

Handout 19

Conditional belief: Stalnaker

BELIEF AND REPRESENTATION. According to some pragmatic accounts (Ramsey), there are two distinct kinds of beliefs: beliefs about particular matters of fact (maps of reality guiding action) and general beliefs (habits of inference or dispositions to extend those maps). Thus general beliefs become conditional dispositions to acquire conditional dispositions to act, setting them further removed from reality and action. 

Stalnaker agrees that a theory of belief must account for static conceptions of the world *and* how those conceptions change in response to new information. But we shouldn't sharply distinguish kinds of beliefs, only one of which is about the way the world is. A mental representation of the world must be rich and flexible enough to account for complex conditional dispositions to act, including general beliefs, conditional beliefs, and beliefs about causal and explanatory connections.

A belief state, so Stalnaker, is composed of two components:

- (1) i. A set of possible worlds, representing the agent's conception of the way the world is.
- ii. A change function, representing the agent's dispositions to change what he accepts in response to new information.

Different dispositions to change what one accepts are always grounded in different factual beliefs. Therefore, the distinction between these two components is not a distinction between two kinds of belief. A difference in the methodological policy of two agents, even if there is no independent way to specify the factual disagreement, constitutes a factual disagreement. For instance: disagreeing on whether Ted Kennedy would win if he were nominated is a result of a *factual* disagreement about the way the world works, namely, how it changes in response to a particular sequence of events.

DISPOSITIONS = CONDITIONAL BELIEFS. Conditional sentences are used both to express methodological dispositions and to make factual claims. We assume that an agent's rational dispositions to change what they currently accept are identified with their conditional beliefs expressed, well, in conditional sentences:

- (2) To be disposed to accept *B* upon learning *A* = to accept *B* conditionally on *A* = to accept that: if *A*, then *B*.

Stalnaker now issues some clarifications about (2):

- (3) **Tacit consent:** It should not be paraphrased in terms of assent to a sentence, 'If *A*, then *B*.' That is because conditional beliefs may be tacit.

Rationality: It only applies to rational dispositions to change beliefs. We don't mean to give a theory of spontaneous, physiological changes (say, a conversion experience triggered by bad news).

Totality: We refer to the disposition of accepting *B* when *A* only given that: *A* is the *total* new information received. Ignoring additional information, such as learning *that A* was learned, or learning *how* it was learned, can create the appearance of a divergence.

COUNTERFACTUALS AND DISPOSITIONS. A longer clarification concerns counterfactuals. Somewhat surprisingly, counterfactuals don't represent rational dispositions to change one's beliefs. Suppose I accept:

- (4) If Hitler had decided to invade England in 1940, Germany would have won. (counterfactual)

Suppose I then discover that Hitler *did* decide to invade, though didn't carry it out. I will give up the conditional, rather than accepting the consequent, 'Germany won the war.'

For every such counterfactual, there is a contrasting *open conditional* (or indicative conditional) which *does* represent a rational disposition to change belief. Suppose I accept (perhaps in 1939):

- (5) If Hitler decides to invade England, then Germany will win the war. (open conditional)

Then I *am* rationally disposed to accept, ‘Germany will win the war’ (incidentally, that’s a good example when I would like to resist following through on my endorsement of the conditional and reject the consequent!). This pattern of examples shows that there must be a semantic, and not merely pragmatic, difference between subjunctive and indicative conditionals. Consider especially Adams’ brilliant examples:

- (6) If Oswald didn’t shoot Kennedy, then someone else did. (indicative)
- (7) If Oswald hadn’t shot Kennedy, someone else would have. (counterfactual)

Their meanings are clearly different.

THE MATERIAL CONDITIONAL: PRO. Stalnaker says that he doesn’t assume any view about the truth conditions of conditional statements. Somewhat obscurely (I think) he claims that, though dispositions to change your beliefs about the world—that is, your conditional beliefs—*are* grounded in beliefs abt the world, this doesn’t imply that those beliefs *themselves* are beliefs about the world. Hmmmm.

Either way, there is an attractive argument that the material conditional ($A \supset B$) correctly represents open conditionals like (5). Looking at its truth table we could say:

- (i) If one does not accept $A \supset B$, then a possible situation where A is true and B is false remains compatible with what one accepts, meaning A cannot rationally lead to the inference of B .
- (ii) If one accepts $A \supset B$ (in an open context) and subsequently learns A , one is rationally disposed to accept B .

Thus, where A is compatible with initial beliefs, acceptance of the material conditional $A \supset B$ is necessary and sufficient for the acceptance of the corresponding open conditional.

THE MATERIAL CONDITIONAL: CONTRA. But this does not imply that the open and the material conditionals express the same proposition. There is a divergence between the rejection conditions and in contexts where the antecedent is incompatible with initial belief. That is, an agent may accept the material conditional $A \supset B$ as a logical consequence of believing $\sim A$, but not be disposed to accept B upon learning A :

(8) **YankeesBiden:** Suppose I believe that Biden won the 2016 election. Then I accept the disjunction, that either Biden won the 2016 election, or he won the 2020 election. That is, I accept the material conditional, ‘If Biden did *not* win the 2016 election, then he won the 2020 election’, where ‘if-then’ is interpreted by the material conditional’s truth table. Suppose I learn that I was wrong in my original belief. I now believe that Biden didn’t win in 2016. Having learn that though, I won’t be disposed to accept the conditional ‘If Biden did *not* win the 2016 election, then he won the 2020 election’, where ‘if-then’ is now interpreted as an open conditional.

The general argument for divergence may be this. You need to be consistent in your beliefs. So it is never rational to be disposed to accept both B and $\sim B$ upon receiving the same information A . Then the principle of conditional non-contradiction (=not both: if A then B and if A then $\sim B$) seems valid for open conditionals. But this principle is invalid for the material conditional, since $(A \supset B) \& (A \supset \sim B)$ is true whenever A is false.

Question 1. Demonstrate the last claim.