g. negative ("not-wise"), relational ("wiser than") or compound ("grue") – than there can be complex particulars. Suppose Socrates is to the right of Plato. One could then imagine three propositions: a first stating that the relation "being to the right of" holds between Socrates and Plato; a second stating that Socrates has the complex property of "being to the right of Plato"; and a third stating that Plato has the complex property something has if Socrates is to the right of it. Thus if there were complex universals, besides the fact that Socrates is to the right of Plato, there would also be two non-relational facts with different constituents. But that is nonsense, the argument goes; there is only one fact, the fact that Socrates is to the right of Plato.

In the present paper we intend to do four things. First, we want to give a brief outline of one of Ramsey's major contributions to metaphysics; and that we have already accomplished. Second, we want to focus on some aspects of Ramsey's first argument – the symmetry argument. We want to see on what assumptions it is based, and to ask what it can contribute to a contemporary metaphysical debate. Third, we want to investigate more closely one basic assumption upon which the success of Ramsey's arguments rests: the assumption of a logical atomism. Fourth, and finally, we want to further investigate and assess an argument against the particular-universal distinc-

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[3] Quotes by Ramsey are all from (Ramsey, 1990).

HERBERT HOCHBERG

Ramsey vs. Russell: Particulars, Universals and Truth

In a well known controversy concerning the question "Are the Characteristics of Things Universal or Particular?" G. E. Moore and G. F. Stout took two things for granted. First, that there were both things, which were assumed to be particulars, and characteristics of things; second, that things and characteristics differed in logically and ontologically crucial ways. Their debate concerned whether the characteristics of things were universal attributes or what are now commonly called "tropes." One can fittingly label a view that takes characteristics to be tropes "moderate nominalism." Quine, along with numerous followers, adopted a more radical form of nominalism—going back to an 11th century view attributed to Rocelinus— that takes predicates to replace properties, and hence denies that there are any characteristics at all, whether universal or particular. F. MacBride has recently taken a further step, in various articles (MacBride, 1998, 1999, 2004), by questioning the presumed distinction between universals and particulars. In doing so he has recalled, relied on and defended Ramsey's line of argument set out in the once classic paper "Universals."

I. Predicables, Terms and Facts

 Ramsey's argument, now resurrected as a challenge to those who would distinguish universals from particulars, is directed primarily against Russell and the latter's purported proof of the existence of universals. To consider Ramsey's challenge one must set out a context for considering Russell's argument. Russell, like Moore and Stout, started from certain facts— that there were two objects—say two red circles—with an (apparently) common attribute—the color. Call the objects "a" and "b", or, given the current speech habits, *baptize* them "a" and "b" and thereby initiate a causal chain that may last, hopefully, for the time it takes to read this paper. Or, in keeping with Ramsey's, rather than Russell's examples, we can consider the individuals Plato and Socrates and the assumption they are both wise, making use of presumably temporally long causal chains and ignoring, as philosophically irrelevant, the view that there is not such a chain going back to the attribute of *being wise*. Russell argued, and pur-

ported to establish, that a and b were particulars and red (or the color like-ness of a and b) a universal or, in the case of Plato and Socrates, that the celebrated Athenians were individuals or particulars and that wisdom is a universal. Thus Russell begins with what we normally take to be *individuals* or objects, on the one hand, and qualities or *attributes*, on the other. He argues that the objects—a and b—must be *particulars*, meaning that they are not qualities or collections of qualities. He also argues that we must recognize *universals*—meaning by that that the qualities (actually the simi-larity relation or relations involved) are universals and not tropes. Given Ramsey's arguments, we should not forget what Russell's arguments as-sume as starting points.

Ramsey argues that the purported (see section *IV*) atomic fact that grounds the truth of the sentence "Plato is wise" can be expressed either in the standard way or as "Wisdom characterizes Plato." Thus, grammati-cally, either "is wise" or "characterizes Plato" can be considered to be "the predicate" of a version of the sentence expressing the fact and, hence, that either "Plato" or "wisdom" can be taken as the subject sign. This suppos-edly indicates that the subject-predicate distinction is merely a linguistic one that provides no ground for holding that the facts we take to ground the truths of sentences, like "Plato is wise" and "Socrates is wiser than Plato," reflect or presuppose a purported *ontic* distinction between characteristics, like wisdom (and relations like is wiser than), and particulars, like Socrates and Plato. But Ramsey is actually making a stronger claim than the one he appears to make and which MacBride, commenting on Ramsey's claim:

> …it becomes clear that there is no sense in the words individual and quality; all we are talking about is two different types of objects such that two objects one of each type, could be the sole constituents of an atomic fact. (Ramsey 1960, p. 132)

understands him to make:

> ... it was no part of Ramsey's conclusion that particulars and universals must enjoy the same logical type. For although Ramsey was willing to countenance the possibility that there are particulars and universals of the same type he in-sisted only on the weaker conclusion that particular and universal need differ by no more than type: (MacBride 2004, p. 183)

FRASER MACBRIDE

Negation and Predication:
A Defence of Ramsey's Thesis

1. *Introduction*

It can hardly be denied that analytic philosophy once took a linguistic turn, returning—for a significant period of its history—distinctively linguistic answers to questions about epistemology, ontology and the character of thought. But it is no less distinctive of analytic philosophy that its practitioners have been suspicious of language, suspicious of the capacity of language to channel and control even the most fundamental judgements of speakers. Witness Russell's 1924 attempt to elucidate the essential features of logical atomism (at least as he saw it). There he could not refrain from issuing a philosophical health warning to his co-workers:

> "The influence of language on philosophy has, I believe, been profound and almost unrecognised. If we are not to be misled by this influence it is necessary to become conscious of it and to ask how far it is legitimate." (Russell 1924: 330)

Russell did not issue this warning lightly. For over twenty years Russell had laboured to promote the cause of relations, their novel logic, their underlying reality. Russell now realised that it was against the invidious influence of language that he had struggled. According to Russell, the traditional subject-predicate logic—the logic that comes so naturally to speakers of European languages—has surreptitiously conditioned philosophers to take for granted a substance-attribute ontology; if only philosophers had been acquainted with less familiar language groups then, Russell maintained, they would have been far less liable to deny the reality of relations, relations being nowhere apparent in the schedule of substances and attributes more familiar languages suggest.

One of his co-workers, Frank Ramsey, took Russell's warning very much to heart. But Ramsey soon came to the conviction that philosophers had not only been misled by language to adopt and adhere to a subject-predicate logic and a denial of relations. Writing in his 1925 *Mind* paper "Universals" (hereafter *U*) Ramsey declared:

"nearly all philosophers, including Mr Russell himself, have been misled by language in a far more far-reaching way than that; that the whole theory of particulars and universals is due to mistaking for a fundamental characteristic of reality, what is merely a characteristic of language." (*U*: 13)

Why should Ramsey have thought of the theory of particulars and universals in such sceptical terms, the consequence of a linguistic illusion that leads unsuspecting philosophers to mistake what is merely appearance for genuine reality? Because traditionally philosophers have derived the distinction between particulars and universals—a distinction intended to be objective and worldly, deep in the nature of things—from a linguistic distinction—the distinction between subjects and predicates. Whereas particulars have been conceived as items fit only for subject expressions to pick out, universals have been conceived as items whose natures are distinctively revealed in the act of predication, in connection with the predicates that express or denote them. But the linguistic distinction between subject and predicate enjoys no objective or worldly significance. Or so Ramsey maintained. Instead, he argued, the distinction between subject and predicate enjoys a different kind of significance, arising from (variously) differences in "literary style" or "the point of view from which we approach the fact" (*U*: 12), the presence or absence of "a subjective property" that "depends not indeed on any one mind but on the common elements in all men's minds and purposes" (*U*: 24), or even "the mathematicians biased interests" (*U*: 28). If Ramsey is right about this—that the subject-predicate distinction enjoys no worldly significance—then philosophers have indeed been the subjects of an illusion. They have been deluded to think that the subject-predicate distinction corresponds to another distinction deep in the nature of things, the distinction between particulars and universals.

But surely such a sceptical outlook is incapable of being sustained. For surely Ramsey's scepticism is belied by one of the foundational insights that Aristotle bequeathed to Western metaphysics, his dictum that a quality has a contrary but a substance does not. For expressed in the formal mode this dictum amounts to the claim—that scarcely seems to require an argument in its favour—that predicates may be negated but subjects not. And this claim, it may be argued, surely marks a logical, and therefore objective, distinction between subject and predicate.

Ramsey's scepticism cannot be so cursorily dismissed. We cannot—if we are to act with due intellectual conscience—take the so-called

ARNOLD KOSLOW

Ramsey on Simplicity and Truth

In the spring of 1922, Ramsey read a paper to the Apostles of Cambridge in which he discussed two related questions.[1] As he states it:

> "[W]hat types of things there are, and the nature of truth."(p.1)

The two questions remain open questions at the end of the paper, but in the course of the discussion they are related to each other in ways that are surprising. It is his discussion of the interconnection of these two issues that reveals a hidden depth to Ramsey's view of truth. His claim is that the idea that "true" is an incomplete symbol and the idea that the world is simple are part of the same view (p.8). The account that is discussed in this early paper is significantly different from the "redundancy" theory of truth that he is usually taken to endorse. It should be noted however that although his remarks are deftly though sketchily provided, it is a carefully considered view, a lot of which gets support from later things he wrote about truth.

Since this paper is relatively early, it's difficult to say that it represents his final view on either of these two subjects. Although the bulk of his paper is devoted to explaining the consequences of taking the world to be simple rather than complex, and the consequences for truth in particular is a theory that makes "true" an incomplete symbol, it is nonetheless a view which can be held without resting on the simplicity thesis. And I believe that Ramsey's continued acceptance of the incomplete symbol account helps to explain why he thought of truth as something that would be easily obtained from an adequate account of belief ascription.[2]

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[1] I am grateful to Mrs. Jane Burch, Ramsey's daughter, for her most kind permission to quote from Ramsey's typescript which is on deposit in the King's College Archives. The nine page typescript with Ramsey's corrections inked in is dated April 29th, 1922 (FPR/4/1). Special thanks are due to Hugh Mellor, Nils-Eric Sahlin N. Rescher, Dr. R. Moad, Archivist of King's College Cambridge, and the members of the Seminar on Ramsey at the Graduate Center, CUNY.

[2] I hope to make this connection evident on another occasion.

The first question, What kinds of things are there? is clearly ontological, but in a sense other than the familiar Quinean way of setting the matter. It asks a question which Quine's criterion does not pretend to answer. Ramsey first notes that there are lots of things and types of things. Simplicity concerns

> "[t]he only things in whose existence we have reason to believe, are simple, not complex."

Ramsey says that he got the view that everything is simple from Russell in conversation and doubts that he would have thought of it alone. It's a view a little reminiscent of those who think of ontology as consisting of the basic "furniture" of the world, the simple things; not the complex ones. Ontology is concerned with the simples; anything else being "made up" from them or "constituted by" or "constructed out" of them. None of these terms are used by Ramsey, but some of them were certainly used by Russell. The underlying idea seems to be that nothing would exist if the simples didn't. On the Quinean view, we can consider the ontology of certain properly formulated or regimented theories of the world, but those theories, no matter how well supported, do not tell you that they are the basic entities. For example, according to the Quine Criterion of Ontological Commitment, a theory of electrons such as Lorentz's, Weber's, Kaufmann's, or Dirac's, implies that there are electrons. However, none of those theories implies that if the electrons it speaks of didn't exist, then nothing would. None of those theories implies that the electrons it speaks of are the basic simple constituents of the world. It's clear then that whatever the Quinean commitments of a theory may be, they do not automatically identify exactly those things that are the basic simple existents. In fact, it looks as if the Quinean Criterion could not be used to determine exactly the basic simples. If that's what the criterion did, then any two theories exactly one of which implied the other would have to have exactly the same Quinean ontological commitment. There are just too many examples of scientific theories for which this just isn't so.

The Quinean Criterion won't help settle what the simples are. Ramsey does however furnish a list of the kinds of things that he thinks are simple and those that are complex. Given his way of sorting things out there is an implication for truth. Here's Ramsey's list:

> "If you were making a list of the types of things that there are you would naturally enumerate the following: individuals or particular things, classes, proper-

NILS-ERIC SAHLIN AND MARTIN KASÅ PALMÉ

Ramsey sentences: an observation[*]

I

R amsey argued that the best way to understand how the theoretical terms of a theory function is to picture them as existentially bound variables. Given three such terms, the "best way to write our theory" according to Ramsey is: $\exists \alpha, \beta, \gamma$(dictionary & axioms) (p. 131).[1] This is the theory's "Ramsey sentence".[2] The existentially bound variables are the carriers of ontological commitment; if the Ramsey sentence is true, they tell us what there is.

It is well-known that the Ramsey sentence and the original theory have the same empirical content. That each observational consequence of the Ramsey sentence is a consequence of the original theory follows from the fact that the former is an existential generalization of the latter and thus implied by it. The reverse implication is not that straightforward, but nearly so. Let s and s_0 be two sentences of a "scientific language", and assume that the latter sentence does not contain any theoretical terms. Let $E_T(s)$ be a complete existential generalization of s with respect to theoretical terms, and $A_T(s)$ its universal counterpart. If s implies s_0 then (trivially) $A_T(s \to s_0)$. Elementary logic tells us that $\forall x(\phi(x) \to \psi(x)) \to (\exists x \phi(x) \to \exists x \psi(x))$, so we conclude that $E_T(s) \to E_T(s_0)$.[3] But $E_T(s)$ can of course be taken to be the Ramsey sentence of a theory, and since $E_T(s_0)$ simply is s_0, we conclude that any non-theoretical consequence of the original theory is indeed a consequence of the Ramsey sentence.[4]

In this paper, our point of departure is the question: does the foregoing result hold also in truly dynamic contexts, where the appropriate semantics is not

[1]All Ramsey quotes are from (Ramsey, 1990).

[2]The theory is assumed to be finitely axiomatizable.

[3]Modulo a little handwaving.

[4]See (Bohnert, 1968).

quite familiar? The answer seems to be that it might, but then again might not. In order to sharpen the question and arrive at our preliminary answer, we need to say a few words about what might be dubbed "experimentally interpreted quantifiers".

II

The question: "If (in some suitable sense) we accept, in the long run, the sentences in the set Γ, will we (in the same sense) accept the sentence ϕ?", can no doubt be attacked in a multitude of ways. Here is one attempt.[5]

We set up a framework for answering questions like this by providing a formal semantics, i.e. structures and a satisfaction relation, for the language used in $\Gamma \cup \{\phi\}$. The aim is to use the syntax of first order logic (FOL), and also to construe the semantics as a dynamic version of FOL semantics. Basically, we take an *experimental structure* to be an ω-sequence of ordinary structures (lying along an imagined, discrete time-line) that is subject to certain constraints. In a simplified but still reasonable version, these are: constancy of domain, eventual fixation of reference for terms, and a "point of convergence" for every pair: (basic n-ary predicate , n-tuple of individuals). To paraphrase the last constraint: a given tuple can only pop in and out of a given predicate extension a finite number of times.

If $(\mathscr{A}_i)_{i \in \omega}$ is such an experimental structure, we can proceed to define an "experimental" (dynamic) satisfaction relation: $(\mathscr{A}_i)_{i \in \omega} \vDash_{\mathrm{E}} \phi[s]$. Given the constraints, there is one obvious and straightforward way to define this for quantifier-free formulas. The atomic case is:

$$(1) \qquad (\mathscr{A}_i)_{i \in \omega} \vDash_{\mathrm{E}} R(t_1, \ldots, t_n)[s] \Leftrightarrow \exists i \forall j_{j>i} (t_1[s], \ldots, t_n[s]) \in R^{\mathscr{A}_j}$$

And the molecular cases follow the definitions for ordinary $\vDash$. It is (almost) a routine matter to check that this works out "as expected".[6]

For quantification, however, there certainly is room for variation. As a simple illustration, ask yourself when you would consider $\forall x F x$ to be true-in-the-long-run. When $\forall a \exists i \forall j_{j>i} (a \in F^{\mathscr{A}_j})$? Or would you demand the stronger condition $\exists i \forall j_{j>i} \forall a (a \in F^{\mathscr{A}_j})$? Now ask the corresponding questions for existentials. This is just one possible distinction between "inner" and "outer" interpretations of quantifiers, and things tend to get quite complex when we consider

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[5]This is inspired by the mainly meta-mathematical work in (Jeroslow, 1975), and also by (Putnam, 1965).

[6]It must be stressed that the convergence assumptions really play a crucial role here.

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Over the last two decades foundationalism has been severely criticized. In response to this various alternatives to it have been advanced, notably coherentism. At the same time new versions of foundationalism were crafted, that were claimed to be immune to the earlier criticisms. This volume contains 12 papers in which various aspects of this dialectic are covered. A number of papers continue the trend to defend foundationalism, and foundationalism's commitment to basic beliefs and basic knowledge, against various attacks. Others aim to show that one important objection against coherentism, viz. that the notion of 'coherence' is too vague to be useful, can be countered.