

## Re-situating Ramsey's Principle\*

Jérôme Dokic & Pascal Engel

Institut Jean Nicod, Paris

Version antérieure d'un article paru dans D.H.Mellor et H. Lillehammer, *Ramsey's Legacy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press , 2005

### *Ramsey's Principle and Success Semantics*

Let us consider what can be called “Ramsey's Principle” . It is the principle that “truth *is* the property of a belief that suffices for your getting what you want when you act on it” (Whyte, 1990: 149). When an action results in getting what one wants, i.e. when it leads to the satisfaction of one's desires, the action is said to be successful. So, according to this principle, there is an internal relation between truth and success:

(RP) True beliefs are those that lead to successful actions whatever the underlying motivating desires.

Ramsey's Principle should not be taken as a definition of truth. *A fortiori* it should not be confused with a pragmatist definition of truth. As well known, Ramsey did not defend a pragmatist *definition* of truth, but argued instead for a version of the redundancy theory of truth<sup>1</sup>. However, in “Facts and Propositions”, he exploited the idea that there is an internal relation between truth and success to suggest a pragmatist theory of the *contents* of at least some beliefs. The content of a belief is

---

\* The argument in what follows derives from Dokic & Engel (2002).

<sup>1</sup> For the reasons why it is only a *quasi*- redundancy view, see Dokic & Engel 2002 : 23.

the conditions under which it is true. Now Ramsey was certainly interested in the claim that a belief's truth-conditions are determined by its *success-conditions*.<sup>2</sup> RP' is an alternative formulation of RP which highlights this specific claim:

(RP') A belief's truth-conditions are those that guarantee the success of an action based on that belief whatever the underlying motivating desires.

It is now customary to call "success semantics" the philosophical project of deriving truth-conditions from success-conditions. Ruth Millikan expressed a very similar idea (without mentioning Ramsey), which she applies in the following quote to visual representations rather than beliefs:

The same percept of the world may be used to guide any of very many and diverse activities, practical or theoretical. What stays the same is that the percept must correspond to environmental configurations in accordance with the same correspondence rules for each of these activities. For example, if the position of the chair in the room does not correspond, so, to my visual representation of its position, that will hinder me equally in my attempts to avoid the chair when passing through the room, to move the chair, to sit in it, to remove the cat from it, to make judgements about it, etc. (1993: 92).

Truth-conditions are not to be identified with the *results* of action, which change according to the desire (or set of desires) involved. They are to be identified with the invariant conditions in the world that guarantee success whatever goal is pursued. According to Ramsey's Principle, these conditions are nothing but the state of affairs corresponding to the belief or, more simply and less emphatically, the belief's truth-conditions.

---

<sup>2</sup> Whyte (1990), Sahlin (1990: 70-72), Mellor (1991: 21-23).

### ***Objections to Ramsey's Principle from Situated Cognition***

Objections have been raised against Ramsey's Principle to the effect that it neglects the fact that human action is situated in a context. The Principle implies that any failure of action is the result of some *false* belief on the agent's part. For if all the agent's beliefs are true, the action cannot be but successful.

It is of course plausible that *some* failures can be traced to false beliefs. I try to drink from a particular glass because I believe that it contains something that will quench my thirst. If my belief is false and the glass is empty, I won't get what I want. However, it is much less plausible, from a cognitive point of view, to suppose that any possible failure of an action corresponds to some false belief or representation on the agent's part. Robert Brandom remarks that "ignorance is no less a threat than error to the positive guarantee of practical success that [Ramsey's Principle] seeks to identify with truth" (1994 : 175-6). Suppose that I do not get what I want because the glass is glued to the table. According to Ramsey's Principle, it seems that I should have the belief that the glass is *not* glued to the table, whose falsity explains the failure of my action. However, the fact that I tried to raise my glass shows at best that I did *not* have the positive belief that it was glued to the table, but it in no way indicates my having the negative belief needed to vindicate Ramsey's Principle, namely the belief that it was *not* glued to the table. In general, there is no guarantee that, in every particular case of action, there is a plausible cognitive level intermediary between a general but trivial belief that there are "no impediments" and a non-denumerable set of beliefs corresponding to each possible failure of the action.

In the same vein, John Perry contends that Ramsey's Principle in its absolute form amounts to "overburdening" belief. He writes:

[L]et us first note how unrealistic it would be to suppose that the content of beliefs fix all of the circumstances relevant to the success of our action. Consider the force of gravitation. If I am in space or on the moon or in some other situation where gravitational forces are much diminished, the movement we envisage me making in the example will not lead to getting a drink; the water would fly out of the glass all over my face – or perhaps I would not even grab the glass, but instead propel myself backwards. If all possible failures are to be accounted for by false beliefs, the corresponding true beliefs must be present when we succeed. So, when I reach for the glass, I must believe that the forces of gravity are just what they need to be for things to work out right (1993: 202).

According to Perry, the gap between action and success cannot be bridged by the agent's cognitive state only (i.e. the set of her beliefs). At best, the truth of a belief guarantees the success of an action only relative to a normal context (for instance on earth), whose identity conditions need not be known by the agent.

Of course, Ramsey himself would not be much impressed by Brandom's and Perry's objections from situated cognition. If Ramsey's Principle is relativized to circumstances, it becomes false *by definition*; any reference to a normal context should be blindly included in the belief's truth-conditions. However, even if this response is (we think) correct, it does not go far enough. Brandom and Perry make appeal to our pre-theoretical intuitions about the contents of our beliefs. They argue that Ramsey's Principle delivers truth-conditions which are at odds with these intuitions.

### ***Ramsey's Principle re-situated***

In the rest of this paper, we shall defend Ramsey's Principle in its absolute form against the foregoing objections. Our defence is based on an analogy between knowledge and action.

As a first and rough approximation, knowledge is the exclusion of alternatives incompatible with the subject's claim of knowing. In a Cartesian-like epistemology, the subject must exclude *all* these alternatives, i.e. have knowledge that they are not the case. For instance, knowing that there is a glass in front of me requires knowing that my visual system is in good order, that I am not dreaming, etc., for these alternatives would certainly preclude my knowledge of the glass if they were the case. What is at stake here is a version of what is sometimes called a Principle of Epistemic Closure:

(PEC) If I know that  $p$ , and  $q$  implies that I do not, I should know that  $q$  is not the case.

Here,  $q$  is an alternative with respect to my claim of knowing that  $p$ . I cannot be said to know that  $p$  if I do not know whether  $q$  is the case or not. So every piece of knowledge presupposes many other pieces of knowledge with their own sets of alternatives, which I must rule out in turn.

A conception of knowledge based on PEC runs into familiar difficulties. For instance, I cannot know anything on the basis of perception unless I know that I am not dreaming or hallucinating. However, either the latter piece of knowledge cannot be established by perception at all, or it can be established by other perceptual experiences which raise essentially the same problems. So perceptual knowledge is either impossible or circular.

The “relevant alternatives” view of knowledge has been proposed in response to these difficulties.<sup>3</sup> On this view, knowledge is the exclusion of *relevant* alternatives only. What counts as a relevant alternative, and thus as knowledge, depends on the context. To borrow an example from Austin, knowledge that a perceived bird is a goldfinch might depend on whether there are other similar birds *in fact* present in my locality. It is then assumed that the alternative that I am dreaming is not relevant in ordinary contexts in which I claim to know that it is raining by looking out the window.

The “relevant alternatives” view in effect rejects the implication in PEC by relativizing knowledge to circumstances. Some remarks of Michael Williams on epistemic closure suggest an alternative way out of the difficulties associated with PEC, which does not require making knowledge context-dependent.<sup>4</sup> These difficulties arise from a *temporal* interpretation of PEC. On such an interpretation, knowing that it is raining by looking out the window requires that I *first and independently* acquire the knowledge that my eyes are in good order.

On another, logical interpretation, my knowledge that it is raining and my knowledge that my eyes are in good order can have the same *source*, for instance my experience of looking out the window. If I am in a position to acquire the former piece of knowledge, I am *also and simultaneously* in the position to acquire the latter piece of knowledge. In general, if am in a position to acquire the knowledge that *p*,

---

<sup>3</sup> Dretske (1970), Nozick (1981).

<sup>4</sup> Williams (1991: Ch. 8). In fact, Williams’s target is a different version of the Principle of Epistemic Closure, according to which if someone knows that *p*, and knows that *p* implies *q*, then she knows that *q*. PEC in the text is stronger than this principle, on two counts: it takes into account a larger set of alternatives (namely all alternatives incompatible with one’s knowing, which includes but is not restricted to the set of alternatives incompatible with what is known), and it does not require that the subject *know* that the alternatives are incompatible with her putative knowledge.

Williams rejects the KK principle (the principle that if one knows, one knows that one knows), which is a consequence of PEC. We cannot go into the discussion of this principle here. Perhaps PEC should be modified to block the possibility of bootstrapping oneself into knowing that one knows. However, the principle that if someone knows that *p*, and knows that *p* implies *q*, then she knows that *q*, is too weak, for it neglects the possibility of *reflective* knowledge, such as the knowledge that I am not hallucinating based on my perceptual experience. If the neutralist conception of experience is rejected, it can be argued that my *perception* that *p*, which is essentially factive, is accessible to reflection or introspection, and thus can indirectly justify the belief that I am not hallucinating.

I am *thereby* in a position to acquire the knowledge that  $q$ , for any alternative  $q$  incompatible with my knowing that  $p$ .

It does not follow that these pieces of knowledge are *cognitively* on a par. The distinction between implicit and explicit knowledge, as well as the distinction between direct and indirect justification, can be invoked here. Typically, only the knowledge that it is raining is explicit and based on direct evidence. However, the exclusion of any alternative to the subject's state of knowing can also be *indirectly* justified on the basis of her perceptual experience. Indirect justification can be inferential or reflective. The subject can gain knowledge that it is not fake rain by *inferring* it from her direct knowledge that it is raining. More controversially, she can gain knowledge that she is not dreaming by *reflecting* on her experience. These pieces of indirect knowledge are rarely, perhaps never made explicit. The claim under consideration is only that *if* the subject were to form the corresponding beliefs, they would be indirectly justified by the very same experience which directly justifies her actual belief that it is raining. On the logical interpretation, PEC is essentially correct, but needs a less misleading formulation, in terms of implicit knowledge:

(PEC\*)      If I know that  $p$ , and  $q$  implies that I do not, I at least implicitly know that  $q$  is not the case.

I have at least implicit knowledge that  $p$  if and only if I am in a position to acquire such knowledge, whether or not I exercise the inferential and reflective capacities needed to actually know that  $p$ .

The temporal interpretation of PEC is naturally associated with a *neutralist* conception of perceptual experience. According to this conception, perception is not a genuine source of objective knowledge. The best that I can learn from my experience of looking out the window is that it *seems* to be raining. Perceptual

experience is *neutral* with respect to the truth of the objective beliefs that are normally grounded on it, such as the belief that it is raining. Whether or not my belief is true, my experience remains in essence the same.

In contrast, the logical interpretation of PEC is naturally associated with the *rejection* of the neutralist conception of perception – what is sometimes called a “disjunctive” theory of experience.<sup>5</sup> When my perceptual experience is veridical, the perceived fact that  $p$  manifests itself to me, so that the proposition “It seems to me that  $p$ ” is not the most precise characterization of what is going on in my cognitive space. There is a real, cognitive distinction between a situation in which a fact manifests itself to me in perception, and a situation in which I am only under the impression that this is so. As a consequence, a transition from my experience of looking out the window to a belief that I am not hallucinating would be warranted. In Burge (1993)’s terminology, I am *entitled* to making such a transition, given that the occurrence of the experience implies the truth of the belief.

Now let us consider an analogous issue about action. The analogy we are interested in is between PEC and the following Principle of Pragmatic Closure:

(PPC) If I am intentionally doing  $p$ , and  $q$  implies that I cannot succeed, I should know that  $q$  is not the case.

Here, the phrase “doing  $p$ ” is used to imply success: just as knowing that  $p$ , doing  $p$  implies  $p$ . PPC is not *exactly* analogous to PEC, for it does not state that in order to do  $p$ , I must *do* whatever is needed to lift any obstacle to my making it the case that  $p$ . This would be utterly implausible, leading to permanent procrastination. PPC is not so obviously wrong. It states that if the truth of  $q$  implies the failure of my action of doing  $p$ , I should know that  $q$  is false. PPC is in fact a stronger version

---

<sup>5</sup> Hinton (1973), McDowell (1982).

of Ramsey's Principle, according to which the beliefs underlying a particular action should amount to knowledge, or at least should be sufficiently warranted. It is not enough that the agent *holds* the beliefs whose collective truth guarantees success; the action counts as rational only if these beliefs are themselves epistemically well-grounded.

As in the knowledge case, there is an issue about whether a relativization strategy is needed at this point. In particular, those who still find PPC implausible might try to relativize Ramsey's Principle to circumstances. I do not need to know that the glass is not glued to the table in order to intentionally raise the glass. I just have to *try*; if the circumstances are normal, the glass will be raised. My action still counts as intentional and even as rational, even though strictly speaking, it is the outcome of a joint collaboration with (benevolent) Mother Nature.

The alternative option is to distinguish between a temporal and a logical interpretation of PPC. Principle PPC won't seem plausible if it is interpreted temporally, as if I should know that the glass is not glued to the table *before and independently* of my action of raising the glass. According to the rival, logical interpretation, I do not have to know that the glass is not glued to the table before acting; rather, my action of raising the glass puts me in the position to know that the glass was not glued to the table (while I was acting). Action itself is a source of knowledge about the absence of any obstacle to it. Such knowledge is not acquired *before* action; at best, it is a logical *consequence* of its occurrence.

According to the logical interpretation of PPC, intentional action is a source of knowledge relative to a set of beliefs whose collective truth guarantees the success of the action. As with PEC, it does not follow that the agent is explicitly representing all possible obstacles to her action. Most of the relevant beliefs are implicit, in the sense that *if* they were to be formed, they would be directly or

indirectly justified by the agent's experience of acting. Normally, the agent does not form them, on pain of being distracted from what she's trying to do. So on the logical interpretation, the consequent of PPC should be qualified in the same way as that of PEC:

(PPC\*) If I am intentionally doing  $p$ , and  $q$  implies that I cannot succeed, I at least implicitly know that  $q$  is not the case.

What is it about the experience of acting which would knowledgeably rule out the alternatives to my intentionally making it the case that  $p$ ? To begin with, the fact that action is controlled by perception at the subdoxastic level is a source of knowledge about the agent's orientation relative to the target of her action, the development of the bodily gesture, and many other parameters. Moreover, most of these parameters are not fixed in advance but change during the course of action, which is another indication that the corresponding beliefs cannot be explicit. Non-conceptual perception of *affordances* yields other beliefs which are instrumental in form, about what one can do and what would be the consequences of one's doing it in the present circumstances.<sup>6</sup>

Can *all* the beliefs underlying an action be implicit? The answer might be positive for *spontaneous* actions, if they exist. Searle pointed out that there are actions which are not caused by any prior intentions, such as the spontaneous action of pacing about the room while reflecting on a philosophical problem.<sup>7</sup> If these actions are genuinely intentional, they must be able to ground a set of beliefs whose collective truth guarantees success. However, none of these beliefs needs to be formed before acting.

---

<sup>6</sup> As Bermúdez (1998: 118) rightly says, "To say that affordances are directly perceived is precisely to say that instrumental relations can feature in the content of perception".

<sup>7</sup> Searle (1983: 84).

The distinction between a neutralist and a disjunctive account of perceptual experience has an analogue in the action case. According to a neutralist conception of action, the best that I can do is *try* to move my body. Action is *neutral* with respect to its success conceived as the satisfaction of the underlying objective desires, such as the desire to raise my arm. Whether or not I succeed in actually raising my arm, I am doing essentially the same thing, viz. trying to raise it. This conception is naturally associated with the temporal interpretation of PPC, for there is no physical action such that I can know in advance that there will not be any obstacles to its success. Such knowledge is possible only for tryings to move one's body, which in a sense cannot fail.

In contrast, the rejection of the neutralist conception of action is in line with the logical interpretation of PPC. According to a disjunctive account of action, a particular action is either a mere trying, which is a failed action, or a genuine (i.e. successful) action. So an action can have intrinsic success-conditions which go beyond the mere trying to do something. The possibility is then open that one's experience of acting, which is essentially psycho-physical, is a source of knowledge about the action's external success-conditions.

### ***Conclusion***

To sum up, Ramsey's Principle in its absolute form is untouched by considerations about situated cognition. In particular, the objection of cognitive overload is answered by distinguishing between implicit and explicit knowledge. Ramsey's Principle and the stronger Principle of Pragmatic Closure concern in fact all warranted beliefs *accessible* to the agent, whether or not she actually holds them. The agent must only have the *means* of forming a set of warranted beliefs whose truth guarantees the success of her action.

However, the best argument in favour of Ramsey's Principle is transcendental, in the sense that it embodies a condition of possibility of intentional and rational action. Some of those, like Perry, who want to relativize the Principle to circumstances invoke the agent's adaptation to her environment in order to justify their claim that the agent does not act with a full awareness of all possible obstacles. Ironically, the objection of cognitive overload does not stand precisely because agents are normally adapted to their environment. Adaptation is not a purely external relation between an agent and its environment, as if the former happened to "fit" the latter. Rather, adaptation manifests itself in the fact that action is normally a source of knowledge about its own success-conditions. This is another aspect of the internal relation between knowledge and action which Ramsey much emphasised. Our actions' success-conditions reflect themselves on the subject's cognitive state, if only implicitly, because the agent's contribution and that of Mother Nature are so intertwined that it is impossible to tell them apart.

## ***References***

- Burge, T., 1993, "Content Preservation", *Philosophical Review* 102, 457-488.
- Dokic, J. & Engel, P., 2002, *Ramsey. Truth and Success*, London: Routledge.
- Dretske, F., 1970, "Epistemic Operators", *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 64, No 24, 1007-1023.
- Hinton, J., 1973, *Experiences*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- McDowell, J., 1982, "Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge", *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Vol. LXVIII, 455-479.
- Mellor, D. H., 1991, *Matters of Metaphysics*, Cambridge: CUP.
- Millikan, R. G., 1993, *White Queen Psychology and Other Essays for Alice*, Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press.
- Nozick, R., 1981, *Philosophical Explanations*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Perry, J., 1993, *The Problem of the Essential Indexical and Other Essays*, Oxford: OUP.
- Ramsey, F. P., 1991, *Philosophical Papers*, ed. D. H. Mellor, Cambridge: CUP.
- Sahlin, N. E., 1990, *The Philosophy of F. P. Ramsey*, Cambridge: CUP.
- Searle, J., 1983, *Intentionality*, Cambridge: CUP.
- Whyte, J., 1990, "Success Semantics", *Analysis*, 50, 149-157.
- Williams, M., 1991, *Unnatural Doubts. Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism*, Oxford: Blackwell.