British philosopher and mathematician, best known for his work on the foundations of mathematics, but also made remarkable contributions to epistemology, semantics, logic, philosophy of science, mathematics, statistics, probability and decision theory, economics and metaphysics. Ontological questions are central to much of his writing, whether it is on numbers, probabilities, the status of theoretical terms or general propositions and causality. One of his most impressive but underestimated contributions to philosophy is his analysis of the problem of UNIVERSALS.

His paper "Universals" (1925) 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 (See nominalism; platonism).

There are various reasons for making the distinction between universals and particulars – psychological, physical and logical. But Ramsey shows that logic justifies no such distinction. Alluding to a grammatical subject-predicate distinction will not do, since “Socrates is wise”, with subject “Socrates” and predicate “wise”, “asserts the same fact, and expresses the same proposition” as “Wisdom is a characteristic of Socrates”, with subject “wisdom” and predicate “Socrates”.

There is, he shows, no essential difference between the (in)completeness of universals and that of particulars. “Wise” can, for example, be used to collect 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 collect propositions of both these forms: for example, “Socrates is wise” and “Socrates is neither wise nor just”. There is thus really a complete symmetry in this respect between individuals and basic properties (qualities). Or, 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”.

Again, Ramsey shows that there can no more be complex universals (for example, negative, as “not-wise”; relational, as “wiser than”; and compound properties, as “grue” (defined to mean “observed before $t$ and green or observed after $t$ and blue”)) than there can be complex particulars. Suppose that Socrates is to the right of Plato. One could then imagine three propositions: first, that the relation “being to the right of” holds between Socrates and Plato; second, that Socrates has the complex property of “being to the right of Plato”; third, that Plato has the complex property which 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, there is only one fact, the fact that Socrates is to the right of Plato.

D.H. Mellor (1991) has shown that a virtue of Ramsey's REALISM is the way it stops the vicious regress started by asking what relates particulars to universals in a fact, for example, what ties Socrates to wisdom in the fact that Socrates is wise. But for Ramsey universals and particulars are constructions out of facts, not the other way around. He needs no hierarchy of universals to recombine them; they were never separated in the first place.
Ramsey's view of universals also affects much of his other work. Nominalists for example reject his so-called “Ramsey sentence” account involving quantifying over universals, thus expanding our ontological commitments. But given Ramsey's kind of realism, that is no objection at all.

WRITINGS

- “Universals,” Mind 34 (1925), 401-17.
- These and other relevant papers are reprinted in.

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