

**PHD THESIS SUMMARY:**  
**How to Leap Without Looking: The Role of Habits in Rational Life**

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‘Look before you leap!’ they say. I may not. This proverb captures the gist of the prevalent accounts of practical rationality. It suggests that one who wants to act in a rational way must deliberate about some features of the context of action.<sup>1</sup> I show that one may act rationally without deliberation, provided one possesses a repertoire of reliable habits and epistemic capacities. I elucidate what these habits and capacities are by drawing on underexplored conceptual resources articulated in Frank Ramsey’s philosophy and John Maynard Keynes’s economics. I bring these resources to light by developing a historical narrative of the transdisciplinary debates on rationality that emerged in the wake of the Great War in Cambridge, UK. A result is an account of rationality that suggests ‘don’t look before you leap!’ if certain conditions are met.

Chapters 1 to 3 present the historical segment of my thesis. In chapter 1, I explore the development of John Maynard Keynes’s philosophical thought from the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 to the publication of his *A Treatise on Probability* in 1921. I bring into focus the evolution of Keynes’s conceptions of human nature and rationality. This evolution is contextualized against the backdrop of discussions ignited by the Great War and Clive Bell’s aesthetic theory within the Bloomsbury group—a prominent intellectual circle that counted Keynes among its members. I argue that Keynes’s experience of war led him to believe that human nature is not reasonable. Additionally, I reveal Keynes’s growing alignment with Bell’s view that the domain of reason (as what guides us to truth) encompasses certain feelings and emotions. Finally, I show that the shift in Keynes’s changing conceptions of human nature and the domain of reason shaped his understanding of the psychology of probabilistic

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief list of proponents of this popular idea, see Kalis and Ometto (2021, 640–641) and Pollard (2010, 75).

reasoning together with his formulation of rationality as presented in his seminal work on probability.<sup>2</sup>

In chapter 2, I focus on the development of Frank Ramsey's psychological and philosophical ideas in the 1920s. I present a novel interpretation of Ramsey's pragmatist notion of habit by reading it within the context of debates occurring around the nature of motives in human behaviors and what renders a behavior rational.<sup>3</sup> I show that Ramsey adhered to a widespread view of the time, according to which human behaviors are typically guided by instincts and habits, not conscious deliberation. This view was widely understood to imply that human behaviors are instances of irrationality, for it was assumed that rational actions must be guided by conscious deliberation. Nonetheless, Ramsey's theory of action relaxed this assumption, contending that one's rational life largely involves relying on reliable habits that may operate in the absence of deliberation. Ramsey's pragmatism thus offered a novel conception of human rationality. The chapter ends with highlighting the historical significance of Ramsey's pragmatism, tracing its influence on the epistemological insights of Margaret MacDonald and Gilbert Ryle in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup>

In chapter 3, I offer a brief historical account of the evolving intellectual context during the early inter-war period at Cambridge by discussing the attraction of the Cambridge intelligentsia to the topics of human nature and rationality. Subsequently, I discuss the evolution of the later Keynes's perspectives on human nature and rationality in the 1920s and 1930s, the pragmatist-friendly aspect of those perspectives, and how they lurked in the background of Keynes's economic theory. I suggest that Ramsey and Keynes developed their ideas in tandem. They both argued for the pragmatist idea that our normative theory of human life ought to be sensitive to what we can ask from human nature. Ramsey made this argument in his philosophy. Keynes made it in his economics. I also explore how Keynes's account of economic rationality addressed certain gaps in Ramsey's theory of action. I conclude by emphasizing that the extensive scholarship on Ramsey's influence on Keynes—which has predominantly centered on their views on probability—should expand its scope. Scholars should follow the example set by Bradley W. Bateman (2021) and Bill Gerrard (2023a, 2023b), who have recently demonstrated

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<sup>2</sup> For a reconstructed version of this chapter, see Marouzi (2023).

<sup>3</sup> For a historical account of this context, see Kremer (2017).

<sup>4</sup> For a published version of this chapter, see Marouzi (2024a).

how Ramsey's pragmatist philosophy significantly shaped Keynes's thinking.<sup>5</sup>

Chapters 4 and 5 present the philosophical segment of my thesis. In chapter 4, I elucidate the nature of epistemic capacities at play in acting from those habits that do not involve deliberations and yet serve our genuine purposes. I argue that those epistemic capacities are, first, *knowing how* to execute the habit and, second, *knowing whether* acting from the habit in the situation at hand is an appropriate thing to do. I draw on Ramsey's pragmatist notion of habit to argue that the epistemic capacity of *knowing whether* is a matter of possessing a perceptual skill that enables the agent to perceive the situation at hand in the way that it ought to be perceived, given the agent's purposes, agential capacities, and the objective features of the situation.

In chapter 5, I reconstruct Ramsey's action theory and extend it by integrating insights from Keynes's notion of uncertainty and John Davis's account of reflexivity. I argue that situations of uncertainty demand the rational agent to act from her reliable habits and epistemic capacities. This argument clarifies the domain of application of the account of non-deliberative rationality developed in this thesis. Additionally, I suggest that Davis's account of reflexivity provides a valuable perspective on how reliable habits could be cultivated over time.<sup>6</sup> In doing so, I demonstrate how my account of rationality accommodates a dynamic learning theory. This chapter ends with showing how my account of rationality improves upon the contemporary literature on bounded rationality.

The historical segment of my thesis presents a novel historical narrative of the transdisciplinary debates on human nature and rationality in the aftermath of the Great War in Cambridge, UK. By examining the works of Ramsey and Keynes, it highlights the parallel development of the history of philosophy and the history of economics during the interwar years. The philosophical segment of my thesis contributes to the contemporary literature on the epistemology of rationality. It argues that one may act rationally in uncertain situations, provided one cultivates a set of reliable habits, knows how to execute those habits, and knows what reliable habit to act from in the situation at hand. Overall, my thesis uses historical research in the service of a philosophical inquiry into the nature of human rationality. It draws on the views of pragmatist thinkers to

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<sup>5</sup> For a reconstructed version of this chapter, see Marouzi (2024b).

<sup>6</sup> The latest formulation of Davis's account could be found in Davis (2024).

advance a pragmatic concept of rationality, a concept that could serve as our normative guideline in our everyday life experiences.

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**Soroush Marouzi** received his PhD in the history and philosophy of science at the Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology at the University of Toronto in 2024. He currently serves as a Research Scholar at the Center for the History of Political Economy at Duke University. His research focuses on theories of rationality in philosophy, politics, and economics. Soroush's work has appeared in *the Journal of the History of Economic Thought* and *the Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy*. His recent awards include JHET Early Career Scholar Award and the Best Conference Paper by a Young Scholar from the History of Economics Society in 2024.

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