

# Handout I: Bennett, Ch. 1: Introduction

Philosophy 691: Conditionals  
Northern Illinois University ★ Fall 2011  
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## §I. SOME QUESTIONS

### 1. First example:

“If rabbits had not been deliberately introduced into New Zealand, there would be none there today.”

- (a) Seems like a true statement! But what does it mean? It’s not a necessary truth (it doesn’t say that it’s *impossible* that there should have been rabbits in New Zealand today without their having been deliberately introduced). And it’s not about the way things actually are (at least not directly, since, in actual fact, rabbits *were* deliberately introduced into New Zealand). It’s rather a truth about a certain way things could have been, but weren’t.
- (b) Seems knowable! But how could you know that? To answer this question, it would be very nice to first know more about what it means; i.e., to answer question (a) above.
- (c) We’ll call conditionals about what “would have been” or “would be” *subjunctive* (and usually *counterfactual*; more about these terms below). Chapters 10-21 of Bennett’s book (and weeks six through ten of this class) are about these.

### 2. Second example:

“If he learned about that from Alice, then she broke a promise to me.”

- (a) Unlike the first example, this statement is more or less directly about the way things actually are. But it’s still not easy to see what it means. It doesn’t say that he *did* learn about it from Alice or that she *did* break her promise. So what does it say?
- (b) We claim to know statements like this. But how could we? Bennett:  
“When we beam our senses on the actual world, we learn unconditional things—P, Q, and R—and it is not obvious how these discoveries guide our judgments on conditional matters, how they tell us that if S, then T” (1-2).

As in the first case, an account of what the statement means will help explain how we can know it.

- (c) We’ll call conditionals about what “was” or “is” *indicative*. Chapters 2-10 of Bennett’s book (and the first five weeks of this class) are about these.

### 3. Preview of the first theory of indicatives. That the above conditional means the same as:

“It’s not the case that: he learned about that from Alice and she didn’t break a promise to me;” i.e., that ‘If it is the case that A, then it is the case that C’ means  $A \supset C$ .

### 4. Preview of three controversies:

- (a) Where is the line between indicatives and subjunctives?
- (b) Is the indicative / subjunctive distinction exhaustive?
- (c) Is the indicative / subjunctive distinction deep / important / real or superficial / insignificant / illusory?

### 5. See the antepenultimate and penultimate paragraphs of §I for motivation, encouragement, reassurances.

## §2. DEFINING ‘CONDITIONAL’

1. What is a conditional? Superficial answer (which could only be plausible as a criterion for *English* conditionals):
  - s An item is a conditional if it is expressed by an English sentence consisting of ‘If’ followed by an English sentence followed by ‘then’ followed by an English sentence.

This is too weak, since conditionals don’t need ‘then’. They also don’t need ‘if’: “Had the civil war not been fought, American slavery would have continued into the twentieth century.” So maybe:

- s\* An item is a conditional if it is *expressible* by an English sentence consisting of ‘If’ followed by an English sentence followed by ‘then’ followed by an English sentence.

(Note that s\*, unlike s, could be plausible as a general criterion, and not just for conditionals in English.)

2. Maybe too weak. The first statement below is a conditional but seems to mean something different from the second (see also the examples quoted from Davis on p. 19):

“If Mediocre State University is the only place you get in, the world won’t come to an end.”

“If Mediocre State University is the only place you get in, then the world won’t come to an end.”

3. And maybe too strong, counting as conditional statements like Cargile’s example:

“If only Joe would come to the party with his wife who always says at first that she won’t come then she does come.”

4. Bennett: “we have to go further down from the surface”. A conditional involves an operation on a pair of sentences, and so has the structure  $O_2(A,C)$ . Cargile’s example instead involves an operation (expressed by “If only...”) on a single sentence, and so has the structure  $O_1(A)$ . So, new proposal:

- s\*\* An item is a conditional if it is expressible in a sentence of the form “If [sentence A], then [sentence C]” where the effect of the whole is to apply a binary operator to propositions expressed by sentence A and sentence C.

(Note that this still seems to exclude the first Miserable State University conditional above.)

5. Two other potential problems with s\*\*:

- (a) Dudman’s example of a non-conditional incorrectly counted as a conditional by s\*\*:

“She was always home before midnight: if she missed the bus, then she would walk.”

- (b) Gibbard’s example (which applies quite generally to subjunctives):

“If the British had not attacked Suez, then Soviet troops would not have entered Hungary a few weeks later.”

This seems *not* to involve a binary operation on the propositions expressed by:

“The British had not attacked Suez.”

“Soviet troops would not have entered Hungary a few weeks later.”

- (c) Bennett’s response: the propositions operated on may not be those expressed by the component sentences considered in themselves. Here, they are the propositions expressed by:

“The British did not attack Suez.”

“Soviet troops did not enter Hungary a few weeks later.”

Important that when Bennett speaks of the “antecedent” and “consequent” of a subjunctive, he means the proposition operated on, not (necessarily) the one expressed by the component sentence considered in itself.

## §3. CHALLENGING THE TERNARY STRUCTURE

In this section, Bennett discusses Dudman’s argument against the claim that conditionals express something with the form  $O_2(A,C)$ . We won’t discuss Dudman, though we will spend time on both Lycan and Kratzer, who will “challenge the ternary structure” (but in very different ways than Dudman).

## §4-5. TWO TYPES OF CONDITIONAL; LABELS FOR THE TWO TYPES

1. Here's a pair of conditionals:

DID-DID. "If Shakespeare did not write *Hamlet*, then some aristocrat did."

HAD-WOULD. "If Shakespeare had not written *Hamlet*, then some aristocrat would have."

2. Bennett says that both express something with the structure  $O_2(A,C)$ , and that in each, A and C are:

A Shakespeare did not write *Hamlet*.

C Some aristocrat wrote *Hamlet*.

3. Since we can accept DID-DID without accepting HAD-WOULD, they must have different meanings. Since both express a binary operation on the same pair of propositions, the operation expressed by DID-DID must not be the same as the operation expressed by HAD-WOULD. (Edgington, pp. 237-238, may be helpful here. She says that the operation expressed by DID-DID can be represented by the "sentence frame":

*"If it is the case that... , then it is the case that..."*

and that expressed by HAD-WOULD by the sentence frame:

*"If it were the case that... , then it would be the case that..."*

4. Some, most notably Gibbard, have held that the two types of conditional have almost nothing in common; he says that their logical similarities are "little more than a coincidence".
5. Against Gibbard, most writers have held out hope for a "Y-shaped analysis" that develops an account of each of the two types from a common core. This is what I'm calling a "unification theory". Bennett is sympathetic to the desire for a Y-shaped analysis and voices agreement with Stalnaker's argument against Gibbard, but (in chapter 23) he seems pretty unimpressed with all of the Y-shaped analyses that have been given, and doesn't offer one of his own. His accounts of indicatives and subjunctives are so different that it's not easy to see how they could be unified in any deep way.
6. Bennett will start by accepting the distinction without elaborating it; he'll explore how paradigm examples of each kind behave, develop theories of each kind, refine the distinction on the basis of the theories, and then at the end (chapters 22-23, with a bit of a preview at the end of chapter 10) return to the topic of what they have in common.
7. At this point, the distinction is quite superficial:

In every conditional of [the HAD-WOULD] group, and in no conditional of [the DID-DID] group, the sentence expressing the consequent has 'would' as the auxiliary of its main verb (10).

8. Bennett will follow philosophical tradition in calling conditionals in the DID-DID family *indicatives* and those in the HAD-WOULD family *subjunctives*, even though he has "found no grammatical authority supporting the claim that the conditionals of the 'would' type ... employ the subjunctive mood" (11).
9. You'll often hear the word *counterfactual* employed as a name for the subjunctives. Bennett won't do this. I approve of Bennett's policy, but not the reasons he gives (they're on p. 12; see what you think).

(a) I'll use *indicative* and *subjunctive* to distinguish conditional statements at a superficial level — basically, according to the 'would' criterion Bennett gives on p. 10.

(b) I'll use *counterfactual* to name a conditional statement that expresses the kind of binary operation expressed by HAD-WOULD. Some subjunctives don't seem to count as counterfactuals in this sense:

"If you will come with me, I would like to go for a swim." (Bennett, p. 10)

"If I were to offer Eve a bribe, she wouldn't take it." (From DeRose, 'The Conditionals of Deliberation')

"If Jones had taken arsenic, he would have shown just exactly those symptoms which he does in fact show." (Said by a doctor, just before she concludes that Jones has taken arsenic. From A. R. Anderson, 'A Note On Subjunctive And Counterfactual Conditionals,' *Analysis* 12, 1951.)

## §6. THE RELOCATION THESIS

A “relocation theory” draws a different fundamental distinction between conditional statements than that between indicatives and subjunctives. Bennett used to be a relocater, but has “since seen the error of my ways”. His old arguments for relocation, and his reasons for retraction, are interesting, but we probably won’t spend any time on them.

## §7. INDEPENDENT CONDITIONALS

### 1. Compare:

1. If the river were to rise another two feet, the subway system would be flooded.
2. If the river were to rise another two feet, it would be two feet higher than it is now.

Both are subjunctives but 2, unlike 1, is what Bennett calls an *independent* conditional. What’s this?

“...in 1 the consequent is reachable from the antecedent only with help from unstated particular matters of fact, while in 2 one can get the consequent from the antecedent without input from any matters of particular fact” (16).

### 2. Three families of independents: “logical,” “causal” (which hold “as a matter of sheer physics”), and “moral”:

*Logical.* “If the closing date is Tuesday the 14th, then the closing date is a Tuesday.”

*Causal.* “If the dinghy and its contents come to weigh more than the same volume of the water they are floating in, the dinghy will sink.”

*Moral.* “If you lied to him about that, you did something morally questionable.”

### 3. Bennett’s policy:

“I plan to keep independent conditionals out of sight, and out of mind except as unloved exiles, occasionally mentioning them at places where I think one might be tempted to readmit them to the arena” (17).

### 4. Independent conditionals, if admitted, would wreak havoc on some key elements of Bennett’s theory of indicatives (in particular they violate what he’ll call in §23 the “zero-intolerance” principle; Bennett hints at this in the last full paragraph on p. 17). But he also states a principled reason for keeping them out, which is that any work they do can always be done by non-conditional statements instead. E.g., we can do everything we would do by asserting the independent conditionals above by instead asserting:

“Rising by two feet makes a river two feet higher.”

“Tuesday the 14th is a Tuesday.”

“Things sink in liquids that weigh less than they do.”

“Lying is morally questionable.”

### 5. In my opinion, this is a question-begging motivation, because some live theories of conditionals hold that any work *any* conditional does can always be done (perhaps clumsily) by non-conditional statements instead. As it happens, those theories are also untroubled by independent conditionals.

### 6. But I think there might be a better motivation for excluding independent conditionals, which is that they can always be replaced by (and are directly based on and follow from) certain *strict* conditionals. So, for example, 2 follows from and can be replaced by:

$\Box(\text{The river rises another two feet} \supset \text{the river is two feet higher than it is now})$

Exercise: come up with strict conditionals that can replace the causally and morally independent examples Bennett gives. (Hint: restrict yourself to some limited sense of necessity by using ‘ $\Box_D$ ’, with  $D$  representing the relevant domain of possible worlds—causally necessary worlds, morally obligatory worlds.)