

Ramsey + Moore = God

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Frank Ramsey (1931) wrote:

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 .

Let us take the first sentence 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. Thus Ramseyan and Moorean principles entail that rational subjects should accept that they have the epistemic powers of a god.¹

Bibliography

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¹ The problem for the Ramsey test raised by (1) is closely related to the problem arising from "Thomason conditionals" such as 'If my business partner is cheating on me, I will never know it' (van Fraassen 1980). The problem is avoided by the different version of the test suggested by the second sentence of the quotation from Ramsey: an indicative conditional 'if p then q ' is acceptable to s iff s 's conditional probability $pr(q|p)$ is high. We thank John Williams, who discusses related problems in his (MS), for helpful discussion and comments.