Handout 7b: Lycan on Conditional Assertion

Philosophy 691: Conditionals
Northern Illinois University ⋆ Fall 2011
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1. Many conceivable ideas could be called "conditional assertion theories". Here is the one we are interested in:

   > The conditional statement $A \rightarrow C$ doesn't express anything with a truth value. Accepting $A \rightarrow C$ is equivalent to conditionally believing C given A, i.e., having a high subjective $P(C|A)$. So what is going on when you assert $A \rightarrow C$? You're making a conditional assertion of C given A.

   We could go on to define conditional assertion as Edgington and DeRose & Grandy do:

   > *Reductive CA.* S conditionally asserts C given $A =_{df.}$ if A is true, S asserts C; otherwise, S asserts nothing.

   Or we could be more cautious, treating conditional assertion as a species of assertion contrasted with unconditional or categorical assertion. When A is not true, someone who conditionally asserts $A \rightarrow C$ does not assert ***nothing***, though she does not categorically assert anything. I think several of Lycan's objections are blunted if we go this way.

2. The idea naturally suggests a way of assigning truth-values to assertions of $A \rightarrow C$. When A is true, an assertion of $A \rightarrow C$ has the same truth-value as C. When A is not true, an assertion of $A \rightarrow C$ has no truth-value. This is ***not*** the same thing as saying that $A \rightarrow C$ is true when $A \& C$ and false when $A \& \neg C$ and otherwise truth-valueless. The claim concerns the truth-values of conditional assertions, not the truth-values of conditional sentences.

3. First objection: contraposition is "utterly ruled out from the beginning":

   > If a conditional is used to assert something true, that is because its antecedent is true and so is its consequent. But then its contrapositive has a false antecedent, and so cannot be used to assert anything whatever.

   If we do not define conditional assertion in terms of unconditional assertion, this objection has no weight; even when C is true, asserting $\neg C \rightarrow \neg A$ is a conditional assertion of $\neg A$ given $\neg C$.

   Still, we might wonder how bad the objection would be. Many indicatives do not naturally contrapose. Some contrapositives of acceptable indicatives are weird; others seem false:

   > *Weird:* If Sally shows up at the department meeting, then I'll show up.
   > #If I don't show up at the department meeting, then Sally won't show up.
   > Biscuits, monkey's uncles (There are biscuits on the sideboard if you want some, If Hitler was a military genius then I'm a monkey's uncle)
   >
   > *False:* If it rains, then it won't rain heavily.
   > × If it rains heavily, then it won't rain.

4. Second objection: assertions of nested conditionals are problematic. Well, distinguish between conditionals with conditional antecedents, and conditionals with conditional consequents. Lycan acknowledges that a CA theorist can handle the latter; in asserting $A \rightarrow (B \rightarrow C)$ I make a conditional conditional assertion. Conditional antecedents are harder. But indicatives with conditional antecedents are typically unacceptable anyway! We've been through this before, haven't we?

   Maybe not always. Edgington's example:

If John should be punished if he took the money, then Mary should be punished if she took the money.

That seems like it could be acceptable. What's the CA theorist to say? Here's what Edgington says (and Lycan ignores). She endorses Dummett's line, whereby someone who asserts this is actually asserting something metalinguistic:

If you accept that [. . .], then you must accept that [. . .].

5. The TT objection. CA theorist says that an assertion of $A \rightarrow C$ is always true when A and C are true. But (says Lycan) even if A and C are both true, the following conditional is false:

   If you do not finish mowing the yard this afternoon, then in 2017 there will be violent solar flares.

   But first, note that the CA theorist we're considering doesn't say that this *conditional* is true when A and C are true. She says that someone who utters it makes a true conditional assertion when A and C are true.

   Second, isn't there a Gricean story here? Surely conditionally asserting C given A is going to typically implicate that there's some connection between A and C; in this case, that's obviously false.

   Third, distinguish between an assertion's being ***not true*** and it's being ***unwarranted***. When I imagine an assertion of that conditional under the stipulation that A and C are both true, I am strongly inclined to regard the assertion as unwarranted, but I have no strong sense that it's not true.

6. Propositional attitudes. What do we mean when we say that S believes that $A \rightarrow C$? This is a tough question, but it's not clear what it has to do with CA. Anybody who believes that $A \rightarrow C$ doesn't express a proposition is going to need a story about what we're doing when we attribute to somebody the belief that $A \rightarrow C$. Edgington has one; it's that we attribute to him a conditional belief in C given A; i.e., a high $P(C|A)$.

   Lycan is right that it's hard to see how to extend this story to nondoxastic attitudes like hope, desire, fear, etc.:

   I fear that if John comes to the party, he'll wind up getting into a fight.

   She's hoping to go to Bali if the chemotherapy works.

   We all want Sally to be here for Thanksgiving if she can stay sober.

   So: hard question, a problem for the CA part of the CA theory? I don't think so. It's a problem for NTV.