

## RAMSEY'S OPTION FOR RELIABILISM

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### Abstract

*The background of the human need for knowledge guarantees further examination of the premise that knowledge is Justified True Belief (JTB). Belief, Truth and Justification emerge as objects of epistemological investigation. The problem of the relationship between truth and belief and how these lead to knowledge requires a closer examination of both Belief and Truth. Frank Ramsey has an interesting treatment of Belief and Truth, an understanding of which would go a long way in advancing the course of the quest for knowledge. Furthermore, Ramsey's theory of Belief and Truth does not seem to receive sufficient attention, hence the need to see if Ramsey's theory can be sufficiently employed to solve the problem of the nature of Belief, how Belief relates to Truth and whether Justification is needful for the verification of Truth. This work thus aims at exposing Ramsey's treatment of Belief and showing how Belief relates to truth in order to bring about knowledge. The scope of the study is thus bounded by content and context. The content consists of an evaluation of Ramsey's notion of Truth and Belief. The context is postmodern and contemporary. This work explains Ramsey's formula for the calculation of the degrees of belief. It also puts one in a position to ascertain whether or not Ramsey's theory of Belief and Truth as well as the quantification of the degrees of belief is anything to go by. The study adopts the qualitative research Method of analysis. Data were sourced from primary and secondary sources such as books, periodicals and the internet among others. This study is limited to an evaluation of Frank Ramsey's notion of Truth and Belief. With a few exceptions, only the ideas of philosophers who post-date Ramsey are mostly employed. The study shows that, Beliefs have varying intensity which can be calculated and assigned numerical values and the highest of the value of a belief is usually 0.5. It also shows that truth results when a belief is acted upon or there is the propensity to act at the instance of a belief. Knowledge therefore results when the truth value of a belief has intensity to the numerical value of at least 0.5 with a complementing absolute propensity to act at the instance of the belief.*

**Keywords: Ramsey, Truth, Reliability, Justified Belief, Epistemology**

### **The Reliability Clause**

In “Truth and Probability” Ramsey submits that “belief was knowledge if it was true, certain and obtained through a reliable process (Truth and Probability, 110). This then refers to knowledge as true, certain and reliable belief. “On the surface, this definition of knowledge looks much like the same traditional 'Justified True Belief' theory, but working out the details of this theory, one discovers that it diverges significantly from that account of knowledge. Of special interest is the third condition” (Sahlin, 4), the reliability clause.

Ramsey's theory acknowledges that truth and belief are key to Knowledge. A truth position can be examined through a mathematical/logical analysis of the content of belief. So belief is at the foundation of our knowledge quest. That being affirmed, Ramsey insists that it is of greatest importance to guarantee the reliability of the source of our beliefs. Ramsey holds that a person X's belief that P is a case of knowledge only if that belief has been obtained by a reliable process. It is not sufficient that X has evidence for believing that P. the way in which we acquire our beliefs should be reliable. The reliability condition tells us that the provenance of knowledge is of decisive importance. To have full belief is not enough, not even if the belief is supported by heaps of evidence. Moreover, the future use of those beliefs constituting knowledge is just as important as the provenance of those beliefs. A belief being a map by which we steer, being a rule to follow, must guide our future actions. A full belief obtained by a reliable method, is definitely not knowledge if it leads us on the wrong track; to be knowledge, it must help us to avoid errors. Thus, knowledge is simply not true justified belief but rather: A belief is knowledge if it is obtained by a reliable process and if it always leads to success. (Sahlin, 4)

The huge turnaround that Ramsey's theory of belief and truth has occasioned in the field of epistemology cannot be discounted. It is a revolutionary discovery that Ramsey steered clear of the Russell-Gettier problems ahead of their invention. He (Ramsey) has brought innovation to the traditional theory of Knowledge.

What might be called the traditional theory of knowledge equates knowledge with true justified belief. That a person is said to have knowledge if a truth condition, a belief condition and a condition of sufficient evidence are satisfied. With this view of knowledge, it is natural to argue that the true evidentiary value (of a piece of evidence for a hypothesis) is the probability of the hypothesis given the evidence. It is well-known that this view of knowledge leads to serious problems. The so-called 'Russell-Gettier problems show that the traditional conditions are not sufficient for knowledge. What Russell and Gettier do is to provide us with counter examples to the claim that knowledge is but true justified belief. The problems arise because justification is often transitive. If a person's belief is justified on the basis of another belief that is also justified, but happens to be false, the true belief will be justified without being an instance of knowledge (Sahlin, 4)

Ramsey steers clear of the Russell-Gettier problem by asserting that, the belief generating process must first of all be reliable. Albeit the subject of the belief must not have a fore awareness of the reliability of the source of the belief. A person may know that 'P' and not

know that the process leading to 'P' is reliable. Sahlin observes that “by emphasizing that a reliable process is needed for knowledge – a belief being knowledge if it is obtained by such a process and is true – one sidesteps many of the difficulties of the traditional theory. It is easily notable, for example, that Russell-Gettier examples are no problem for a theory of knowledge like Ramsey's. Introduction of reliable process prevents that true beliefs can be justifiably inferred from false premises.” (Sahlin, 4) Hence, Ramsey proposes a theory of reliability in the quest for knowledge.

Many years later, Wittgenstein would agree with Ramsey in his (Wittgenstein's) *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (Philosophical Investigations) posthumously published in 1953. In his views on induction merit discussion, Wittgenstein contends that, if one should drop a book, it will fall to the ground. In such instance, there is no need for a justification of our expectations on the book falling to the ground because, nothing justifies the certainty of a book falling to the ground, if we drop it, better than the success of dropping the book and it falling to the ground. He also “saw that it is not the truth of our rule-following habits that has to be certified, what has to be certified is the effectiveness of our rule-following habits, and nothing can do this better than success”(Sahlin, 11)

Frank Ramsey has tried to bring out an interesting pragmatic theory of knowledge that is capable of a global impact on epistemology. This finds expression in his theory of Truth and Belief as has been exposed above. This theory overcomes the Gettier problem, which is the problem of justification. It emphasizes the link between or among philosophy, science, mathematics and belief. It also opens a new chapter of epistemological discourse which is the problem of reliability or the success theory. There is another huge impact of this theory which cannot be overlooked. It is the fact that various beliefs are entertained by various societies. Going by Ramsey's theory of belief and truth, the success of the reliable outcome of such beliefs in any given context would result to truth in that context. So a remarkable achievement of Ramsey's theory of belief and truth would be the contextualization of truth and knowledge. This means that knowledge can pass for a product of culture. It would be important to note that Ramsey was the first reliabilist theorist. In recent times, the proponents of reliabilism have come to include Alvin Goldman, Robert Nozick, Marshall Swain, Kent Bach, Alven Plantinga and D.M. Armstrong among others.

Alvin Goldman's epistemology and account of justified belief employs notions like causation and reliability in his analysis. While doing what would later be called naturalized epistemology, Goldman focused on the treatment of the question of justification. The Gettier challenge calls attention to the insufficiency of justified true belief to yield knowledge. Goldman's view emerged as part of the efforts to find a "fourth" condition in response to the [Gettier](#) problem of accounting for knowledge as "justified true belief."

As a response to the Gettier problem, Goldman developed 'A Causal Theory of Knowledge'. In his causal theory of knowledge, he holds that knowledge amounts to true belief appropriately caused by the very fact that makes it true. He advanced with the argument of the causal connection between a case of knowledge and the knowing subject to

assert that knowledge amounts to true belief that is produced by a reliable process. Without prejudice to the analytic task of identifying the criteria and satisfactory conditions for the traditional normative epistemic requirements for justification, Goldman proposes the criterion of reliability as the process of belief formation. He argues that, for our beliefs to be reliable, they must be the products of a reliable cognitive mechanism.

In discussing 'Belief, Truth, and Knowledge', David Armstrong (73) argues that one's knowledge claim can be true only if his or her belief is a completely reliable sign of the truth of the proposition believed. The reliability of a belief is therefore a necessary condition for the held belief to be an instance of knowledge. Armstrong replaces the theory of justification with the theory of reliability. Here, Armstrong's view is broadly similar to that of [Alvin Goldman](#), [Robert Nozick](#), Marshall Swain, Kent Bach and Alven Plantinga.

In treating the question of the relationship between belief and [knowledge](#), Armstrong argues in defense of the identification of belief with knowledge. According to him if a person can be said to know 'P', it means that he or she believes 'P'. He disagrees with the position which seems to suggest that belief is related to doubt and hence an indication of lack of knowledge. If at the train station, someone is asked whether the train has just left and he or she says, I believe it has left. This should not be regarded as a case of lack of knowledge which would be used as a reference point for indicating that belief signifies lack of knowledge.

People may use belief to express doubt in some contexts but there is no way that knowledge can go without believing that the fact known is indeed known. This is reasonable because people do not know things so as to disbelieve that they know them. Similarly, people do not believe things so as to deny knowledge of them. He admits however that where belief and doubt may coexist is an instance where one may not know that he or she knows. Such cases may be common in psychological experiences of lack of confidence or denial of the obvious due to deep unwillingness towards acceptance of undesirable occurrence like the death of a dearly one (Benedict, 453)

It should be made clear here, the question of the relationship between reliability and justification. Ramsey and the subsequent scholars mentioned above have offered reliability as an answer to the Gettier question. Ramsey had earlier solved the problem before its emergence. If only he had been widely read, and if only Gettier himself had read Ramsey, his take on justification may not have arisen or may have taken a different tone. Unfortunately, that never happened and in the days of Goldman, Nozick, Bach, Armstrong and Plantinga among others, this problem whose answer predated it had to be discussed all over again. This discussion is however not a waste of time. It has expanded the scope of the treatment of the problem of justification and the place of reliabilism in the understanding of knowledge. It is noteworthy however that these subsequent reliabilists differ from Ramsey on the note that they did not go far enough to delve into the treatment of the quantification of the degrees of belief.

Talking of Justification and reliability, there is a seeming confusion that must be clarified. In the treatment of the relationship between justification and reliability, there are those who may regard reliability as replacing justification. There are also those who may regard reliability as merely substituting justification. Still others may see reliability as an alternative to justification. What these three positions on the relationship between justification and reliability means is that: to say reliability substitutes justification would be to say that justification was truly the real deal and correctly led us to the path of knowledge until reliability, which can equally lead us to the path of knowledge, was discovered. This view is not correct because it is not as though one should still be free, on a good day, to switch over again by fielding back justification in place of reliability, believing that justification too can equally play the role of reliability.

Secondly, to say that reliability is an alternative to justification would mean that justification and reliability can be used simultaneously and interchangeably. This would certainly be beside the point as far as the position of Ramsey who, ahead of other scholars, thought of reliability as an answer to the problem of justification. The third position which holds reliability as a replacement for justification is to be upheld. Reliability, in a manner of speaking, is enough justification. Strictly speaking, reliability is to be regarded as more satisfying than justification because reliability gives more satisfaction than justification can ever give. Reliability offers a satisfaction that is never found in justification because justification usually ends up in an unending chain of itself and hence guarantees no satisfaction. This means that reliability settles the mind of knowledge seekers better than justification does.

### **Evaluation of Ramsey's Theory of Belief and Truth**

One of Frank Ramsey's crucial contributions to epistemology is his theory of belief. His premature death, however, prevented him from proceeding with more theories. (Gruber, 1). Ramsey's theory has primacy of a way out of the problem of Justification well ahead of its birth. It cannot be said that he was responding to the Gettier problem as later reliabilists like Goldman among others did simply because his solution to the problem predates the problem. For whatever reason, Ramsey was simply not given enough attention. No significant advance has been made beyond reliabilism since after Ramsey; the recent alignment of reliability with validity cannot be appropriately seen as advancement from reliabilism or a supporting structure to it. The affirmation which validity seeks through a repetitive process of whatever successful experimentation is a strengthening of reliability. It is only when the result of a process becomes reliable that it becomes valid. Validity can therefore be rightly referred to as process reliability. Although Ramsey did not express this understanding by using exactly this term, he expressed it in his treatment of the notion of the finite nature of infinite axioms.

Apart from being an earlier proponent of reliabilism, Ramsey's theory still holds huge further scholarly potentials. Recently, Holger and Gunther (20) proposed "a Ramsey test analysis of actual causation". They applied a belief revision approach to create a framework of causal models so as to arrive at a test conditional for causal models. The

procedure as they have is as simple as given below:

First step: suspend judgment about both the antecedent A and the consequent C.

Second step: hypothetically add the antecedent A to your stock of beliefs

Finally: consider whether or not the consequent entails your beliefs.

The test “conditional  $A \gg C$  should be believed if and only if, after suspending judgment on A and C, C is believed as a result of assuming A. The conditional  $\gg$  gives rise to an analysis of causation via the following template: C a cause of E if and only if C and E occur, and  $C \gg E$ ” (Holger and Gunther,1). Although it is difficult to accept as logically and psychologically valid that one should suspend judgment on an antecedent proposition and still add it (hypothetically) to one's stock of beliefs, the attempt by Holger and Gunther (21) shows that Ramsey's theory has potential for innovative research.

An interesting part of Ramsey's theory of belief and truth that has not received enough attention is the employment of the laws of probability in the calculation and quantification of the degrees of belief. This is an interesting and novel aspect of Ramsey's theory. Ramsey's theory of belief and truth and the formula for the calculation and quantification of the degrees of belief is an interesting link among science, philosophy and mathematics. Nonetheless, the formula for the calculation of the degree of belief using the law of probability only indicates the intensity of belief-feeling and the corresponding propensity to act. It does not lead to action.

So, in the end, the successful pragmatic outcome upon which Ramsey founds his theory of reliability does not need the logical and mathematical calculations in order to take effect. Reliability would be determined by the consistent successful outcome of our beliefs independent of any calculations. This makes one to think that Ramsey may have been sailing to an undermined coast but had to finally navigate to another having perceived a safer landing.

Ramsey being a mathematician, it is understood why he was at home applying calculations to the question of belief and truth. If he had remained at that level analyzing belief with logical and mathematical formulae, the exercise would be merely an academic exercise with no bearing on practical everydayness. He creditably led his theory to end in successful outcome of belief resulting from propositions. In this way, he has both tied knowledge to outcome and de-monopolized it. He has also introduced a demand on truth and knowledge that bears the tenets of science because science is practical results oriented. This is exactly why it has been said above that Ramsey's theory has brought together science, philosophy and mathematics.

In FP (Facts and Propositions), Ramsey deals with full beliefs, which he defines as 'a set of actions for whose utility P is a necessary and sufficient condition'. Our actions are the combining force in Ramsey's investigations into Belief and Truth. He suggests that whatever characterizes the feelings we might have, only the attitude leading to action may be called a belief. Hence, he defines the meaning of a sentence via reference to action (Gruber, 4).

The pragmatic orientation of science expressed in Ramsey's theory of Belief and Truth has

a huge implication for epistemology. Wherever and whenever action is required as prove of a high degree of belief and a corresponding high propensity to act, and the action is obliged, a case of knowledge would then, according to Ramey, be said to have been established. This in a number of cases could include technical demonstration of belief and knowledge especially where it has to do with scientific and technological inventions. The implication of this is that of going beyond the traditional frontiers of epistemological discourse which concerns itself with propositional knowledge in other words known as 'knowing that' as against 'knowing how'.

Ramsey's notion of reliability keeps his theory of Belief and Truth more securely within the frontiers of epistemology only where the propensity to act upon a belief is high but not actualized. This is because, the moment the propensity to act on a belief is actualized, the possibility of a crossing from 'knowing that' to 'knowing how' can be hardly excluded. This is the case because, a proposition may be held as a hypothetical statement. Suppose it is a scientist who holds the proposition in belief with a high degree of belief feeling and a corresponding high propensity to act upon such belief. Scientists in their usual way would be more inclined to experiment and in the course of which an invention may occur, resulting in an exhibition of technical knowledge.

It would then be safer if the belief-feeling remains at a certain high degree with a corresponding high propensity to act but the action is not being taken; that will be of no use if such action would be beneficial. What we learn from this is that propositional knowledge has the potency of becoming technical knowledge. In other words, that is to say 'knowing that' can lead to 'knowing how'. In an epistemological discourse however, one must be careful in threading between 'propositional knowledge and technical knowledge so as not to slip over from one side of the discourse to the other; Ramsey's theory threads between these delicate zones. It can be said that the influence of pragmatism on Ramsey's theory of Belief and Truth has given the theory a balance. Discourses about knowledge sometimes sounds as mere intellectual gymnastics without concrete manifestation. This is especially when the discourse is solely on propositional knowledge. Ramsey has carefully placed epistemological discourse between rational and pragmatic epistemologies.

### **Conclusion**

By Ramsey's theory of belief and truth therefore, one is able to affirm that truth is the pragmatic manifestation of the content of belief. As long as this is the case, one can confidently contend that truth bears resemblance to the delineation of belief as false, partial and full. If belief can be partial, then truth can be partial as well and so would knowledge. From Ramsey we have it that belief is an attitude towards perceived reality holding that such and such is the case; truth is the pragmatic manifestation of belief and knowledge is a reliable true belief.

As it is given that belief is partial, truth too like belief is partial. This means that our knowing is partial. This shows that a position or an experience may hold as a fact and thus true in one place yet in another place that may not be the case. In fact, the alternative to what

holds true in one context may be true in another context. For example, the belief that the procreation of a black man in West Africa with a black woman also of West Africa would result to a black West African child is true. Also, true would be the belief that a white woman and a white man from Western Europe would procreate a white West European child. The beliefs are opposite yet have equal truth value, it would not hold same to believe that a black man and a black woman of West Africa would procreate a white West European child. Similarly, that a white woman and a white man of Western Europe would procreate a black West African child.

The partiality of belief and the partiality of truth account for the partiality of knowledge. Absolute knowledge does not seem to be in our proximate proximity or in our fore sight. Ramsey's theory of belief and truth shows that, knowledge comes to us in pieces and in contexts.

The saying that no one has the monopoly of knowledge makes sense here. This is why what is believed in one place may be the opposite of that believed in another place yet both would be true and hence cases of knowledge according to the prevailing contexts. This shows that there is always room for either an addition or an alternative to a case of knowledge that one may come to. Hence a case of knowledge being true cannot impose itself as an absolute piece of knowledge.

Without prejudice to cases of facts of experiences that are believed to be truly conventional and thus instances of knowledge; Ramsey's theory evidentially lends support to the case that our knowledge including that which is believed to be conventional, come to us in partial packages of local contents and beliefs. Because of the local content of our belief and truth, it is reasonable that they are partial. By way of reasoning, it makes sense from the foregoing argument that belief is partial as well as truth. By way of mathematical calculation and quantification too, Ramsey has shown that belief is partial.

Suppose a piece of belief is held in a local context, and that belief is held to be true and as such a case of knowledge, what would render it acceptable would be its reliability. When an experience becomes reliable, no justification is required again for its acceptability. Justification may call out as a question to a case of knowledge and reliability would be the answer. Reliability does not however bring our knowledge quest to its final stop. It has room for improvement on our encounter with a case or cases of knowledge from one stage of reliability to another stage of reliability because our knowledge is partial. Although knowledge may be partial, it does attain fullness through exhibition but interestingly, that too does not make it absolute. It can only attain reliability which in my take is only a statement of its validity.

It can well be observed also that what is called the problem of justification also regarded as the Gettier problem is more than a problem of Justification. It is, more deeply considered a problem between belief and knowledge. It is precisely the problem of the relationship between belief and Knowledge. Suppose P is true and A believes that P, this would be an instance of truth but not as yet of knowledge unless A knows that P is true. Simply believing

P would not make it knowledge if A is not aware of the truth value of P. Thus, it is not the truth-value of P that translates to knowledge, but whether A knows P to be true or not.

The question as to how we know that we know is, as acknowledged by Russell, the most difficult philosophical question. Justification has proven to be an inadequate solution to the question of the relationship between belief and knowledge. Ramsey has intelligently attempted this question with a unique and novel approach. The delineation of belief in degrees offers that the higher the measure of Belief, the stronger the assurance that we are closer to the truth. This already tells us half way how to know that we know. To complete the evidence that we know that we know would depend on our propensity to act on our Belief. When our actions on Belief are proven successful and reliable, the validity of our knowing is and the knowledge of our knowing is established. This is a far-reaching effort by Ramsey.

There is however, no room for skepticism here in so far as truth is understood as the pragmatic manifestation of the content of belief. Remember we had noted earlier that Ramsey's theory admits of the finitist nature of the axioms of infinity, meaning that propositions about truth (facts) are not endless but open-ended. This holds true also of the nature of knowledge that knowledge grows. Ramsey's theory of Belief and Truth is relevant for local application. Its understanding helps us to come to the awareness that although knowledge has no fortified boundaries of exclusion, yet it is chiefly a product of context and culture. Knowledge comes to us as objective feelings and the fulfillment of desires. Although knowledge may be a subjective experience, it endures as an objective reference. Hence knowledge must not only be true but also cannot be false. Knowledge is manifested through its application and its readiness to be applied, in the case of the propensity to act upon a belief of a high degree. In other words, knowledge is showcased in its applicability. Knowledge is therefore meant to be put to use and good use at that.

- a. It makes belief a focal basis for knowledge
- b. It formulates a mathematical approach for the quantification of belief
- c. It makes the outcome of belief to be the basis for truth assessment
- d. It holds that words do not bring about acquaintance with the truth; experience does. This suggests that figmentation too would not acquaint one with the truth.
- e. It holds that when the amount of truth in a belief produces experiential successful results, it becomes reliable and only then is knowledge achieved.
- f. It relegates justification and upholds reliability of belief; hence, according to Ramsey, justified true belief does not lead to knowledge as proven by Gettier. Instead, true reliable and successful belief is knowledge.

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