

**Prospects for an Objective Pragmatism:
Frank Ramsey on Truth, Meaning, and Justification***

Griffin Klemick
University of Toronto

This is a post-peer-review, pre-copyedit version of an article published in Sami Pihlström
(ed.), *Pragmatism and Objectivity* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 46–71.

I

It is by now a familiar view that, at bottom, there are two rival factions within the pragmatist camp. “One kind,” Cheryl Misak maintains, “tries to retain a place for objectivity and for our aspiration to get things right”; “the other,” she adds delicately, if suggestively, “is not nearly so committed to that” (2013, 246; cf. 3). Misak gives her allegiance to the former faction, interspersing defenses of it and attacks on its rival throughout her telling of the history of pragmatism (see Misak 2013). Indeed, from pragmatism’s inception, those who committed themselves to an *objective pragmatism*, as I shall call it, have been much more invested in distinguishing the two factions than those accused of a *subjective pragmatism*.¹ For instance, while William James dedicated his 1897 collection *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* “to my old friend Charles Sanders Peirce” (1979/1897, 3) and presented the pragmatism of his 1906 Lowell lectures as founded on “the principle of Peirce” (1978/1907, 29), Peirce was vitally concerned to distinguish the “logical gospel” he had called “pragmatism” from the “doctrine of philosophy” into which James transformed it. For, he reports, “prominent parts” of this Jamesian doctrine “I regarded, and still regard, as opposed to sound logic,” and even as “characterized by an angry hatred of strict logic, and . . . some disposition to rate any exact

* My thanks are due to Cheryl Misak for helpful comments, as well as to the Balzan Foundation–University of Toronto Styles of Reasoning project, inaugurated by Ian Hacking, for its support.

¹ Rorty is an exception. He sharply separates Peirce’s embrace of Kantianism from James’ and Dewey’s rejection of it, insisting that Peirce’s “contribution to pragmatism was merely to have given it a name, and to have stimulated James” (1982, 161).

thought which interferes with [its adherents'] doctrines as all humbug" (1931-58, VI, §§482, 485: 1908).

One philosopher who has recently expounded the distinction between the two factions in some detail is Nicholas Rescher, who, like Misak, vigorously defends objective pragmatism, which he calls "pragmatism of the right," against the subjectivist view he calls "pragmatism of the left."² While we saw Misak describe the former as committed to objectivity and the goal of accurately describing reality, we have not yet arrived at a positive characterization of the latter position. But Rescher leaves us in little doubt about its central feature: in his description of pragmatism of the left, he uses 'relativism' or cognate words six times in five pages (2000, 64-9). He tells us that this sort of "pragmatism countenances a live-and-let-live multiplicity of views that is as broad and flexible as the range of human idiosyncrasy and cultural variation," abandoning all "impersonal or [at] any rate person-indifferent" epistemic standards (ibid., 65). It holds, rather, that one is warranted in believing something just in case it *works* for one, which does not entail its working for those with different goals, values, or preferences.

The most prominent representatives of pragmatism of the left identified by Rescher are William James and Richard Rorty.³ And it's not difficult to see why these two are singled out. Replying to Russell's objections to his pragmatist view of truth, James states outright that "in any concrete account of what is denoted by 'truth' in human life, the word can only be used relatively" to some particular subject's point of view. He goes on to suggest that, if he engages in a disagreement about some matter of fact, his interlocutor ought "in his capacity of pragmatist [to] see plainly that the workings of my opinion, I being what I am, make it perfectly true for me" even as the interlocutor maintains his contrary opinion (1978/1909, 147).

² Rescher gives the former its name "because of its essentially conservative nature" (2000, 69).

³ Rescher also names F. C. S. Schiller (ibid., 64). I won't discuss Schiller's views here.

Rorty, for his part, builds upon James' idea that truth is "what is good for *us* to believe,"⁴ suggesting that we should attempt to "reduce objectivity to solidarity": to identify the distinction between knowledge and opinion with that "between topics on which agreement [within one's community] is relatively easy to get and topics on which agreement is relatively hard to get" (1991/1989, 22-3). Rescher's pragmatist of the right recoils at this idea: surely the community with which I am in "solidarity" might agree in finding a belief congenial for reasons with no bearing on its truth! James' stance is equally unacceptable: that "I, being what I am," should find a belief agreeable or even plausible might not be a reliable indicator of its truth. For the belief might be false but useful to me or to my community, in light of other false beliefs we hold; likewise, it might be true but fail to be useful, in light of our ignorance of other pertinent truths.

Pragmatists must go deeper, normatively speaking: they must hold that a statement's truth-conditions, as well as the conditions under which someone is justified in believing it, are not relativized to the contingent features of particular subjects, but are objective, applying indifferently to any person. Of course, whether a particular person is justified in believing a statement will depend on features of her particular epistemic situation: most obviously, on what else she knows and believes. But that her total evidence does or does not justify her in believing the statement in question—this, Rescher insists, does not depend on her or on the particularities of her culture, but rather is a norm that applies to all persons alike.

To forestall the worry that this makes truth and justification excessively transcendent, placing them entirely beyond the sphere in which we live our lives and so leaving us without hope of attaining them, Rescher notes that he is not advocating a version of this view that would devolve into "academic skepticism revived" (2000, 67). If he refuses to follow James and Rorty in replacing objective notions of truth and evidence with a relativistic notion of practical

⁴ The wording and emphasis are Rorty's own; for James' original statement, see his (1978/1907, 42).

success, still he maintains that practical success, understood in an objective way, constitutes our best evidence for truth. But he thinks we can affirm this claim while retaining a place for objectivity and “an impersonally normative rationality.” Indeed, he thinks that, rightly understood, acceptance of this claim leads us to “an adherence to metaphysical realism,” since practical success, at least in the sense relevant to epistemology, is something “that lies in the objective nature of things,” especially in our dealings with the natural world (ibid., 68).

Both Rescher (2000, 64, 68) and Misak (2013, 3-4) identify Peirce as the foremost proponent of objective pragmatism. I think Peirce’s relation to objective pragmatism merits detailed scrutiny, and I hope to explore this question elsewhere. Presently, however, I turn to a figure who is less frequently associated with pragmatism, but who was in fact a serious reader of Peirce and played an important role in the transmission of pragmatism in England: Frank Ramsey.⁵ Misak has recently suggested that Ramsey argues for a persuasive version of objective pragmatism (forthcoming, Chapter 6). And Rescher has worked extensively on Ramsey, acquiring and administering the Ramsey Collection at the University of Pittsburgh, as well as editing (with Ulrich Majer) Ramsey’s unfinished manuscript *On Truth* for publication. He, too, recognizes the important pragmatist strand in Ramsey’s thinking (see Rescher and Majer 1991, xv), and he finds Ramsey’s views important and, seemingly, congenial. So, I propose to explore Ramsey’s views of meaning and justification, exploring how he manifests the deep normative concerns and realist sympathies characteristic of objective pragmatism. I suggest that we will indeed find both of these features present in Ramsey, but that they fit together less easily than we might have supposed—indeed, that they are ultimately in significant tension.

⁵ One might wonder how Ramsey gained access to the then-unknown Peirce’s thought and writings. He did so through C. K. Ogden, who published in England the first collection of Peirce’s writings and also gave papers of Peirce’s to Ramsey personally. See Misak (forthcoming, Introduction).

In §II, I present Ramsey's deflationism about truth and show how it leads him to search for a pragmatist theory of meaning. I explain that theory of meaning (and the functionalism about beliefs on which it is based) in §III. I draw some epistemological consequences from this theory of meaning in §IV, suggesting that objective pragmatists should find them congenial. But I argue in §§V-VI that Ramsey's metaphysical and semantic realism lead him to a bifurcated theory of meaning that cannot preserve these attractive consequences, but instead is threatened by skepticism and psychologism. I conclude in §VII, suggesting that work remains for objective pragmatists in their attempt to articulate both the fit between their realism and their emphasis on objectivity as well as their precise differences from subjective pragmatism.

II

One not intimately acquainted with the life and work of Frank Plumpton Ramsey might be surprised to find him proclaimed (on the back cover of a collection of his philosophical writings) "the greatest of the remarkable generation of Cambridge philosophers and logicians which included G. E. Moore, Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein and [John] Meynard Keynes" (Ramsey 1990). Yet, as engagement with Ramsey's work has deepened, this view has steadily gained support. Leaving aside his founding of decision theory and other branches of mathematics and economics, additional attestation to his superlative genius derives from the seeming inescapability, for late 20th-century analytic philosophers, of what Donald Davidson called *the Ramsey effect*: "for any theory that X believes to have discovered, it is likely that it was anticipated in some form by Ramsey." Those who have fallen prey to the Ramsey effect include proponents of reliabilism about knowledge and justification, subjectivism about probability, functionalist approaches to meaning and the mind, the "Ramsey-Lewis" analysis of theoretical

statements, the neo-Humean “best systems” approach to scientific laws, expressivism about causal statements, and an indexical analysis of tensed beliefs and statements—as well as Davidson himself.⁶ These achievements of Ramsey’s, already staggering, seem completely astonishing when one realizes that he completed them all before his 27th birthday, which, owing to acute liver problems, he did not live to see.

It seems best to approach Ramsey’s views of meaning and justification by considering the contribution for which he is, perhaps, most often actually *read* today: his deflationary account of truth. Ramsey spent much of his time during the years 1927-9 painstakingly drafting a manuscript titled *On Truth*, which he did not complete before his death. He was keenly interested in problems about meaning, addressing their complexities in great detail. But concerning the basic question what ‘true’ means, Ramsey thought that “the answer is really perfectly obvious” (1991/1927-9, 9). Indeed, he had arrived at his central insight on this point as early as 1921, stating it in a paper read before the Moral Sciences Club called “The Nature of Propositions”: “The most certain thing about truth is that ‘*p* is true’ and ‘*p*’, if not identical, are equivalent” (ibid., 118). For, he later wrote in *On Truth*, the correct “definition” of truth is the following simple biconditional: “a belief is true if [and only if⁷] it is a belief that *p*, and *p*” (ibid., 9). And therefore, as he remarks in his 1927 article “Facts and Propositions,” “it is evident that ‘It is true that Cæsar was murdered’ means no more than that Cæsar was murdered, and ‘It is false that Cæsar was murdered’ means that Cæsar was not murdered” (1990, 38: 1927). For Ramsey, then, ‘true’ and ‘false’ do not make contributions of their own to the meanings of statements in which

⁶ Davidson (1999, 32) uses the phrase “the Ramsey effect” and describes its befalling him. (He thought he had discovered a way to isolate a 50% subjective probability of one of a subject’s beliefs without knowing anything about the subject’s scale of utilities—the fundamental insight of Ramsey’s 1926 paper “Truth and Probability.”) The actual description of the Ramsey effect, however, is Dokic and Engel’s; see their (2002, 2).

⁷ In his initial statement of the “definition,” Ramsey forgets to claim that the condition is necessary as well as sufficient. But he adds the ‘only if’ in his second statement of it (*OT*, 13). And his criticism of James for violating the definition makes sense only if the definition includes this claim to necessity as well, since James does not deny that any belief that *p* is true if *p*, but instead seemingly maintains that a belief that *p* can be true even if $\sim p$.

they appear. And therefore “there is really no separate problem of truth but merely a linguistic muddle” (ibid.).

But what is the function of the phrase ‘. . . is true,’ if not to ascribe a substantive, irreducible semantic property? For Ramsey, its basic function is to resolve a quirk of ordinary language. Now, it doesn’t serve this function in statements like ‘It is true that Caesar was murdered,’ statements in which the propositions to which truth is ascribed are explicitly given. Here the phrase should be treated pragmatically: we use it “for emphasis or for stylistic reasons, or to indicate the position occupied by the statement in our argument” (1990, 38: 1927). The basic function emerges only in statements like ‘What he believed was true’ or ‘She always speaks truly,’ in which the propositions taken as true are not explicitly given. In uttering these sentences, we refer to the propositions we wish to affirm by means of the terms ‘what’ and ‘that’ (glossing the second sentence as ‘For any proposition, if she asserts it, then that proposition is true’). Now these terms, Ramsey tells us, “should really be called *pro-sentences*” (1991/1927-9, 10) and viewed as standing in for whole sentences. Accordingly, there is no reason convention should not permit us to say simply ‘What he believed’ or ‘For any proposition, if she asserts it, then that’: since the propositions denoted by the pro-sentences contain verbs of their own, there is no need to supply an additional verb.⁸ But ordinary language treats these terms instead as mere pronouns and so requires their supplementation by a verb phrase. And when they are used to refer to propositions for the purpose of assertion, the supplementary verb phrase we use is ‘. . . is true.’ In short, then, ‘. . . is true’ functions primarily as a device for asserting propositions denoted by opaque nominalizations, which device is necessary because natural language construes the most basic of these nominals as pronouns rather than pro-sentences. Here, again,

⁸ The formal analogue to this natural linguistic phenomenon is the variable sentence. Ramsey’s “definition” of truth—a belief is true if it is a belief that *p*, and *p*—“sounds odd because we do not at first realize that ‘*p*’ is a variable *sentence* and so should be regarded as containing a verb” (1991/1927-9, 9).

Ramsey was prescient, anticipating the central idea of the influential prosentential analysis of ‘it is true’ given by Grover, Camp, and Belnap (1975).⁹

In this way Ramsey commits himself to a pragmatist direction of explanation in his theory of meaning. He does not propose to account for meaning in terms of truth-conditions and, in turn, for truth-conditions in terms of correspondence to facts. Instead, he analyzes ‘the fact that p ’ as a loose, ontologically noncommittal way of talking, licensed whenever p is true (see 1991/1927-9, 114-8), and, in turn, accounts for the truth of p in terms of a pragmatist account of the meaning (or, to use Ramsey’s own term, the “propositional reference”) of p .¹⁰ And so, while in an early draft of *On Truth*, Ramsey says that his view of truth “belongs undoubtedly to the class of correspondence theories” (ibid., 18), he quickly notes problems with analyzing the truth of just any belief (and especially beliefs in disjunctions) in terms of a corresponding fact, and suggests that talk of correspondence to fact is “not an analysis of truth but a cumbersome periphrasis” (ibid., 19). In the final version, he says not that his view is a correspondence view, but only that it can capture some of the advantages of correspondence theories without presupposing a precise notion of correspondence (ibid., 11-2). Ramsey thus follows Peirce in accepting as a platitude the thesis that truth is correspondence to fact while maintaining that truth must ultimately be accounted for in terms of a pragmatist account of meaning.¹¹ Indeed, Ramsey’s account seems elegantly to execute this Peircean program while eschewing some of

⁹ And for a modified prosententialist theory that seems to end up quite close to Ramsey’s mature view, since it analyzes the function of ‘. . . is true’ in terms of prosentences while allowing its coupling to pronouns, see Brandom (1994, §§5.III.3-4).

¹⁰ Of course, this direction of explanation requires establishing a close relationship between the meaning of p and the norms governing assertion of p , since Ramsey’s biconditional—*a belief is true just if it is a belief that p , and p* —presupposes not only a theory of content that tells us when a belief is a belief that p , but also a standard that tells us when p —when the assertion that p meets some standard of correctness (which, moreover, we must analyze without presupposing the notion of truth). We shall return to this below.

¹¹ For Peirce’s attempt to bring together these two thoughts, see his (1931-58, VIII, §100: 1910).

Peirce's explications of truth that proved more distracting than illuminating—especially his descriptions of it as our “predestined” or “fated” opinion.¹²

III

Ramsey grants, then, that “an account of truth which accepts the notion of propositional reference without analysis cannot possibly be regarded as complete,” since “all the many difficulties connected with that notion are really involved in truth which depends on it” (1991/1927-9, 14; cf. 1990, 39-40: 1927). Deflationism about truth calls urgently for a satisfactory account of meaning, and so, having defended the former in the first chapter of *On Truth*, Ramsey tells us that his next task is to deliver the latter (see 1991/1927-9, 43, 103). Let us consider, then, his account of meaning, as presented in the third chapter of *On Truth* and in several earlier papers.

Given the role meaning plays in Ramsey's theory of language, accounting for truth and facts rather than accounted for in terms of them, one might expect Ramsey to take meaning as primitive by embracing what he calls *the propositional theory of judgment*: the view that the contentfulness of our mental states can be explained only by positing irreducible semantic entities called *propositions*. But here, again, Ramsey opts instead for a pragmatist stance. He considers the positing of such entities an unwarranted instance of ontological profligacy; as he remarks in one manuscript, “it is only the hardiest verbalists who can persuade themselves that ‘that the earth is flat’ is the name of something real” (1991/1927-9, 85). The only motivation

¹² But Peirce himself deflates this language of “fate” and was not, perhaps, seriously committed to these formulations. (See Misak 2013, 36-7.) There is some question about whether Ramsey himself recognized this and so viewed himself as in line with Peirce concerning truth (if perhaps as expressing the view more clearly than Peirce himself did), or instead took himself to be correcting Peirce's inadequate, inflationary view of truth. There is some textual support for the latter view (1991/1927-9, 24, note 2), but Ramsey makes some approving remarks about Peirce's view of truth that lend some support to the former (1991/1927-9, 91; 1990, 161: 1929).

such “verbalists” can provide for this posit is “that no one has seen any alternative” (ibid., 110): we can only explain the intentionality of our mental states—their directedness toward objects—by appeal to their contents, which, seemingly, we can only explain by positing entities that can serve as their contents. Ramsey’s response to this argument is ingenious. The verbalist’s sole reason for positing propositions is, as we’ve just seen, to explain how beliefs can be related to the objects that figure in their contents. But in that case, why not simply *identify* a belief’s propositional reference—its meaning or content—with this multiple relation it bears to these objects? After all, this would equally preserve the belief’s directedness toward objects while being more parsimonious than the propositional theory of judgment. Seeing no plausible objection to this line of argument, Ramsey concludes: “The correct analysis is that [propositional] references are multiple relational properties” (ibid., 113).

Ramsey gave this clever argument against the existence of propositions (construed as irreducible semantic entities) in “The Nature of Propositions.” But the force of the argument depends on finding particular relations between beliefs and objects that can plausibly be identified with the beliefs’ meanings: if no such relations can be found, it would seem we have no recourse but to posit new entities to do the job. In that early paper, Ramsey doesn’t specify the relations he has in mind. It isn’t till five years later, with the presentation of “Truth and Probability” (1926) and the publication of “Facts and Propositions” (1927), that Ramsey gives the details of his proposal.

In the former paper, Ramsey attempts to give a theory of probability, which he takes to be “a branch of logic, the logic of partial belief and inconclusive argument” (1990, 53: 1926). His aim, then, is normative: to show us how “to apportion correctly our belief to the probability” (ibid., 62). But since we can do this only if we already know what we believe, he attempts “to

develop a purely psychological method of measuring belief” (ibid.): that is, to give an account, using only descriptive language, that tells us just when a subject has a belief with particular content, as well as to what specific degree she believes it.

After considering and rejecting the view that beliefs are constituted by subjective, introspectively-accessible feelings, Ramsey settles on an alternate approach: one he finds in the claim, raised (though not fully endorsed) by Russell in *The Analysis of Mind*, “that the degree of a belief is a causal property of it, which we can express vaguely as the extent to which we are prepared to act on it” (1990, 65: 1926). On this view, beliefs are “*dispositional*”: their existence is grounded in the fact that they “would be manifested if occasion arose,” though they “may still be there without being manifested” (1991/1927-9, 43). He continues:

To say a man has such and such . . . beliefs . . . means then generally something hypothetical, something about what he would think, say, or do in suitable circumstances. It is, in my view, important to realise that it is not only a question of what he would think or say but also of what he would do, for many of our dispositional beliefs are manifested far more in our actions than in our thoughts. For instance, I have a dispositional belief . . . that the Cambridge Union is in Bridge Street; but this belief is very rarely manifested in an [occurrent] act of thought On the other hand, this belief of mine is frequently manifested by my turning my steps that way when I want a book from the Union Library I go there habitually without having to think.

[ibid., 44-5]

And, in fact, Ramsey suggests, he has just understated the relationship between belief and action in giving this example: not only does the action *manifest* the belief, but the disposition to act in that way in those circumstances partly *constitutes* the belief. For “it [is] impossible to give any satisfactory account of belief or even of thought without making any reference to possible resulting action” (ibid., 45).

Now, one reason Russell objected to the dispositional view of belief is that it individuates beliefs solely by reference to their effects. And this we cannot do, he argues, because, absent any difference between two beliefs independent of their effects, there is no reason they should

produce different effects. So, we must find some corresponding antecedent difference between them. Ramsey grants that the objection succeeds against a purely dispositional account of belief, but suggests that we can find a corresponding difference between the respective causes of the beliefs (1990, 66: 1926). The reason for focusing on the effects rather than the causes is simply that the latter are of interest to us when we are attempting to predict others' behavior, as well as that we sometimes know the causes of our beliefs only vaguely. But beliefs are nevertheless partly constituted by each: to believe that *p* is to be in a mental state that is caused by one of a number of input states and tends in given circumstances to produce various output states, where these states are selected by their relation to the belief's propositional reference. Ramsey gives us, then, a *functionalist* theory of mental states.¹³

Peirce tells us that, once Nicholas St. John Green had impressed Bain's dispositional view of belief as "that upon which a man is prepared to act" upon him and the other members of the Metaphysical Club, their new theory of meaning followed quickly: "From this definition, pragmatism is scarce more than a corollary" (1931-58, V, §12: c. 1906). So it was for Ramsey as well: quick upon his functionalist view of mental states followed a functionalist account of meaning. Not only is a belief that *p* a state constituted by its causal relations to various input and output states, but the belief's *being a belief that p* is to be analyzed in terms of its being caused by, and causing, the particular states to which it bears those relations. He writes:

¹³ At times, Ramsey seems to allow, against functionalism, that some mental states are partly constituted by intrinsic phenomenal properties. In "Facts and Propositions," for instance, he suggests that judgments, or beliefs that are consciously asserted, are "accompanied by a feeling or feelings of belief or disbelief, related to [the symbols that express the judgment's content] in a way I do not propose to discuss" (1990, 40: 1927). But in a footnote, he suggests that, if the reader prefers, she is free to substitute other terms for 'feeling'—among them, "act of assertion" and "act of denial" (ibid., note 2). And these seem less phenomenally weighty and more amenable to functionalist analyses.

At any rate, if Ramsey did adhere to a thoroughgoing functionalism, he faced the challenge of accounting for phenomenal character (for a brief statement of the problem, see Block and Fodor 1972, §III, argument #3); to my knowledge, he never took up this challenge. For the suggestion that Peirce, too, was torn between an attraction to dispositional accounts of belief and the burden of doing justice to belief's intrinsic character, see Misak (forthcoming, Chapter 1).

It seems to me that the equivalence between believing ‘not-*p*’ and disbelieving ‘*p*’ is to be defined in terms of causation, the two occurrences having in common many of their causes and many of their effects. . . . To be equivalent, we may say, is to have in common certain causal properties, which I wish I could define more precisely.

It is evident that the importance of beliefs and disbeliefs lies not in their intrinsic nature, but in their causal properties, i.e. their causes and more especially their effects. For why should I want to have a feeling of belief towards names ‘*a*’, ‘*R*’, and ‘*b*’, except because the effects of these feelings are more often satisfactory than those of the alternative ones.

[1990, 44: 1927]¹⁴

Here we finally find the answer to our question: with which relational properties does Ramsey seek to identify meanings? The answer is that he identifies them with causal relations between mental states and worldly objects—whether their causal impact on us in perception, or ours on them in action—as well as relations between distinct mental states exhibited in inference. In identifying meanings with these properties rather than positing irreducible propositions, Ramsey adopts a pragmatist rather than a metaphysical approach to meaning, as he recognizes: “The essence of pragmatism I take to be this, that the meaning of a sentence is to be defined by reference to the actions to which asserting it would lead, or, more vaguely still, by its possible causes and effects” (1990, 51: 1927). Thus construed, he is right to make a remark that some have found quite perplexing: “My pragmatism is derived from Mr Russell” (ibid.). For it was in reading *The Analysis of Mind* that Ramsey first saw the appeal of functionalism.¹⁵

IV

Now we can begin to situate Ramsey with respect to objective pragmatism. For, I suggest, Ramsey’s functionalism about meaning has epistemological consequences that those seeking an

¹⁴ This emphasis on “feeling” might seem to conflict with Ramsey’s functionalism. But see the preceding footnote.

¹⁵ *The Analysis of Mind* came out in 1921, while the first collection of Peirce’s writings was not published until 1923. Ramsey had already cited Peirce approvingly on epistemological matters in §5 of “Truth and Probability,” as we shall see below. But he does not seem to have engaged (in writing, at least) with the American pragmatists on the topic of meaning until 1927-9, in the drafts of *On Truth* as well as briefly in “General Propositions and Causality.”

objective pragmatism should find congenial. Notice first that, on Ramsey's view, meaning must be *holistic*: any particular statement means what it does only in virtue of its role in a network of other meaningful statements.¹⁶ For the meaning of a particular statement consists in its propensities to be caused by particular perceptual states of a subject and to cause him to perform particular actions. Let's focus on the latter propensities at present: what sort of assertion about a subject's hypothetical behavior do we make when we say that he believes that *p*? Ramsey remarks that this assertion must be "a very complicated one, for 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" (1991/1927-9, 45). Since no belief makes a contribution to a subject's behavior except in tandem with many other beliefs, meaning is a property, first and foremost, of the whole network of the subject's beliefs, and only derivatively of any particular belief in the network.¹⁷

This holism about meaning leads naturally to an *epistemic* holism: like meaning, justification is not primarily a property of a subject's particular beliefs, but first and foremost of the whole "system with which [she] meets the future" (1990, 149: 1929). For Ramsey—and here, as he notes (1990, 90, note 2: 1926), he is simply following Peirce—a belief is justified just in case it is produced by a reliable belief-forming habit or process: one which leads, and perhaps would lead in similar circumstances,¹⁸ to truth a sufficiently high proportion of the time. But the

¹⁶ In the second chapter of *On Truth*, Ramsey objects to one particular construal of holism about meaning. But his objection applies only to views on which meaning "is not applicable to isolated judgments but only to systems of judgments" (1991/1927-9, 26). This claim is not essential to holism about meaning, and the view I sketch briefly in the text makes no use of it.

¹⁷ A similar holistic point, can, I think—and, if the functionalist semantic program is to work, *must*—be made with reference to input states. Indeed, Wilfrid Sellars, the next great semantic pragmatist or functionalist following Ramsey, makes an argument of this sort concerning input states (1997/1956, §VIII).

¹⁸ For the need to take hypothetical and not merely actual cases into account in deciding whether a belief-forming habit leads to truth, see Ramsey (1990, 97, ¶2: 1928; *ibid.*, 153-7: 1929). (For analogous subjunctive statements

other beliefs of the subject will figure at least implicitly in any sufficiently detailed description of her belief-forming habits. My perceptual processes lead me to form the beliefs I do—presently, for instance, that there is a stuffed penguin wearing an eyepatch on my desk—only operating in tandem with many other beliefs of mine: beliefs about what penguins look like, what items I have accumulated as would-be cutesy gifts for my wife, the likelihood that my perceptual faculties are reliable at close range, and so on.¹⁹ To be sure, when describing how we come to form beliefs, we frequently leave the background conditions involving such beliefs out of the story. But this is only because we take them for granted, not because they are not necessary parts of the belief-formation process. A person who did not know what a penguin was would not form the belief I presently have. And if I were explaining how I came to believe as I do to someone I knew lacked this knowledge, I would not say simply that I formed the belief on the basis of perception but would also adduce the role played by my beliefs about penguins. Inquiry, then, is a matter of confirming, or discovering the need for revisions within, our whole system of beliefs. And it succeeds when it leads us to beliefs that are true—beliefs that are useful in an objective sense (see Ramsey 1991/1927-9, 91-2).²⁰ This seems an excellent statement of the epistemology objective pragmatists are attempting to articulate: a view on which epistemic norms are founded in practical success without being relativized to particular subjects.

Ramsey's epistemological holism initially appears to yield a further appealing consequence. For it seems to enable him to conjoin two views that initially may seem incompatible when applied to the same domain of statements: *expressivism*, or the thesis that a

about meaning, see *ibid.*, 51: 1927; *ibid.*, 133-4: 1929.) But Ramsey's stance on this question is ambivalent, as we'll see in §VI.

¹⁹ Compare Sellars (1997/1956, §VIII.36).

²⁰ If we were attempting to analyze truth and meaning in terms of practical success, this would be far too quick: we would need to explicate and defend this idea in painstaking detail. However, I'll be arguing (in §§V-VI) that Ramsey actually turns his back on this program. So, while it remains an essential program for objective pragmatists (in my view), we need not pursue it in any detail to meet our present goal of understanding Ramsey's views of meaning and justification.

given domain of (putative) statements that behave syntactically like assertions should nevertheless be analyzed as expressions of non-cognitive attitudes, and *warrant-aptness*, the thesis that commitments to statements within a given domain are properly assessed according to whether they mislead a subject about the world or instead enable her to get it right. In his influential 1929 paper “General Propositions and Causality,” Ramsey attempts to maintain both these views concerning statements of causal laws. Such statements are not strictly true or false, Ramsey tells us. For they admit of, and entail consequences for, an infinite number of cases, whether actual or merely hypothetical ones. The only way to analyze them truth-functionally, then, would be as infinite conjunctions, stating that the law is satisfied in every one of these infinitely many cases. Ramsey had previously adopted this analysis of law-statements, but he now abandons it, on the grounds that infinite conjunctions are inexpressible and, at any rate, do not capture the central practical function of law-statements (1990, 145-6: 1929). Instead, he holds that law-statements are not propositional or strictly true or false. Nevertheless, he argues, we can view commitment to such statements as more or less reasonable (and different subjects’ different degrees of commitment to them as genuinely *disagreeing with*, and not merely differing from, one another) precisely because such commitments play a role in shaping our systems of expectations for the future, and particular possible states of the future will be consistent with some such systems but inconsistent with others. In this way, by relying on his epistemological holism, Ramsey can maintain that causal commitments are sometimes warranted (in light of their contributions to warranted systems of belief) even while treating them as expressions of commitments to rules for judging rather than of beliefs in propositions, capable of truth or falsity.

V

If this result is *prima facie* epistemologically satisfying, however, still one might wonder whether it is compatible with Ramsey's theory of meaning. On Ramsey's functionalism, all it takes for a mental state to be a belief is for it to stand in particular causal relations—especially for it to make a particular contribution, as a part of a system of beliefs and in tandem with a system of desires, to the behavior of a subject. And the content of such a belief—the “proposition” to which it refers, we might say loosely—simply is the sum of the causal relations in which the belief stands. But we have just seen him grant that commitments to statements of causal laws play such a functional role, and so it is not clear how he can deny that they are beliefs in “propositions” (on his understanding of propositions).²¹

Nor does Ramsey seem able to pull apart a commitment's warrant-aptness from its truth-aptness in the way his view of law-statements requires. For Ramsey is committed to analyzing statements of the form ‘*p* is true’ in terms of the instances of *p*, which he must analyze, in turn, without appealing to truth. So, once he has given deflationist-friendly accounts of content and of the norms governing assertion of content, he can have nothing more to say about truth: truth can't be some further property or status that transcends the outputs of these accounts. Of course, this isn't to say that Ramsey is committed to identifying truth with justification or with proper assertibility for a particular speaker at a particular time. But it is to say that any understanding of warranted belief or assertibility that Ramsey is entitled to deploy in accounting for the ‘and *p*’ on the right side of his biconditional—*a belief is true just in case it is a belief that p, and p*—can differ only in degree or in scope from simple speaker-warrant, not in kind. He could appeal, for instance, to the Peircean idea of indefinitely-persisting justification for an indefinitely expansive

²¹ This worry has been raised by Holton and Price (2003). Indeed, a number of the worries I'll raise below for Ramsey's theory of meaning are anticipated by Holton and Price.

community of inquiry, but to nothing more transcendent than that. But since Ramsey grants that a commitment to a causal statement can be warranted for particular subjects at particular times, and since he gives us no reason to think that this warrant could not in principle persist across indefinitely many subjects and times, he is not entitled to deny that such commitments are truth-apt any more than that they amount to beliefs in propositions.

What accounts for Ramsey's failure to follow through on his ostensible commitment to holism in these ways? I think that this failure evinces his reliance on a realist conception of meaning or the proposition, which leads to a *bifurcation* within his theory of meaning (to borrow a term from Kraut 1990): only a subset of the statements he admits as in [a loose](#) sense meaningful correspond to propositions, or are meaningful, in this deeper sense. It is easiest to see how this bifurcation arises by considering the development of Ramsey's views about meaning against the backdrop of logical atomism.

In the mid-1920s, and specifically in his 1925 paper "Universals," Ramsey's account of propositions follows closely the one Wittgenstein presents in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (which, incidentally, Ramsey was largely responsible for translating).²² On this view, there exist simple objects that bear relations to one another; the obtaining of such a relation is an atomic fact, which we logically "picture" in an atomic proposition by means of signs. These simple objects in relation compose complex objects bearing relations to one another; the obtaining of a relation of this latter sort is a molecular fact. And, similarly, we picture these using signs to designate them. And we can analyze these complex signs into simple signs, just as the complexes for which the former stand are composed of the simples for which the latter stand. Importantly,

²² I am not entirely sure how to square Ramsey's commitment to this Wittgensteinian view of propositions with his earlier deflationary view (in his 1921 "The Nature of Propositions") and his later functionalist development of it (in 1926-7). But since one of my central theses in this paper is that there is a deep inconsistency in Ramsey's views on this topic, perhaps this is not altogether surprising.

Ramsey follows Wittgenstein in adopting a basically Kantian stance toward atomic facts and propositions: as he says in “Universals,” “we are not acquainted with any genuine objects or atomic propositions, but merely infer them as presupposed by other propositions” (1990, 19: 1925). The Wittgensteinian inference Ramsey mentions here is this:

Objects make up the substance of the world. That is why they cannot be composite.
If the world had no substance, then whether a proposition had sense would depend on
whether another proposition was true.

In that case we could not sketch any picture of the world (true or false).

[Wittgenstein 1974/1921, §§2.021-2.0212]

We posit simple objects not because perception puts us in relations of acquaintance with them, but because only if they exist will there be a world outside us with a determinate character—a base-level, objective “way things are.” And only in this way can our statements be *about* anything at all, and so be capable of describing anything rightly or wrongly (i.e. being true or false). We see, then, that Ramsey’s theory of language in “Universals” ties the concepts of the proposition and of truth to worldly objects as conceived by the metaphysics of logical atomism. If other statements (e.g., probability statements) have “meanings” and correctness-conditions of some sort—deriving from their causal influence on our behavior, say—still these statements “express cognitive attitudes without being propositions” and without being truth-apt (see Ramsey 1990, 147: 1929).

The concession that we lack acquaintance to objects might not seem particularly damaging; indeed, it might seem a healthy corrective to Russell’s perhaps naïvely empiricist epistemology of acquaintance. But, as David Pears notes, the early Wittgenstein was equally “opposed to any . . . dilution of pure atomicity” by appeal to “the way in which we learn meanings in daily life” or the role terms play in our current philosophical regimentation of our thought (1985, 31, 34). So, having already contested the Russellian argument that, in molecular

statements, terms denoting universals and terms denoting particulars can be differentiated based on pure syntax, Ramsey is happy to reply to the rejoinder that this can at least be done for *atomic* propositions with a straightforward expression of Tractarian Kantianism:

The truth is that we know and can know nothing whatever about the forms of atomic propositions; we do not know whether some or all objects can occur in more than one form of atomic proposition; and there is obviously no way of deciding any such question.
[1990, 29: 1925]

Whatever the merits of the concession regarding acquaintance to objects, the consequences of this more expansive concession appear devastating—most obviously for epistemology, but even concerning meaning. First and foremost, it leaves us vulnerable to skepticism. On the atomist model, the molecular statements we make in the course of everyday life are true just in case they are analyzable in terms of atomic propositions—statements about simple objects and the relations between them—that picture these worldly entities accurately. But the Tractarian account denies that we can know whether our molecular statements are thus analyzable, by denying that we can recognize atomic propositions as such.²³ So, it seems we have no way of knowing whether our molecular statements are true.

And, in fact, the situation is even worse, since analyzability into atomic propositions is a necessary condition not only for molecular statements' *truth*, but even for their *meaningfulness* (at least in the strict sense: their constituting propositions). Ramsey's Tractarian theory of meaning, then, undercuts itself by leading to skepticism about meaning.²⁴ The current of

²³ A defender of the Tractarian account might reply that, though we cannot know whether our ordinary propositions about everyday objects can be analyzed into atomic propositions, we have discovered that they are analyzable into the more basic propositions of physics and so have inductive support for concluding that we will be able to analyze them still further—ultimately, into atomic propositions. But the Tractarian account denies that the theoretical virtues that attach to our best theories of fundamental physics provide any motivation for viewing the statements of any such theory as atomic propositions. (This is Pears' point that, in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein opposed any "dilution of pure atomicity" by pragmatic considerations.)

²⁴ Of course, considering Wittgenstein's famous admission at the end of the *Tractatus* that the work's propositions are nonsensical (1974/1921, §6.54), this self-undercutting character is perhaps not surprising.

metaphysical and semantic realism he borrows from logical atomism is not only difficult to square with his holist functionalism, and so a threat the idea that statements that are not propositional in the atomist sense (e.g., law-statements) are genuinely meaningful in any sense. The particular version to which Ramsey subscribed in 1925, at least, is also straightforwardly self-defeating.

VI

It did not take long for Ramsey to grow dissatisfied with the semantic approach of the *Tractatus*. In a 1926 note on “Universals,” written just a year after the paper, Ramsey noted that he was “now very doubtful” that it is impossible to reach atomic propositions through analysis (1990, 31: 1926). In “Facts and Propositions,” one year later still, he retained the Tractarian analysis of molecular propositions as truth-functions of atomic ones, but rejected its Kantian transcendental approach to the meaning of atomic propositions in favor of the functionalist account described above. As Ramsey described it: “Everything that I have said is due to [Wittgenstein], except the parts which have a pragmatist tendency, which seem to me to be needed in order to fill up a gap in his system” (1990, 51: 1927). The latter, again, he learned from Russell.

But ultimately, in the 1929 note “Philosophy,” he would embrace a metaphilosophical program that departed starkly from the atomism of both Russell and Wittgenstein. His distaste for Wittgenstein’s Kantianism is now transparent. Against Wittgenstein’s semantically self-undermining philosophical propositions, Ramsey writes that, once we have established that philosophy is nonsense, “we must then take seriously that it is nonsense, and not pretend, as Wittgenstein does, that it is important nonsense!” (1990, 1: 1929). And his insistence that “our

For a contemporary presentation of the idea that skepticism about knowledge leads to skepticism about meaning, see Button (2013, Chapter 7).

analyses of our statements, whether about meaning or about anything else, must be such as we can understand” (ibid., 7) equally opposes the attempt to analyze all our ordinary statements in terms of an unknowable, transcendental, foundational body of atomic propositions. But the implications he draws from this point apply not merely to Wittgenstein but to the heart of the atomists’ analytic program. Articulating the central insight of his functionalism about meaning, he argues that some bits of our linguistic behavior—he singles out our deployments of variable hypotheticals and theoretical terms—are such that we can’t capture their meanings naturally in definitions, but must instead “explain the way in which they are used” (ibid., 5) by displaying their effects on our other cognitions and, ultimately, on our behavior. But this means that, *contra* the atomists, we cannot simply look through our thoughts and our language to the facts themselves, assuming a structural isomorphism between the realm of the semantic and that of the real; rather, we must develop accounts of mental states and their meanings that can incorporate these accounts of our language-use. Nor, however, should we attempt to do this in Cartesian fashion, accounting for meaning and mind without reference to the external world, which latter we work our way out to only subsequently. Rather, we “have to take our problems as a whole and jump to a simultaneous solution; which will have something of the nature of a hypothesis . . . we are in the ordinary position of scientists having to be content with piecemeal improvements” (ibid., 6). Here Ramsey puts forward a holistic view of inquiry quite reminiscent of Peirce,²⁵ and seems to do so on the basis of his mature pragmatist account of meaning. Should we conclude, then, that Ramsey’s flirtations with a bifurcated semantics were mere by-products of his early allegiance to a Tractarian theory of meaning that formed no part of his final philosophical views?

²⁵ For Peirce’s assimilation of practical inquiry to piecemeal scientific investigation (though he distinguishes them in some respects), see the third lecture in his series “Detached Ideas on Vitaly Important Topics” (1931-58, V, §589: 1898).

I confess that I'd rather like to take this view of the matter, but, unfortunately, I don't think it is correct. A defender of this view would be hard-pressed to explain why Ramsey's denial that variable hypothetical statements are genuine propositions is found, as we've seen, not in his early work, but in the 1929 paper "General Propositions and Causality." She would also be hard-pressed to explain why, in "Philosophy" itself (which, recall, was also written in 1929), Ramsey appears to *contrast* variable hypotheticals and theoretical statements, which should be explained in terms of use and which (as he says elsewhere) do not express propositions, with other statements that apparently require other sorts of semantic explanation. Which statements fall into this latter class? Ramsey tells us that such "a belief of the primary sort is a map of neighbouring space by which we steer" (1990, 146: 1929): seemingly, a description of a finite number of spatiotemporal objects. These are genuine propositions, corresponding to facts (1990, 112: 1929). In attempting to evaluate or explain these primary propositions, we commit to statements of other sorts: besides variable hypotheticals and theoretical statements, these include statements about chances²⁶ and counterfactual statements not entailed by known facts.²⁷ As we've seen, these secondary statements do form part of "the system with which we meet the future," for Ramsey. But they are not propositions, nor is the system taken as a whole (cf. *ibid.*, 106: 1928); indeed, Ramsey is clear that theoretical statements are ultimately (if not always informatively) definable in terms of primary statements or propositions (*ibid.*, 119-29: 1929), and that counterfactuals are nonsensical unless they or their negations "can be deduced from our system" (*ibid.*, 161: 1929). These conclusions are hard to explain, given a holistic functionalist theory of meaning: after all, Ramsey himself tells us how vital such non-propositional statements

²⁶ See Ramsey (1990, 162: 1929 & 104: 1928).

²⁷ See *ibid.* (135, 138, 161: all from 1929).

are for guiding our inferences and actions,²⁸ as well as for epistemic appraisal (see *ibid.*, 153-7: 1929). It seems, then, that even after his ostensible shift away from atomism in 1926-7, Ramsey ultimately retained the representationalist view he acquired from atomism as his core notion of meaning (or the proposition): a statement that is meaningful in this sense is one that stands for or represents non-semantic, worldly objects.²⁹ He allowed that statements he treated as non-representational could be meaningful only in a secondary sense, one grounded in our use of them—in their functional characteristics.

In my view, this later bifurcated theory of meaning has epistemological consequences that are just as unpalatable as those of Ramsey's earlier Tractarian account. These emerge on both sides of the bifurcation: the representationalist center and the pragmatist edges. Statements of the former sort are to be treated as meaningful in virtue of their depicting—and true in virtue of their correctly depicting—"the facts": mind-independent spatiotemporal objects bearing relations to one another. But because he adopts this representationalism, Ramsey lands us in *skepticism* about the primary propositions. The central difficulty is this: for any belief about worldly facts that a subject reaches on the basis of some perceptual or cognitive state she is in, the state might be such as to make the belief "*seem* correct to [the subject] and yet . . . be utterly mistaken" (1991/1927-9, 58). But we cannot analyze any of our perceptual or cognitive mental states as relations to (or "apprehensions of") facts unless we can introspectively distinguish between cases in which that state discloses reality to us as it really is from cases in which it misleads us (*ibid.*, 59). So, the skeptic concludes, no mental state constitutes an apprehension of a fact. Indeed, she suggests, "this is not merely a limitation of the human mind, [i.e.] it is not

²⁸ See *ibid.* (129-30: 1929 & 97-101: 1928).

²⁹ See Price et al. (2013, 8-9).

merely beyond our capacity to apprehend facts, but [rather] such a thing is in the nature of the case impossible” (ibid., 62).

It is perhaps not surprising that Ramsey anticipates this argument. What is surprising, however, is that he does not object to it, but rather grants its conclusion quite cheerfully. I think this is because he runs together two concessions, one innocuous and the other deeply damaging.³⁰ The former is the thesis that we have “no infallible mode of knowledge” (1991/1927-9, 62): that is, no mental state such that, occupying it, we are, or are justified in being, immune in principle from doubting the beliefs we embrace on its basis. I think Ramsey’s reply to worries about *this* concession is completely on point: “This fact, with the risk of error which it involves, must simply be faced We sometimes make mistakes and it’s no use pretending we don’t” (ibid.). Admitting this, we are still right to embrace the beliefs that presently appear to us quite well-founded with something approaching certainty (“practical certainty,” Ramsey calls it: ibid., 63), while remaining just open-minded enough to listen to those who reject them. But the manifest correctness of this approach cannot be explained, I argue, once we make the further concession that none of our mental states puts us in relation to facts. For if this is true, it becomes mystifying how any such state could imbue our beliefs about the facts with so much as fallible or probabilistic justification. It can only constitute one more *appearance* that *p*, and, absent any contact with some of the facts that shows us that other facts even *probably* are the way they appear, how can the weight of such appearances ever license us in taking *p* to be really true?

But in any case, as I argued above (while discussing “Universals”), such epistemological skepticism leads equally to skepticism about meaning: if our beliefs are meaningful, at least in

³⁰ He is addressing Cook Wilson’s particular statement of the position he’s contesting, so perhaps it is this statement and not Ramsey’s treatment to which this looseness should be traced. In any event, on the importance of distinguishing these two ideas when discussing skepticism, see Harman (1973, 3).

the primary sense, only by depicting (accurately or inaccurately) the facts, and if we find reason to reject the idea that any of our beliefs is a relation to a fact, it seems we should reject the idea that our beliefs are meaningful. And this conclusion, of course, serves as a *reductio ad absurdum*.

If Ramsey's representationalist treatment of the one side of his bifurcated account of meaning leads to skepticism, his pragmatist treatment of the other side leads first, to *formalism*.³¹ This is especially apparent in his 1929 paper "Theories," where Ramsey suggests that all that "our theory asserts to be true" is the "totality of laws and consequences" stated in the vocabulary of the primary system that the theory leads us to predict (1990, 115: 1929). The theoretical statements themselves, while practically indispensable for generating new empirical predictions, nevertheless have no genuine content of their own; they are simply the most efficient and internally consistent system we can adopt to transform statements of the primary system (*ibid.*, 119). Retaining a representationalist conception of meaning generates pressure to *oppose* statements' genuine meaningfulness to their practical function—at least when the statements in question aren't easily assimilated to the model of ordinary empirical claims. It pushes for a deflationary account of them as merely useful shorthand for generating "real beliefs." And so it is unable to account, as Ramsey himself had previously noted (in his 1926 paper "Mathematical Logic"), for the fact that

all our natural associations to the words judgment and knowledge fit [e.g.] general and existential propositions as well as they do individual ones; for in either case we can feel greater or lesser degrees of conviction about the matter, and in either case we can be in some sense right or wrong.

[1990, 235-6: 1926]

It is unable, that is, to do justice to our application of epistemic statuses and norms to the statements of "the secondary system" as well as to those of "the primary system."

³¹ On Ramsey's formalism, see Holton and Price (2003), §4.

How, then, should we account for our epistemic appraisals of strictly contentless secondary statements? Since such a statement serves as a rule for generating beliefs in primary statements, we can obviously assess it according to whether the beliefs it generates are true or false (waiving for the present the skeptical worries raised above). But since these rules will always apply to more cases than those we observe and in which we form the corresponding primary-statement belief—as Ramsey says, they “always [go] beyond what we know or want . . . express[ing] an inference we are at any time prepared to make” (1990, 146: 1929)—they cannot be justified fully on the basis of the truth of those beliefs. How, then, should we account for this epistemic residue? In a 1928 note concerning statements about chances, Ramsey takes a natural line, perhaps the only one that remains open to him: these are objective, and so our beliefs about them admit of justification, “in that everyone agrees about them” (1990, 106: 1928). He adopts, that is, a *psychologistic* epistemology of secondary statements. This is the second position to which Ramsey’s pragmatist treatment of the secondary side of the bifurcation leads.

Ramsey states this psychologistic view most generally in drafts of an Introduction to the planned *Logic* treatise that would follow *On Truth*. Speaking of ethics and aesthetics, which, together with logic, form the three “normative sciences,” he writes:

it will be one of my chief objects to show that the view, which I take of them, that they are definable in . . . natural terms, is also true of rationality and truth: so that just as ethics and aesthetics are really branches of psychology, so also logic is part, not exactly of psychology, but of natural science in its widest sense, in which it includes psychology and all the problems of the relations between man and his environment.

[1991/1927-9, 4]

Here Ramsey states plainly that all normative statements, including epistemic ones, are to be accounted for purely descriptively, in terms of psychological properties of subjects and, perhaps, natural properties of worldly objects (cf. *ibid.*, 5, note 4). Insofar as secondary statements go beyond particular objects and their properties in their application, then, our justification for

committing to them can be grounded only in our psychology—in that “everyone agrees about them.”

The clearest application of Ramsey’s psychologism can be found in his approach to induction. In a 1922 paper, after rejecting Keynes’ logical account of probability relations, Ramsey considers what non-logical approach we might take to justifying induction. The first suggestion he makes—seemingly, the one in which he has more confidence at the time—is Hume’s: “good inferences are those proceeding from those principles of the imagination which are permanent, irresistible and universal, as opposed to those which are changeable, weak and irregular” (1991/1927-9, 123). This approach is psychologistic, reducing the reasonability of an inference to the force of our disposition to employ it. And it would seem that, until shortly before Ramsey gave this paper, this approach had been his considered view. But now he also suggests an alternative, which, he says, “has only just occurred to me, and as I am tired I cannot see clearly if it is sensible or absurd.” This second approach is reliabilist, holding that “a type of inference is reasonable or unreasonable according to the relative frequencies with which it leads to truth and falsehood” (ibid.). And Ramsey evidently decided that it was quite sensible after all, as he carried it into the works of his middle period, most notably “Truth and Probability.” There he suggests that this approach is “a kind of pragmatism,” judging habits of inference “by whether they work, i.e. whether the opinions they lead to are for the most part true, or more often true than those to which alternative habits would lead to” (1990, 93-4: 1926). And he argues that, by this criterion, induction is clearly vindicated, since “the world is so constituted that inductive arguments lead on the whole to true opinions. We are not, therefore, able to help trusting induction, nor if we could help it do we see any reason why we should, because we believe it to be a reliable process” (ibid., 93).

Now, one might raise worries about this approach like those typically raised against externalist theories of justification. In the 1922 paper, Ramsey cheerfully admits that, on his reliabilist proposal, we “establish by induction that induction [is] reasonable, and induction being reasonable this [is] a reasonable argument” (1991/1927-9, 123). An internalist might reply that whether induction is reasonable is, however, precisely what was in question. And absent any non-circular reply to this prior question, it would seem that the only support Ramsey can fall back upon is our inability to help trusting induction, or our basic, ungrounded feeling of assent on considering inductive inferences. In short, one might wonder whether, absent some deeper support for induction, reliabilism really advances beyond psychologism in any significant way.

This objection is hardly unfamiliar and rarely unanticipated by externalists. I put it forward, not to suggest that it is decisive, but rather to note that, in fact, Ramsey abandoned this reliabilist justification of induction for entirely different reasons—reasons much more closely linked to his bifurcated semantics. In 1926, the same year Ramsey wrote “Truth and Probability,” Ramsey was still following Wittgenstein in arguing (in “Mathematical Logic,” as well as in “Facts and Propositions” the following year) that general propositions are to be analyzed as infinite conjunctions. Indeed, that year, Ramsey baldly rejected Hilbert’s objection that statements in which a variable ranges over an infinite number of objects are “initially meaningless and can only be given a meaning in an indirect way”; he simply denies that whether a conjunction is finite or infinite makes any semantic difference (1990, 237: 1926). Of course, by 1929, precisely this argument had convinced Ramsey to abandon this Tractarian analysis of general propositions for Hilbert’s formalist approach. And this is an admission that his reliabilism cannot provide a deep account of the epistemic standing of our inductive “rules for judging,” since reliabilism accounts for their justification in terms of the truth of the judgments

to which they lead, but Ramsey must now grant that they are not simply truth-functions of the latter but go beyond them. Two subjects might agree in all their particular judgments about how things are while still adopting conflicting inductive rules.

He faces again, then, the question of how to justify our commitment to general propositions as rules for inductive judgment. And he is adamant that, in cases of the sort just mentioned—in which the parties agree in all their particular judgments but differ in their commitments to inductive rules—there is no fact of the matter that can decide their dispute. We cannot appeal to merely possible experience to settle things: our respective rules may have consequences about counterfactual circumstances, but there is no “fact” or “reality” that these consequential commitments seek to describe and that is capable of confirming or disconfirming them. Since both systems of inductive rules lead to the same primary beliefs, and so “both fit the facts,” Ramsey asks, “is not the choice capricious?” Here is his answer:

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 to the ‘true scientific system’.

[1990, 161: 1929]

In fact, though this is a fairly accurate description of Peirce’s account of truth in “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” it is not his considered view of truth. Peirce quickly moved from this indicative framing to a subjunctive one, on which the truth about a question is the view on which the totality of possible evidence could not improve.

Given the paltry circulation of Peirce’s later works and manuscripts, Ramsey is hardly to be blamed for attributing the less nuanced view to Peirce. It’s important to realize, however, that Ramsey must himself be endorsing this less nuanced view rather than its counterpart. This is not merely because the language he actually uses is decidedly indicative, or because he is drawing

upon the writings where Peirce puts forward that view. It is because Peirce's considered view of truth is irreducibly normative and modal, and at this stage of the development of his views, Ramsey has committed himself to rejecting non-reductive realism about both.³² He can account for the "truth" of the secondary system, then, only in terms of our *actual psychological* properties (and the actual natural properties of objects), then, and not in terms of our *hypothetical normative* statuses (e.g., our indefinitely continuing warrant to assert a claim). He does not give this psychologistic account of "the truthful statement of matters of fact": statements on that side of the semantic bifurcation are accounted for in representationalist terms. But the other elements of "the true scientific system" are indeed true just in case "everyone will believe [them] in the end": Ramsey gives only a psychologistic account of their truth.³³

VII

For all their Peircean trappings, then, Ramsey's ultimate views about meaning and justification begin to look more significantly Humean than Peircean. Indeed, Peirce was a fierce critic of psychologism, especially in the case of logic: he famously argues in "The Fixation of Belief," for instance, that "the question of validity is purely one of fact and not of thinking. . . . It is not in the least the question whether, when the premisses are accepted by the mind, we feel an impulse to

³² As we've seen, he rejects non-reductive realism about normativity in the Introduction to the *Logic* treatise. He rejects this stance toward modality here in "General Propositions and Causality," as well as in "Theories" and a companion note of 1929 called "Causal Qualities."

³³ I take, then, a rather minimal view of Ramsey's earlier claim that "Variable hypotheticals or causal laws . . . are not . . . 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'" (1990, 149: 1929). Of course Ramsey is right that, "so long as we don't believe the same things" (*ibid.*), there is an important difference between us; the question, though, is about the significance of a disagreement purely at the secondary level, and so the point that there is an epistemically significant difference in a case where we believe different primary statements is not pertinent. Once this is recognized, it seems to me that the only difference Ramsey can allow is that, while the two parties in the example will never reach an agreement on the truth of the sentence 'I went to Grantchester' unless an index for 'I' is fixed, we all assume that we will reach an agreement on the "truth" of statements of causal laws. But unless this psychological difference is *grounded* in a further *normative* difference, I don't see that the former difference is deep or significant.

accept the conclusion also” (1931-58, V, §365: 1877). And yet, viewed from another direction, one can see Ramsey and, at least in his later writings, Peirce as struggling with similar difficulties.³⁴ Both are attracted by a unified pragmatist semantic program, with anti-skeptical epistemological implications. This program captures nicely the objective pragmatist concern for normative depth and opposition to relativism, but it cannot obviously found the robust understanding of facts or of “the objective nature of things” that at least some objective pragmatists are concerned to provide. Both also feel this pull toward metaphysical realism and, in some measure, toward a representationalist theory of meaning: to interpret the ‘and *p*’ in Ramsey’s biconditional—*a belief is true just in case it is a belief that p, and p*—by appeal to the *facts*, or constraint by the *real*, and not wholly in pragmatist terms. But this introduces a bifurcation into their theories of meaning. As a result, the statements they treat representationally are threatened with skeptical worries that every pragmatist is committed to opposing. And psychologism looms for those statements they treat “merely pragmatically”: the objective pragmatist concern for normativity notwithstanding, it seems they must ultimately treat our commitment to some statements central to our practical inquiry as merely a stance to which “we, being what we are” are forced, and not one supported by reasons that would hold good for any rational subject.

My central contention in this paper is that, for all that Ramsey was able to achieve before his tragically premature death, he was not able to provide a satisfactory resolution to this difficulty. But that leaves us with the question of whether and how contemporary objective pragmatists can do better. I want to conclude by making two brief remarks about that question.

First, the problem of skepticism regarding the primary propositions seems to arise for objective pragmatists because of their metaphysical realism. As we have seen, Ramsey’s realist

³⁴ On the difficulties for Peirce, see Hookway (2004).

construal of facts entails that any appearance of them to a subject or community of subjects might prove misleading. For this reason, he concludes, none of our mental states can be analyzed simply as an apprehension of a fact: appearances screen off the facts from us. And then it becomes hard to see how the appearances could provide us with any reason to judge that the facts are as they appear. Now, one way to avoid this conclusion would be to reject the metaphysical realist's construal of facts, holding instead with the early Peirce that "the real, as it really is" consists simply of the contents that a hypothetical community of inquiry "without definite limits" would, eventually, "always continue to reaffirm" (1931-58, V, §311: 1868). This would not be simply to surrender objective pragmatism. For this view retains a distinction between what limited communities presently agree about or take to "work for them" and what is true. But objective pragmatists who will not relinquish realism face the task of answering this skeptical worry. And, if answering it proves impossible, and if abandoning all our beliefs in primary propositions seems untenable (as it should), then the only remaining option is to hold that such beliefs can be justified in some more minimal way—not as demonstrating that the subjectivity-transcendent facts are thus-and-so, but as constituting the best grasp of them that "we, being what we are" can attain. That is, in this case, objective pragmatists would be forced into adopting psychologism about our justification for our beliefs in primary propositions as well as secondary ones.

Accordingly, my second remark concerns psychologism. If objective pragmatists do embrace psychologism about justification, then, I suggest, the onus is on them to explain how their view of epistemic norms is less unattractive than the subjective pragmatist view they decry. For it is not clear that relativism is in fact the source of the faults they find with subjective pragmatists. Take Rorty, for instance. In some places, at least, Rorty emphatically rejects the

relativistic thesis that other cultures might have conceptual schemes incommensurable with ours, or that our disagreements with them might be simply incapable of adjudication. On the contrary, such disagreements can, and indeed ought, to be adjudicated, though the opposing beliefs can only “be tested by trying to weave them together with beliefs we already have” (1991/1989, 25-6). This last thought, far from relativistic, is simply the Peircean idea that we can only begin to inquire from where we actually are. The objectionable thought Rorty retains is not *relativism*, but is instead his persistent distinction between what makes our views better or worse and their success or failure at “correspond[ing] to the nature of things” (ibid., 23)—that is, his persistent *psychologism*.

In any case, whether or not this is a correct reading of Rorty, it raises an important substantive question: what is the benefit of rejecting relativism if we retain psychologism? The objective pragmatist’s worry about relativism seemed to be that it threatens our right to view the beliefs embraced by our community as not merely what we happen to think, but as aimed at getting things right. But even if we reject relativism, this right is equally threatened by psychologism: granted, not with respect to our local communities in the here and now, but with respect to the human community, spanning across indefinitely many subjects and an indefinite period of time. If psychologism is true, this community’s beliefs can only ever amount to what it happens to think; it cannot view itself as subject to the standard of getting reality right. In my view, the central task at hand for objective pragmatists who are metaphysical realists is explaining why, given this fact, the objectivity with which their view is concerned is something that should matter to us—something that makes it *important* to opt for objective rather than subjective pragmatism.

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