

Can F. P. Ramsey's Theory of Belief Accommodate Akrasia?

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Abstract

Cheryl Misak has expressed concern that Frank Ramsey's dispositionalist theory of belief may have difficulty accommodating *akrasia*—the phenomenon of agents intentionally acting against their better judgement in the face of countervailing pleasures and/or pains. She also mentions that Ramsey might be able to handle *akrasia* with recourse to his theory of partial belief and desire. This paper develops this position, arguing that Ramsey can indeed accommodate *akrasia*. I demonstrate that Ramsey's theory of partial beliefs and his treatment of humans as expected utility maximizers allows for cases where desire overwhelms our normative beliefs, hence producing acts of *akrasia*. The paper concludes with a sketch of how this account can be extended to account for *enkrateia* and virtue, as well as an analysis of how well the Ramseyian treatment I put forth captures the original meaning of *akrasia*.

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§ 0. Introduction

A difficulty for any action-oriented epistemology is whether it can make sense of *akrasia*, or ‘weakness of the will,’ the phenomenon of acting against one’s better judgement (i.e. against one’s normative beliefs) in the face of countervailing pleasures and/or pains. For frameworks which identify beliefs with actions, it seems that this phenomenon will be impossible to accommodate—as what it is to believe a normative proposition is to act according to it. Of course, this is an absurd result as likely everyone reading this has experienced weakness of the will at some point throughout their life. Frank Ramsey’s account of belief is one such action-oriented theory, concerned with the dispositions of agents, and so *akrasia* needs explaining under his framework. I will argue that Ramsey can indeed make sense of *akrasia* with recourse to his theory of how our desires interact with our partial beliefs to determine action. In section I, I will exposit the relevant theoretical background on *akrasia* and Ramsey’s theory of belief, and set up the potential problem with combining them. In section II, I will develop my thesis that Ramsey can accommodate *akrasia* by putting forth a definition of it in terms of partial belief, desires, and expected utility. Finally, in section III, I will sketch how my analysis can further be extended to account for *enkrateia* (or ‘strength of will’) and virtue, as well as discuss the extent to which my Ramseyian analysis of *akrasia* still captures its original meaning.

It should be noted that this paper sits squarely within the pragmatist tradition, on which one of the primary virtues of a theory is its success in guiding action. Accordingly, several of the argumentative moves that I make rely on the pragmatist principle that a theory’s practical merit is what chiefly justifies accepting it or rejecting it.

§ 1.

Akrasia is the phenomenon of intentionally acting against your normative beliefs in the face of strong desires ‘pulling’ in the opposite direction. In English, it means something like ‘lack of self-control’ or ‘weakness of the will’. On Aristotle’s account, *akrasia* is a negative state of character and, in becoming virtuous, an agent passes from *akrasia*—when their beliefs about the good are correct, but their desires are misaligned, and they follow their desires rather than what is right; to *enkrateia*—when their desires are still misaligned with their beliefs but they learn to choose the right over the pleasurable; to virtue—when their desires finally align with their (true) normative beliefs about the good.

Socrates’ position on the matter was that, because the nature of normative belief is inherently motivational, *akrasia* does not really exist because one cannot believe a normative proposition without acting according to it.² It should be clear

² Aristotle. 2020. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Adam Beresford. London: Penguin Books, 1145b25-30.

that this account is untenable because it would force us to deny our regular experience of *akrasia*, and this sort of highly impractical doubt of our experience is something we are unwilling to commit to. As C.S. Peirce would put it, doubting our experience of *akrasia* is not a “real and living doubt, and without this all discussion is idle.”³ It is impossible for this doubt in the existence of *akrasia* to grip us, and so becomes essentially a ‘paper doubt’.

Aristotle recognized this trouble, and made an attempt to get around it by affirming the existence of *akrasia*, and treating it as a case in which someone has knowledge of the good but does not use it.⁴ Whether Aristotle’s account is sufficient on his own epistemology is an open question and far outside the purview of this paper. However, it should be clear that this account will not work for Ramsey’s theory of belief because, for Ramsey, believing something is essentially to have particular dispositions to act in a certain way, so the idea of knowledge that is divorced from usage is nonsensical.

Nonetheless, the Socratic denial of *akrasia* and the Aristotelian response to it constitutes a philosophical legacy that leaves us with which any theory of belief must meet when it comes to the phenomenon of *akrasia*. The first, as recognized by Aristotle, is that any theory of belief must be able to accommodate *akrasia*. The second, which led Socrates to deny *akrasia* in the first place (as he believed the following condition could not be met): in building *akrasia* into our epistemology we have to somehow retain the motivational nature of normative belief.

1.1

Ramsey’s is a causal theory of belief, meaning that belief is defined in terms of its causes and effects. Particularly the behavioral effects of belief are what is relevant to its analysis—that “we deduce from [the belief] and act on it in a certain way.”⁵ Of course, we hold plenty of beliefs that we are not at any given moment acting on, like my belief that Caesar is dead. So, instead of a belief being something “which does actually lead to action,” Ramsey asserts that belief is something “which would lead to action in suitable circumstances.”⁶ For example, my belief that Robarts Library at the University of Toronto is located on Huron street amounts to my tendency to, when looking to study at the library, head up Huron street and expect to reach it. As such, beliefs are dispositional states, defined as ways in which agents *would* act, *if* they were placed in the proper circumstances. One of the examples Ramsey himself gives of his analysis is the belief that Hell exists: “To say a man believes in hell means ... that he avoids doing those things which would result in his being thrown

³ Peirce, Charles S. 1877. “The Fixation of Belief.” *Popular Science Monthly* 12 (November): 1–15.

⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1146b30-35.

⁵ Ramsey, Frank. (1929a/1990) ‘General Propositions and Causality’ in *Philosophical Papers*. Ed. D. H. Mellor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 145-164, 159.

⁶ Ramsey, Frank. (1926/1990) ‘Truth and Probability’ in *Philosophical Papers*. Ed. D. H. Mellor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 52-95, 66.

into hell.”⁷ The behaviors he is speaking of are fairly obvious, including practically anything⁸ contrary to the Bible (so long as the agent views the Bible as an adequate guide to the truth).

It should be immediately clear that the notion of *akrasia* discussed in the previous section (I.i) seems to directly contradict Ramsey's theory of belief. As Cheryl Misak points out, a belief “about the good expresses a disposition to act, [and so] it seems as though it will never be the case that I believe ‘ ϕ -ing is the best thing to do, all things considered’ and yet find myself more strongly disposed to refrain from ϕ -ing.”⁹ To put it another way, it seems as though the fact that (on Ramsey's theory of belief) one cannot hold a belief that is contradictory to their dispositional states, one can never fail to act according to their belief. To defend Ramsey from this objection, more of his theory of belief must be introduced. The remainder of this section (I.ii) will serve that purpose.

Ramsey's theory of belief admits of partial beliefs, one of his most valuable contributions to philosophy. He says that “the degree of belief is a causal property of it, which we can express vaguely as the extent to which we are prepared to act on it.”¹⁰ The measurement of belief begins by asserting that full belief can be denoted “by 1, full belief in the contradictory by 0, and equal beliefs in the proposition and its contradictory by $\frac{1}{2}$.”¹¹ As for the other values not yet discussed between 0 and 1, Ramsey proposes that we can measure these degrees if we:

[T]ake as a basis a general psychological theory, which is now universally discarded, but nevertheless comes, I think, fairly close to the truth.... I mean the theory that we act in the way we think most likely to realize the objects of our desires, so that a person's actions are completely determined by his desires and opinions.¹²

His reasoning for taking this as given that we are essentially expected utility¹³ maximizers, even though this psychological theory is widely considered to be wrong, is that it, like Newtonian Mechanics, can be used to approximate the correct answer quite closely. Given Ramsey's commitment to pragmatism—the metaphilosophical position on which a theory is evaluated by its practical success in guiding action and/or inquiry—and thereby some sort of fallibilism, it should not be surprising that he is willing to approximate in his theory, even knowing it is not perfectly accurate, rather than simply be unwilling to propose a theory at all.

This same pragmatist/dispositionalist framework lends Ramsey's theory of belief one of its most distinctive strengths: its ability to handle the phenomenon that

⁷ Ramsey, Frank (1930/1991). ‘On Truth’. Ed. N. Rescher and U. Majer. Dordrecht: Kluwer. 91.

⁸ Including, perhaps, my behavior of capitalizing ‘Hell’ throughout this paper.

⁹ Misak, Cheryl. 2018. *Cambridge Pragmatism*. Oxford University Press. 219.

¹⁰ Ramsey, *Truth and Probability*, 65.

¹¹ Ramsey, *Truth and Probability*, 64.

¹² Ramsey, *Truth and Probability*, 69.

¹³ Not in the sense of pleasure, but in the sense of a ‘desire’ (before the fact), which may or may not be pleasurable (after the fact).

"no one feels strongly about things he takes for granted," or the fact that our most dearly held beliefs are accompanied by (practically¹⁴) no 'belief-feelings'.¹⁵ An example which makes use of this strength is my belief that the ground is solid—a belief I hold almost entirely without conscious consideration. The intuitive explanation or evidence for this particular belief is dispositional: that I tend to walk on the floor, to not expect it to swallow me up, to express skepticism when someone asserts the converse, and so on. On a traditional Humean¹⁶ view of belief a particular belief is constituted by various belief-feelings. When confronted with a belief that is expressed dispositionally and which is absent¹⁷ of belief-feelings, such as the belief that the ground is solid, a Humean must either deny that the subject really has the belief in question or deny their own approach. Ramsey's theory, by contrast, is not faced with this unfortunate disjunction.

Still, Ramsey's theory of belief does have some counterintuitive consequences, particularly that it forbids beliefs being evaluated in terms of their truth and falsity. It would be odd to say, for example, that my tendency to avoid doing things that would damn me to Hell is 'true'. It can be true or false *that* I am disposed in certain ways and it can be true or false *that* Hell exists, but the dispositions themselves cannot be.¹⁸ The alternative for Ramsey is that the analysis of belief falls to success or failure; beliefs are to be analyzed like "a map... by which we steer."¹⁹ If the map is good, following it will get us to our destination. It should be made clear that Ramsey's account does not permit for beliefs being 'good' in absence of the propositional content therein being true—viz. a belief in *p* is only useful if *p*.²⁰ Now having laid out the core of Ramsey's theory of belief, we will again take up the problem of *akrasia*.

Misak also notes that Ramsey might be able to accommodate *akrasia* with reference to his account of how beliefs combine with desires.²¹ In the next section (II) I will develop the thesis that Ramsey can indeed accommodate *akrasia* with recourse to his theory of partial beliefs and his theory on how desires combine with these beliefs to determine our actions.

¹⁴ Beyond the conscious experience of considering it to be an example of an unconscious belief.

¹⁵ Ramsey, *Truth and Probability*, 65

¹⁶ Hume, David. 1739. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Oxford University Press. Book 1, Part 3, §7

¹⁷ Not wholly absent, but I certainly believed that the ground was solid when I walked to, for example, Robarts Library this afternoon, and I certainly did not have any belief-feelings whilst doing so.

¹⁸ Ramsey does assert that there are 'other cognitive attitudes' relevant to belief in *General Propositions and Causality* (Ramsey 1929a, 147-148) but it's clear that, whatever these may be, they are not simply truth and falsity.

¹⁹ Ramsey, *General Propositions and Causality*, 146.

²⁰ Ramsey, Frank. (1927/1990) 'Facts and Propositions' in *Philosophical Papers*. Ed. D. H. Mellor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 34—51, 40.

²¹ Misak, *Cambridge Pragmatism*, 219.

§ 2.

I will adopt the following definitions for the remainder of this essay:

- $W\{1\}$ = That $\{1\}$ is the wrong thing to do, all things considered
- p = Some proposition
- The function which expresses the subject's degree of belief in p as a number on the closed interval $[0,1]$ shall be denoted as $B(p)$
 - As for the degree of belief in the contradictory, this can be represented as $1 - B(p)$
- The function which expresses the subject's desire for a certain state of affairs (which includes p) as an integer on the open interval $(-\infty, \infty)$ shall be denoted as $D(\omega_1 \ \& \ p)$ ²²
 - As for the desire for the reverse, this shall be denoted as $D(\omega_2 \ \& \ \neg p)$
- g_X = the gamble ' X ' ²³
- The function expressing the expected utility of a given (binary) gamble X on the truth of p shall be denoted as $EU(g_X)$, and its equation is given as follows:

$$EU(g_X) = B(p) \cdot D(\omega_1 \ \& \ p) + (1 - B(p)) \cdot D(\omega_2 \ \& \ \neg p)$$
 ²⁴
- When the $EU(g_X) > EU(\neg g_X)$, the subject is determined²⁵ to gamble, and vice versa.

The account of *akrasia* I wish to advance is that when a subject takes a specific gamble on the truth of $W(x)$, which I shall refer to as a 'Gamble of Indulgence', the agent acts out of *akrasia*. More specifically, taking a Gamble of Indulgence is *identical* to acting out of *akrasia*.

A Gamble of Indulgence (g_I) is defined as follows (i.e. each of the following conditions is necessary and they are jointly sufficient to consider any gamble a Gamble of Indulgence):

1. The subject has a high value for $B(W(x))$
(i.e. the subject has a high degree of belief that x is wrong)

²² It should be noted here that I am using omega, ω , to represent a possible world.

²³ Particular gambles designated with a name shall replace the subscript of X with the first letter of the name of that specific gamble

²⁴ See: MacBride, Fraser, Mathieu Marion, Frápolli, María José, Dorothy Edgington, Edward Elliott, Sebastian Lutz, and Jeffrey Paris. 2019. "Frank Ramsey." Stanford.edu. August 14, 2019. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ramsey>.

²⁵ See Ramsey in *Truth and Probability*, quoted on Page 4 of my paper.

2. The subject has a negative, low magnitude, value for $D(\omega_1 \ \& \ W(x))$
(i.e. the subject disprefers doing x when $W(x)$, but not to a large extent)
3. The subject has a positive, high magnitude, value for $D(\omega_2 \ \& \ \neg W(x))$
(i.e. the subject prefers doing x when $\neg W(x)$, to a large extent)

As opposed to motivating this account one condition at a time, I will propose an example which I believe to be illustrative of my account, that of 'The Strawberry Cheesecake Lover':

The Strawberry Cheesecake Lover is a subject who believes quite strongly that he should not indulge himself in unhealthy foods, as he is quite overweight and trying to become healthier. His favorite food in the whole world is strawberry cheesecake and his desire for it is at an all time high since he is on a diet. Our subject takes a stroll through the park and is greeted by a friend offering him a slice of strawberry cheesecake. He fights dearly to retain his principle of temperance, but fails and indulges in the cake.

Assume that:

a = the act of indulging in the cake

- $B(W(a)) = 0.8$
 - Assigned as an arbitrarily high value to account for his high credence in the normative proposition $W(a)$.²⁶
- $D(\omega_1 \ \& \ W(a)) = -10$
 - Assigned as a negative and relatively low value (magnitude) to account for the fact that this is only a single instance of imprudence in the case that $W(a)$, and our subject cares less about the individual instances and more about the overall virtue.
- $D(\omega_2 \ \& \ \neg W(a)) = 100$
 - Assigned as a positive and high value (magnitude) to account for the fact that this is his favorite food and that he should very much like to eat it if it's not wrong to.

(Note that the points above are sufficient to consider eating the cake a Gamble of Indulgence)

- $EU(\neg g_I) = 10$

²⁶ Because this is a thought experiment, these specific values are stipulated for ease of illustration. In real-world cases, however, Ramsey's theory will—by observing an agent across a range of different situations—generate enough data to calculate both $B(W(a))$ and $D(\omega_1 \ \& \ W(a))$ (and their complements). In fact (on my reading), the entire reason Ramsey treats us as expected utility maximizers is to be able to reliably deduce these values given repeated and intentional observation. See *Truth and Probability* (page 68ff) for Ramsey's comments on this.

- Assigned as a positive and relatively low value (magnitude) to account for the fact that this is only a single instance of abstinence, and, as previously mentioned, our subject cares less about the individual instances and more about the overall virtue.

Plugging these values into the following equation and solving for $EU(g_I)$:

$$EU(g_I) = B(W(a)) \cdot D(\omega_1 \& W(a)) + (1 - B(W(a))) \cdot D(\omega_2 \& \neg W(a))$$

We get that $EU(g_I) = 12$, and we had stipulated that $EU(\neg g_I) = 10$. Hence the expected utility of gambling is higher than that of not ($EU(g_I) > EU(\neg g_I)$), and the subject takes²⁷ the Gamble of Indulgence, thereby falling into *akrasia*.

It should be clear that this Ramseyian treatment meets the two criteria I posited in section I, I.i. Regarding the first condition, *akrasia* can be handled by Ramsey as I have described above in this section, with recourse to his theory of partial beliefs and how desires combine with them to determine action. As for the second, the motivational nature of normative belief has been retained because it is the nature of any belief to be 'motivational'—meaning that they contribute to motivating our actions—as beliefs are, in essence, dispositional states.

§ 3.

Any theory of *akrasia* also must be capable of being extended to account for *enkrateia*, or 'strength of will,' as well as virtue. I will sketch how Ramsey may be able to handle these but refrain from discussing them at length. My proposal for how Ramsey could handle these is as follows: an *enkrateic* act occurs when an agent is presented with a Gamble of Indulgence but does not gamble; a state of virtue is a state of never being presented with a Gamble of Indulgence because the agent's desires align with their (correct) beliefs about the good.

Aristotle defines *enkrateia* as a state wherein one's desires are misaligned with the good, the same as the *akratic*, but unlike the *akratic* they overcome these desires and act rightly.²⁸ Because Ramsey is treating people as expected utility maximizers, not gambling when presented with a potential Gamble of Indulgence would mean that the expected utility of gambling must be lower than that of not. There are two ways of achieving this, either lowering the value for the misaligned desire— $D(\omega_2 \& \neg W(x))$ —or raising the degree of belief that the act is wrong— $B(W(x))$. Admitting Aristotle's condition that the desires of the *akratic* and the *enkrateic* are the same, the first option is not available, so the degree of belief must increase. In the case of the Strawberry Cheesecake Lover, their degree of belief that eating the cake is wrong, i.e.

²⁷ It should be noted once again that, in treating humans as expected utility maximizers, whenever the expected utility of a specific gamble exceeds that of not gambling (as it does here), the subject is *determined* to gamble.

²⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1145b10-15.

$B(W(a))$, would need to be >0.82 (roughly) to produce a $EU(g_i) < EU(\neg g_i)$ so that the subject would act from *enkrateia*.

On virtue, Aristotle refers to it as the state of having one's desires aligned with the good, unlike the *akratic* or the *enkratic*, so they do not need to exercise self-control.²⁹ On my Ramseyian interpretation, this would mean that there is never a case in which a subject's $D(\omega_2 \ \& \ \neg W(x))$ is positive and high magnitude³⁰ at the same time as their $B(W(x))$ approaches 1 and is correct.³¹ This stipulation, of course, violates the conjunction of necessary conditions (1) and (3) for considering a gamble to be a Gamble of Indulgence. Therefore, an agent being virtuous, on this view, amounts to them never being presented with a Gamble of Indulgence due to their desires never being misaligned with their (correct) beliefs.

3.1

The question now before us is whether the account I have put forth accurately captures the same *akrasia* that Aristotle is referring to—what I take to be the original meaning of the term. One portion of this original account that I have neglected to discuss is that Aristotle assumes that the *akratic* is “100 percent certain” of $W(x)$.³²

It should be immediately obvious that my account does not admit of this possibility. To have a belief of degree 1 in $W(x)$ (and therefore 0 in the contradictory) implies that, whenever presented with a Gamble of Indulgence, the subject will refrain from gambling, even if the desire for $D(\omega_1 \ \& \ \neg W(x))$ approaches infinity. Hence, in treating humans as expected utility maximizers, we actually forbid what appears to be the original account of *akrasia*, and seem to fall directly into the kind of Socratic denial that we set aside as a paper doubt in section I.i.

The response, I think, is to deny that Aristotle can really support the idea that an *akratic* is 100% certain of their normative beliefs. If he cannot, then my account aligns his—i.e. the original meaning of the concept—in this regard. All I can say on this matter is to assert a pragmatist and/or fallibilist principle that no human person ever really reaches a degree of belief of 1 (or 0) in any proposition whatsoever, and so the real human phenomenon of *akrasia* cannot rely on us having a degree of belief in $W(x)$ of 1. If it did, then Aristotle would also fall into the kind of Socratic denial that he agrees to be absurd.

Ramsey would accept this principle, as he in fact states it outright:

²⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1104b1-5.

³⁰ Whether it may be positive as long as it is low enough magnitude or must be negative is a topic for another paper.

³¹ Of course, because beliefs are not truth-apt for Ramsey, correct means something like ‘the belief is useful’. Then again, because Ramsey asserts that a belief in $W(x)$ cannot ever be useful if $\neg W(x)$, whenever $W(x)$ is false, this condition of ‘correctness’ cannot obtain. Whether the truth of $W(x)$ or the usefulness of the belief in $W(x)$ matters more for virtue is also a topic for another paper.

³² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1146b30-35.

Ideally [the] best thing is that we should have beliefs of degree 1 in all true propositions and beliefs of degree 0 in all false propositions. But this is too high a standard to expect of mortal men.³³

I think the apportioning of certainty to the *akratic* comes from the more typical Humean view of belief that a belief is constituted by certain feelings. Because *akrasia* comes with incredibly strong belief feelings, we propose certainty. However, this misses a key observation Ramsey makes that “no one feels strongly about things he takes for granted,” and so the presence of such intense belief feelings should actually be interpreted as further evidence that there is a *lack* of certainty when dealing with *akrasia*.

It remains to be argued that certainty is unachievable, and it needs to be assumed in order to avoid my account failing to capture the original meaning of *akrasia*. Then again, even if it turns out to be that there are some normative³⁴ propositions of which we can be certain, it still needs to be shown that Aristotle's certainty condition is correct. It seems to me that that it is clearly not, as the ‘fix’ for the *akratic* that we tend to apply is to try and *convince them further* that their act is wrong. If they were already certain, then there would be no point in trying to bring them closer to certainty. Regardless, these are topics for further literature to address.

§ 4. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that Ramsey's dispositional theory of belief can indeed be extended to account for *akrasia* and that this treatment also succeeds in retaining the motivational nature of normative belief. On this view—where *akrasia* is defined with reference to partial belief, desire, and expected utility—it is clear that *akrasia* is not merely a breakdown of rationality. It is better understood as a problem of lack of confidence in one's normative beliefs. This account thereby also leaves us with the ability to *help* the *akratic* overcome their *akrasia* by helping them to raise their own credence in correct normative beliefs and lower their credence in incorrect ones. It should come as no surprise to those familiar with Ramsey and his version of pragmatism that his account of belief would leave us uniquely positioned to help the *akratic*, as his theories are structured around the position that “[p]hilosophy must be of some use to us [by] clear[ing] our thoughts and so our actions.”³⁵ Aristotle, I think, would firmly agree with this principle, as he makes it very clear that idle contemplation of *akrasia* and virtue is pointless because we do not just want abstract knowledge. “We want to actually become good.”³⁶

³³ Ramsey, *Truth and Probability*, 80.

³⁴ Because *akrasia* is about normative propositions, not ones like ‘that I exist,’ pointing to such cases does not vindicate Aristotle's condition. Even if it were the case that we can be certain of propositions like the cogito, what would be needed is a normative proposition we are certain of.

³⁵ Ramsey, Frank. (1929b/1990) ‘Philosophy’. Ramsey 1990, in *Philosophical Papers*. Ed. D. H. Mellor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1-8, 1.

³⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103b25-30.

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