

Ramsey + Moore ≠ God

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Frank Ramsey writes:

If two people are arguing ‘if p will q ?’ and both are in doubt as to p , they are adding p hypothetically to their stock of knowledge and arguing on that basis about q . We can say that they are fixing their degrees of belief in q given p . (1931)

Chalmers and Hájek write:

Let us take the first sentence [of Ramsey] the way it is often taken, as proposing the following test for the acceptability of an indicative conditional:

‘if p then q ’ is acceptable to a subject S iff, were S to accept p and consider q , S would accept q .

Now consider an indicative conditional of the form

(1) If p , then I believe p .

Suppose that you accept p and consider ‘I believe p ’. To accept p while rejecting ‘I believe p ’ is tantamount to accepting the Moore-paradoxical sentence ‘ p and I do not believe p ’, and so is irrational. To accept p while suspending judgment about ‘I believe p ’ is irrational for similar reasons. So rationality requires that if you accept p and consider ‘I believe p ’, you accept ‘I believe p ’.

Consider also an indicative conditional of the form

(2) If I believe p , then p .

Suppose that you accept ‘I believe p ’ and consider p . To accept ‘I believe p ’ while rejecting p is tantamount to accepting the Moore-paradoxical sentence ‘Not- p and I believe p ’, and so is irrational. To accept ‘I believe p ’ while suspending judgment about p is irrational for similar reasons. So rationality requires that if you accept ‘I believe p ’ and consider p , you

accept p .

According to the Ramsey test, understood as above, it follows that all instances of (1) and (2) are acceptable to a rational subject. But if one accepts all instances of (1), one should accept that one is omniscient. And if one accepts all instances of (2), one should accept that one is infallible. So Ramseyan and Moorean principles entail that rational subjects should accept that they have the epistemic powers of a god. (2007: 170-71)

As Chalmers and Hájek emphasize in their only footnote, their argument is neutral on the correct interpretation of Ramsey's test; it aims only to show that a certain interpretation, together with the Moorean principles, entails that rational subjects should accept that they have the epistemic powers of a god. I aim to show that this interpretation is mistaken and that, given a correct interpretation, the entailment does not hold. If I am right, then the problem that Chalmers and Hájek raise is not a problem for Ramsey's test.

First I need to introduce some terminology:

<i>Ramsey's Test</i>	If two people are arguing 'if p will q ?' and both are in doubt as to p , they are adding p hypothetically to their stock of knowledge and arguing on that basis about q .
<i>If-then Acceptability</i>	'If p then q ' is acceptable to a subject S iff, were S to accept p and consider q , S would accept q .
<i>Moore #1</i>	Rationality requires that if you accept p and consider 'I believe p ', you accept 'I believe p '.
<i>Moore #2</i>	Rationality requires that if you accept 'I believe p ' and consider p , you accept p .
<i>Auto-omniscience</i>	All instances of (1) are acceptable to a rational subject.
<i>Auto-infallibility</i>	All instances of (2) are acceptable to a rational subject.

The interpretation of *Ramsey's Test* that Chalmers and Hájek employ is *If-then Acceptability*. To begin to see that this interpretation is mistaken, notice that, on its own, *Ramsey's Test* does not tell us what it is for a conditional statement to be *acceptable*, but only what it is to consider and to accept a conditional statement:

If-then Consideration To consider ‘If p then q ’ is to hypothetically accept p and, on that basis, consider whether q .

If-then Acceptance To accept ‘If p then q ’ is to hypothetically accept p and, on that basis, accept q .

To derive acceptability conditions from these principles, a general principle is needed that gives acceptability conditions of a statement in terms of the notions of considering and accepting the statement.

Sticking with the counterfactual form of *If-then Acceptability*, here is the only plausible candidate:

General Acceptability A statement is acceptable to subject S iff, were S to consider the statement, S would accept it.

Given *General Acceptability*, and that *If-then Acceptance* and *If-then Consideration* follow directly from *Ramsey’s Test*, here are the acceptability conditions entailed by *Ramsey’s Test*:

Ramsey If-then Acceptability ‘If p then q ’ is acceptable to a subject S iff, were S to hypothetically accept p and, on that basis, consider q , S would, on that basis, accept q .

Clearly, *Ramsey If-then Acceptability* \neq *If-then Acceptability*. And clearly *If-then Acceptability* is not entailed by *General Acceptability*, *If-then Acceptance*, and *If-then Consideration*. Moreover, there is no plausible alternative to *General Acceptability* which, when combined with *If-then Acceptance* and *If-then Consideration*, entails *If-then Acceptability*. Hence, it is a mistake to interpret *Ramsey’s Test* as *If-then Acceptability*.

Indeed, to interpret *Ramsey’s Test* as *If-then Acceptability* is tantamount to interpreting *Ramsey’s Test* as *Ramsey*’s Test*:

Ramsey’s Test* If two people are arguing ‘if p will q ?’ and both are in doubt as to p , they are accepting p arguing about q .

The move from *General Acceptability* to *If-then Acceptability* is sound given *Ramsey*’s Test*, but not given *Ramsey’s Test*. Because *Ramsey’s Test* is initially plausible and *Ramsey*’s Test* is obviously false,

it would be a mistake to interpret *Ramsey's Test* as *Ramsey*'s Test*. Because interpreting *Ramsey's Test* as *If-then Acceptability* is tantamount to interpreting *Ramsey's Test* as *Ramsey*'s Test*, it would be a mistake to interpret *Ramsey's Test* as *If-then Acceptability*.

The question remains: does *Ramsey's Test*, together with *Moore #1* and *Moore #2*, entail *Auto-omniscience* and *Auto-infallibility*? The answer is *no*. Given *General Acceptability*, the acceptability condition entailed by *Ramsey's Test* is *Ramsey If-then Acceptability*. This condition, together with *Moore #1* and *Moore #2*, entails neither *Auto-omniscience* nor *Auto-infallibility*. For *Moore #1* and *Moore #2* are rational requirements on subjects who accept and consider things, not *hypothetically*—that is, not relative to suppositions or hypotheses—but *categorically*. By contrast, the conditions given by *Ramsey If-then Acceptability* involve *hypothetical* acceptance and *hypothetical* consideration. Thus, combined with *Moore #1* and *Moore #2*, *Ramsey If-then Acceptability* does not entail *Auto-omniscience* or *Auto-infallibility*. In other words, *Ramsey's Test*, together with the relevant Moorean principles, does not entail that rational subjects should accept that they have the epistemic powers of a god.

To be sure, there is an entailment from *Ramsey's Test*, together with the following *Moorean** principles, to the conclusion that rational subjects should accept that they have the epistemic powers of a god:

Moore #1* Rationality requires that if you *hypothetically* accept *p* and, *on that basis*, consider 'I believe *p*', then, *on that basis*, you accept 'I believe *p*'.

Moore #2* Rationality requires that if you *hypothetically* accept 'I believe *p*' and, *on that basis*, consider *p*, then, *on that basis*, you accept *p*.

However, just as it would be a mistake to interpret *Ramsey's Test* as *Ramsey*'s Test*, it would be a mistake to interpret *Moore #1* and *Moore #2* as *Moore* #1* and *Moore* #2*. For whereas *Moore #1* and *Moore #2* are initially plausible, *Moore* #1* and *Moore* #2* are highly dubious.

To see that they are dubious, let us engage in some hypothetical reasoning, all the while keeping clear on the distinction between *hypothetically* accepting something—that is, accepting something by

virtue of hypothesizing it, supposing it, or holding it on the basis of some hypothesis or supposition—and *categorically* accepting something—accepting something independent of any hypothesis or supposition. I assume that you have no reason to suspect that you have been targeted for assassination. Suppose nevertheless that you have been so targeted. On the basis of this supposition, consider (3):

(3) you accept that you have been targeted for assassination.

(3) is ambiguous between (3H) and (3C):

(3H) you *hypothetically* accept that you have been targeted for assassination

(3C) you *categorically* accept that you have been targeted for assassination.

Presumably, you *categorically* accept that you are currently supposing that you have been targeted for assassination. So, on the basis of what you categorically accept, you are rationally required, upon considering (3H), to accept it. But you are not on this basis rationally required, upon considering (3C), to accept it. Of course, if you are rationally required to accept p on the basis of what you categorically accept, then you are rationally required to categorically accept p . So, on consideration, you are rationally required to *categorically* accept (3H), but not to *categorically* accept (3C). Generalizing:

Upon hypothetically accepting p :

(4a) upon categorically considering ‘I hypothetically accept p ’ (i.e., upon considering it on the basis of what one categorically accepts), one is rationally required to categorically accept ‘I hypothetically accept p ’

(4b) upon categorically considering ‘I categorically accept p ’, one need not be rationally required to categorically accept ‘I categorically accept p ’.

Now, by virtue of supposing that you have been targeted, you *hypothetically* accept that you have been targeted. On *this* basis, are you rationally required to accept (3H) or (3C)? No. The proposition that you have been targeted gives you no reason to accept either that you hypothetically accept that you have

been targeted or that you categorically accept that you have been targeted. To be sure, if you suppose instead that you are supposing that you have been targeted, then, on the basis of *this* supposition, you have reason to accept (3H). But this is not what you are supposing; you are merely supposing that you have been targeted for assassination. Also, if hypothetically accepting *p* were to involve (i) categorically accepting *that you are hypothetically adding p to your belief state* and (ii) transforming this enriched categorical belief state by virtue of hypothetically adding *p* to *it* (rather than to the pre-suppositional categorical state), then you would, on the basis of hypothetically adding *p* to your belief state, have reason to accept (3H). But hypothetically accepting *p* does not involve hypothetically adding *p* to an enriched categorical belief state—one that includes the categorical belief that you are hypothetically accepting *p*. It rather involves hypothetically adding *p* to one’s initial categorical belief state—the state comprising one’s categorical beliefs prior to the act of supposing *p*. So, you are not rationally required to hypothetically accept (3H) or (3C). More generally:

Upon hypothetically accepting *p*:

- (5a) upon hypothetically considering ‘I hypothetically accept *p*’ (i.e., upon considering it on the basis of what one hypothetically accepts), one need not be rationally required to hypothetically accept ‘I hypothetically accept *p*’
- (5b) upon hypothetically considering ‘I categorically accept *p*’, one need not be rationally required to hypothetically accept ‘I categorically accept *p*’.

Now, perhaps *Moore* #1* admits of two interpretations: one on which ‘I believe *p*’ means ‘I hypothetically believe *p*’, and one on which ‘I believe *p*’ means ‘I categorically believe *p*’. (5a) entails that the first interpretation is false; (5b) entails that the second is false. Thus, on either candidate interpretation, *Moore* #1* is false. Analogous considerations show that, on either candidate interpretation, *Moore* #2* is false.

To summarize: Chalmers and Hájek argue that a certain interpretation of *Ramsey’s Test*, together with a pair of uncontroversial Moorean principles—*Moore #1* and *Moore #2*—entails that rational subjects should accept that they have the epistemic powers of a god. I have shown that the interpretation

that Chalmers and Hájek consider is mistaken. It is tantamount to interpreting *Ramsey's Test* as the obviously false *Ramsey*'s Test*. Furthermore, I have shown that, properly interpreted, *Ramsey's Test*, together with the Moorean principles, does not entail that rational subjects should accept that they have the epistemic powers of a god. To be sure, *Ramsey's Test*, together with a couple of Moorean* principles—*Moore* #1* and *Moore* #2*—does entail that rationally subjects should accept that they have the epistemic powers of a god. But *Moore* #1* and *Moore* #2* are highly dubious. And so this entailment is less interesting.¹

References

Chalmers, D. and Hájek, A. 2007. Ramsey + Moore = God. *Analysis* 67: 170–72.

Ramsey, F. P. 1931. General propositions and causality. In *The Foundations of Mathematics and Other Logical Essays*, ed. R. B. Braithwaite. London: Kegan Paul.

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