

Handout 14: Stalnaker's *Inquiry*, Chapter 6

Philosophy 691: Conditionals
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THE BIG PICTURE

1. This is the “pragmatic picture” of belief: “Beliefs [...] are conditional dispositions to act. A rational agent is, in general and by definition, disposed to act appropriately, where what is appropriate is defined relative to his beliefs and desires. To say that an agent believes that *P* is to say something like this: the actions that are appropriate for that agent—those he is disposed to perform—are those that will tend to serve his interests and desires in situations in which *P* is true” (82).
2. On the pragmatic picture: “Propositions [...] are simply ways of distinguishing between the elements of the relevant range of alternative possibilities—ways that are useful for characterizing and expressing an agent’s attitudes toward those possibilities. To *understand* a proposition—to know the content of a statement or thought—is to have the capacity to divide the relevant alternatives in the right way. To *entertain* a proposition is to focus one’s attention on certain possibilities, contrasting them with others. To *distinguish* two propositions is to conceive of a possible situation in which one is true and the other false” (4-5).
3. Contrast: the “linguistic picture”: “Rational creatures are essentially speakers. Unspoken thought is something like inner speech—‘saying in one’s heart’ [(Geach, *Mental Acts*)]. Representational mental states represent the world because of their resemblance to, or relation with, the most basic kind of representations: linguistic expressions” (5). Chapter 2 of *Inquiry* argues that the linguistic picture can’t give us a satisfactory picture of intentionality (i.e., of a mental state’s being *about* something).
4. An agent’s “belief state” (at a time) is represented as a set of alternative possibilities representing the agent’s conception of how the world is, together with a function representing her dispositions to change that set in response to new information.

CONDITIONAL BELIEF AND CONDITIONAL PROPOSITIONS

1. Note that Stalnaker tends to use “accept” instead of “believe” in this chapter. Acceptance is a technical term; “a broader concept than belief”; belief is “obviously the most fundamental acceptance concept”; others include “presupposing, presuming, postulating, positing, assuming and supposing” (79). Attitudes of acceptance are those said to be *correct* iff the accepted proposition is *true*.
2. “What I want to explore is the idea that understanding conditional belief can help us understand the content of conditional propositions,” but “The main thing I want to do in this chapter is to sketch an account of conditional belief, and to show why conditional belief must diverge from belief in conditional propositions” (103). Hmm...
3. Conditional belief = disposition to change one’s beliefs in response to some new information: “I will assume, to begin with, that an agent’s rational dispositions to change what he accepts may be identified with his conditional beliefs, expressed in conditional sentences. To be disposed to accept *B* on learning *A* is to accept *B* conditionally on *A*, or to accept that if *A*, then *B*” (103).
4. Conditional proposition = (I *think*) a proposition expressed by a particular conditional sentence.

5. Five caveats about identifying agent's dispositions to change her beliefs as conditional beliefs:
 - (a) Disposition to accept B given $A \neq$ disposition to *assent* to 'If A , then B '. E.g., tacit beliefs, animals, etc.
 - (b) Not every disposition to accept B given A counts as a conditional belief; non-rational dispositions are excluded. ("Suppose that if I were to learn that I had a fatal disease this would trigger [a conversion] experience, causing me to become a devout believer in God" (104). Stalnaker wants to say that this doesn't imply that I believe that if I have a fatal disease, then God exists.)
 - (c) Having a disposition to accept B given A doesn't mean that you *will* accept B when you learn A ; you may learn other things at the same time as you learn A , which would lead you to abandon your disposition to accept B given A . ("But it will be in general true that so long as the total new information is compatible with the initial acceptance state, the agent will accept B whenever he initially accepts *if A , then B* , and then learns A " (105).)
 - (d) We don't assume that *all* conditionals that you accept represent your dispositions to change beliefs. E.g., counterfactuals. Stalnaker uses the term "open conditional sentence" for a conditional that represents an agent's disposition to change her beliefs; I think we can assume that open conditionals \approx indicative conditionals. Key seems to be that open conditional sentences are used only when the antecedent is neither accepted nor rejected.
 - (e) Doesn't presuppose that conditional belief = belief that a proposition is true. (GP: but if we abandon this presupposition, then how can understanding conditional belief help us to understand conditional propositions?)
6. A Big Idea: The 'projection strategy': "[N]atural necessities [GP: and, I think, conditional propositions] should be explained as projections of epistemic principles and practices onto the world" (103). More on this in chapters 7 and 8. Conditional statements seem not to be reports about our epistemic states; they seem to be the sorts of things we can be right or wrong about, disagree about, etc. On the other hand, it's hard to see what the objective corollary of a conditional belief could be (if you'll indulge the phrase: what is its mind-independent truthmaker?). The 'projection strategy' is, I think, an approach that treats conditional statements as 'objective' in some sense while acknowledging that conditional belief is not belief that some mind-independent fact obtains. (Note the parallel puzzle for moral discourse: can we both respect the idea that moral discourse is in some sense 'objective' without conceding that there are mind-independent moral facts? A friend of mine who was a student of Stalnaker's told me that Stalnaker's approach to conditionals (and 'objective' modal discourse) should be seen as a form of quasi-realism. If that helps you, great!)

CRITICISM OF THE HORSESHOE ANALYSIS

1. Initial hypothesis: open conditional sentence 'If A , then B ' means $A \supset B$. Seems plausible!
 - (a) Suppose I believe $A \supset B$ and it's an open question whether A . If I learn that A is true, then I'm "logically committed" to believing B , assuming that I don't also learn something else that requires me to give up $A \supset B$. So I have the relevant rational disposition; i.e., the conditional belief that B given A .
 - (b) Suppose I am rationally disposed to believe B given A . Then I must also believe $A \supset B$, otherwise there's some $A \ \& \ \neg B$ possibility compatible with what I believe, in which case I wouldn't be *rationally* disposed to believe B given A . ("A cannot be my *reason* for subsequently accepting B since the truth of A can give me no reason for ruling out a possibility in which A is true" (107).)
2. But horseshoe analysis can't be right, Stalnaker says:
 - (a) When you believe $\neg A$, you believe $A \supset B$ but may lack a conditional belief in B given A . We've seen a lot of examples; for variety's sake, here's Stalnaker's (more baseball!):
 - i. I believe that the Yankees won the AL pennant in 1927, so I believe that the Yankees won the AL or the NL pennant: "That is, I accept the material conditional, 'the Yankees didn't win the AL pennant in 1927 \supset they won the NL pennant in 1927'."

- ii. But I'm not disposed to believe that the Yankees won the NL pennant in 1927 upon learning that they didn't win the AL pennant in 1927; i.e., I lack the corresponding conditional belief.
- (b) Conditions under which $A \supset B$ are rejected diverge from those when 'If A, then B' is rejected.
 - i. I don't know who will win the pennant, but I'm "prepared to reject" that if the Yankees win the pennant, then the Red Sox will win the world series.
 - ii. "But the corresponding material conditional may, for all I know, be true. [GP: why? Because for all I know the Yankees won't win the pennant.] So the conditional and the material conditional cannot say the same thing" (107).
- (c) Note two key assumptions that could be resisted. I wouldn't resist the first; I might resist the second:
 - i. If I believe A, then I believe $\neg A \supset C$ for any C. Stalnaker's picture commits him to thinking that when I believe A, I believe every logical consequence of A. If you think that's implausibly strong, then you might think that I can believe A without believing some instances of $\neg A \supset C$; e.g., $\neg A \supset A$.
 - ii. Not only do I not believe the open conditional 'If the Yankees win the pennant, the Sox will win the series'; I "reject" it. I take it this means: I believe the negation of that open conditional sentence. Is this right? Note that we have no natural way of negating an entire open conditional sentence; "It's not the case that if A, then B" is not something you'd *ever* normally say.
- 3. What's been shown here? Let's ignore the case where I "reject" an open conditional sentence for a moment. There are cases where a subject believes $A \supset B$ without having the corresponding conditional belief. This is evidence against the horseshoe analysis if:

Sufficient. Whenever you believe what's expressed by an open conditional sentence 'If A, then B', you have a conditional belief in B given A.

You might think Stalnaker is assumption that to conditionally believe B given A is "to accept that if A, then B" implies Sufficient. But Stalnaker seems to deny Sufficient: he says that you can believe what someone asserts when they utter 'If A, then B' without having the corresponding conditional belief. This is a theme of his discussion of the Gibbard cases [e.g.: "I would *reject* the claim that if Pete called he won. But I still believe what Zack told me when he said, 'If Pete called, he won'." (109)] See also the "two if by sea" example on p. 108. In that example, I don't know whether the British will come by sea or by land, and I believe what you say when you assert 'If the British are coming by sea, there will be two lanterns in the church tower'. I know that there's only one lantern in the church tower, and my acceptance of what you said allows me to conclude that the British aren't coming. But I don't conditionally believe Two Lanterns given By Sea: "I initially accepted, implicitly, the contrary open conditional, if the British are coming by sea (or however they come), there is only one lantern in the tower, and I may continue to do so" (108).

DEFENDING THE HORSESHOE ANALYSIS

- i. Let's call an agent's belief in $A \supset B$ *resilient* with respect to A if she is rationally disposed to retain that belief upon learning A, and *fragile* if she is rationally disposed to abandon it upon learning A.¹ Then she conditionally believes B given A (in Stalnaker's sense) iff she resiliently believes $A \supset B$ (I think this is right, though it should be shown rather than merely asserted).

Hypothesis: the propositional content of 'If A, then B' = $A \supset B$, but 'If A, then B' should be asserted only when the speaker's belief in $A \supset B$ is resilient with respect to A. That hypothesis would explain why (a) someone who asserts 'If A, then B' expresses her conditional belief in B given A, and also why (b) someone can believe what's asserted by 'If A, then B' without conditionally believing B given A.

¹'Resilience' with respect to A is close to, but different in a crucial respect from, Jackson's 'robustness' with respect to A. For Jackson, your high confidence in $A \supset B$ is robust with respect to A iff your $P(A \supset B|A)$ is high. But when your $P(A) = 0$, your $P(A \supset B|A)$ is undefined, and so can't be high. Since we are interested in cases where 'If A, then B' is assertable even though $P(A) = 0$, resilience is better suited to the task than robustness, since there's no block to saying that your belief in $A \supset B$ is resilient even when your $P(A) = 0$.

Where does the assertability rule come from? Good question. But note that ‘ A or B ’ seems subject to a similar restriction: you should only assert that when it’s resilient with respect to $\neg A$ and to $\neg B$. Indeed, a very similar idea plays a key role in Stalnaker’s defense (in ‘Indicative Conditionals’) of the idea that or-to-if is a reasonable inference.

2. When you conditionally believe $\neg B$ given A , you’ll think you don’t believe what’s expressed by ‘If A , then B ’. On the horseshoe analysis, this is an error in any case where you believe $A \supset B$. Error theory: the distinction between *having a conditional belief* and *believing a conditional proposition* is subtle. We are inclined to regard ourselves as not believing or even disbelieving many conditional propositions which we do, in fact, believe, because we lack the conditional belief we would represent ourselves as having were we to assert those propositions.

We can extend the error theory to account for the “rejection” data, too. Suppose I conditionally believe $\neg B$ given A . Then I’ll not only refrain from asserting ‘If A , then B ’, I’ll want to express my disagreement with someone who does assert that, for I have the contrary conditional belief to the one she has expressed. Insensitive as we are to the conditional proposition that’s the content of her assertion and the conditional belief she’s expressed, it’s easy for us to think that she’s said something false when she hasn’t. (Note: this is assuming we take the “rejection” data at face value; I’m skeptical about it myself.) The error theory is not unproblematic. But what’s the alternative?

3. There’s Stalnaker’s theory employing the selection function; we’ve already seen its outlines, and chapter 7 contains more discussion. But to account for the Gibbard-style data, the Stalnakerian conditional propositions must be highly context-sensitive. “To play their methodological role, open conditionals must be too closely tied to the epistemic states of the agents who utter them for those conditionals to express propositions which could be separated from the contexts in which they are accepted” (111).
4. Then there’s NTV: say that open conditional sentences don’t express propositions and only ever express the conditional beliefs of those who assert them. Throughout the second half of chapter 6, Stalnaker seems to flirt with this idea. (E.g., he writes of “...the contrast between open and proposition-expressing conditionals...” (112), though earlier he implies that the contrast is between open propositions and those “that express propositions that can be separated from their contexts” (111).) In addition to all of the other problems we know NTV faces, we can now add this one: it makes it hard to understand what’s going on in the Gibbard and “two if by sea” cases: given NTV, how I can accept what you say when you assert ‘If A , then B ’ without myself forming the conditional belief in B given A ?
5. This defense of the horseshoe analysis draws a bright line between the propositions expressed by open conditional sentences (which, on the account, are as ‘objective’ as anything) and conditional belief (which is now made equivalent to resilient acceptance of a conditional proposition). The alternative is to make conditional propositions highly sensitive to the epistemic states of the speakers who utter them (Stalnaker), or to do away with them altogether (NTV). I’m frightened, intimidated, and mildly repulsed by most varieties of anti-realism, so for me this is a big plus.

On the other hand, the bright line reveals a surprise: on the account, we believe many conditionals we didn’t realize that we did. All forms of realism imply that we can be radically mistaken about something or other, but this mistake may be too much even for those sympathetic to realism in general to countenance.