

Conditionals

Barry Loewer and Jason Stanley

No linguistic construction has exercised philosophers more than the conditional. There are many reasons for this. One reason is that many analyses of important notions are given in terms of subjunctive (counterfactual) conditionals. A second reason is that conditionals seem to be connected to a number of other notions of fundamental philosophical interest; for example, indicative conditionals seem to be conceptually connected to conditional probability. A third reason is that certain theories of meaning for conditionals seem to reflect what some philosophers think is the proper theory of meaning for sentences containing ethical terms. A fourth reason is that conditionals (specifically counterfactual conditionals) have figured centrally in recent metaphysics and philosophy of science. There are connections between conditionals and laws of nature, causation, dispositions, objective chances and properties. Finally, “if” is the natural language logical term whose meaning is most unyielding to analysis. Virtually no claim about conditionals has gone uncontested; indeed theorists disagree about such fundamental matters as for instance whether there is even a two-place operator on propositions expressed by “if...then”, or whether, even if there is, it is a modal operator or a truth-function, or even whether conditionals express propositions at all.

Because philosophers and linguists working on conditionals have used so many different resources in developing theories of them, working on conditionals requires having at one’s fingertips a number of different formal resources, from frameworks in semantic theory for natural language to basic probability. Though we will be assuming basic familiarity with these frameworks, we will also be providing brief introductions to them as the semester progresses. The first part of the semester will be devoted to developing the basic problem space for the study of conditionals.

Some central themes of the semester:

- (1) Unitary versus non-unitary analysis of conditionals, i.e. does the indicative/subjunctive distinction mark a distinction in semantic kind?
- (2) Non-truth-conditional views of indicative conditionals (maybe subjunctives as well). What semantic and philosophical commitments does an NTV view about conditionals incur? How does this compare with e.g. the commitments of an expressivist about moral discourse?
- (3) The relation between conditionals and objective probability.

Readings:

Throughout we will be using chapters from Bennett’s excellent book, [A Philosophical Guide to Conditionals](#). Other books worth purchasing are William Lycan’s book [Real Conditionals](#), and David Lewis’s [Counterfactuals](#) (which you should own anyway!).

Guest Speakers: We will have two guest speakers this semester, Thony Gillies of Michigan and Brian Weatherson of Cornell.

(Tentative) Schedule (we will certainly add readings):

January 18: Introduction: Classifying Conditionals (Loewer and Stanley)
Distinction between indicatives and subjunctives
Non-conditional conditionals

Recommended reading: Sabine Iatridou “The Grammatical Ingredients of Counterfactuality”, *Linguistic Inquiry* 31.2, 2000, Gilbert Harman, “‘If’ and Modus Ponens”, *Theory and Decision*, 11:1

January 25: The Material Conditional Account of Indicative Conditionals (Stanley)

First three chapters of Bennett
Selections from Strawson, Introduction to Logical Theory
Paul Grice, “Logic and Conversation”, “Indicative Conditionals”
Frank Jackson, “On Assertion and Indicative Conditionals”
Kent Bach, “Against Conventional Implicature”
Adam Rieger, “A Simple Theory of Conditionals”, *Analysis* (July 2006)

February 1: Stalnaker and Lewis (Stanley)

Nelson Goodman, “A Problem for Counterfactuals”
Robert Stalnaker, “A Theory of Conditionals”
Robert Stalnaker, “Indicative Conditionals”
David Lewis, Counterfactuals, pp. 77-83.
Robert Stalnaker, Inquiry, Chapter 7
Bennett, Chapter 10

February 8: Lewis’s Theory (Loewer)

Selections from David Lewis, Counterfactuals
Bennett, Chapter 11
Loewer, “Cotenability and Counterfactual Logics”
Loewer, “Counterfactuals with Disjunctive Antecedents”

February 15: Two Truth-Conditional Theories of Conditionals (Stanley)

A. Conditionals as Modal Claims
David Lewis, “Adverbs of Quantification”
Angelika Kratzer, “Conditionals” (available on Semantics Archive)
Angelika Kratzer, “The Notional Category of Modality”

B. Conditionals as Quantifiers over events
William Lycan, Real Conditionals, Chapters 1-3

February 22: NO CLASS

March 1: Arguments for NTV views, Part I: The Equation (Loewer)

David Lewis, "Probabilities of Conditionals and Conditional Probabilities"
Chapter 4 & 5 of Bennett.

March 8: Arguments for NTV views, Part II: Gibbardian stand-offs (Stanley)

Allan Gibbard, "Two Recent Theories of Conditionals"
Robert Stalnaker, Inquiry, Chapter 6
Bennett, Chapter 6 and 7

March 22: Subjectivity arguments for NTV, continued. (Stanley)

Papers by Dorthy Edgington
General issues with NTV accounts
Recent work by Edgington
Lycan, Real Conditionals, Chapter 4

March 29: Counterfactuals; the similarity relation. (Loewer)

Lewis, "Time's Arrow"
Bennett, chs. 12-18

April 5: Counterfactuals and probability (Loewer)

Lewis, appendix to "Time's Arrow"
Adam Elga, "Statistical Mechanics and the Asymmetry of Counterfactuals"
Bennett, ch. 19
Loewer, "Counterfactuals and the Second Law"

April 12: Talk by Thony Gillies (Michigan)

April 19: Relating and Unifying the Two Kinds of Conditionals (Loewer and Stanley)

Bennett chs. 22 and 23

April 26: Talk by Brian Weatherson (Cornell)

May 3: Summary and Conclusions (Loewer and Stanley)