Handout 7: NTV

Philosophy 691: Conditionals
Northern Illinois University ★ Fall 2011
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1. Rather than following Bennett's discussion in chapters 7 and 8 closely, I want to explore two different developments of an NTV theory of indicatives. Bennett discusses each sympathetically, without really favoring either. To my knowledge, no one has expended much energy in developing the first, though Gibbard (1981) seems to endorse it. Edgington is the best-known proponent of the second (see §7.3 of her (1995)); DeRose and Grandy are supporters:

   (a) *Expressivism.* When a speaker asserts $A \rightarrow C$, she *expresses*, but does not *report*, her high conditional credence in C, given A; i.e., her high value for $P(C|A)$.

   (b) *Conditional assertion.* When a speaker asserts $A \rightarrow C$, she makes a conditional, not a categorical, assertion. $A \rightarrow C$ is a device for conditionally asserting C given A, not for (unconditionally) asserting anything.

2. Don't see the two views as competitors; they may be two sides of the same coin.

3. Both say what a speaker means when she asserts $A \rightarrow C$. But we can (apparently) accept or believe $A \rightarrow C$ without asserting it. So neither is a complete account of the meaning of $A \rightarrow C$.

1. We're eating ice cream together. Saying "Yum!" is a way for you to express your enjoyment of the ice cream. So is saying "I'm enjoying the ice cream." The latter asserts a statement with truth-conditional content; it's true iff you are enjoying the ice cream. The former does not. It appears to have no truth-conditions, and seems (to me, at least) not to be an assertion at all.

2. One way of bringing out the contrast is to consider what is involved in *agreeing* or *disagreeing* each of the utterances:

   (a) "Yum!" If I agree with your utterance, then I am enjoying the ice cream too. If I disagree with your utterance, then I am not enjoying the ice cream. When an utterance is a (mere) expression of an attitude, agreeing / disagreeing is purely a matter of sharing / not sharing the expressed attitude.

   (b) "I'm enjoying the ice cream." If I agree with your utterance, then I believe that you are enjoying the ice cream. If I disagree with your utterance, then I don't believe that you are enjoying the ice cream. When the utterance is (primarily) a report of an attitude, agreeing / disagreeing is (primarily) a matter of believing / not believing that the speaker has the reported attitude.

3. Expressivism has been developed primarily as a theory in metaethics; the basic idea is that when someone makes a first-order moral claim ("Stealing is wrong;" "You should help those in need;" etc.) she isn't stating something that's true or false, but rather expressing an attitude of some kind (it is not easy to specify exactly what attitude is supposed to be expressed; the best version (I think) is Gibbard's idea that it is *endorsement of a norm*.)

4. The expressivist theory of indicatives that Bennett seems to like says that when a speaker asserts $A \rightarrow C$, she expresses her high conditional credence in C given A, but does not assert anything with a truth-conditional content. In particular, she does not *report* that she has a high $P(C|A)$. (Maybe a better, Gibbard-inspired version: asserting $A \rightarrow C$ is a way of *endorsing* a high $P(C|A)$? That might help to make sense of the kind of epistemic commitment that I take on when I assert / accept $A \rightarrow C$. I take on no analogous commitment when I say "Yum!"; saying "Yum!" doesn't involve an endorsement of my enjoyment.)

5. Jackson and Pettit (1998) argue that metaethical expressivists can't avoid the conclusion that someone who utters (e.g.) "Stealing is wrong" thereby reports that he has a certain attitude concerning stealing. Their paper is short and clear; see what you think. Bennett's response (§44) is worth dwelling on.

   (a) Our best source of evidence about the meaning of a sentence-type S comes from the question: what, normally and in the most general sense, does someone intend to bring about by saying 'S'?

   (b) When the answer is "To get her interlocutors to believe that P," that's when 'S' means that P. E.g., the general purpose of asserting "The door is closed" is to get your listeners to believe that the door is closed. Note that in general a speaker can accomplish this goal only by first getting her interlocutors to believe that *she* believes that P, but you can see how the goal of getting your interlocutors to believe that you believe that P is not the primary goal of asserting 'S'.

   (c) Bennett: normally and generally speaking, the point of asserting $A \to C$ is to get your listener to have a high $P(C|A)$, *not* to get him to believe that you have a high $P(C|A)$.

   (d) Note: this is a *defensive* argument, meant to shore up the expressivist theory against the charge that it collapses into the view that an assertion of $A \to C$ reports the speaker's high $P(C|A)$. This argument does not directly support expressivism or NTV.

CONDITIONAL ASSERTION

1. Usually, when you utter a declarative sentence 'S' that means that P, you express your belief that P and thereby assert that P. Edgington's idea: when you utter a conditional sentence '$A \to C$', you express your conditional belief in C given A, thereby conditionally asserting that C given A.

2. Edgington says that "a conditional assertion 'If A, B' is an assertion of B when A is true, and an assertion of nothing when A is false" (1995, p. 290). DeRose and Grandy say something similar (see their p. 407f.).

   It is implausible (in my opinion) to say that when A is false, someone who utters $A \to C$ *has asserted nothing*. But this might be stronger than the conditional assertion view needs to be. More carefully, we might say that whether A is true or false, by uttering $A \to C$ there is nothing that the speaker *categorically* or *unconditionally* asserts, and what she *conditionally* asserts is the same whether A is true or false; to wit, C. One key difference between categorical and conditional assertion will show up in the appropriateness conditions for the speech acts. Unlike a categorical assertion of C, which is wrong / false / should be retracted whenever C is (discovered to be) false, a conditional assertion of C given A is only wrong / false / should be retracted when A is true and C is false.

   We might tweak this by saying that a conditional assertion of C given A is, when A is true, also a categorical assertion of C; and, when A is false, not a categorical assertion of anything. This add-on seems harmless, but unimportant.

3. Does a conditional assertion of C given A have a truth value? Edgington suggests:

   EDGINGTON. An assertion of $A \to C$ is (a) true when $A \& C$, (b) false when $A \& \neg C$, and (c) otherwise neither.

   Note that EDGINGTON specifies when *an assertion of* $A \to C$ is true or false, and not when $A \to C$ is true or false. Bennett discusses an idea he calls Adams**, which is basically EDGINGTON, though he does not carefully distinguish between a statement's having a truth-value and an assertion's having a truth value. McDermott (1996) defends the idea that conditionals express a proposition whose truth value is that of the consequent when the antecedent is true and which is otherwise truth-valueless.

4. Edgington's analogy with commands: "If A, C!" isn't naturally interpreted as a command that $A \to C$ be made true. By analogy (I guess) we're supposed to think that an assertion of the form "If A, then C" isn't best thought of as an assertion that $A \to C$ is true. (See also DeRose & Grandy, p. 410). Given that there are so many differences between commands and assertions, what is the significance of this point?

   I disagree with what Bennett says about conditional questions. I have a hard time parsing "If she sang, could you hear that she had a cold?" but no trouble at all with "If John is over 60, is he entitled to a rail card?" I can't think of examples of conditional questions that aren't interpretable as questions about whether $A \supset C$, $A \to C$, or $A \dashv3 C$.

5. Lycan has a litany of objections to the idea of conditional assertion. We'll look at a few next time.

1. One of our initial motivations for attempting to figure out what $A \rightarrow C$ means was to understand how we can know that $A \rightarrow C$ (see Handout 1 and Bennett §1).

2. There is a near-universal consensus among epistemologists that if you know that P, then P is true.

3. If some version of NTV is correct, then either this consensus is misguided, or you cannot, in general, know that $A \rightarrow C$. Since it's obvious that you *can* know indicative conditionals, the consensus must be misguided if NTV is correct.

4. A possible reply: Just as Edgington and Bennett think that conditional belief is a distinct kind of belief (and that conditional assertion is a distinct kind of assertion), you might say that conditional knowledge is a distinct kind of knowledge. What would the details look like? What is it to conditionally know that C given A?