

Professor Frank Knight was the dominating intellectual force of the economics department during my student days. This dominance was not an easy prize: he was surrounded by colleagues as erudite and incisive as Jacob Viner, as closely tuned to the emerging trends in economic analysis as Henry Schultz, as broad in vision and knowledge as John Nef, as socially concerned as Paul Douglas, and as exciting as Henry Simons. Yet no serious student of economics left the University without bearing some marks of Knight.

In some respects a more improbable Moses, if Knight could ever forgive the figure, could not be designed. There he was in his office, smoking cigarettes--with the aid of a tooth pick--down to lengths, or possibly they should be called non-lengths, that threatened his moustache. There he was in the classroom, pursuing a new and monstrous fallacy in this weeks' New Republic, while we experienced students watched with unkind amusement the efforts of new students to keep remotely orderly lecture notes. Or, still in the classroom, he was conducting a debate with a colleague on the nature of costs, using us as the unreliable channel of communication. How clearly I remember the occasion on which we were told to withdraw forthwith from economics if we did not understand the analysis of Ricardian rent about to be presented, and how, ten minutes later, Knight explained that he had not understood it until two years before. And then he was in a colleague's classroom, expostulating at some argument clearly labelled as nonsense. He was a lovable, indomitable, improbable man, but his powerful influence did not derive from his eccentricities or his charm.

One great source of his influence was the purity of his devotion to the pursuit of knowledge. Frank Knight transmitted, to a degree I have never seen equalled, a sense of unreserved commitment to the truth. This

harsh mistress must be served even when the service was dangerous or painful. No authority was too august to challenge: Knight would not hesitate to tell Gabriel if his horn needed tuning. No contemporary passion was so powerful that it could escape critical scrutiny and usually denunciation. One must quarrel even with an esteemed colleague who was entertaining mistaken views. The compromises of expediency were simply alien to the world of this scholar: thus, it would be an absurd question to ask to which political party he belonged, for neither possessed a scrap of him.

This unswerving devotion to knowledge was exemplified and reinforced in its message to us by Knight's way of life. He was not a consultant to great or small bodies, whether public or private; he did not ride the lecture circuit; he did not seek a place in the popular press. He conducted himself as if the pursuit of academic knowledge was a worthy full time career for a first-class mind. This conduct was becoming more or less anachronistic even at the time he was impressing it upon us, but anachronistic practices are not necessarily mistaken practices. Surely dedication to scholarship is an essential ingredient of a great teacher: students are too intelligent to believe preaching that is not practiced.

As a corollary of Knight's scholarship, he had an unflinching suspicion of authority, which, if anything, he may have over-taught some of us. Yet somehow his unwillingness to bow to any authority except reason did not lead him to arrogance but rather to a special sort of humility: in particular there was not the slightest element of condescension in his relations with us students. He listened at least as hopefully to a suggestion from one of us as to one from a famous scholar, and in fact it was sometimes downright embarrassing to be accorded the respect with which he awaited our inadequate views.

Frank Knight had a second characteristic which armed his scholarship with purpose. He concentrated his mind on great issues of economic and social life. There was no element of gadgetry in his work, although gadgetry has a powerful fascination for clever and subtle minds. In the area of technical economic analysis, to which Knight devoted decreasing attention during and after the 1930's, his concern was with one of the most fundamental and difficult of subjects, capital theory. Outside technical economics, his central work was on the role of intelligence in social life, the ethical nature of a good society, and the methodology of social science. The fundamental problems in these large areas were not solved in his class,-- they were made more explicit and vastly more formidable. We students felt that it was inconceivable that any issue that occupied Knight would vanish from the center of intellectual life in our time.

Knight's immense influence did not generate imitative discipleships, partly because he applied to himself the suspicion of authority. Indeed none of us believed that we were capable of dealing with his range of problems at his level, and we were surely right. For example, Knight's distinguished follower, Henry Simons, a scholar of brilliance and grace, dealt with a range of important contemporary problems that never attracted his teacher. Yet Knight was not remote,--on the contrary he was so generous with time and knowledge that some dissertations--I have my own in mind--ought at a minimum to have listed a collaborator. Knight did not give an agenda of research to Simons and the remainder of us, but he gave us beliefs and doubts that we have never lost.

We shall continue to be the students of Professor Knight.

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