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When There Was Nothing to Discuss

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ABSTRACT

We offer a novel interpretation of Frank Ramsey's talk, "On There Being No Discussable Subject," delivered to the Cambridge Apostles Society in 1925. We suggest that Ramsey aimed to present a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. His argument was that if the prevailing philosophical outlook among the Apostles were true, then we would conclude that there is nothing to discuss in the Society. Ramsey believed that this conclusion is absurd. His point was to challenge the Apostles by telling them that their theoretical philosophical commitments fail to explain why, indeed, there is much to discuss in the Society in practice. Exploring Ramsey's reductio argument motivates a new historical explanation for the pragmatist philosophy he developed in the second half of the 1920s. It also facilitates a new reading of his pragmatism and its significance. More specifically, we argue that Ramsey developed his pragmatism partly due to his concern that the prevailing philosophical outlook within Cambridge-based intellectual circles, such as the Apostles Society, seemed to fail to account for the epistemic value of their members' non-expert conversations with each other. His pragmatism left us hints about how to make sense of the epistemology of disagreements in our daily social lives.

> I think we realize too little how often our arguments are of the form: A. : 'I went to Grantchester this afternoon.' B. : 'No I didn't.'
> — Ramsey (1925d, 247)

> Variable hypotheticals or causal laws form the system with which the speaker meets the future; they are not, therefore, subjective in the sense that if you and I enunciate different ones we are each saying something about ourselves which pass by one another like 'I went to Grantchester', 'I didn't.'
> — Ramsey (1929a, 149)

1. Introduction

The Cambridge Apostles Society meeting, February 28th of 1925: it is Frank Ramsey's turn to deliver a paper. He stands in front of the Apostles and starts to read from his notes, "[h]aving to write a paper for the Society I was as usual at a loss for a subject; and I flattered myself that this was not merely my personal deficiency, but arose from the fact that there really was no subject suitable for discussion" (Ramsey 1925d, 245). He continues, "I reflected that in such a sentence 'subject' must be limited to mean a subject of the first order and that perhaps there might be a subject of the second order which would be possible. And then I saw that it lay ready before me, namely, that I should put forward the thesis that there is no discussable subject (of the first order)" (Ramsey 1925d, 245). The Cambridge Apostles Society (hereafter, the Society) was a discussion group. Ramsey was there to tell its members that "there really is nothing to discuss" (Ramsey 1925d, 248).

Or was he? The Society consisted of a set of distinguished male thinkers, each bringing special areas of expertise while sharing overlapping intellectual interests. The standard practice was for a "brother," as members referred to themselves, to give a talk at each of the Society's weekly meetings. The talk was expected to be both accessible and attractive, designed to captivate the interest of an audience with a wide range of interests. We offer a novel interpretation of Ramsey's talk by situating it within the institutional context of the Society. We suggest that Ramsey aimed to present a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. His argument was that *if* the prevailing philosophical outlook among the Apostles were true, then we would conclude that there is nothing to discuss in the Society. Ramsey believed that this conclusion is absurd. His point was to challenge the Apostles by telling them that their theoretical philosophical commitments fail to explain why, indeed, there is much to discuss in the Society in practice.

Exploring Ramsey's *reductio* argument motivates a new historical explanation for the pragmatist philosophy he developed in the second half of the 1920s. On this historical explanation, Ramsey believed that the prevailing philosophical outlook in his local intellectual environment, epitomized by Ludwig Wittgenstein's work, fails to account for the epistemic value of non-expert discussions within the Society and similar

intellectual circles. This concern was among the factors that motivated him to create a theoretical framework that would recognize the epistemic value of what he and his close associates were engaged with in practice. That is, Ramsey's pragmatism was born, at least in part, to make sense of his everyday life experience in debating clubs.

Section 2 reviews the enduring norms of the Society, highlighting its commitment to the pursuit of truth within a casual, engaging social setting. This provides crucial context for understanding the institutional setting in which Ramsey delivered his talk. Section 3 reconstructs Ramsey's *reductio* argument, aiming to make explicit what was left implicit—largely due to the rhetorical norms of the Society. Section 4 shows that the conclusion of Ramsey's argument—that there is nothing to discuss in the Society–was a pointed reference to Wittgenstein's earlier, notorious claim, one that resonated with the Apostles' shared institutional memory. It also suggests that Ramsey himself found this conclusion absurd. Section 5 argues that the major premise of Ramsey's argument–that science encompasses all that can be known–echoed Wittgenstein's view, which was largely shared by the "brothers," but not by Ramsey himself. Section 6 suggests that Ramsey's reflections in his 1925 Apostle talk contributed to his motivation to develop certain aspects of his pragmatist philosophy, particularly those that could account for the epistemic value of casual conversations within the Society and similar intellectual circles. Section 7 concludes the paper with some preliminary reflections on how Ramsey's pragmatism might inform the epistemology of disagreement in everyday life.

2. The Spirit of the Society

Throughout its rich history since its establishment in 1820, the Society, originally known as "the Cambridge Conversazione Society," has been home to a wide range of prominent intellectual figures. One such figure was Henry Sidgwick, who joined in 1856. Later in life, he described the internal atmosphere (or the spirit) of the Society as follows:

> I can only describe it as the spirit of the pursuit of truth with absolute devotion and unreserve by a group of intimate friends, who were perfectly frank with each other, and indulged in any amount of humorous sarcasm

> and playful banter, and yet each respects the other. (Quoted in Sidgwick and Sidgwick 1906, 34)

Ramsey was elected as an Apostle during his second year as an undergraduate mathematics student at Cambridge University. The Society's minutes record his election on October 15, 1921 (GBR/0272/KCAS/39). By then, Sidgwick had long passed, having died at the turn of the century. Nonetheless, the Society had preserved the spirit of his era. Friendship, truth, and humor were three words capturing the spirit of the Society that all Apostles, from Sidgwick to Ramsey, would experience.[1]

The Apostles of Ramsey's time were "intimate friends," sometimes even romantically involved. Richard Braithwaite proposed Ramsey for membership in the Society, which occurred while John Maynard Keynes was its president.[2] Walter John Herbert Sprott, known as Sebastian, and Lionel Penrose were among the other frequent attendees of the Society's meetings when Ramsey joined (GBR/0272/KCAS/39). These Apostles would become some of Ramsey's most intimate friends throughout his short life, which tragically ended with his untimely death in January 1930.[3]

Ramsey and his Apostle friends were united by their passion for "the pursuit of truth," though that pursuit had to be sensitive to the institutional setting of the Society. Meetings typically took place on

[1] For more details on the spirit of the Society during its early years, see Allen (1978). For a detailed examination of the Society from 1820 to 1914, within the context of Britain's social, political, and intellectual history, see Lubenow (1998). For an analysis of the Society as the backdrop to G. E. Moore's intellectual biography, consult Levy (1980). For a more accessible introduction to the Society with a comprehensive historical scope, see Deacon (1986).

[2] In his presidential address to the Society on June 21, 1921, Keynes lamented that "there is at this moment no active brothers in Trinity" (Keynes 1921). This comment seemingly spurred the Apostles to actively recruit new members from Trinity College. Four months later, on the recommendation of Braithwaite–who had only recently become a member–Ramsey, then residing at Trinity, would join the Society. Braithwaite knew Ramsey through other channels. Ramsey became a member of the Cambridge University Socialist Society on October 22, 1920, during Braithwaite's tenure as chairman (GBR/0265/UA/SOC.47). Both were elected for the Moral Sciences Club on the same day, on March 12, 1921 (GBR/0265/UA/Min.IX.42/89). Additionally, they collaborated at the Cambridge University Labour Club from at least the beginning of the Michaelmas Term in 1921, with Braithwaite serving as the junior treasurer and Ramsey being an active member (GBR/0265/UA/SOC.101).

[3] For an account of Ramsey's friendship with the Apostles, including Braithwaite, Keynes, Sprott, and Penrose, see Misak (2020).

Saturday evenings in an Apostle's rooms, beginning with a talk by a "brother." This was followed by a frank discussion among the attendees. Ramsey was a mathematics student with interests in politics, psychology, economics, and philosophy. Keynes had made his name with his philosophical work on probability and his criticism of the Treaty of Versailles as an economist. Braithwaite studied physics and mathematics and was interested in the philosophical aspects of science, ethics, and religion. Sebastian's mind often wandered through questions of psychology, and his passion was writing. Given this diversity in interests, specializations, and training, it was simply not possible to have expert discussions in the Society's meetings. The joint pursuit of truth was often carried out through deep, though non-expert, casual conversations.

Finally, Ramsey and his friends had strong tendency toward what Sidgwick called "humorous sarcasm and playful banter." Ramsey attended his first Society meeting on October 21, 1921. The meeting was held at Keynes's rooms and featured a talk by Braithwaite. We know from the minutes that the attendees discussed the following question: "Is [Bertrand] Russell's book deserving our approbation?" Ramsey cast a dissenting vote, as did Braithwaite, who added, "as philosophy, no; as a penny dreadful, yes" (GBR/0272/KCAS/39).[4] On October 20, 1923, the Society convened in Ramsey's rooms, where Ramsey himself was the speaker. He presented a paper critically examining Keynes's and Ludwig Wittgenstein's treatments of induction. He argued that induction is reasonable not because it can be justified by logical relations, but because it is indispensable for having a healthy life (Ramsey 1923b). Following his presentation, the Apostles discussed the provocative question: "Is the belief in induction philosophically similar to the love of copulation?" Keynes and Braithwaite answered no. Ramsey and Sebastian responded yes, as if implying that both induction and copulation are crucial elements of a good life, despite being impossible to justify on logical grounds. The Apostles maintained a witty and playful tone in their discussions, reflecting the inevitable aspect of a communal inquiry of a set of intimate friends who used to gather to both learn and enjoy each other's company.

[4] "A penny dreadful" is likely a reference to Russell's public-facing book, *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912), which Russell called the "Shilling Shocker."

3. Ramsey's Apostle Talk

Throughout his involvement with the Society, Ramsey delivered at least eight Apostle talks, covering a wide range of topics from philosophy to politics and psychology. Here we focus on one of them, "On There Being No Discussable Subject," presented on February 28, 1925.[5] We shall see that, in this talk, Ramsey dealt with intricate philosophical questions that had emerged from the spirit of the Society. More specifically, he reflected on the epistemic value of discussions within the Society's meetings. Indeed, why were the "brothers" expected to pursue truth in an institutional setting that encouraged non-expert, casual conversations laced with humor and sarcasm?

Ramsey tells his Apostle friends that "I think we realize too little how often our arguments are of the form: A. : 'I went to Grantchester this afternoon.' B. : 'No I didn't.'" As far as topics in psychology are concerned, Ramsey says, "we [the Apostles] rarely, if ever, discuss fundamental psychological questions, but far more often simply compare our several experiences, which is not a form of discussing" (Ramsey 1925d, 247). Things do not get better when the Apostles turn to other subjects, such as aesthetics: "what we really like doing is again to compare our own experience . . . We do not and cannot discuss whether one work of art is better than another; we merely compare the feelings it gives us" (Ramsey 1925d, 248). Ramsey appears to suggest that a genuine discussion is not "merely comparing our own experience from personal interest" (Ramsey 1925d, 247); it rather involves appraisals and disagreements

[5] Ramsey did not give his paper a title, but Lettice Baker, Ramsey's wife, has titled it "On There Being No Discussable Subject" (ASP.1983.01, Box 7, Folder 6). This title has also been adopted by Maria Carla Galavotti in her edited volume of Ramsey's unpublished notes (Ramsey 1925d). Braithwaite, the editor of Ramsey's work in *The Foundations of Mathematics and Other Logical Essays* (1931), and D. H. Mellor, the editor of *Philosophical Papers: F. P. Ramsey* (1990), titled Ramsey's paper "Epilogue," printing it as the concluding piece in their respective volumes (Ramsey 1925b). This may unwittingly suggest that Ramsey's final reflections on his work paralleled Wittgenstein's concluding remarks in the *Tractatus* (Wittgenstein 1922): Wittgenstein explored numerous philosophical themes throughout his work but ultimately stated that philosophy falls outside the realm of the sayables, while Ramsey examined various philosophical topics only to eventually assert that there is nothing to discuss. We will adopt Baker's and Galavotti's chosen title for Ramsey's talk, as one of the central arguments of this paper is that, contrary to Wittgenstein, Ramsey, indeed, believed there is much to discuss, and he was critical of Wittgenstein's narrowed account of the expressible region.

that remain open to normative constraints and rational criticism. The Apostles, according to Ramsey, are busy with a mere comparison of experiences or a mere exchange of "information" or "feelings," which is not a form of genuine discussion (Ramsey 1925d, 248). They do not and cannot get involved in genuine discussions. In other words, "there really is nothing to discuss" in the Society (Ramsey 1925d, 248).

But why is it that, as Ramsey appears to suggest, the Apostles do not and cannot get involved in genuine discussions? He says, "we have settled everything by realizing that there is nothing to know except science" (Ramsey 1925d, 245). But science is not something that can be genuinely discussed by everyone. This is due to the recent "process in the development of civilization," which has led to "the advance of science" and "the decay of religion." Consequently, this process has rendered "all the old general questions becoming either technical or ridiculous" (Ramsey 1925d, 248). The technical nature of science, like the recent philosophy, has made it inaccessible "for the layman" (Ramsey 1925d, 246). This suggests that "science" is "not suited for discussion except by experts" (Ramsey 1925d, 245). As Ramsey notes, however, the Apostles are not experts of science: "we are most of us ignorant of most sciences so that, while we can exchange information, we cannot usefully discuss them, as we are just learners" (Ramsey 1925d, 245). This is why the Apostles do not and cannot have genuine discussions together. Ramsey's argument could be reconstructed as follows:

1. "There is nothing to know except science."
2. Science is now "too technical" for "the layman." It can be genuinely discussed only by science "experts."
3. The Apostles have no common areas of expertise in any scientific fields, and the norm of the Society is to have non-expert discussions.
4. Thus, there is nothing to discuss in the Society.

Premise (2) reflects Ramsey's impression of the state of science of his time, likely influenced by the advancements in natural sciences, such as physics, in the early twentieth century with which he was well-acquainted. Ramsey does not provide a detailed defense of this premise in his work. However, this view was not uncommon in Cambridge around that time. For instance, Russell would address the growing

divide between scientific communities and common sense resulting from the advancements in natural sciences and their increasing technical nature in his 1927 book, *The Analysis of Matter*, two years after Ramsey's talk. Premise (3) derives its validity from the nature of the institutional setting of the Society, and thus Ramsey's appeal to it is not puzzling. Nonetheless, Ramsey's positions on premise (1) and conclusion (4) are far from straightforward.

In the following sections, we shall demonstrate that Ramsey's argument should be understood as a *reductio ad absurdum*. That is, he entertained the line of reasoning above to show that there is something wrong with premise (1) on the ground that it leads to the absurd conclusion (4). In Section 4, we show that Ramsey considered conclusion (4) absurd. Subsequently, in Section 5, we illustrate that although Ramsey had good reasons to entertain premise (1) in front of the Apostles and to explore its implications for the epistemic value of their social practices, he did not actually believe in this premise.[6]

Thus, we challenge interpretations of Ramsey's argument that appear to take it at its face-value (e.g., Arrow 1980, 638; Rosenbaum 1998, 179–80; Pianalto 2011; Sousa 2022, 15). Instead, we find Cheryl Misak's interpretation more compelling, as it shows sensitivity to the institutional

[6] A sensible question that may arise here is why Ramsey himself did not explicitly say that he is making a *reductio* argument. Why did he not straightforwardly declare that if the Apostles assume the view that science is the only thing we can know, they must then make the absurd conclusion that there is nothing to discuss in the Society, and that therefore they should abandon their assumption? The question highlights an important aspect of interpreting Ramsey's talk: that it should be sensitive to the institutional context within which it was delivered. Ramsey's rhetorical strategy was deliberately indirect, for he remained faithful to rhetorical conventions of the Society. As discussed in Section 2, the Apostles engaged in conversations characterized by irony, subtle provocation, and playful intellectual exploration. Ramsey's primary aim was to prompt self-reflection among his friends rather than deliver a rigid philosophical ultimatum. Similar rhetorical styles are evident in Ramsey's other Apostle talks. For example, in "An Imaginary Conversation with John Stuart Mill," presented in January 1924, he evaluates the practical value of Mill's theory of psychology. Here, too, Ramsey avoids explicit analytic clarity or systematic exposition resembling his scholarly writings such as "Truth and Probability" (Ramsey 1926). Instead, he weaves his critical concerns into the form of an imagined dialogue with Mill, centered on Mill's efforts to confront and recover from his youthful depression. The talk reads more like a short story than a philosophical argument, yet it implicitly conveys subtle and serious insights into psychology. When interpreted in light of this rhetorical pattern, our reading of the 1925 talk–as advancing a *reductio*–becomes more plausible, even though Ramsey never explicitly framed it as such.

and intellectual context within which Ramsey's talk was given (see Misak 2016b; 2020, 215–20). However, our analysis extends beyond Misak's reading by delving into the nuances of Ramsey's argument. We reveal that Ramsey observed a disparity between the Apostles' theoretical commitments (i.e., their endorsement of premise (1)) and their practices (i.e., their habit of engaging in non-expert discussions). This observation, among others, motivated him to develop a pragmatist philosophy that could bridge the gap between one's theoretical commitments and practices, a pragmatist philosophy that could recognize the possibility of having non-expert discussions with epistemic significance.

4. Was There Nothing to Discuss?

The surviving historical evidence indicates that Ramsey indeed believed there was much to discuss within the Society. His 1925 remark, "there is nothing to discuss," was likely a conscious reference to Ludwig Wittgenstein's earlier pronouncement from nearly a decade prior, which had ignited intense debates and significant concerns among the Apostles.

In October 1911, Wittgenstein arrived unannounced at Russell's rooms in Trinity College. Their intellectual camaraderie quickly flourished. Russell harbored doubts about whether Wittgenstein would be well-suited for the Society, believing its social atmosphere might be off-putting to him. The writer and Apostle Lytton Strachey, however, was less concerned. He suspected Russell's reservations stemmed from a desire to monopolize Wittgenstein's company. Meanwhile, Keynes was eager to include Wittgenstein and made significant efforts to secure his membership (see Levy 1980, 266–67; Monk 1990, 47–49; Rosenbaum 1998, chap. 8). Around that time, Keynes and Strachey were the dominant figures of the Society, with G. E. Moore and Russell representing the older generation of its active members. Ultimately, during the Society's meeting on November 2, 1912, the economist Gerald Shove announced his intention that "at the next meeting of the Society he would propose that Mr L. Wittgenstein of Trinity College be elected as member." Wittgenstein was "duly elected" at the subsequent meeting on November 9 (GBR/0272/KCAS/39). Russell's apprehensions persisted, however. He wrote to Keynes on November 11, expressing his concern that "obviously," from Wittgenstein's point of view, "the Society is a

mere waste of time" (quoted in Levy 1980, 266). He knew Wittgenstein well.

The records of the Society show that Wittgenstein attended only the three meetings of November 16th, 23rd, and 30th. After these dates, he ceased his participation in the Society's gatherings. The minutes from January 18th, 1913, indicate that Wittgenstein officially resigned (GBR/0272/KCAS/39). His brief involvement with the Society was unpleasant for both him and the Apostles. He was notoriously difficult to interact with, and the situation was exacerbated in an environment where discussions were kept at the non-expert level and often punctuated with laughter and sarcasm. The Society was not a congenial setting for him.

The meeting on November 16th, the first that Wittgenstein attended, featured a presentation by Moore, who gave an old paper, "Is Conversion Possible?"[7] Moore explored the concept of "New Birth" that could be found in the work of Leo Tolstoy, which Moore described as a good state of mind characterized by a mystical experience akin to the literary techniques of allusion and description, rather than analytical reasoning. He pondered whether it is possible to live a life marked by successive conversions and if one can will to do so (see Levy 1980, 217–18). Following the presentation, the "brothers" debated the question, "Can the happy warrior think?" (GBR/0272/KCAS/39). Moore had contended that the state of New Birth keeps the spirit nimble, while keeping it harmonized with Reason (Levy 1980, 217). Perhaps the question was about this aspect of the paper: could a happy warrior, who is in a good state of mind and determined to confront the world under a continuous mode of New Birth experience, be capable of thinking or reasoning at all? Wittgenstein, along with Russell and Strachey,

[7]It was not uncommon for the Society to revisit older papers. This practice was often employed when new members were present or when long-standing members, who attended meetings only sporadically and had missed the earlier presentation of the paper, were in attendance. Moore first presented his paper on conversion on May 26, 1900. He read it again on February 22, 1902 (see Levy 1980, 217–18, 226–27). The third time would be the one that saw Wittgenstein in attendance on November 16, 1913. He would read this paper for the fourth time on March 3, 1923, with Ramsey and Braithwaite among the audience. The question discussed at the meeting on November 17, 1928, moderated by Moore, suggests that he either presented his conversion paper for the fifth time or that elements of it were revisited during the meeting (GBR/0272/KCAS/39). His paper was a classic Apostle work.

answered yes (GBR/0272/KCAS/39).[8] There is no historical record suggesting that Wittgenstein found this meeting particularly irksome. However, the subsequent two Apostle talks proved more challenging for him.

Shove was the moderator at the meeting on November 23. The paper presented at the meeting appears to have been lost. However, we know that the Apostles discussed the question, "Are we curious?" Wittgenstein, along with Shove, voted affirmatively. The only other recorded attendees were the British poet and artist Francis Kennard Bliss, who voted both yes and no, and the Hungarian poet Ferenc Bekassy, who voted no, adding, "I am not [curious]. Except about oddities" (GBR/0272/KCAS/39). According to Lytton Strachey, Bliss and Bekassy were in love with each other. Bliss and Wittgenstein harbored mutual disdain, and Wittgenstein also detested Bekassy, although this sentiment was not reciprocated. Strachey speculated that the three would eventually reconcile their differences and get along.[9] He was mistaken.

The meeting on November 30th featured a talk by Bekassy. Following the presentation, the Apostles discussed "What was it about?" Bekassy himself responded, "Me," adding, "and therefore all the other things." Bliss replied, "I don't know," while Sydney-Turner echoed the uncertainty with, "God knows?" Wittgenstein tersely answered with a single word: "Nothing" (GBR/0272/KCAS/39). He was furious. Shortly after the meeting, Sydney-Turner visited Wittgenstein, attempting to calm him down and trying to ensure he would not cut his ties with the Society (Lubenow 1998, 46). He then wrote to James Strachey (Lytton's brother), "Wittgenstein complained that there was *nothing to discuss* and that the proceedings were futile; reminded that he had said the same a

[8] This theme of Moore's talk would later resurface in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (Wittgenstein 1922) in a distinctly novel manner. Wittgenstein proposed that one's proper attitude toward the world involves saying what could be said clearly, along the lines of natural sciences, while also embracing the mystical experience necessary for engaging with that which only shows itself. On December 20, 1919, Russell wrote to Lady Ottoline Morrell, attributing Wittgenstein's attraction to mysticism largely to his wartime engagement with Tolstoy's work. He said, "I think (though he [Wittgenstein] wouldn't agree) that what he likes best in mysticism is its power to make him stop thinking" (quoted in Wittgenstein 1974, 82). Wittgenstein's recorded response to the question addressed in Moore's Apostle talk suggests that, indeed, he would not have agreed with Russell.

[9] See Strachey's letter to Saxon Sydney-Turner on November 20, 1912, in Holroyd (1968, 71–72). Rosenbaum reports that Wittgenstein so detested Bliss that he "threatened to leave the Apostles" (Rosenbaum 1998, 167).

week before he replied that he could not have *if he could have then imagined this*" (quoted in Rosenbaum 1998, 168). Wittgenstein was resolute in his desire to resign from the Society. The story quickly spread, causing concern among the Apostles, including Lytton Strachey, Moore, and Keynes. Numerous diplomatic efforts were made to dissuade Wittgenstein from resigning (see Levy 1980, 267–69). The situation was grave; there had only been one previous resignation in the Society's history, and that individual had been ritually cursed. Despite temporarily holding off on his resignation, Wittgenstein decided not to attend any future meetings. His name next appeared in the Society's minutes for the meeting on January 18th, 1913: "Wittgenstein resigned, and the Society's Excommunication was pronounced upon him" (GBR/0272/KCAS/39). He was officially damned.

Wittgenstein's incident became widely known as a dramatic chapter of the Society. Misak (2020, 103) rightly points out that when Ramsey echoed Wittgenstein's phrase in 1925, he was alluding to this notorious episode in the Society's history. However, how should we interpret Ramsey's remark? Did he reiterate these words in agreement? As we shall see, the answer is negative. The records of Ramsey's involvement with the Society indicate that he believed there was much to discuss there. A brief comparison between the engagements of Ramsey and Wittgenstein with the Society may provide valuable insights.

First, we have seen that Wittgenstein attended only three meetings of the Society. In stark contrast, Ramsey's attendance record is remarkable: from his first meeting on October 22, 1921, until he declared "there is nothing to discuss" on February 28, 1925, he attended seventy-three out of seventy-six meetings of the Society.[10] The institutional records of the Society suggest that Ramsey was the most dedicated participant of its meetings during this period. He not only attended the meetings but also hosted fourteen meetings at his rooms (meaning that he provided coffee and snacks, which was typically sardines on toast, known as "whales" among the Apostles), moderated ten meetings, and gave seven talks (GBR/0272/KCAS/39).

Second, Wittgenstein's declaration that "there is nothing to discuss" led him to cease attending the Society's meetings, a decision consistent

[10]The figures exclude the meetings held from April 26 to June 19, 1924, as Ramsey was in Vienna during this period to be psychoanalyzed and could not possibly attend these meetings.

with his stated belief.[11] Ramsey, however, echoed Wittgenstein's words but continued to attend the meetings. He missed only two out of fourteen meetings from since the early March of 1925 until he became an "honorary member" on November 24, 1925–the day he delivered another talk titled "Civilization and Happiness"–and he was quite happy to occasionally host or moderate meetings during this period.[12] Assuming consistency between Ramsey's beliefs and behavior, we have good reasons to suggest that Ramsey did not believe that there is nothing to discuss in the Society.

One might object that Ramsey's extensive involvement with the Society does not necessarily indicate that he believed there was much to discuss there, as he could have attended simply to enjoy the company of his friends. However, this objection does not hold water. Ramsey began to develop some of his significant ideas in philosophy, economics, and politics during the Society's meetings. His attendance was not solely for the occasional "humorous sarcasm and playful banter," as Sidgwick described, but also because of the Society's commitment to "the pursuit of truth."

[11] He would come back to the Society upon his return to Cambridge in the early 1929. He attended four meetings in that year, the first on January 19, and the last on February 16. Afterward, he ceased attending meetings once more. Despite this, he came to peace terms with the Society. The minutes from the April 20, 1929, meeting note that "Wittgenstein was declared to have been absolved from his excommunication" (GBR/0272/KCAS/39).

[12] The most active participants in the Society were typically undergraduate students. Upon graduating or securing a fellowship or a position that entailed additional teaching or research responsibilities, a member could attain the status of "honorary member." These honorary members were also referred to as "angels," symbolizing that the Apostle had "taken wings." As angels, they were expected to loosen their visible ties to the Society due to their increased engagement with the outside world and demanding schedule. Nevertheless, they were always welcome to return and attend meetings whenever possible. Ramsey took wings a bit later than usual. His lectureship and fellowship at King's College commenced in October 1924, a year before he took wings (see Misak 2020, 178–81). His teaching load was heavy. In a letter to Keynes, dated December 11, 1925, roughly two weeks after becoming an honorary member, he lamented that his teaching duties had left him with little time for research (Ramsey 1925c). It was typical for an Apostle's attendance to decline after taking wings, and Ramsey was no exception. He participated in about one-third of the Society's meetings as an angel and maintained a relatively stable attendance rate from 1926 to 1929. During this period, he also occasionally contributed to the selection of discussion topics and cast votes in the meetings, and he attended all annual meetings of the Society except for the one held in June 1929 (GBR/0272/KCAS/39). He most likely missed the 1929 annual meeting because he was on holidays in Ireland (see Misak 2020, 414).

For instance, Ramsey's view on induction began to take shape during his involvement with the Society. As briefly discussed in Section 2, he presented a talk on this topic on October 20, 1923, in which he argued that induction is reasonable on the ground that it, like copulation, is indispensable to have a good life. A more articulated version of Ramsey's view on induction later appeared in his scholarly work "Truth and Probability," where he argued that to ask for a proof of induction is to "cry for the moon," although relying on induction is reasonable because it leads us to success (Ramsey 1926, 93). Similarly, Ramsey's views on some economic and political topics found their shape because of his involvement with the Society. He discussed various economic and political themes in his Apostle talks, "Socialism and Equality of Income" (Ramsey 1923c), "Sex from the Point of View of Society" (Ramsey 1924), and "Civilization and Happiness" (Ramsey 1925a). These economic and political themes encompass his discussions on intergenerational justice, the role of women in the economy, and patterns of production and distribution of income in a socialist state. Although his ideas in these Apostle talks were not yet fully developed, they served as a foundation for his later work in economics and his political activism (see Gaspard 2003; Marouzi 2022, forthcoming).

The Society served as a training ground for cultivating ideas and testing them against the brilliant minds of its members. Once these ideas were fully developed, the "angel" (see note 12) would present them to the relevant expert communities outside the Society. There was much to discuss in the Society, at least that is what we learn from the historical records that Ramsey left behind. His talk, "On There Being No Discussable Subject," exemplified the rhetorical style of the Apostles. It was *on* there being no discussable subject; it did not *defend* the claim that there is no discussable subject. Ramsey entertained the idea that there is nothing to know except science to show its absurd consequences for the social practice of himself and his Apostle friends. We shall see that he had good reasons to do so.

5. Was There Nothing to Know Except Science?

In this section, we focus on premise (1) of Ramsey's argument, the claim that "there is nothing to know except science." We address three ques-

tions. First, what philosophical outlook rendered this claim believable? Second, why did Ramsey take this claim worthy of consideration in front of the Apostles? Third, did Ramsey endorse this claim? We shall see that the most articulated defense of this claim was presented in the work of Wittgenstein. Ramsey entertained this idea because it captured the view that had become dominant in the intellectual climax of Cambridge, including the Society. His point was that if one were to adopt this dominant view, then one would come to the absurd conclusion that there is nothing to discuss in the Society. We shall also see that Ramsey left signs of dissatisfaction with this dominant view before and during his Apostle talk. Nonetheless, he did not have a positive alternative view to put on the table when giving his talk on February 28, 1925.

5.1. Wittgenstein, science, and the sayables

In "On There Being No Discussable Subject," Ramsey asserts, "we have settled everything by realizing that there is nothing to know except science." But how did the Apostles, as Ramsey says, come to adopt the view that "there is nothing to know except science?" Who introduced this view to the Society, and how was it defended? We can find the answer in Ramsey's next remarks. He goes on to respectfully call Wittgenstein "the greatest modern philosopher" who holds that philosophy "is an activity," which "aims merely at curing headaches." He continues,

> It might be thought that, apart from this technical philosophy [i.e., Wittgenstein's] whose center is logic, there was a sort of popular philosophy which dealt with such subjects as the relation of man to nature, and the meaning of morality. But any attempt to treat such topics seriously reduces them to questions either of science or of technical philosophy, or results more immediately in perceiving them to be non-sensical. (Ramsey 1925d, 246)

The idea that "there is nothing to know except science" alluded to Wittgenstein's influential conception of the domain of sayables, as outlined in the *Tractatus* (Wittgenstein 1922). Ramsey, who translated this seminal work from German to English, echoed Wittgenstein's view that this domain is restricted to propositions of natural science.[13] Consequently, much was excluded from the domain of sayables, including

[13] To be precise, at least on one occasion Ramsey implies that the domain of sayables includes propositions of both science and "technical philosophy" (see Ramsey's quotation

popular philosophy. How about normative areas, such as ethics and aesthetics? On Wittgenstein's view, these could either be reduced to natural sciences, and thereby rendered sayable, or they would remain outside the domain of sayables and thus must be deemed nonsense. Ramsey says that "ethics has. . .been reduced to psychology," and that the only remaining subject matter for discussion in aesthetics consists of its related "psychological problems." Nonetheless, the Apostles are not experts in psychology, and thus they cannot have genuine discussions on ethics and aesthetics, too (Ramsey 1925d, 247–48).

It was the very implication of Wittgenstein's narrowed conception of what can be said that there was nothing to discuss in the Society. This was because the Apostles were not science experts. Not only that; they were highly interested in bringing normative questions to the fore of non-expert discussions without having them reduced to the relevant questions of science.[14] That said, in his 1925 Apostle talk, Ramsey was about to argue that if we (the Apostles) endorse a view similar to Wittgenstein's conception of the domain of sayables, then we must be committed to the claim that there is nothing to discuss in the Society and that casual conversations during the meetings are not instances of genuine discussions and they lack epistemic value. It is our conjecture that he hoped this conclusion would sound counter-intuitive enough such that the Apostles become skeptical about Wittgenstein's position.

above). However, throughout the rest of his talk, he suggests that this domain is limited exclusively to propositions of science. Wittgenstein's position on what Ramsey calls "technical philosophy" was admittedly hard to parse. He held that "the right method of philosophy would be this. To say nothing except what can be said, i.e. the propositions of natural science" (Wittgenstein 1922, 6.53). Anticipating the criticism that the propositions of the *Tractatus* say something while they are not science but rather philosophy, he argued that those propositions merely function as a ladder by means of which one comes to know that what can be said is only propositions of science–a ladder that must be eventually kicked away after being used (Wittgenstein 1922, 6.54). Here, and throughout the rest of the paper, we cite the 1922 translation of the *Tractatus* because of Ramsey's significant involvement with its production.

[14]For example, during Ramsey's presentation on "Sex from the Point of View of Society" (Ramsey 1924) on November 15, 1924–his final talk before "On There Being No Discussable Subject"–the Apostles cast their votes on the following: "Be bad, sweet maid, and let the male be clever!" (GBR/0272/KCAS/39).

5.2. Failing to make sense of the practice

Ramsey had good reasons to explore the implications of Wittgenstein's philosophy for the social practices of the Apostles. The *Tractatus* was a subject of intense debate in Cambridge, its conception of the domain of sayables was embraced by some esteemed members of the Society, and there was a history behind the debate on how to make sense of the epistemic significance of non-expert discussions in intellectual circles in the Society's neighborhood.

By the time Ramsey delivered his talk on February 28, 1925, Wittgenstein had long since departed from the Society and from Cambridge, having taken up the role of a schoolteacher in rural Austria. Nonetheless, his influence lingered within the intellectual life of Cambridge. A year before Ramsey's talk, on March 29, 1924, Keynes wrote to Wittgenstein, stating that "right or wrong," the *Tractatus* "dominates all fundamental discussions at Cambridge since it was written" (McGuinness 2008, 151). According to Wittgenstein, the "main contention" of the book was the distinction between what can be said and what can only be shown.[15] In the preface to the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein summarized the "whole meaning" of his book as follows: "what can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent" (Wittgenstein 1922, 27). This does not imply that what cannot be said lacks significance. Wittgenstein is reported to have said that his work consisted of two parts, "the one presented here [in the *Tractatus*] plus all that I have not written. And it is precisely this second part that is the most important" (quoted in Engelmann 1967, 143). He maintained that "the problems of life" remain untouched "even if all possible scientific questions be answered," as these problems pertain to "the mystical," or that which "shows itself." He added that "what can be shown cannot be said" (Wittgenstein 1922, 6.52, 6.521, 6.522; see also 1922, 4.1212).

Wittgenstein's distinction between saying and showing sparked significant controversy in Cambridge, engaging a few esteemed members of the Apostles. Russell's logical atomism (what was to become his math-

[15] In his letter to Russell, dated August 19, 1919, Wittgenstein wrote, "I'm afraid you haven't really got hold of my main contention, to which the whole business of logical prop[position]s is only a corollary. The main point is the theory of what can be expressed (gesagt) by prop[position]s–i.e. by language–(and, which comes to the same, what can be thought) and what can not be expressed by prop[osition]s, but only shown (gezeigt); which, I believe, is the cardinal problem of philosophy" (McGuinness 2008, 98).

ematical philosophy) influenced the approach Wittgenstein adopted in the *Tractatus*, which sought to elucidate the relationship between language and the world. He was naturally very keen on Wittgenstein's project, though he harbored a significant reservation: he could not fully endorse Wittgenstein's "main contention." In his introduction to the *Tractatus*, Russell highlighted "Mr Wittgenstein's attitude towards the mystical," a part of the book which Wittgenstein "would wish to lay most stress" (Wittgenstein 1922, 21, 23). He wondered why Wittgenstein considered "the whole of logic and philosophy" to belong to the inexpressible region, even though his book is a work of logic and philosophy. He noted, "what causes hesitation is the fact that, after all, Mr Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said." Russell continued, Wittgenstein's "defence would be that what he calls the mystical can be shown, although it cannot be said. It may be that this defence is adequate, but, for my part, I confess that it leaves me with a certain sense of intellectual discomfort" (Wittgenstein 1922, 22). Russell wished for Wittgenstein to include logic and philosophy (in their technical form practiced by himself and Wittgenstein) within the domain of sayables and to cease mystifying and ascribing significant importance to what cannot be said.

As far as Ramsey's point was concerned, there was not much difference at the end of the day: both Russell and Wittgenstein had advocated for such a narrowed conception of the domain of sayables that they could not account for the possibility of genuine discussions within the Society that generally avoided expert discussions of science (and logic and philosophy). Around the time that Ramsey gave his talk, Wittgenstein was gone, but Russell was still around and was an occasional attendee of the Society's meetings. Ramsey knew his audience well.

Keynes was another Apostle who could be a proper target of Ramsey. He had implicitly endorsed Wittgenstein's saying-showing distinction in the public domain, two years before Ramsey's talk. In his article "The Underlying Principles," written for the *Manchester Guardian Commercial* on January 4, 1923, Keynes referred to Wittgenstein as "our newest Spinoza," and quoted approvingly from the *Tractatus*, using his own translation of the passage: "We feel that even if all possible questions of knowledge [translated as 'science' in the 1922 version edited by Ogden] be answered, our problems of life are still not touched at all. But in that

event there is obviously no question left; and just this is the answer" (Keynes 1923, 449).

There was a history behind the attraction of the Apostles (and their close associates) to what Russell would call "mysticism." That history goes back to years before Wittgenstein's work appeared. In his Apostle talk, "A Theory of Beauty," presented on May 25, 1912, Keynes argued that:

> It may be difficult or impossible for the artist to translate into the medium of words the full meaning and content of his keenest perceptions; he must be willing to convey what he can to others who know by the subtle and vague suggestion of language and rhythm, by allusion that is only half allusion and allegory that is half truth, by imagery and ornament, by saying more when he means less, and by a silence when most is intended. His language must lack exactness, for we know more things than we can tell; but not so his conceptions. (Keynes [1905] 1912)

This was few months before Wittgenstein joined the Society, and long before the *Tractatus* appeared in print. Keynes's view could motivate the idea that there is an inexpressible region (at least in the realm of aesthetics) that could not be the subject of discussion by the Apostles. Attendees of Keynes's talk included Leonard Woolf and Moore (GBR/0272/KCAS/39). They were both involved in controversies that were relevant to the pre-history of Wittgenstein's worry, expressed in 1912, that there is nothing to discuss in the Society.

Leonard Woolf was both an Apostle and a central figure of the Bloomsbury group, a set of intellectuals, artists, and writers with overlapping members with the Society, such as Lytton Strachey and Keynes. Leonard Woolf married Virginia Stephen, whose sister Venessa married Clive Bell. They were all Bloomsbury members and highly influential in the domains of art and literature. In *Art* (1914), the first Bloomsbury manifesto, Bell argued that aesthetic experience enables us to know what he took to be the "spiritual" (or non-material) realm of the world, which included goodness; that is, an aesthetic experience could let us know what is good. He argued that aesthetic experience consists in feeling the emotions excited by the essence of a work of art, or its Significant Form, which he defined as "lines and colors combined in a particular way" or "certain forms and relations of forms" (Bell 1914, 8). Nonetheless, Bell showed awareness that his epistemology of aesthetic experience cannot make sense of having genuine discussions

over matters of the spiritual: "We have an emotional conviction that some things are better than others. . .but there is no proving these things. Few things of importance can be proved; important things have to be felt and expressed. That is why people with things of importance to say tend to write poems rather than moral treatises" (Bell 1914, 279–80). Bell's view created a huge controversy within the Bloomsbury group. In one instance, Leonard Woolf picked up on Bell's view in his novel, the *Wise Virgins*, scorning his "odd" view of "feelings" that make them unprovable, or, we can add, undiscussable (Woolf 1914, 93–94).[16] Ramsey picked up on this debate, too. In his Apostle talk on the possibility of genuine discussions, he implicitly referred to Bell's idea of Significant Form: "we. . .have very little to say about the psychological problems of which aesthetics really consists, e.g. why certain combinations of colours give us such peculiar feelings."[17] He continued, "we do not and cannot discuss whether one work of art is better than another; we merely compare the feelings it gives us" (Ramsey 1925d, 247–48).

Moore had brought another kind of "mysticism" to the intellectual circles in his vicinity. He was a highly regarded figure in both the Society and the Bloomsbury group. In *Principia Ethica* (1903), he famously held that human beings possess the capacity of intuition, which enables them to grasp goodness. Keynes reports that Moore's view had caused troubles among Bloomsbury members, as they struggled to reconcile their disagreements over what constituted good things on an epistemic basis, especially when their intuitions diverged:

> In that case who was right when there was a difference of opinion? . . . In practice, victory was with those who could speak with the greatest appearance of clear, undoubting conviction and could best use the accents of infallibility. Moore at this time was a master of this method–greeting one's remarks with a gasp of incredulity–*Do* you *really* think *that*, an expression of face as if to hear such a thing said reduced him to a state of wonder verging on imbecility, with his mouth wide open and wagging his head in the negative so violently that his hair shook. Oh! He would say, goggling at you as if either you or he must be mad; and no reply

[16] Virgina Woolf (née Stephen) appears to have shared a view more akin to that of her brother-in-law, Clive Bell, than to her husband, Leonard Woolf. She maintained that some aspects of reality defy description and that, at least in some cases, neither language nor paint could fully capture the depths of human experience (see Hussey 2021, 42–43).

[17] Ramsey's 1920 diary indicates that he read Clive Bell's *Art* (1914) in August (GBR/0272/KCAS/39).

> was possible. Strachey's methods were different: grim silence as if such a dreadful observation was beyond comment and the less said about it the better, but almost as effective for disposing of what he called death-packets. Woolf was fairly good at indicating a negative, but he was better at producing the effect that it was *useless* to argue with him than at crushing you. Dickinson knew how to shrug his shoulders and retreat unconvinced, but it was retreat all the same. As for Sheppard and me we could only turn like worms, but worms who could be eventually goaded into voluble claims that worms have at least the right to turn. (Keynes 1938, 437–38; see also Bell 1914, 88).

By the time Ramsey entered Cambridge University, in the autumn of 1920, Keynes's primary concern was not goodness or beauty, but rather judgments of probability. In his *Treatise on Probability* ([1921] 2013), influenced by Moore, Keynes asserted that we know probability relations by intuition. Ramsey in turn, in a 1923 Apostle talk, said that Keynes's probability relation is similar to Moore's "objective or intrinsic good;" it is "a mysterious entity not easy to identify" (Ramsey 1923b, 122)–the remark indicating that Ramsey saw mysticism not only in the work of Wittgenstein, but also in Moore's and Keynes's.[18]

In short, Wittgenstein held that there are important things that we can only show (but not tell), Bell believed that important things cannot be proved or discussed (but can be expressed in, say, poetry), Moore asserted that we grasp goodness by intuition (but could not make sense of how to address disagreements over what we appear to intuit), and Keynes held that we know certain things by intuition or aesthetic experience (though they either could not be the subject of epistemic disagreements or their content could not be expressed at all). All these views were united in suggesting that there is nothing (or at least not much) to discuss in the Society. Their adherents (except for Wittgenstein who left the Society) could not make sense of what themselves used to

[18]Ramsey would repeat his criticism a few years later, in "Truth and Probability" (Ramsey 1926), arguing that Keynes "supposes that, at any rate in certain cases, they [the probability relations] can be perceived; but speaking for myself I feel confident that this is not true. I do not perceive them, and if I am to be persuaded that they exist it must be by argument; moreover I shrewdly suspect that others do not perceive them either, because they are able to come to so very little agreement as to which of them relates any two given propositions" (Ramsey 1926, 57, emphasis added). The analysis indicating that Ramsey, similar to his 1925 Apostle talk on the possibility of genuine discussions, was keen to give the primacy to his practical experience, and only then to evaluate if the relevant theoretical notion could hold the water by making sense of that experience.

do in practice. That is, they could not account for the epistemic value of non-expert and casual conversations that they routinely had in the Society or the Bloomsbury meetings. This was the intellectual context within which Ramsey was giving his Apostle talk. He had good reasons to explore the consequences of the most extreme and influential kind of "mysticism" around (which was the one offered in the *Tractatus*) for the social practices of the Apostles.

5.3. Ramsey on what is discussable

Did Ramsey agree with Wittgenstein's view that "there is nothing to know except science?" There are two pieces of evidence suggesting that the answer is negative. First, Ramsey published a critical notice of the *Tractatus* in *Mind*, in 1923. In it he raises several issues for Wittgenstein's philosophy, the most famous of which is now known as "the color exclusion problem," which challenges Wittgenstein's view that it is a logical impossibility to have two different colors to occur at the same place simultaneously. Among Ramsey's critical points are his remarks on Wittgenstein's mysticism. Ramsey finds the view "that there are certain things which cannot be said but only shown, and these constitute the Mystical" as "one of the most interesting of Mr Wittgenstein's theories." But he soon goes on to propose an objection to this interesting part of the *Tractatus*. He reads Wittgenstein as to suggest that "the reason why" the Mystical "cannot be said" has "to do with the logical form, which propositions have in common with reality." Ramsey, however, argues that Wittgenstein's characterization "of the nature of the logical form" is not "sufficiently clear," and it thus threatens the validity of his notion of the Mystical (Ramsey 1923a, 472–73). On another occasion, Ramsey argues that one can "develop a general account of" the "origin and apparent significance" of certain things that Wittgenstein calls "nonsense" such that "no mystical implications" would be involved in the *Tractatus* (Ramsey 1923a, 474).

Second, recall that Ramsey's "On There Being No Discussable Subject" gave the example of "popular philosophy which" deals "with such subjects as the relation of man to nature, and the meaning of morality" among those things deserved to be called nonsensical on Wittgenstein's standard (Ramsey 1925d, 246). It is noteworthy to mention that the last part of Ramsey's talk is pretty much a piece of popular philosophy

about the relation of man to nature and the meaning of morality! In the first half of his talk, Ramsey briefly discusses Russell's lecture on "What I Believe," showing that it is an instance of technical philosophy that draws on sciences, such as "modern physics, physiology, and astronomy" (Ramsey 1925d, 246). He then begins the last part of his talk by saying that "if I was to write a *Weltanschauung* I should call it not 'What I Believe' but 'What I feel.'" He then says, "I shall conclude by some remarks on things in general, or, as I would rather say, not things but life in general" (Ramsey 1925d, 246–47). He ends the talk as follows:

> My picture of the world is drawn in perspective, and not like a model to scale. The foreground is occupied by human beings and the stars are all as small as threepenny bits. I don't really believe in astronomy, except as a complicated description of part of the course of human and possibly animal sensation. I apply my perspective not merely to space but also to time. In time the world will cool and everything will die; but that is a long time off still, and its present value at compound discount is almost nothing. Nor is the present less valuable because the future will be blank. Humanity, which fills the foreground of my picture, I find interesting and on the whole admirable. I find, just now at least, the world a pleasant and exciting place. You may find it depressing; I am sorry for you, and you despise me. But I have reason and you have none; you would only have a reason for despising me if your feeling corresponded to the fact in a way mine didn't. But neither can correspond to the fact. The fact is not in itself good or bad; it is just that it thrills me but depresses you. On the other hand, I pity you with reason, because it is pleasanter to be thrilled than to be depressed, and not merely pleasanter but better for all one's activities. (Ramsey 1925d, 249–50)

Ramsey's talk concludes with remarks that exemplify the rhetorical style characteristic of the Cambridge Apostles. His rhetorical move anticipates his later criticism of Wittgenstein's saying-showing distinction. In 1929, four years after the talk, Ramsey would liken Wittgenstein's position to "the absurd position of the child in the following dialogue: 'Say breakfast.' 'Can't.' 'What can't you say?' 'Can't say breakfast'" (Ramsey 1929b, 6). His 1925 Apostle talk opens by asserting that there is nothing to discuss, using popular philosophy as a case in point for an undiscussable subject. Yet, it ends with several popular philosophy remarks, implicitly suggesting that such subjects are, in fact, discussable. It is as if he is showing Wittgenstein and his followers just how simple it is to say "breakfast."

Simple or not, it is important to note that Ramsey did not offer a substantial theoretical account of what makes the supposedly undiscussable discussable. His talk, including its concluding remarks, is best read as a characteristically Apostle-style critical intervention aimed at Wittgenstein's view of the domain of sayables, rather than as a constructive philosophical proposal. It contains little in the way of a positive alternative framework for understanding the domain of sayables.[19] In the next section, however, we will see that in the subsequent years after this talk, Ramsey began moving in a direction that appears to lay the groundwork for such an alternative.

All this means that, by the time Ramsey read the remarks above in front of the Apostles, he had good reasons to consider whether and how there is anything to discuss in the Society. The most promising philosophical projects of his time, including the ones developed by Wittgenstein, Russell, Keynes, and Moore, could hardly make sense of having genuine discussions within the Society, the Bloomsbury group, and other similar intellectual circles. Members of the Society and the Bloomsbury group had adopted philosophical notions of the kind that could not make sense of what they used to do in practice. In short, theory and practice were not aligned. The pragmatist Ramsey seems to have been alert to the theory-practice discrepancy observed in his vicinity. His Apostle talk on there is nothing to discuss was an invitation

[19]The only ideas in Ramsey's talk that gesture toward an alternative outlook appear in his concluding remarks, quoted above. Yet even the ideas implicit in those remarks remain largely under-theorized. Ramsey suggests that one's feelings about life are just as discussable as one's beliefs about matters of fact. He proposes that one may have a "reason" for such feelings–not in the sense that there is a fact to which the feeling corresponds, but rather in the sense that the feeling itself may bring about certain facts. As he puts it, he has a "reason" to find "the world a pleasant and exciting place," where the "reason" is that this feeling makes him "thrilled" rather "depressed" and that this is "better for all" his "activities." Here, Ramsey seems momentarily drawn to a view akin to that of William James, who famously argued that there are occasions when we ought to harmonize our beliefs with emotional experiences (see Klein 2017). However, there is no evidence in Ramsey's later writings to suggest that he continued to embrace this Jamesian-friendly insight. Additionally, Ramsey compares his picture of the world to that of some of his friends, stating that, unlike them, he is not humbled by the vastness of the heavens. Nevertheless, he cares so deeply for human beings that he exalts humanity to the foreground of his world-picture. Although underdeveloped, Ramsey's point regarding the disagreement between world-pictures bears a resemblance to the concept of "deep disagreement" in contemporary epistemology (see, e.g., Ranalli and Lagewaard 2022). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for drawing our attention to this similarity.

to bring Apostles to harmonize their theoretical commitments and practical interests. Wittgenstein was after harmonizing theory and practice, too. But the two philosophers adopted competing solutions. Wittgenstein opted to keep up with his theoretical commitments, while abandoning discussion groups in practice. Ramsey opted to develop alternative theoretical commitments, while keep discussing various topics of interest with his Apostle and Bloomsbury friends. It is those alternative theoretical commitments that we now turn to.

6. Ramsey's Pragmatism: A New Historical Explanation

Ramsey was on the brink of his most productive years when he presented his Apostle talk in February 1925. From since then until the end of 1929, he developed the core tenets of his pragmatist philosophy, which sought to make philosophical concepts relevant to human experience and what we do in practice. In his words, his aim was for "philosophy" to be "of some use" to human life (Ramsey 1929b, 1). What historical explanations do we have for the emergence of Ramsey's pragmatism in the second half of the 1920s?

We have several fine answers to the question above. Ramsey found Russell's theory of judgment troubling, and thus formulated a pragmatist account of belief or judgment in dispositional terms (see, e.g., Vickers 2004; Sullivan and Johnston 2018). He, dissatisfied with Keynes's interpretation of probability, developed his own pragmatist interpretation of the concept, showing it has to do with one's degrees of belief that could be measured by observing one's betting behaviors (see, e.g., Bateman 1987). Unconvinced by Wittgenstein's account of meaning presented in the *Tractatus*, Ramsey crafted an alternative pragmatist concept, arguing that meaning is tied to how we use words in practice (see Misak 2023). Moreover, we not only know the ideas Ramsey responded to but also those he built upon. Thanks to C. K. Ogden, Ramsey had access to a wealth of materials by C. S. Peirce and became highly interested in Peirce's pragmatism (see Misak 2016a). In addition to Peirce's work, Ramsey drew on Hermann Weyl's intuitionism and perhaps also David Hilbert's formalism to enhance his pragmatist insights (see, e.g., Majer 1989; Holton and Price 2003). The list goes on.

Historical explanations like those mentioned above are united in that they explain the development of Ramsey's pragmatism by referencing his engagement with ideas in the history of philosophy and related disciplines. These explanations undoubtedly enhance our understanding of Ramsey's pragmatism and its origins. Nonetheless, a historical explanation of one's ideas could also benefit from showing the relevance of one's facts of social life to the development of those ideas–a theme documented in the recent biographical work on Ramsey (see Misak 2020). Extending this mode of historical examination, we shall use our interpretation of Ramsey's Apostle talk "On There Being No Discussable Subject" to argue that at least one aspect of Ramsey's pragmatism was partly developed due to his extensive engagements with Cambridge-based intellectual circles, such as the Society. This aspect pertains to Ramsey's account of variable hypotheticals.

One of Ramsey's original pragmatist insights was the distinction he made in 1929, between *genuine judgments* and *rules for judging*. In "General Propositions and Causality" (Ramsey 1929a), he argues that a genuine judgement is "a map of neighboring space by which we steer" (Ramsey 1929a, 146). This map analogy illustrates two features of genuine judgments: that they have some representational content, and that they dispose us to act in certain ways. Rules for judging, on the hand, are what Ramsey calls "variable hypotheticals." A variable hypothetical is a generalization with infinite domain such as "all men are mortal" (Ramsey 1929a, 145). Variable hypotheticals are the logical expressions of one's habits and they "form the system with which the speaker meets the future" (Ramsey 1929a, 149). It is by means of this system of habits that we make judgements. Having the habit of $(x)Fx \supset Yx$ means that "if I meet a F, I shall regard it as a Y" (Ramsey 1929a, 149). Ramsey believed that habits are the typical motives in human actions; that is, they lie at the bottom of human inductive inferences, observations, how memory functions, and so on (see Ramsey 1926). Ramsey sometimes used the term "dispositional belief function" for habits (Ramsey 1991b, 49–51), implying that, unlike genuine judgments (which are maps by which we steer), they do not have representational content. The content of habit consists in how they dispose us to act in the world, not in what the world looks like.

Ramsey's conception of human habits is almost unique within the intellectual context of his time. Unlike most psychologists, he argues that there is no contrast between reason and habit. For Ramsey, anyone aspiring to live a rational life must develop a set of reliable (or reasonable) habits that dispose them to successful actions (see Marouzi 2024, 2026). Consequently, there is much to discuss among friends with no science backgrounds who want to engage with non-expert conversations with epistemic value. Individuals can participate in normative appraisals and rational criticism of each other's habits (in the wide sense used by Ramsey) during their interactions. On Ramsey's account, for instance, one's genuine judgment that this behavior is bad or that work of art is good could be evaluated based on what habits they involve and whether they work for the one who holds the judgment, or for the society, or for any other subject of interest. Ramsey's pragmatism as such expands the domain of sayables to include much more than what Wittgenstein suggested, leaving much room for debates in intellectual circles like the Society. In fact, Ramsey says that a key feature of his concept of variable hypotheticals is their suitability for debate:

> Variable hypotheticals are not judgments but rules for judging 'if I meet a F, I shall regard it as a Y.' This cannot be negated but it can be *disagreed with* by one who does not adopt it. (Ramsey 1929a, 149, emphasis original)

One may argue that even if Ramsey's account of variable hypothetical could be used to make sense of the epistemic culture of the Society, from this it does not follow that it was Ramsey's concern with the spirit of the Society that led him to develop this pragmatist account. This is right. But Ramsey has left us a sign indicating that his conception of variable hypotheticals is linked with his worries expressed in his earlier Apostle talk. Recall that in his Apostle talk, Ramsey appeared to suggest that there is nothing to discuss as the Apostles, including himself, could be understood as advancing arguments "of the form: A. : 'I went to Grantchester this afternoon.' B. : 'No I didn't'" (Ramsey 1925d, 247). In "General Propositions and Causality" (Ramsey 1929a), he implicitly refers to this earlier remark of his, writing that

> Variable hypotheticals or causal laws form the system with which the speaker meets the future; they are not, therefore, subjective in the sense that if you and I enunciate different ones we are each saying something

> about ourselves which pass by one another like 'I went to Grantchester', 'I didn't.' (Ramsey 1929a, 149)

The link between the two pieces becomes clearer if we consider the fact that Ramsey presented the concept of variable hypothetical in response to Wittgenstein's saying-showing distinction, the distinction advocated by some prominent Apostles, which had failed to make sense of their practice. In a famous quip that appears right after elaborating the key features of variable hypotheticals, Ramsey writes, "what we can't say we can't say, and we can't whistle it either" (Ramsey 1929a, 146).[20] There is no doubt that Ramsey conceptualized variable hypotheticals because of his critical engagement with influential philosophical ideas of his time, including Wittgenstein's. But there seems to be a deeper motivation at play as well: developing a theoretical concept that could make sense of what he and his friends used to do in practice in Cambridge-based intellectual circles.

7. Concluding Remarks

On Ramsey's account, members of Cambridge-based intellectual circles, such as the Apostles, used to preach theoretical commitments that were not aligned with their forms of practice. More specifically, they held the view that implied not much can be discussed, yet they continued to routinely discuss the supposedly undiscussables. Ramsey's methodological approach to this problem consisted in giving primacy to what

[20] Diamond (2011) argues that it is mistaken to read the quip as a criticism of Wittgenstein's saying-showing distinction. On her account, Ramsey's point was that there is an inconsistency in the *Tractatus*. For Wittgenstein, on the one hand, had argued that propositions (or what can be said) can be said clearly, while, on the other hand, held that open generalizations are propositions equivalent to infinite conjunctions of propositions. But, according to Diamond's Ramsey, the lack of symbolic power to express infinite conjunctions implies that open generalizations are not propositions at all. For a compelling criticism of Diamond's reading see Methven (2014), who defends the view that Ramsey's quip targeted Wittgenstein's saying-showing distinction. Ramsey repeated his concerns with Wittgenstein's distinction in other places, too. For instance, as mentioned earlier, in "Philosophy" (Ramsey 1929b), written around the same time as "General Propositions and Causality" (Ramsey 1929a), he finds Wittgenstein's position similar to "the absurd position of the child in the following dialogue: 'Say breakfast.' 'Can't.' 'What can't you say?' 'Can't say breakfast'" (Ramsey 1929b, 6). His remark is reminiscent of what Russell wrote on Wittgenstein's mysticism in the introduction to the *Tractatus*: "After all, Mr Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said" (Wittgenstein 1922, 22).

seemed to be right in practice, and only then looking for a theoretical outlook that could make sense of that experience. He was convinced that, indeed, there is much to discuss in the Society. Then, motivated in part by this conviction, he invented a pragmatist philosophy that could make sense of why and how this is the case.

We would like to conclude this paper by suggesting some sketchy remarks as to how Ramsey's work could potentially offer insights into the current literature of the epistemology of disagreement. As discussed earlier, Ramsey distinguished between genuine judgments and rules for judging. While they both function to dispose us to act in certain ways, they differ in their content. Judgments, like maps, possess representational content, which can be expressed by propositions. Rules, by contrast, do not represent states of affairs; rather, they are cognitive attitudes expressed in the format of variable hypotheticals, whose normative content cannot be fully captured by propositions (Ramsey 1929a). It is noteworthy that Ramsey's distinction between judgements and rules provided the ground for Gilbert Ryle's influential distinction between *knowing that* (a propositional attitude) and *knowing how* (an epistemic capacity employed in applying a rule) (Marouzi 2024, 17–25). What implications does this have for the epistemology of disagreement?

Ramsey argued that although variable hypotheticals "cannot be negated," they "can be *disagreed with* by one who does not adopt" them (Ramsey 1929a, 149, emphasis original). His pragmatism, developed after his 1925 talk, points toward a broad conception of argument and reasoning–one that accommodates rational appraisals not only of genuine judgments about matters of fact, but also of rules for judging. This was while Ramsey's contemporaries, as implied by his 1925 talk, adopted a narrow conception of argument and reasoning–one that found them applicable only to judgments about matters of fact (see Ramsey 1925d, 248). Evidently, this narrow conception of reasoning limits the domain of genuine epistemic disagreements to propositions that are meant to describe matters of fact. However, the broad conception of reasoning allows for meaningful epistemic disagreements over how to apply rules. Since Ramsey's variable hypotheticals are the logical expressions of one's habits, which could be reasonable, disagreements over them exceed simply comparing feelings and notes, as given a specific goal, one can argue in favor of adopting one set of habits

rather than another set to attain that goal. Moreover, such disagreement might turn on what it takes to properly follow or apply a rule in a specific context. In this light, Ramsey's pragmatism invites us to treat the adoption and application of rules or habits as legitimate objects of analyses for the epistemology of disagreement. It thus encourages contemporary epistemologists of disagreement to expand their scope of analysis beyond propositional items, to include non-propositional items as well.[21] Future research may show the benefits of Ramsey's insights for the epistemology of disagreement.

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[21] Disagreement over non-propositional items has received comparatively little attention in the epistemology of disagreement. A notable exception is Carter and Pritchard (2015), who offer an account of how know-how disagreements ought to be framed and analyzed.

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