Handout 14b: Rejecting an Open Conditional

Philosophy 691: Conditionals
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1. Focus: open conditionals / indicatives with epistemically possible antecedents.
2. Is believing that if A then C believing a proposition expressed by 'if A then C'? Reasons to think 'yes':
   (a) Methodological conservatism.
   (b) Knowledge of conditionals. Not only can you believe that if A then C, you can know that if A then C; knowledge-that is a relation to true propositions. If you can know a conditional proposition, then surely you can believe one!
3. Does 'If A then C' express different propositions at different contexts?[1] Reasons to think 'no':
   (a) Paraphrase resistance. When an expression is context-sensitive, we can generally make the context-sensitive material explicit. (E.g., "He's tall *for a basketball player*.") But there's no obvious or natural way to do this with open conditionals.
   (b) Indirect speech / belief reports.
4. If the proposition expressed by 'If A then C' doesn't vary across contexts, what is it? Answer: no good candidates other than $A \supset C$.
5. Stalnaker's "rejection" case:

   > I am not sure who will win the AL pennant, but one thing I am prepared to reject is this: if the Yankees win the pennant, then the Red Sox will win the series. But the corresponding material conditional may, for all I know, be true. So the conditional and the material conditional cannot say the same thing (*Inquiry*, 107).

   Since I don't believe Yankees, I don't believe ¬(Yankees ⊃ Red Sox). This is evidence against the horseshoe analysis if being "prepared to reject" the conditional 'if Yankees, then Red Sox' is equivalent to believing ¬(If Yankees then Red Sox). Is it? Note that the following states are all distinct from and do not require a belief that ¬(Yankees ⊃ Red Sox):

   1. I don't believe that Yankees ⊃ Red Sox. On the horseshoe analysis: I don't believe that if Yankees then Red Sox.
   2. I believe that Yankees ⊃ ¬Red Sox. On the horseshoe analysis: I believe that if Yankees then ¬Red Sox.
   3. I believe that □(Yankees ⊃ ¬Red Sox); equivalently, that ¬◇(Yankees & Red Sox). On the horseshoe analysis: I believe that it's necessary that if Yankees then ¬Red Sox.

   So if we treat the "rejection" of the conditional as equivalent to any of these three states, the case provides no (direct) evidence against the horseshoe analysis.

[1] There's another way we can understand context-sensitivity than as the expression of different propositions at different contexts. We can say that the sentence expresses the same proposition at all contexts, but that it's a proposition that can't be evaluated for truth or falsity until we take into account some feature of its context of utterance or evaluation. (Those who say that it's a feature of the context of utterance are 'contextualists' of a certain kind; those who say that it's a feature of the context of evaluation are 'relativists'.) See recent work by John MacFarlane for clear discussion of these options. I'll ignore this complication.

6. What is involved in rejecting an open conditional? We're planning our annual Saturnalia party, and considering whom to invite. I say:

   "If we invite the doctor, then Rose will want to come."

   You disagree. Here are three things you could say in response:

   (a) "Well, she might not care."
   $\approx \Diamond\neg C$, or maybe $\Diamond(A \,\&\, \neg C)$, or maybe 'If A, then $\Diamond\neg C$'.

   (b) "Oh no, she can't stand him anymore. If we invite the doctor, then she *won't* want to come."
   $\approx$ If A, then $\neg C$

   (c) "That's false. It's not the case that if we invite him, then she will want to come."
   $\approx \neg$(If A, then C)

   To my ears, (a) and (b) sound *far* more natural than (c). That's prima facie evidence that when we disagree with or reject an open indicative conditional, we're typically *not* asserting that it's false.

7. Still, the rejection data presents two challenges to the horseshoe analysis.

   i. Given horseshoe, (a) and (b) are consistent with the target conditional. But they are used to express *disagreement* with 'If A then C'. What gives?

   ii. Given horseshoe, (b) doesn't entail (c). But it seems to.

8. Let's call a pair of utterances a *consistent disagreement* when the utterances are consistent, but we interpret one as an expression of disagreement with the other. E.g.:

   "She'll get an A." / "No, she'll probably get a B."

   "Either the Packers or the Bears will win the division." / "No, it'll either be the Packers or the Lions."

   Stalnaker's picture of belief / acceptance may help us to understand what's going on in these cases. Even though neither member of each pair is inconsistent with the other, it's irrational to accept both.

   Suppose I accept that she will get an A. Then my belief set (i.e.: the set of possibilities consistent with what I accept) entails that the she will get an A; i.e., there are no possibilities consistent with what I accept in which she doesn't get an A. Suppose I accept that she will probably get a B. Then my belief set does not entail that she will get an A, since there are possibilities consistent with what I accept in which she gets a B. A rational belief set can't both entail that P and not entail that P. So, if you're rational, you can't accept both.

   Suppose I don't accept that the Packers will win, but I do accept that it will be the Packers or the Bears. Then my belief set entails that the Lions won't win. Suppose I don't accept that the Packers will win, but I do accept that it will be the Packers or the Lions. Then my belief set doesn't entail that the Lions won't win. I'm rational, so (as long as I don't accept that the Packers will win) I can't accept both disjunctions.

   Finally, suppose I don't accept $\neg A$. If I accept $A \supset C$, then my belief set entails that $\neg(A \,\&\, \neg C)$. If I accept $A \supset \neg C$, then my belief set does not entail that $\neg(A \,\&\, \neg C)$. So while $A \supset C$ and $A \supset \neg C$ are not inconsistent, they can't both be accepted by someone who doesn't accept $\neg A$.

9. This last fact may enable the horseshoer explain why (a) and (b) are naturally heard as disagreements with the open conditional 'If A then C': though they are not inconsistent with 'If A then C', one cannot consistently accept 'If A then C' while also accepting either of (a) or (b). And it may explain why we are inclined to think that (b) entails (c): no one who accepts the open conditional in (b) can rationally accept 'If A then C'.