Handout 16: Lycan, II

Philosophy 691: Conditionals
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Modus Ponens

1. The validity of Modus Ponens, given Lycan's semantics, stands or falls with the *Reality Requirement*: that all (or at least some) actual relevant events be included in $\mathcal{R}$. If we suspend the requirement, then it is possible for 'If A then C' to be true while A is true and C is false: provided no actual A-events are in $\mathcal{R}$, it may be that each $e \in \mathcal{R}$ is such that either $\neg\text{In}(e, A)$ or $\text{In}(e, C)$, while in actuality, A is true and C is false. Lycan favors abandoning the Reality Requirement, and hence rejects the validity of Modus Ponens.

2. Lycan's first argument against Modus Ponens rests on indicative Sobel sequences (we saw subjunctive Sobel sequences on Handout 8). Here is his example:

   (9) *a.* If Albert comes to the party, it will be great.
   b. If Albert and Betty come to the party, it will be awful.
   c. If Albert and Betty and Carl come to the party, it will be great [...]

   Lycan: "All the members of such a sequence may be true" (58). Suppose that (9a) and (9b) are true, and Albert and Betty come to the party. Then applying Modus Ponens to both results in a contradiction. What's a lover of Modus Ponens to do?

3. Lycan considers three replies on behalf of Modus Ponens. First, she might point out that once (9b) is accepted, we have to retract (9a): Lycan's semantics predicts this, since asserting (9b) triggers an expansion of $\mathcal{R}$, and the newly expanded $\mathcal{R}$ should falsify (9a). Lycan holds that we can felicitously expand and shrink $\mathcal{R}$ with ease. I'm skeptical: try to insist on both, without rephrasing either. But I'm also not sure what help this would be: even if (9a) and (9b) can't be true in the same context, Modus Ponens is still in trouble if they can both be true while the underlying facts of the matter are fixed. Second, she might say that (9a) is false whenever (9b) and its antecedent are true. (That's what I say! More in a moment.) Third, she might say that (9a)'s antecedent contains an elliptical *...and Betty doesn't*. Lycan says, and I agree, that this is hopeless:

   > "[O]nce we go into the business of seeing ellipsis in the antecedent whenever a conditional is threatened by Antecedent Strengthening, we find there is no end to it. Since *every* contingent conditional has some potential defeater or other, we would again have to say that every apparently contingent conditional is really elliptical for a necessary one; there are no contingently true conditionals" (62).

4. If you asserted (9a) based on Ramsey Testing, and then Albert comes to the party but it's awful, what would you say about your earlier assertion of (9a)? I *think* I'd say it was wrong / incorrect / false, even if the explanation for why the party was awful with Albert there is that, contrary to my expectations, Betty came too. "I wasn't expecting Betty to come," I'd say, not to defend my earlier assertion's truth, but rather explaining why I made it. This is all delicate data, but it suggests that if we are drawn toward (9b) and learn that its antecedent is true, we are inclined to reject (9a). This supports treating (9a) as false when (9b) and its antecedent are true.

   Lycan says that if we accept this move, we should accept an analogous move in defense of Antecedent Strengthening. When you come to accept (9b), you will be inclined to reject (9a) as it stands. This supports treating (9a) as false when (9b) is true. I agree. But, Lycan argues, if we accept Antecedent Strengthening on these grounds, then:

> "[S]ince *any* contingent conditional can have its antecedent strengthened in such a way as to produce an obvious falsehood, no contingent conditional is ever true" (61).

The analogy is imperfect. The defender of Antecedent Strengthening who wishes to avoid this result must accept that some obviously false-seeming conditionals are true (e.g., Lycan's "If you take this rifle and shoot that man right in the heart, but a team of nanobots who have traveled here from the future are standing by to repair all his tissue damage in a hundredth of a second, then he will die"). The defender of Modus Ponens must instead accept that some true-seeming conditionals (e.g., (9a) above) are false. I find the latter intuitive cost easier to bear than the former, though I have nothing to say in defense of this attitude. More below.

5. The second argument against Modus Ponens rests on this example from Gibbard:

(12–) I'll be polite if you insult me, but I won't be polite if you insult my wife.

Suppose you insult me and my wife. If Modus Ponens is valid, then (12–) is false: I am either polite or not polite; if I am not polite, the first conjunct is false; if I am polite, the second is. I agreed with Lycan above that it was implausible to treat (9a) as containing an elliptical *...and Betty doesn't*. The reason was that we can't expect speakers to intend their antecedents to contain an ellipsis ruling out every problematic strengthening in advance. But here, it seems much less implausible and ad hoc to read an elliptical *...just...* or *...alone...* into the antecedent of the first conditional. And if we do that, then Modus Ponens presents no problem: when you insult me and my wife the antecedent in the first conjunct is not true.

6. Lycan discusses an old counterexample to Modus Ponens from Van McGee: the following argument seems to have true premises and a false conclusion (as uttered some time in 1980):

> If a Republican wins the election, then if it's not Reagan who wins, it will be Anderson.
>
> A Republican will win the election.
>
> ∴ If it's not Reagan who wins, it will be Anderson.

Lycan endorses the example as a "genuine counterexample" to Modus Ponens: the premises are "just plain true" and the conclusion "just plain false" (67). But as he explains, on his semantics the reason the argument fails is that the tacit quantifier in the conditional in the consequent of the first premise is more severely restricted than that in the conclusion: the former, but not the latter, excludes events in which a Republican loses. (Note that if you force yourself restrict the conclusion with an $\mathcal{R}$ containing just events in which a Republican wins, you'll hear the conclusion as true.) I think this is a very appealing explanation of the argument's defect. But then how is the argument a "genuine counterexample" to Modus Ponens?

If the restriction on the quantifier in the conclusion is different from the restriction on the quantifier in the premise's consequent, then the argument isn't even an *instance* of Modus Ponens: the proposition expressed by the conclusion ≠ that expressed by the consequent of the first premise. Lycan actually *acknowledges* this, but disparages it as correct in a merely "technical sense" (68), and not if we use "instance" in its "ordinary loose and popular sense" (69). For myself, I'm concerned with whether Modus Ponens is valid in the technical sense, and so am happy that Lycan's semantics enables us to explain why McGee's example does not show otherwise.

7. The issue about Modus Ponens and the Reality Requirement touches on a deeper question. Respecting Modus Ponens requires thinking that "the most highly assertible conditionals are falsified by the most bizarre and unlikely events" (61). Lycan's objection to this is worth thinking about:

> "[It] would be tendentious [...] for someone to insist on *radically* non-epistemic truth-conditions for indicatives. (Often people suggest that the 'indicative' / 'subjunctive' distinction lines up well with the epistemic / metaphysical distinction.) And I see little difference between insisting on radically non-epistemic truth-conditions and just announcing that if a conditional *in fact* has a true antecedent and a false consequent, whatever the speaker's epistemic circumstances, it is false" (69).

indicatives vs. subjunctives; straights vs. boxarrows

1. Lycan adopts the terminology 'straight' vs. 'boxarrow' to name the distinction we've been calling 'indicative' vs. 'subjunctive'. Note that he excludes 'non-conditional conditionals' from the discussion. A few notable criteria of he gives for conditionality are:

   (a) Dependency between consequent and antecedent

   (b) Inferrability of consequent from antecedent (though not *valid* inferrability, apparently!)

   (c) An assertion of 'If A then C' is neither an assertion of A nor an assertion of C

   Biscuit conditionals have none of these features. Non-contraposers lack the third. See Appendix I for more.

2. The difference between straights and boxarrows consists in which events are in $\mathcal{R}$:

   > "A conditional is lexicalized straightly when its utterer holds fixed some salient fact that is looming large in his or her epistemic field, a fact that is presumably though not necessarily 'common ground' (in Stalnaker's phrase) between utterer and audience. A conditional is lexicalized boxarrowly when its utterer means to prescind from contextually salient facts and consider a generally wider range of alternative possibilities constrained only by broader and perhaps more idealized epistemic considerations" (145).

   As Lycan says, this account of the distinction is "crude and vague". But it seems to fit Adams pairs; e.g.:

   (1) *a.* If Oswald didn't shoot Kennedy, then someone else did.
   b. If Oswald hadn't shot Kennedy, then someone else would have.

   If the salient fact held fixed for (1a) is *that someone shot Kennedy*—i.e., if someone shot Kennedy at every $e \in \mathcal{R}$—then (1a) is true. The same restriction doesn't apply to (1b), letting it come out false.

3. This account of the distinction needs quite a bit more work. What makes it the case that *that someone shot Kennedy* is the salient fact restricting (1a)'s $\mathcal{R}$? Lycan mentions the following case from McDermott. I'm certain of and very interested in the fact that Oswald acted alone. That doesn't render my utterance of 'If Oswald didn't shoot Kennedy, then no one did' true, so our being certain of and interested in the fact that P doesn't suffice to restrict $\mathcal{R}$ to P-events. What does?

   Lycan says no more about the "generally wider range of alternative possibilities constrained only by broader and perhaps more idealized epistemic considerations" that characterizes a boxarrow's $\mathcal{R}$. He does say that the domain of a straight needn't be a proper subset of that of the corresponding boxarrow, which is good, otherwise $A \mathrel{\Box\!\!\rightarrow} C$ would entail $A \rightarrow C$, and it doesn't ('If Oswald hadn't killed Kennedy, then no one would would have' is (likely) true but 'If Oswald didn't kill Kennedy, then no one did' is (likely) false). So there can be additional restrictions on the boxarrow quantifier domains that don't apply to the corresponding straights; what are these? Lycan leaves this question unexplored.

4. Here's an idea. Let's restrict the domain of a straight's $\mathcal{R}$ using the Ramsey Test:

   > straight. $A \rightarrow C$ is true iff $\forall e[e \in R][\text{In}(e, A) \supset \text{In}(e, C)]$, where $e \in \mathcal{R}$ only if $P(e \text{ occurs}|A)$ is high.

   The idea is: e is relevant to the truth of $A \rightarrow C$ only if Ramsey Testing on A yields a very high probability for the conjunction of every P such that $\text{In}(e, P)$. E.g., when I Ramsey Test on 'Oswald didn't kill Kennedy,' all the (relevant) events with high probabilities are events in which someone killed Kennedy. Only such events get into $\mathcal{R}$, and so (1a) comes out true. It is not the holding fixed of a salient fact that gets the right restriction; it's Ramsey Testing on the antecedent. (Note that this proposal is in tension with the Reality Requirement and hence with Modus Ponens. Suppose $\neg C$ is true. The Reality Requirement says that $\mathcal{R}$ must include some $\neg C$-events. Still it might be that my $P(C|A)$ is very high, in which case the proposal would prevent any $\neg C$-events from making it into $\mathcal{R}$.)

Can we restrict the domain of a boxarrow's $\mathcal{R}$ by employing the notion of closeness, which we've already expended so much time and energy on? E.g.:

> BOXARROW. $A \mathrel{\Box\!\!\rightarrow} C$ is true iff $\forall e[e \in R][\mathrm{In}(e, A) \supset \mathrm{In}(e, C)]$, where $e \in \mathcal{R}$ only if e is a closest A-event.

Since events are not maximal (and may be quite 'small') we can't directly employ ramp-n-fork or Lewis's criteria as determiners of event closeness. One option is to let the closeness of an event piggyback on the closeness of the worlds at which it occurs: e is close iff e occurs at a close world. But this route would rob Lycan's approach of one of its attractions, which is that it seems (at the outset) able to eschew some of the difficult questions about world similarity that face the Lewis-Stalnaker approach. Perhaps some notion of 'closeness' can be extracted from his vague remarks about the "broader and perhaps more idealized epistemic considerations" that restrict the domain of a boxarrow's quantifier, but clearly there is much to be done.