

HABITS AND DISPOSITIONS IN FRANK RAMSEY'S PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Ramsey's use of the concepts of habit and disposition, challenging the common interpretation that he employs them interchangeably in his theory of belief. This interpretative trend reflects a broader tendency to equate habit and disposition, based on the assumption that a habit is an acquired disposition to act. However, the precise relationship between these concepts often remains underexplored and it is not clear whether habits are merely a subset of dispositions or if they are conceptually distinct. Using Ramsey's writings as a case study, this paper argues that their relationship is more nuanced than a reductive equivalence suggests. I advance a twofold thesis: first, I argue that Ramsey's use of the notions of habit and disposition is more complex than typically assumed, as he employs them in distinct philosophical contexts and conceptualizes them in different ways. Second, I distinguish between a logical-grammatical kind of dispositionalism and a metaphysical one to argue that the notion of habit is dispositional but habits are not metaphysically equivalent to dispositions. Ramsey conceptualizes habits as methods, rules, procedures of thought, whereas dispositions are understood as tendencies or inclinations engendered and shaped by habits.

Keywords: Frank Ramsey; habit; disposition; pragmatism; normativity.

1. Introduction

Is stating that beliefs are habits of mind the same as claiming that beliefs are dispositions to act? In other words, are the concepts of habit and disposition equivalent? I will argue against this equivalence by looking at Frank Ramsey's theories of belief and judgment.

Ramsey's emphasis on the notion of habit represents a distinctively pragmatist strand within his philosophy (Misak 2016; Tuzet 2020), one that he explicitly develops by drawing on Bertrand Russell's *The Analysis of Mind* (1921/2008) and Charles Peirce's writings.¹ The notion of habit plays a central role in Ramsey's causal theory of belief, which the literature commonly characterizes as "dispositional". According to this account, a belief is defined by its role in guiding behavior: it is a mental state—a disposition—that produces actions in conjunction with desires. Although closely related, Ramsey commentators frequently treat the terms "habit" and "disposition" as interchangeable, using them synonymously to describe the principles underlying action. On this view, beliefs are understood by Ramsey as habits *or* dispositions to act (Misak 2016, 2022; Engel 2005; Kraemer 1985). As Soroush Marouzi notes, "Ramsey refers to these dispositions as habits", whose nature aligns with the moderate behaviorism characteristic of several philosophers of the 1920s, including Ralph Perry, Edwin Holt, and Edward Tolman (see Marouzi 2024, 9).²

This interpretative trend reflects a broader inclination to conflate habit and disposition, grounded in the view that a habit is an acquired disposition to act. Already in Aristotle, habit (*hexis*) is defined as an acquired disposition that enhances the agent's performance.³ Subsequent thinkers in the Aristotelian tradition have continued to conceptualize habit within the framework of disposition. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, describes habit as an acquired disposition that is resistant to change and rooted in stable causes (Miner 2013). Similarly, Félix Ravaisson (2008) defines habit as a disposition relative to change.

In contemporary philosophy, the relation between habits and dispositions is frequently invoked to support the idea that, once acquired, a habit disposes an agent to act in particular ways. This perspective serves as a conceptual counterpoint to behaviorist accounts that characterize habits as

¹ Ramsey read *Chance, Love and Logic*, a volume published by Odgen in 1923 as part of his *International Library* series. It reprinted six articles that Peirce had published in the *Popular Science Monthly* between 1877 and 1878. For a detailed reconstruction of Ramsey's pragmatist sources, see Misak (2016).

² This kind of behaviorism is discussed in Mills (1998).

³ For a detailed account of the Aristotelian theory of habit, see Lockwood (2013) and Chiaradonna and Farina (2022).

automatic, conditioned responses to stimuli. In contrast to these reductive views, authors such as Daniel Hutto and Ian Robertson (2021) argue that habitual doings display intelligence, understood as focused and flexible, world-directed dispositions. Along similar lines, Katsunori Miyahara, Taller Ransom, and Shaun Gallagher (2021) introduce the notion of “skilful dispositions” to describe the enduring tendencies that underlie habitual yet attentive forms of action. Contemporary efforts to rehabilitate the concept of habit essentially draw on pragmatist thought, which has long advocated for a more nuanced understanding of the term. From Wiliam James’s depiction of individuals as “bundles of habits” (James 1914) to John Dewey’s claim that “habit means will” (Dewey 2023, 21), pragmatism portrays habits as dynamic, ecological, and self-organizing structures. In this framework, rather than opposing reflective awareness, habits mediate between pre-reflective and reflective processes, revealing their integral role in intelligent, situated action.⁴

Despite their frequent use, the concepts of habit and disposition are often employed interchangeably in the literature, with little clarification of their conceptual relationship. If habits are defined as dispositions to act, does this mean that they are merely a subset of dispositions, or do they possess distinct conceptual features? While I am not suggesting that the aforementioned authors endorse a form of metaphysical reductionism, I do believe that this lack of terminological precision risks obscuring important philosophical distinctions. This paper aims to address this gap by providing a careful examination of the distinction between habits and dispositions in Ramsey’s philosophy. I take this to be the paper’s most significant contribution to the current scholarly discourse. The question, as I frame it, is not whether habits are dispositions or vice versa, but how the conceptual relationship between the two is best understood.

I argue that Ramsey’s treatment of the concepts of habit and disposition is more nuanced than is commonly assumed. Although closely related, these notions are employed in distinct theoretical contexts and serve different philosophical purposes in his work. To support this claim, I begin by demonstrating that the concepts of habit and disposition are not reducible to one another, as evidenced by the different ways Ramsey deploys and conceptualizes them across various philosophical contexts. I then examine the claim that habits are dispositions by distinguishing between two forms of dispositionalism: a logical-grammatical approach and a metaphysical one. I argue that mental habits are dispositional insofar as they give rise to

⁴Other notable exceptions to the narrow view of habit are found in sociology and in the phenomenological tradition (Merleau-Ponty 2012). For instance, Pierre Bourdieu employs the notion of *Habitus* precisely “to set aside the common conception of habit as a mechanical assembly or preformed programme” (Bourdieu 1977, 218).

beliefs and opinions, which belong to the logical category of the dispositional. These beliefs, once formed through habitual thought, dispose the agent toward particular patterns of behavior. I conclude that although the notion of habit is dispositional, habits are not metaphysically identical with dispositions. Rather, mental habits—or habits of thought—should be understood as *methods* of thought, whereas dispositions are *tendencies* or *inclinations* shaped and structured by these habits. Furthermore, I suggest that this conceptual clarification sheds light on the distinction that Ramsey articulates in *General Propositions and Causality* [GPC] between judgments and rules for judging (Ramsey 1994, 149)—a distinction that remains a point of interpretative contention in the literature.⁵

2. Against conceptual reduction: Contexts

In this section, I argue that although Ramsey acknowledges important similarities between the concepts of habit and disposition, he also preserves key distinctions that preclude their conceptual reduction.⁶ Specifically, he employs these notions in distinct philosophical contexts and for different theoretical purposes. Conceptual reduction—as I use the term here—occurs when one concept (A) is defined entirely in terms of another (B). I will contend that Ramsey neither reduces habit to disposition nor disposition to habit.

Despite their differences, habits and dispositions share three salient features. First, they both *govern* human actions and behavior, serving as *explanatory* principles. In this sense, they are both principles of action. In *Truth and Probability* [TP], Ramsey characterizes habit as a rule or law of behavior—one of the general principles according to which the human mind functions (Ramsey 1994, 90). Similarly, in *On Truth* [OT], he characterizes the dispositional as the persistent background of the mind that is manifested in action and thought, and invoked to explain specific instances of each (Ramsey 1991, 43). Second, both are manifested in *particular* acts. While a habit is a general rule of action, it leads to specific thoughts and behaviors. Likewise, a disposition reveals itself through its manifestations—or through the actions that *would* occur under suitable conditions. Ramsey notes that dispositions are not themselves acts of thought, but are manifested in such acts (ibid., 98-99). Third, both contribute to the *explanation* of immediate or spontaneous action—that is,

⁵ See Holton and Price (2003), Misak (2016), Marouzi (2024), and Marion (2012).

⁶ There can be at least three kinds of reduction (McKittrick 2009, 32): conceptual, epistemic, and metaphysical. In this paper, I argue that Ramsey does not commit to conceptual reduction. However, I will suggest that part of his general framework aligns with the idea that habits and dispositions are not reducible to one another from a metaphysical perspective too.

action performed without conscious deliberation. In this respect, dispositions can contribute to the explanation of habitual behavior. Ramsey illustrates this point in **OT** using the example of believing that the Cambridge Union is located on Bridge Street. This belief is dispositional in that it exists as a potentiality: it may guide action even when not actively entertained. Though rarely formulated as an explicit thought, the belief often manifests in action—for example, “by my turning my steps that way when I want a book from the Union Library” in Cambridge (“where I am at home, I go there habitually without having to think”: *ibid.*, 44–45). This action, guided by a dispositional belief, is executed “without any process of thought”, whereas in other contexts the philosopher might need to reflect on the Union’s location. Most importantly, Ramsey does not infer that habitual action is unintelligent. On the contrary, he contends that such actions bypass specific acts of thought because habit “makes the intermediate state of thought disappear” (*ibid.*, 51). Habit formation, he writes, “telescopes” thought: it eliminates the intermediary stage of judgment, enabling conditions to give rise directly to action.

Despite these similarities, the notions of habit and disposition differ in two significant ways: they are used in distinct philosophical contexts and are conceptualized differently.⁷ This section addresses the first difference; the second will be explored in the next section.

Ramsey assigns a central role to habit in his causal theory of belief, while disposition is pivotal in his classification of mental states. When discussing habits, he focuses on measuring degrees of belief; when analyzing dispositions, he aims to clarify the nature of judgment. It is important to note that in *Facts and Propositions* [**FP**], belief and judgment are treated as synonymous (Ramsey 1994, 34), but this identification is explicitly rejected in **OT**.⁸ There, beliefs are categorized as dispositional states, while judgments are construed as spatio-temporal, affirmative acts of thought with propositional content. Dispositions and acts thus fall under distinct logical types. Consequently, Ramsey does not develop a dispositional theory of judgment, though he arguably advances a dispositional theory of belief.

⁷ More precisely, Ramsey uses the two notions as synonyms on one occasion in **OT** while clarifying the nature of judgment. He writes: “(...) clearly the same mental disposition or habit was manifested the day before he slapped what was really Jones’ back” (Ramsey 1991, 49). However, this singular occurrence does not conflict with the idea that there are more substantial differences between the two notions.

⁸ They are equivalent in that they cover the range of mental states from conjecture to knowledge. In **OT**, Ramsey (1991, 8) uses the terms “belief” and “judgment” interchangeably when analyzing the ascriptions of “true” and “false” to mental states, but he specifies that their ordinary meaning is narrower.

Cheryl Misak (2016) claims that Ramsey's dispositional theory of belief as a habit is already present in **FP**. While I agree that a dispositional account is articulated there in substance, it is noteworthy that Ramsey uses neither the term "habit" nor "disposition" in that text. These terms appear more explicitly in **TP**, *Knowledge* [**K**] and **GPC**. They have only a limited presence in **OT**, where "habit" appears sparingly, and "disposition" predominates. This observation is not merely a matter of tallying words, but part of a broader conceptual analysis aimed at avoiding the conflation of distinct yet related terms in an effort to trace the development of Ramsey's thought. Since I argue that "habit" and "disposition" are not reducible to one another within his framework, examining how he uses the two terms across his writings is a necessary part of this philosophical analysis. It helps clarify not just what Ramsey thought, but also how he thought it—how his conceptual vocabulary shaped, and was shaped by, his evolving views on belief.

Notably, Ramsey does not explicitly define habits as acquired dispositions. Instead, he incorporates habits into his theory of belief, which is part of his broader theory of probability as a branch of the logic of partial belief and inconclusive arguments.⁹ Ramsey requires a theory of belief in order to adopt a quantitative approach to measuring degrees of belief through a "purely psychological method" (Ramsey 1994, 62). In other words, he is concerned with the distinction between stronger and weaker degrees of belief. This is very important because Ramsey's theoretical points depend on this pragmatic need to approach beliefs from a quantitative standpoint.

Rather than viewing degrees of belief as introspectable feelings, Ramsey treats them as causal properties of the belief that determine "the extent to which we are prepared to act on it" (ibid., 65). This is essentially the idea, already developed by Russell (1921/2008), that the differentia of belief lies in its causal efficacy: "how far we should act on these beliefs" (Ramsey 1994, 66). In this framework, beliefs serve as the foundation for potential actions, guiding behavior in hypothetical situations. The strength of a belief is assessed by proposing a bet and determining the lowest odds one

⁹As a reviewer has rightly noted, it might be objected that Ramsey was critical of traditional definitional approaches in philosophy, particularly those that seek necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of concepts. In his essay *Philosophy* (Ramsey 1994, 1-7), Ramsey argues for a more pragmatic and elucidatory role for philosophical analysis. I fully agree with this interpretation. My claim that Ramsey "does not explicitly define" habit as an acquired disposition should not be taken to imply that he fails to provide such a definition in the classical sense. Rather, I mean that he does not offer a formal or reductive account of habit in terms of disposition. His remarks on habit are better seen as part of a broader, non-reductive conceptual elucidation, consistent with his anti-definitional stance. I aim to show that while Ramsey treats belief in dispositional terms and employs the notion of habit, he does not treat habit and disposition as interchangeable or reducible to one another. In this respect, my approach mirrors Ramsey's own methodological commitment to clarifying our conceptual practices rather than imposing rigid theoretical definitions on them.

would accept. Thus, beliefs are that basis for possible actions; they are ideas that can lead to certain actions under certain circumstances.¹⁰ Given this, the notion of habit is a fundamental component of a psychological approach that, while only an approximation of truth, allows for a theory of quantities that is both general and exact. This theory rests on two key ideas: first, that people act in the way they believe most likely to realize the objects of their desires—so that action is determined by desires, interests, and opinions; and second, that the human mind operates “essentially according to general rules or habits” (ibid., 90).

The notion of disposition appears only once in the aforementioned texts, in the phrase “dispositional belief” (ibid., 68), which is contrasted with actualized belief. A dispositional belief is a belief that guides action in cases where it is relevant, though it is rarely considered, such as the belief that the Earth is round. A belief is actualized when a person thinks of it at a particular moment. Beliefs that are considered the basis for action are dispositional insofar as they guide action when relevant without being explicitly considered by the agent. In this context, “dispositional” means “not actualized”; the contrast is between something potential acting in the background and something occurrent explicitly operating at a conscious level. Not surprisingly, this distinction aligns with the distinction between dispositional states and definite acts of thought established in **OT**, where the notion of disposition plays a central role.

On Truth is a posthumous work based on manuscripts that Ramsey wrote between 1927 and 1929. He intended to develop a comprehensive study of truth and probability, synthesizing his earlier work into a unified whole. On a general level, Ramsey’s “truth project” can be outlined in four steps. First, he frames the problem of truth as a question about the meaning of “true” when applied to mental states—not what is true, but what truth is. Second, he defends a redundancy theory of truth based on propositional reference against coherentist and pragmatist views. According to this theory, a belief is true if it is a belief *that p*, and *p*. A belief is false if it is a belief *that p*, and *non-p*.¹¹ However, Ramsey argues that correspondence alone is insufficient to properly account for what we mean by truth and propositional reference because the correspondence relation is not unique

¹⁰ Like his pragmatist predecessors, Ramsey linked belief to action. In particular, he adopted Alexander Bain’s view that a belief involves “acting, or being prepared to act, when the occasion arises” (Bain 1872, 372) and Peirce’s view that belief involves “the establishment in our nature of a rule of action, or, say for short, a habit” (Peirce 1930-51, 255).

¹¹ Here lies a possible misunderstanding of the label “pragmatist”. Ramsey actually criticizes a particular pragmatist theory of truth—the idea that a belief is true if it is useful (Ramsey 1991, 17-18). However, his theory of truth can still be called pragmatic. Indeed, according to Tuzet (2020), Ramsey finds it useful to link truth and utility insofar as it captures an important aspect of propositional reference: the belief that A is B is useful if A is B, and it is not useful if A is not B.

in form, that is, it is not always and necessarily a direct correspondence between a mental state and a fact. Given this, Ramsey must clarify what propositional reference means in order to discuss the kind of correspondence involved. Finally, he clarifies the nature of judgment to defend the idea that correspondence should not be viewed as a relation between judgments and facts, since the objects of beliefs, opinions, and conjectures are not facts but rather propositions or attitudes associated with actions and their utility (Gruber 2022). In other words, it is the propositional content that guides behavior.

Within this project, Ramsey employs the concept of disposition to address the problem of propositional reference and the definition of judgment. He defines judgment as an *act* of thought with propositional reference and an affirmative character. To develop this idea, however, he first distinguishes between two kinds of states of mind: dispositions and acts of thought. Mental states such as knowledge, belief, and opinion are *dispositional* in that they have dispositional characteristics, that is, they exhibit qualities of disposition or character in the ordinary sense, applying to both mental states and material substances. For instance, if I say that Paul knows the date of the Norman Conquest, I do not mean that he is thinking “1066” at the moment of speaking, but rather that he would be able to provide the answer when asked. Similarly, a man can be called brave or irascible without implying that he is currently displaying those qualities. Likewise, when we say that a poker is strong, we mean that it can withstand a considerable strain without breaking, but the poker in question may never be subjected to such a strain. In this regard, Ramsey states that

A belief is a disposition not only to make a certain kind of judgment on suitable occasions but also to behave in certain ways in pursuing the pursuit of certain ends. (Ramsey 1991, 99)

Dispositional beliefs generate judgments and guide actions based on the principle that individuals act in ways that would yield the most satisfactory consequences if their beliefs were true. In contrast, “‘thinking’, as in ‘I was just thinking it would snow tomorrow’ (...) ‘judging’, ‘inferring’, ‘asserting’, ‘perceiving’, ‘discovering’, and ‘learning’ all refer to definite acts [of thought]” (ibid., 45)—real events and dateable acts of mind that can be expressed by dispositions because they manifest underlying dispositions.

3. Against conceptual reduction: Definitions

So what are habits and dispositions? The second key difference concerns their definitions. I argue that, broadly speaking, Ramsey conceptualizes mental habits as procedures—methods of thought, laws, or rules—whereas he conceptualizes dispositions as tendencies and—more generally—as a logical category to which the concept of habit belongs. However, a precise characterization of the nature of dispositions remains an open question. Rather than being a rule or law, Ramsey seems to suggest that the term “disposition” refers to an entity, yet he does not clarify whether it is a mere logical construct or the referent of a hypothetical entity. I will first discuss the conceptualization of habit before turning to the notion of disposition. Finally, I will distinguish between two kinds of dispositionalism to support the idea that habits are dispositional without necessarily being dispositions in the metaphysical sense.

3.1 Habits as methods of thought

In TP, Ramsey defines habit as “simply (a) rule or law of behaviour, including instinct” (1994, 90). A habit, understood as a rule, can be either acquired or innate. According to Ramsey, the key feature of habit is its role in regulating processes of thought, regardless of its origin.¹² Consequently, he sees no fundamental distinction between acquired habits (or rules) and innate rules (or instincts), as both function as principles of action. This is not an obvious way to conceptualize habit. Indeed, one might emphasize acquisition instead, distinguishing between learned habits and innate instincts.¹³ However, Ramsey does not distinguish between habit and instinct for a pragmatic reason: he is concerned with a particular kind of habit—namely, habits of thought, such as habits of inference, observation, memory, induction, and doubt. As we have seen, Ramsey aims to defend a

¹² One might object that attributing the central role of regulating thought to habit stands in tension with Ramsey’s assertion that habit “telescopes” thought away. However, this apparent tension can be resolved by distinguishing between the nature of habit and its functioning. On Ramsey’s account, the regulation of thought is indeed a central feature of habit’s nature, insofar as acquisition is not considered an essential conceptual component. That is, for Ramsey, a habit need not be acquired in order to function as a rule or principle governing action and thought. The notion of “telescoping” thought away should not be conflated with the regulation of thought *per se*; rather, it refers to the process of habit formation—specifically, the way habitual behavior bypasses the intermediate stage of explicit judgment and proceeds in an immediate and unreflective manner. I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for drawing attention to this point.

¹³ For instance, habits and instincts are rigidly separated in Baldwin’s (1901) *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*: a habit is defined as an individually acquired function, while a custom is defined as a widespread, habitual manner of acting in society that is not physically inherited—when it is, then it is defined as an instinct. Similarly, Dewey defines habit as a “kind of human activity which is influenced by prior activity” (2023, 20). Although Dewey does not draw a rigid distinction between habit and instinct in conduct, he maintains that instinct is prior to habit in individuals’ lives, assuming that habits are learned and instincts are not.

causal theory of belief and holds that a psychological theory must be assumed to measure a rational agent's degrees of belief. This psychological framework posits that the human mind operates according to general rules. Thus, Ramsey's focus is on laws, methods, and procedures of thought—such as the habit of proceeding from the opinion that a toadstool is yellow to the opinion that it is unwholesome. It is for this reason that he focuses on habits as principles of action, irrespective of their origin. As he states, “whenever I make an inference, I do so according to some rule or habit” (ibid., 91), for a process of thought that does not proceed according to some rule is merely a random sequence of ideas.

Given this, mental habits exhibit at least two key features: (1) they entertain or produce varying degrees of beliefs and opinions, and (2) they may be useful or useless depending on how closely the degree of belief they produce aligns with the actual proportion in which they lead to truth (ibid., 92). This means that, according to Ramsey, mental habits can either lead to truth or diverge from it. For this reason, they can be evaluated and judged in a pragmatic way, that is, by whether they work or not—whether the resulting opinions are for the most part true, or more often true than those resulting from alternative habits. Consequently, we can only praise or blame opinions indirectly, insofar as we praise or blame the habits that produce them. All beliefs involve habits, that is, we deduce from them and act accordingly. Indeed, for Ramsey, the question of the ideal is nothing more than the question of what habits would best serve the human mind, given that habits lead to opinions and are more or less conducive to the truth. The view that mental habits are procedures and methods of thought evaluated pragmatically is further reinforced by Ramsey's treatment of induction, variable hypotheticals, and knowledge.

First, consider the case of induction. According to Ramsey, induction is not just a mental habit, but a *good* mental habit, because it generally leads to true opinions and is regarded as a reliable process. Indeed, we all agree that a man who did not make inductions would be unreasonable. In this context, however, “reasonable” and “unreasonable” do not mean, respectively, in accordance with and against formal logic, but rather possessing a good and useful habit or thought procedure—one that increases the likelihood of forming true beliefs (ibid., 93). It is important to note that Ramsey's perspective is general: he is not claiming that every induction leads to truth—counterexamples abound—but rather that induction is “for the most part” a procedure that leads to truth. In other words, induction is generally a truth-conducive method.

Second, consider the case of variable hypotheticals, such as “Arsenic is poisonous” and “All men are mortal”. These are general propositions in

which the variable remains unrestricted, making them open generalizations. In **GPC**, Ramsey analyzes variable hypotheticals in terms of mental habits, countering the view that they are conjunctions (ibid., 148-149).¹⁴ Their defining characteristic is that they express an inference that we are prepared to make at any time, rather than a belief of the primary sort; in other words, they express a dispositional belief. For example, to believe that all men are mortal is partly to say so and partly to believe, in regard to any x that turns up, that if x is a man, then he is mortal.

Ramsey defines variable hypotheticals as encapsulations of rules of judgment that form the system with which we meet the future. Yet, these rules are mental habits and, as we have seen, all beliefs involve habits. In this context, habits are rules that make up a system with which we meet the future—rules that enable to state, “If I meet q , then I have to treat it as p ”—and a variable hypothetical is a trustworthy rule, a useful and working mental habit. In other words, habits are rules and variable hypotheticals are good and trustworthy rules—that is, good mental habits—because they generally lead to true beliefs.¹⁵ Indeed, in **K** (ibid., 110), Ramsey uses the concept of a variable hypothetical to clarify what “reliable way” means in the definition of knowledge as a belief which is true, certain, and formed in a reliable way. Here, certainty is psychological rather than epistemic. However, upon reflection, we realize that we can only have certainty if we regard our way as reliable. This, in turn, involves formulating as a variable hypothetical the habit of following the way because it is considered a good or useful habit. In all these cases, a habit is a “method of thought” (ibid., 94) which is responsible for certain beliefs, opinions, and courses of action. Furthermore, mental habits are not particular procedures fixed through rough repetition; rather, they are *regular*, *structured*, and *shared* thought processes that constitute the implicit mental background of human thought.

Against this conceptualization of habit, one might argue that habits cannot be methods (of thought) because they differ in at least two key respects. First, the concept of method is broader than that of habit. For example, it would be odd to claim that if I have the habit of thinking that a certain wine

¹⁴ This is the view that the universal quantifier, “ $\forall x \phi(x)$ ”, is a conjunction “ $\phi(a) \wedge \phi(b) \wedge \phi(c) \wedge \dots$ ” and the existential quantifier, “ $\exists x \phi(x)$ ”, is a disjunction “ $\phi(a) \vee \phi(b) \vee \phi(c) \vee \dots$ ”. Wittgenstein held this idea in his *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (1961). For a detailed discussion of Ramsey’s critique of this theory and its influence on Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, see Marion (2012).

¹⁵ This is not to deny the existence of bad habits or untrustworthy variable hypotheticals; rather, the point is that the relevant criterion of demarcation is practical, not formal. Habits may be either good or bad, depending on whether the opinions to which they give rise are mostly true. A variable hypothetical qualifies as a good habit not by virtue of its logical form, but by the role it plays within a given system of thought. The proposition “All men are immortal”, for example, is formally a general proposition and thus a variable hypothetical for Ramsey. However, it is not trustworthy, insofar as it is not among the variable hypotheticals that constitute the system “with which we meet the future”. I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for highlighting this issue.

is red because it is from Tuscany, I thereby possess a corresponding method of thought. Second, the concept of method is often used normatively, that is: it does not describe how people think and act, but how they *ought to* think and act. In contrast, the concept of habit appears to be purely descriptive, as a habit of thought describes how someone thinks, rather than how she ought to think.¹⁶ *In principle*, however, the concept of habit is not incompatible with generality and normativity. Ramsey's notion of habit refers to a kind of habit that is collective rather than individual, and normative rather than merely descriptive. Of course, this does not mean that all habits are collective and normative, but rather that the variety of habitual behavior is more complex than what is commonly assumed.

As far as generality is concerned, a habit is a collective and general method of thought because it is a stable, entrenched practice that individuals learn due to belonging to a particular form of life. Some collective habits, or customs, form the system into which people are born and raised, making the environment already deeply habitualized in this respect.¹⁷ This is a pragmatist theme, emphasizing that custom has a cumulative dimension that should not be forgotten. As Dewey observes:

“[T]he activities of the group are already there, and some assimilation of his own acts to their pattern is a prerequisite of (...) having any part in what is going on”. (2023, 33)

We do not need to “build private roads to travel upon”, but it is convenient and “natural to use the roads that are already there” (ibid.).

Similarly, Young describes custom as “both architect and policeman of society” (1988, 99), because, even though there is always room for variation in principle, custom is the factor involved in the constitution of the regularity of society. An individual may be said to have a habit of induction, but induction itself is not a private road that must be built anew every time; rather, it is one of the paths that constitute the form of life to which the individual belongs. This form of life is shared with other individuals and is transmitted through formal and informal processes of socialization, education, and continuous interaction with the broader environment.

As regards normativity, a mental habit can be considered normative if it functions as a rule or standard for thought and action. In this sense, it not

¹⁶ I thank Giovanni Tuzet for this important point.

¹⁷ The term “custom” is used by Dewey precisely to grasp the collective dimension of habit. Customs are “wide-spread uniformities of habit” (Dewey 2023, 33).

only describes how an individual thinks, but it is also one of the elements in virtue of which an individual acts and thinks in a particular way. More precisely, we might observe that when we say that a habit describes how people think, we are not necessarily divorcing habit from normativity: a habit may describe the methods and principles according to which people think and act.

This is particularly relevant if we think about habits of thought.¹⁸ Indeed, in Ramsey's time, this notion was not uncommon; Ludwig Wittgenstein and Ludwig Boltzmann also employed it (Preston 2022). Boltzmann (1974), for instance, argued that many "illusory" philosophical problems stemmed from deceptive habits of thought—that is, habits useful in specific contexts but misleading when overextended. They overshoot the mark, so to speak. Consider philosophical reductionism: the activity of dismantling "concepts into simpler elements and explain[ing] phenomena by means of laws we know already" is both useful and necessary, but it

becomes so much a habit as to produce the compelling [but misleading] appearance that the simplest concept themselves must be dismantled into their elements and the elementary laws reduced to even simpler ones. (Ibid., 137)

In a similar vein, Wittgenstein noted that "by the force of habit, we are [so] accustomed to calming our mental anxieties by reducing certain propositions to others that are more fundamental" that we tend to adopt this remedy even when it is practically useless. For example, we do this when our anxiety arises from a lack of clarity regarding the grammatical connections in certain linguistic domains (Baker et al. 2003). We may become so accustomed to particular procedures and methods of thought that Wittgenstein defines even the laws of logic as expressions of "thinking habits" and "the habit of thinking" (Wittgenstein 1978, §131). The latter shows "what human beings call 'thinking'", but the former shows "how human beings think" (ibid.) because such a habit is at the basis of action and thought: "thanks to custom, particular forms become paradigms; they acquire the force of a law" (Wittgenstein 1980, I §343).¹⁹

¹⁸ I am not defending the idea of a rigid distinction between *purely* mental habits and *purely* bodily one. The very notion of habit allows us to bypass mind-body dualism. Nevertheless, I conceptually distinguish between them, since not all habits are paradigmatically manifested in actions and movements. In other words, not all habits are motor habits: some take the form of implicit, embodied practices and procedures that guide our inquiry. Some of them are also embedded in institutionalized practices, such as the habit of induction.

¹⁹ Dewey (2023, 33-35) too acknowledges the normative import of collective customs that become laws, regulative patterns, and standards for individual conduct.

3.2 Dispositionalism

According to Ramsey, dispositional states govern our actions and give rise to corresponding judgments, which are themselves acts. As a category, they differ from occurrent states of mind in that: (1) they refer to the persistent background of the mind, rather than to discrete spatio-temporal acts of thought; (2) they are potential, that is, they would manifest under the right conditions, but they may also remain latent; (3) they state a purely hypothetical fact, namely what a person would think, say, or do; and (4) they are primarily manifested in action rather than thought (Ramsey 1991, 43-45). In this regard, Ramsey treats dispositionality as a logical-grammatical category to which certain psychological concepts belong.

This grammatical approach to dispositionality reappears in Wittgenstein's *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* (1980, II §§ 43, 45, 178, 243), where he distinguishes between the logical category of dispositions and that of states of consciousness. The distinction serves to clarify the difference between concepts such as understanding, meaning, intending, and believing, on the one hand, and concepts such as feeling pain, perceiving something, and seeing an image, on the other. For Wittgenstein, this distinction is purely methodological; he employs it as a conceptual tool to reject the idea that psychological concepts refer to the inner, private states, processes, or experiences [*Erlebnisse*] of subjects.²⁰

However, unlike Wittgenstein, Ramsey also maintains that (6) dispositional states depend on non-dispositional states (1991, 44), and that (7) they explain a kind of immediate (conditioned-reflex) action or response to stimuli (ibid., 50). These two claims imply a shift toward using the concept of disposition to refer to a particular entity that is hypostatized, ascribed to the agent, and invoked to causally explain other mental states and processes. In doing so, Ramsey partially moves toward a kind of metaphysical dispositionalism that postulates the existence of dispositional entities rather than using dispositionality purely as a logical-grammatical category. In contemporary debates on dispositions, this metaphysical shift is assumed by both dispositional realism and categoricism, though they differ in how they characterize the nature of dispositional entities. Dispositional realists (e.g. Mellor 1974; Mumford 2003) argue that dispositions possess ontological autonomy, whereas categoricists claim that all dispositional properties ultimately depend on some underlying non-dispositional properties of their bearers, such as their molecular structure or biological system (Armstrong 1997).

²⁰ For a detailed analysis of Wittgenstein's use of the concept of disposition, see Morelli (2024).

Ramsey *partly* leans toward metaphysical dispositionalism because he appears to endorse classical categoricism in (6). However, he endorses a specific version of categoricism. Traditionally, categoricism has been understood as both an ontological thesis about the nature of dispositional entities and a semantic thesis about dispositional terms, where non-dispositional properties are the referents of the dispositional expressions.

However, Ramsey does not formulate categoricism from a linguistic perspective. Instead, he appears to support the idea that dispositional characteristics depend on some positive characteristics, because he endorses the analogy between mental dispositions and the physical dispositions of inert matter. For example, in the case of a poker, we suppose that its strength—a dispositional characteristic—depends on the non-dispositional properties of its constituent particles. Similarly, in the case of knowledge, which is a dispositional state, we suppose that it depends on some “arrangement, trace or record” (Ramsey 1991, 44) formed in the mind or brain through learning and retained until forgotten.

Yet, according to Ramsey, these positive characteristics are not the referents of dispositional terms. We can discuss dispositional characteristics meaningfully without identifying their categorical basis because we only need to know the kinds of actions, thoughts, and reactions they are expected to produce. In this sense, from an ontological perspective, “the problem of their status is very analogous to that of the unobservable entities in physics” (ibid., 101). A disposition is thus conceptualized as an unobservable property, entity, or character inferred from external behavior and used to explain specific actions and thoughts, even when knowledge of these entities is lacking—whether they be material particles, mental traces, or brain processes. Nevertheless, we do explain behavior in dispositional terms, regardless of our knowledge of its supposed categorical basis. Therefore, positive characteristics are posited to account for the latent nature of dispositions—the fact that they persist even when not concretely manifested. However, we could also treat dispositions as mere “logical constructions” without undermining the validity of dispositional discourse and explanation.²¹

²¹ This perspective is drawn from Broad (1925), a work explicitly cited by Ramsey in OT (1991, 44, footnote 1). Broad uses the notion of disposition alongside that of mental trace to reconstruct the debate on mnemonic persistents—mental entities produced by experience that persist and give rise to new states of mind or modify existing ones when triggered by stimuli. These entities were postulated to explain forms of behavior learned from past behavior, despite the large time gap between the two. From a metaphysical perspective, Broad carefully weighs the advantages and disadvantages of two theories concerning the nature of these mental persistents: trace theory and mnemonic causation. However, he argues that there is no need to choose between them, since we use these notions to predict, control, and explain mental events but know nothing about these entities in detail. We know what they are only through their effects, and we know it independently of the particular theory on their nature we choose to adopt.

On this basis, I conclude that Ramsey does not view dispositions as rules or laws. They are not procedures of thought, like mental habits. Rather, dispositionality is, first and foremost, a logical category to which mental states such as believing, knowing, and intending belong. Second, dispositions are conceptualized as tendencies or propensities toward particular thoughts and actions engendered by certain mental habits. This suggests that the notion of habit is itself dispositional from a grammatical standpoint, but not in a metaphysical sense, as habits are not metaphysically reduced to dispositional entities.

4. Belief, judgment, and knowledge

In this section, I will elaborate on the idea that thought habits are dispositional insofar as they produce beliefs and opinions that, in turn, dispose an agent to think and act in a particular manner. However, they should not be conflated with dispositions themselves, because Ramsey does not reduce them to dispositional entities. Additionally, I will examine the aforementioned point (7), which concerns the use of dispositional language to explain immediate and conditioned-reflex action in response to stimuli.

As we have seen, Ramsey distinguishes between two logical categories: dispositions and definite acts of thought. While belief falls under the dispositional category, judgment belongs to the occurrent category. A judgment is (a) an act of thought that (b) has propositional reference *and* (c) an affirmative character. Propositional reference is the *aboutness* of a mental state—its being “that something is so and so” (Ramsey 1991, 7). Consequently, a judgment (a) is not a dispositional belief, (b) is an occurrence of thinking that something has a particular property, and (c) is not a state of doubt or wondering. In this sense, we could say that “judgment” is a more precise word for actual belief, as opposed to dispositional belief.

From this perspective, Ramsey’s inquiry into the concept of truth offers insight into the relationship between beliefs, habits, dispositions, judgments, and knowledge. The idea is that, on the one hand, a belief—dispositional in nature—disposes the agent to make particular judgments, which can, in turn, be seen as manifestations of that belief. On the other hand, judgments, as acts, can give rise to particular dispositions. In general, judgments are particular acts of thought with propositional reference and an affirmative character. However, they vary depending on the kind of belief they manifest or the type of disposition they produce: there are judgments “which are cases of knowing” and judgments “which

are not knowledge". The latter are then called "opinions" (ibid., 55). In this context, Ramsey seems to imply that knowledge is a specific kind of judgment—i.e., that which is nearly always true, certain, and justified—yet this clashes with the claim that the concept of knowledge belongs to the dispositional category, since judgment is classified as an act of thought. Ramsey is perfectly aware of this, and he addresses the issue right at the beginning of the chapter on knowledge and opinion in **OT**. He starts by stating that "judgment in the wide sense in which we use the term was held (...) to comprehend two essentially different processes, knowledge and opinion" (ibid.). His next step in this chapter is to examine this distinction. At the same time, though, Ramsey admits that "the words knowledge and opinion (...) are most commonly used not of judgements but of dispositions". However,

since the distinction which we are investigating is primarily one between different kinds of judgements, (which can be extended to the dispositions arising from or manifested by these two kinds of judgements) we shall use the words knowledge and opinion in the present chapter to mean judgments and not dispositions. (Ibid.)

Conceptually, knowledge belongs to the category of the dispositional. Yet, in this *specific* context, Ramsey treats knowledge as a judgment because he wants to "examine the meaning and validity" of the ordinary distinction between knowledge and opinion—that is, the view that knowledge involves certainty, whereas opinion carries some degree of uncertainty. In particular, treating knowledge as a specific kind of judgment enables Ramsey to claim that knowledge and opinion are not two different classes with different propositional references, but rather different species of the same genus—a false judgment is not considered knowledge, yet it remains a judgment nonetheless. At the same time, we have seen that all beliefs involve habits, that is, we deduce from them and we act accordingly in a certain way, meaning that the dispositions manifested in particular acts of thought are engendered by certain habits of mind. To develop this point further, we must examine the notion of judgment more closely.

Ramsey's concept of judgment presupposes no process of reflection or weighing of evidence: a judgment can be a reasoned conclusion, a guess, a prejudice, a memory, or a presentiment, provided it has propositional reference and an affirmative character. However, judgment appears to be essentially *mediated* and to require a *thought* as a response. Indeed, Ramsey does not classify immediate action, where no mental intermediary is involved, as a case of judgment. For example, uttering "It's a fly" is a judgment, whereas swatting the fly without saying anything is not a

judgment, even indirectly. Similarly, consider the case of seeing an apple. I may conjure up images of the taste of apples or the word “apple”, or I may *directly* experience significant bodily changes or actions without articulating any thoughts. The former case is a judgment, the latter is not. The latter can be understood as an action done out of habit, that is, triggered directly by a certain stimulus. Indeed, Ramsey defines a habitual action as one that is *directly* triggered by an external stimulus, because “habit or instinct has made the intermediate stage of judgement disappear” (ibid., 51). Accordingly, he refers to acting out of an old habit as acting without explicitly thinking about it, in the sense of engaging in a definite act of thought or forming a mental image *beforehand*. For this reason, habitual action is a manifestation of a dispositional belief function *without* judgment.

In this respect, Ramsey appears to endorse what is now called “the received view” on automaticity (Douskos 2013), which is the idea that automaticity is an essential feature of habitual acts involving the absence of deliberation and intention. Habitual acts are *directly* triggered by a stimulus and are direct responses to circumstances. Now, one way to explain the motivational force of habit—the idea that something is done out of habit—is to say that habit disposes the agent in a certain way. Ramsey’s use of the notion of disposition goes in this direction, because reference to dispositions is a way to characterize the tendency to act, or habit’s motivational pull. For this reason, habit can be said to be dispositional in nature from a logical point of view. Habit has a dispositional profile, so to speak.

Given this, is habit dispositional in a metaphysical sense too? In other words, is habit itself a disposition? As we have seen, Ramsey leaves open the question of whether the term “disposition” is purely a logical construct or denotes an actual dispositional entity, such as a mental trace or record. Regardless of this metaphysical issue, he does not reduce habit to disposition. He does not conceptualize habit as an internal matrix or source of actions and thoughts. Instead, he treats habit as having a dispositional character from a logical standpoint, framing it as a tendency toward certain actions—an inherent motivational pull. Thus, while habit has a dispositional profile, its metaphysical nature remains an open question within Ramsey’s framework.

Before turning to the conclusion, I will briefly address a contested issue in the literature on Ramsey’s philosophy concerning the concept of judgment—an issue which, I argue, can be clarified by the conceptual analysis of habit and disposition developed so far.

4.1 A controversy in the literature

As we have seen, in **OT**, Ramsey asserts that the term “judgment” refers to specific acts of thought, as opposed to dispositions. He distinguishes between judgments that constitute knowledge and judgments that constitute opinions. In **GPC**, he introduces a further distinction within his account of general propositions, distinguishing between judgments and rules for judging. Ramsey contends that “variable hypotheticals are not judgements but rules for judging ‘If I meet a ϕ , I shall regard it as a ψ ’” (Ramsey 1994, 149). However, scholarly interpretations of this distinction remain divided.

Richard Holton and Huw Price (2003) construe the distinction as one between beliefs of the primary sort—genuine judgments—and universal beliefs, or variable hypotheticals—rules for judging. Yet, they ultimately reject the distinction’s significance, arguing that under Ramsey’s broader thesis that all beliefs are dispositions, there is no functional or hierarchical difference between the two. While Ramsey characterizes primary beliefs as “a map of neighbouring space by which we steer” (1994, 146), Holton and Price counter that “surely the use of maps is itself dispositional” (2003, 326).

In contrast, Marouzi (2024, 19) contends that this distinction represents a difference in kind. On this reading, Ramsey’s central claim is that rules for judging are not propositions, but rather cognitive attitudes that are irreducible to judgments. Drawing on Hugh Mellor, Misak similarly maintains that “singular beliefs, general beliefs, and conditional beliefs are all dispositions to behave, but (...) they correspond to different kinds of dispositions” (2016, 196): beliefs of the primary sort are dispositions to direct action, while open generalizations involve dispositions to acquire other beliefs. My own position aligns with those proposed by both Misak and Marouzi.

First, it is essential to contextualize Ramsey’s terminological and metaphorical choices. As we have seen with the term “knowledge”, Ramsey often adapts terminology, employing it in broader or narrower senses depending on the problem at hand. Holton and Price (2003) interpret the distinction between judgments and rules for judging primarily within the framework of Ramsey’s remarks on infinity. Notably, Ramsey rejects the view that variable hypotheticals are conjunctions. His arguments here rely on the limitations imposed by infinity: a variable hypothetical “cannot be written out” as a conjunction; its application in class-thinking is only valid for finite classes; “it always goes beyond what we know or want”; and its certainty pertains to a particular instance, not to “an infinite number

which we never use, and of which we couldn't be certain at all" (Ramsey 1994, 145-146). However, in assessing the significance of the distinction in **GPC**, one must consider the broader context of Ramsey's "human logic" and his commitment to a "realistic spirit". In this respect, I concur with Mathieu Marion (2012, 17), who argues that the introduction of variable hypotheticals is a pragmatic argument not limited to the infinite case at all. Ramsey rejects the treatment of variable hypotheticals as propositions conceived in the Tractarian sense, namely as pictures of facts:

Variable hypotheticals have formal analogies to other propositions which make us take them sometimes as facts about universals, sometimes as infinite conjunctions. The analogies are misleading. (Ramsey 1994, 160)

Second, Ramsey's characterization of a belief of the primary sort as "a map of neighbouring space by which we steer" is consistent with his treatment of judgment in **OT**, provided we distinguish between habits as methods or procedures and dispositions as tendencies. As we have seen, judgments are definite acts of thought for Ramsey—occurrent mental states that express belief about a specific situation or fact. By contrast, rules for judging are dispositional or procedural: they guide the formation of future judgments. They are not judgments themselves, but rather frameworks that shape subsequent cognitive responses. Judgments, thus conceived, are manifestations of beliefs (understood dispositionally) that can, in turn, generate further dispositions. Therefore, the distinction between definite acts of thought and dispositions is logical, but not formal—in essence, it is functional. In this regard, it is closely akin to Wittgenstein's distinction between grammatical and factual propositions.

Ramsey's characterization of variable hypotheticals as rules emerges as a more realistic alternative to their analysis as conjunctions. This shift is not merely semantic but epistemological: it marks a move away from an analysis based solely on syntactic form and toward one that considers the various cognitive attitudes we might adopt toward a proposition. On this account, a belief of the primary sort—a genuine judgment—is also dispositional. While Holton and Price (2003) rightly note that using a map is itself dispositional, the map's capacity to dispose us toward certain actions partly stems from its representational content (Marouzi 2024, 18). By contrast, a rule does not function by representing how the world is; rather, it expresses a habit of thought. Agents may be disposed in various ways, including through the acquisition of such cognitive habits.

5. Concluding remarks

My argument provides a contribution on two levels: the interpretation of Ramsey's philosophy and the conceptualization of habit and disposition.

On the first level, I have argued that habit and disposition are distinct concepts in Ramsey's philosophy and are not *conceptually* reducible to one another. They share three key features: 1. they are principles of action; 2. they are manifested in particular acts; and 3. they explain immediate action. However, they are used in different philosophical contexts for distinct theoretical purposes and are conceptualized differently. I have differentiated between logical-grammatical and metaphysical dispositionalism, contending that habit is dispositional in nature and should be understood as part of the conceptual framework through which we describe tendencies to act, rather than as an occurrent mental state. Yet, habit itself is not a disposition. Ramsey conceptualizes mental habits as methods of thought—deeply internalized procedures underlying certain actions and thoughts—whereas dispositions emerge from habits as tendencies explaining their motivational force, even though their ontological status remains an open question. This distinction suggests that habits and dispositions are not only conceptually but also metaphysically irreducible to one another.

I have also argued that the distinction between habits and dispositions also elucidates Ramsey's distinction between judgments and rules for judging, especially when viewed through the lens of his broader pragmatic orientation. Judgments, as definite acts of thought, and rules for judging, as procedural habits, play distinct roles in our cognitive life. They differ not merely in grammatical form, but in their functional orientation toward future reasoning and action. This interpretation establishes Ramsey's philosophy as one that resists rigid categorization, highlighting instead the dynamic interplay between acts, attitudes, and their practical contexts. Recognizing this distinction clarifies Ramsey's conceptual framework and enriches our broader understanding of belief, judgment, and the dispositional architecture of thought.

On the second level, I have argued that Ramsey's notion of mental habit is both general and normative. It serves as a shared standard of action and thought, constituting the framework of a particular form of life. Moreover, Ramsey develops the idea that habits function as dispositions in the sense that specific habits of thought lead to beliefs, which in turn predispose an agent to act in a certain way. This provides an account of immediate action that bypasses judgment and intellectual mediation. While this view implies a narrow understanding of automaticity as the absence of deliberation, it also frames the relationship between habit and disposition without

necessarily postulating an additional dispositional entity to explain habitual action causally.

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