

Philosophy 691: Conditionals

www.niu.edu/~gpynn/conditionals.html
Northern Illinois University * Fall 2011
Founders Memorial Library 352 * T / Th 2:00 - 3:15

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No word is more familiar than ‘if’. Any competent speaker of English can deploy and understand a bewildering variety of conditional statements. But what do they mean? This question belongs primarily to the philosophy of language and logic, but answering it also requires discussion of issues in metaphysics, philosophy of mind, epistemology, and probability theory.

Because conditionals are everywhere, they are intrinsically interesting. Their ubiquity in everyday life is mirrored in philosophy, so careful consideration of their nature has instrumental philosophical value as well. Here are a few philosophical topics where conditionals play an important role:

1. Metaphysics and philosophy of science: causation; dispositions; laws of nature; temporal asymmetry; free will
2. Epistemology: counterfactual and reliabilist accounts of knowledge and justification; safety and sensitivity; epistemic modality
3. Ethics and decision theory: deliberation; obligation; Newcomb’s problem (and other puzzles)
4. Philosophy of religion: God’s foreknowledge of free actions (the “middle knowledge” debate)

READING

The course will be largely structured around Jonathan Bennett’s *A Philosophical Guide To Conditionals*. You should also obtain a copy of Dorothy Edgington’s book-length paper “On Conditionals” (*Mind*, 104:235-329). We will read half of William Lycan’s *Real Conditionals*, so you might want to purchase that book as well. Other readings will either be linked from the course website, or taken from one of the following books:

- *The Logic of Conditionals*, Ernest Adams (D. Reidel; on reserve at FML)
- *Probability and Conditionals*, Eells and Skyrms, eds. (Cambridge University Press; on reserve at FML)
- *Studies in The Ways of Words*, Paul Grice (Harvard University Press; not owned by FML)
- *Conditionals*, Frank Jackson (Blackwell; on reserve at FML)
- *Counterfactuals*, David Lewis (Blackwell; on reserve at FML)
- *Philosophical Papers, Vol. II*, David Lewis (Oxford University Press; on reserve at FML)
- *Context and Content*, Robert Stalnaker (Oxford University Press; on reserve at FML)
- *Inquiry*, Robert Stalnaker (MIT Press; on reserve at FML)
- *Content and Modality*, Thomson and Byrne, eds. (Oxford University Press; on reserve at FML)

POLICIES

Handouts, assignments, and any changes to the syllabus will be posted on the course website. Grades will be posted on Blackboard.

There will be seven quizzes, the first on Thursday, 8/25, and then every second Thursday after that. In addition, each student will be responsible for leading one session of the class. A schedule for class presentations will be available a week or so after the semester begins; more detailed instructions are given below. Finally, each student must submit an original research paper of 3,000–4,000 words. The only topical requirement for the paper is that it concern a question, problem, or argument discussed in one of our course readings; detailed instructions will follow later in the semester. The paper is due on Monday, Dec. 5 (the first day of final exam week). Late papers will not be accepted.

Course grades will be calculated using the following percentages:

- 25%: Presentation
- 25%: Quizzes
- 50%: Research paper

Percentages translate into letter grades as follows: A = 90% and up; B = 80–89.9%; C = 65–79.9%; D = 50–64.9%; F = 49.9% and below. Note that the NIU Graduate Catalog defines ‘C’ as ‘marginal performance’, ‘B’ as ‘satisfactory performance’, and ‘A’ as ‘superior performance’. I follow those definitions.

According to the Catalog, “Students are considered to have cheated if they copy the work of another during an examination or turn in a paper or an assignment written, in whole or in part, by someone else. Students are guilty of plagiarism, intentional or not, if they copy material from books, magazines, or other sources or if they paraphrase ideas from such sources without acknowledging them. Students guilty of, or assisting others in, either cheating or plagiarism on an assignment, quiz, or examination may receive a grade of F for the course involved and may be suspended or dismissed from the university.” Incidents of suspected cheating or plagiarism will be handled following the guidelines given in the *Academic Regulations* section of the Catalog.

PRESENTATIONS

The goal of your presentation is to teach and lead discussion on the assigned material for that class day. The pedagogical purpose of this exercise is for you to gain deep knowledge of one issue or debate in the literature on conditionals (nothing teaches you something like having to teach it yourself!), and for you to practice clear, confident philosophical speaking, which is an essential skill in our discipline.

You must meet with me to discuss your presentation before you give it. Our default meeting time will be during my office hours after class one week before your presentation. You should have done the relevant reading and made an outline of your presentation *before* we meet; the purpose of our meeting is to ensure that you’re adequately prepared. If significant repairs are necessary, I will require you to come for a second meeting before your presentation.

A NOTE ON DIFFICULTY

The philosophical literature on conditionals is vast and intimidating (to say nothing of the parallel literatures in linguistics and cognitive science). Not even the simplest claims about conditionals are uncontroversial, and perhaps more than in other areas of philosophy, here the devil is truly in the details. So this course will be quite demanding, and at times you will almost certainly find yourself bamboozled, baffled, and lost. You will need to spend a good deal of time reading and re-reading the assignments; in no case will a cursory skim do the job. But Bennett’s book is a very clear and helpful (if opinionated) guide, and with serious preparation for class I think you will find the course to be quite rewarding. Please do not hesitate to ask questions—in class, in office hours, or by email—whenever you feel like your best efforts to understand what’s going on have failed.

OVERVIEW

Philosophers traditionally divide conditionals into two categories: “indicatives” and “subjunctives”.¹ The easiest way to distinguish them is by example; here is a famous pair from Ernest Adams:

IND If Oswald didn’t kill Kennedy, then someone else did.

SUB If Oswald hadn’t killed Kennedy, then someone else would have.

While IND seems obviously correct, SUB is tendentious. SUB concerns an alternative possible history of the world, while IND is in some difficult-to-specify sense about the way things actually are.

In the first part of the course, we will examine two approaches to understanding indicatives: the material conditional analysis (according to which ‘If A, then C’ is true if and only if either A is false or C is true), and the no-truth-value approach, according to which indicative conditionals do not (or at least not usually) have truth-values. The deep chasm between these approaches is bridged by what Bennett calls The Equation (a very plausible claim equating the probability of ‘If A, then C’ with the conditional probability of C given A) and what Edgington calls The Bombshell (the result, first proved by David Lewis, that given The Equation, the probability of a conditional cannot be the probability of a truth-valued proposition).

In the second part of the course, we will study the dominant framework for understanding subjunctive conditionals: the possible worlds approach to counterfactuals developed by David Lewis and Robert Stalnaker. The framework starts with the idea that ‘If A were the case, C would be the case’ is true if and only if, at all the possible worlds “closest to” the actual world where A is true, C is true. Many fascinating and daunting questions arise when attempting to develop that framework into a theory.

Finally, we will turn to some attempts to give a unified account of indicatives and subjunctives. One, best exemplified by Robert Stalnaker’s work, extends the possible worlds framework to include indicatives. This approach intersects with influential work in semantics by Angelika Kratzer and is related to William Lycan’s interesting theory of conditionals as quantifiers over events. The other unified approach (championed primarily by Dorothy Edgington) extends the no-truth-value approach to subjunctives.

SCHEDULE

Quiz dates have boxes around them. Readings marked with a “*” are optional: you would benefit from studying them, but they are not essential preparation for class. For example, “Bennett, ch. 5 *(§27, 28, 29)” means that Bennett, ch. 5 is required except for sections 27, 28, and 29, which are optional. Readings marked with a ‘+’ offer further background or development of the themes in the required and optional readings. References of the form ‘LastName (Year), “Title”’ correspond to entries in Bennett’s bibliography.

8/23 Introduction. Logic review. “Indicatives” vs. “subjunctives”.
READING: Bennett, ch. 1

I: INDICATIVES

The Material Conditional Analysis

8/25 Grice
READING: Bennett, ch. 2
Edgington, “On Conditionals” (§2)
Jackson, *Conditionals*, ch. 2 (pp. 17-22)
*Grice, *Studies in the Ways of Words*, chs. 2, 4
+Strawson (1986), “If’ and ‘ \supset ”

¹These standard labels are misleading, since there is agreement among linguists that the grammatical markers associated with each type of conditional are correlated with tense and aspect, not mood.

- 8/30 Jackson
 READING: Bennett, ch. 3
 Jackson, *Conditionals*, ch. 2 (pp. 22-42), *ch. 5
 +Jackson (1979), "On Assertion and Indicative Conditionals"
- 9/1 Defending the MCA
 READING: Thomson (1990), "In Defense of \supset "
 William Hanson, "Indicative Conditionals are Truth-Functional" (*Mind*, 100:1, 1991)
 *Adam Rieger, "A Simple Theory of Conditionals" (*Analysis*, 66:3, 2006)

Indicatives and Conditional Probability

- 9/6 The Equation
 READING: Bennett, ch. 4
 Edgington, "On Conditionals" (§5)
 +Stalnaker (1970), "Probability and Conditionals"
 +Igor Douven and Sara Verbrugge, "The Adams Family" (*Cognition*, 117:3, 2010)

9/8

- The Bombshell
 READING: Bennett, ch. 5 *(§27, 28, 29)
 Edgington, "On Conditionals" (§6)
 *Lewis (1976), "Probabilities of Conditionals and Conditional Probabilities"
 +Lewis (1986f), "Probabilities of Conditionals and Conditional Probabilities II"
 +Hájek (1994), "Triviality on the Cheap?" (in Eells and Skyrms, *Probability and Conditionals*)

The No Truth Value Theory

- 9/13 Preparing the Ground for NTV
 READING: Bennett, ch. 6
 *Gibbard (1981b), "Two Recent Theories of Conditionals"
 +Stalnaker, *Inquiry*, ch. 6
- 9/15 Arguments for NTV
 READING: Bennett, ch. 7 *(§39, 40)
 Edgington, "On Conditionals" (§7)
 Lycan, *Real Conditionals*, ch. 4
- 9/20 Developing NTV
 READING: Bennett, ch. 8
 +DeRose & Grandy (1999), "Conditional Assertions and 'Biscuit' Conditionals"

9/22

- Scorekeeping
 READING: Bennett, ch. 9 *(§55, 56, 60)
 William Lycan, "Conditional-Assertion Theories of Conditionals" (in Thomson and Byrne, *Content and Modality*)
 *E. J. Lowe, "Conditional Probability and Conditional Belief," (*Mind*, 105:420, 1996)
 +Adams (1975), *The Logic of Conditionals*

II: SUBJUNCTIVES

The Received View

- 9/27 First Steps
READING: Bennett, ch. 10
Lewis, *Counterfactuals*, ch. 1
- 9/29 Some Initial Problems: Limits, Density, Ties
READING: Bennett, ch. 11 (§70, 71)
Stalnaker (1968), "A Theory of Conditionals"
- 10/4 Conditional Excluded Middle
READING: Bennett, ch. 11 (§72)
Stalnaker (1978), "A Defense of Conditional Excluded Middle"
+Adams (1987), "Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil"
- 10/6 Might Counterfactuals
READING: Bennett, ch. 11 (§73)
DeRose (1999), "Could It Be That It Would Have Been Even Though It Might Not Have Been?"
J. Robert Williams, "Defending Conditional Excluded Middle" (*Nôus*, 44:4, 2010)

Closeness

- 10/11 Forks
READING: Bennett, chs. 12-13
Lewis (1979), "Counterfactual Dependence and Time's Arrow"
- 10/13 Miracles and Matters of Particular Fact
READING: Bennett, chs. 14-15
Lewis (1986c), "Postscripts to 'Causation'" (in Lewis, *Philosophical Papers, Vol. II*)

Open Questions

- 10/18 Chance
READING: Bennett, ch. 16 * (§99, 100)
John Hawthorne, "Chance and Counterfactuals" (*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 70:2, 2005)
+J. Robert Williams, "Chances, Counterfactuals, and Similarity", (*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 77:2, 2008)

- 10/20 Future-Directed Conditionals
READING: Keith DeRose, "The Conditionals of Deliberation" (*Mind*, 119:473, 2010)

- 10/25 Backtracking
 READING: Bennett, ch. 18
- 10/27 Time's Arrow
 READING: Bennett, ch. 19
 Lewis (1986d), "Postscripts to 'Counterfactual Dependence and Time's Arrow'"
 (in Lewis, *Philosophical Papers, Vol. II*)
 +Elga (2000), "Statistical Mechanics and the Asymmetry of Counterfactual Dependence"

III: UNIFICATION THEORIES

Worldly Approaches

- 11/1 Stalnaker I
 READING: Stalnaker (1975), "Indicative Conditionals" (in Stalnaker, *Context and Content*)
 Bennett, ch. 23 (§139)
- 11/3 Stalnaker II
 READING: Stalnaker, *Inquiry*, ch. 6
 Daniel Nolan, "Defending a Possible-Worlds Account of Indicative Conditionals"
 (*Philosophical Studies*, 116:3, 2003)
- 11/8 Putting the Stalnakerian Framework to Work
 READING: Eliza Block, "Indicative Conditionals and Context" (*Mind*, 117:468, 2008)
 J. Robert Williams, "Conversation and Conditionals" (*Philosophical Studies*, 138:2, 2008)
- 11/10 Kratzer
 READING: Angelika Kratzer, "Conditionals" (*Chicago Linguistics Society*, 22, 1986)
 *David Lewis, "Adverbs of Quantification" (in *Formal Semantics of Natural Language*, Keenan (ed.), Cambridge, 1975)
- 11/15 Lycan I
 READING: Lycan, *Real Conditionals*, chs. 1-2
- 11/17 Lycan II
 READING: Lycan, *Real Conditionals*, chs. 7-8
- 11/22 Scorekeeping and Catch-up

Edgingtonianism

- 11/29 READING: Edgington, "On Conditionals" (§1, 10)
 Bennett, ch. 16 (§99, 100), ch. 23 (§141)
- 12/1 READING: Dorothy Edgington, "Counterfactuals" (*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*,
 101:1P1, 2008)

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- 12/5 Research Paper Due (11:59PM)