Handout 18: Edgington on Counterfactuals

Philosophy 691: Conditionals
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getting something off my chest

1. We should be careful to distinguish conditional belief in C given A from belief in the semantic content of 'if A then C'. The former is (*very roughly*) a rational disposition to believe C upon learning A. The latter is an attitude towards what is expressed by an English sentence. With this distinction in place, there is no clear path from data about conditional belief to conclusions about the semantic contents of conditional sentences or assertions of those sentence.

2. Two places where we've seen this path presupposed:

   (a) Edgington, Bennett: conditional belief is not belief in a proposition → the sentence 'If A then C' (or: an assertion of that sentence) does not express a proposition.

   (b) Stalnaker, Lycan: conditional belief can be modeled as belief in a proposition that makes reference to the speaker's epistemic state → the sentence 'if A then C' (or: an assertion of that sentence) expresses a proposition that makes reference to the speaker's epistemic state

3. You can believe something to varying degrees of certainty. You can believe with 99% certainty that P, 85% certainty that Q, etc. You can't assert something to varying degrees of certainty. (You can assert, "I'm 99% that P", but that's not the same thing as making a 99% certain assertion that P.)

4. Hypothesis that I find attractive: X is assertible by S only if S is warrantedly certain that X. Three little arguments. All presuppose that *some* degree of warranted certainty is necessary for assertibility:

   (a) No matter how high the odds, you can't warrantedly assert that someone's lottery ticket has lost on the basis of the odds. Explanation: you can't assert that X when your warranted certainty that X is less than 100%.

   (b) When your warranted certainty in X is less than 100%, you can truly say that you are not certain that X. But you can never appropriately say "X and I am not certain that X". Explanation: you can't assert that P when your warranted certainty that P is less than 100%.

   (c) Suppose you can assert that X only if $C(X) \geq n$, where $C(X)$ denotes your warranted certainty in X and $n < 1$. A and B are probabilistically independent. When your $C(A) = n$ and your $C(B) = n$ you can assert A and you can assert B but you can't assert $A \,\&\, B$, since your $C(A \,\&\, B) = n^2 < n$. E.g., suppose $n = 0.999$. You know that there are a thousand balls in the bag, 998 of which are black, one of which is red, and one of which is green. I have chosen a ball at random and am holding in my closed fist. You can assert that the ball is not green and you can assert that it is not red, but you cannot assert that it is black. This is absurd. So $n = 1$.

5. Relevance: suppose that 'If A then C' expresses $A \supset C$. This rule means that you can only assert 'If A then C' when your warranted certainty in $A \supset C$ is 100%; i.e., when $C(A \supset C) = 1$. But it's easy to prove that when your $C(\neg A) < 1$ and $C(A \supset C) = 1$, your $C(C|A) = 1$. Supposing that someone conditionally believes that C given A iff her $C(C|A) = 1$, this explains why appropriately asserting 'If A then C' while being uncertain that $\neg A$ expresses the speaker's conditional belief in C given A.

6. If it's never appropriate to assert 'If A then C' when you are less than certain that if A then C, then we should refrain from treating facts about uncertain conditional belief as evidence about what is (typically) asserted by an appropriate utterance of 'If A then C'.

Edgington on Counterfactuals

1. The Suppositional View of Indicatives:

   (a) An assertion of 'If A then C' is "not a categorical assertion of a proposition, true or false as the case may be" but a conditional assertion of C under the supposition of A.

   (b) "A conditional belief is not a categorical belief that something is the case; it is a belief in the consequent in the context of a supposition of the antecedent" (2).

   "The strongest evidence for this view comes from considering uncertain conditional judgments." I agree that these considerations give strong evidence for the bit about belief, but disagree that they do so for the bit about assertions.

2. Edgington sides with Lycan over Bennett: we should not suppose that there is a radical difference in meaning between indicatives and subjunctives. Lycan takes this as evidence against Bennett's NTV view of indicatives. Edgington goes the other way, and takes it as evidence against the truth-conditional view of subjunctives.

3. Past tense probability judgments are not judgments about how probable I thought something was; they are judgments about how probable something *was*. We can make such judgments in a suppositional context: supposing Oswald hadn't shot Kennedy, was it probable that he would still be killed?

4. Suppositional View of Subjunctives: "[S]ubjunctive conditionals [normally express] your view about how likely it *was* that C *would have* happened, given that A had" (5). ('Normally' because of future-directed subjunctives and antecedents that don't concern any particular time.)

5. The use of subjunctives in abductive reasoning:

   (a) 'I think the patient took arsenic; for he has such-and-such symptoms; and these are the symptoms he would have if he had taken arsenic.'

   (b) 'They're not at home; for the lights are off; and if they had been at home, the lights would have been on.'

   E says that "these are not intended as deductively valid arguments" (6) and that seems right about the first; what about the second?

6. First argument against truth-conditions. 'If you touch that wire you will get a shock.' [Time passes; I don't touch the wire, but you test it with an instrument and say:] 'You see, if you had touched it you would have got a shock.' It's quite odd to say that the meaning of the first conditional is radically different than the meaning of the second. If we go NTV with the first, we should do so for the second.

7. Second argument. Suppose Lewis / Lycan truth-conditions for $A \mathrel{\Box\!\!\rightarrow} C$. I am certain that in some small portion of the closest stranger-approaching worlds, the dog doesn't bite. Then on Lewis / Lycan, I should be certain that You Approach $\mathrel{\Box\!\!\rightarrow}$ Dog Bites is false. But I am not; I am fairly sure that it's true: in my opinion, it's probable that if you had approached, the dog would have bitten you. Or: the doctor thinks it's 90% likely that I would have been cured if I had had the operation. She is certain that the Lewis / Lycan truth condition does not obtain: in 10% of the closest worlds / relevant events, I have the operation and am not cured. But she doesn't reject the counterfactual as false; she's 90% certain of it.

8. Response to second argument: distinguish:

   90% : Operation $\mathrel{\Box\!\!\rightarrow}$ Cure

   Operation $\mathrel{\Box\!\!\rightarrow}$ 90% : Cure

Edgington's argument is blunted if the doctor's belief is in the second. But, E says:

(a) Doctor needn't think that in all the closest Operation worlds there's a 90% chance of Cure: "Indeed, it is compatible with her belief that she thinks some ways in which the operation could have gone would have had a very low chance of success" (10).

(b) Second, the conjunction, "Certainly it's not the case that Operation $\Box\!\!\rightarrow$ Cure, though Operation $\Box\!\!\rightarrow$ 90% Cure" sounds horrible. "There are not really two distinct natural ways of hearing these uncertain conditionals."

9. Alternative response: modify Lewis / Lycan in the way considered by Hawthorne: $A \Box\!\!\rightarrow C$ is true iff at most of the closest A-worlds / relevant A-events, C. Arguments against:

   (a) Suppose the threshold is $n\%$ and you know that $n\%$ of relevant A-events are C events. Then on the proposal you can be certain that $A \Box\!\!\rightarrow C$. But that's weird. It seems that knowing this makes it okay for you to be $n\%$ certain of $A \Box\!\!\rightarrow C$.

   (b) Suppose you know that exactly $(n-1)\%$ of relevant A-events are C-events. Then on the proposal you can be certain that $A \Box\!\!\rightarrow C$ is false. But that's equally strange.

   (c) Hawthorne-style objection: Agglomeration fails.

10. A proposal that E does not consider in detail here: try to do it with Stalnaker's semantics. "There have been some attempts to develop such a theory [...] but all ran into difficulties. I am inclined to think that if there were anything promising to be discovered along these lines it would have been discovered by now" (14).