Metaphysics // Fall 2025

Handout 20

Conditional belief: Stalnaker II

Gibbard's paradox. Question: if open and material conditionals aren't the same, does the open 108
conditional $p \rightarrow q$ express a stronger proposition than the material conditional $p \supset q$?

First, the Paul Revere truncated example ' two if by sea '. Let:

(1) P: the British arrive by sea.

Q: there are two lanterns in the tower.

$\sim Q$: there is only one lantern in the tower.

Then suppose you tell me:

(2) If the British arrive by sea, there will be two lanterns in the tower.

If you tell me that, I learn that either the British don't come by sea, or there are two lanterns. So I accept the material conditional $P \supset Q$. But suppose now that I also know that there is only one lantern left in the world. Then, when I learn that the British did in fact come by sea, I need not assent to the sentence (2). The reason is that, since I already know that the consequent is false, I assent to the ' contrary ' conditional:

(3) If they are coming by sea, there is only one lantern in the tower.

Oddly, I believe what you told me (2), I use it in my inference, but I still assent to the conditional that contradicts what you told me, and I reject the open conditional $P \rightarrow Q$ that seems to be the same as the one you told me.

Second, the Sly Pete example. The idea is ultimately to argue that open conditionals may not 109
express propositions at all. We have two agents who have different beliefs regarding three alternative possibilities, resulting in their acceptance of contrasting open conditionals.

Here's the setup: A poker game on a Mississippi riverboat featuring Sly Pete and Mr. Stone, with Sly Pete currently positioned to either call or fold.

(4) a. Stone's Hand: Stone's hand is quite good.
   b. Henchman Zack: Zack sees only Stone's hand and signals its contents to Pete.
   c. Henchman Jack: Jack sees both hands and observes that Pete's hand is low, thus confirming Stone has the winning hand.

There are three different possible outcomes:

(5) A. Pete folds.
   B. Pete calls and wins.
   C. Pete calls and loses.

The actual situation turns out to be (5A).

Now, I receive two contradictory conditional statements from my henchmen: 110

(6) a. (Zack's Note) ' If Pete called, he won. '
   b. (Jack's Note) ' If Pete called, he lost. '

I trust the sources, and I know nothing else about the circumstances. Then I concludes that Pete folded. This conclusion is consistent with accepting the conjunction of the two corresponding material conditionals: $P \supset Q$ and $P \supset \sim Q$.

But on the other hand: having learned all the circumstances (e.g., Pete had a losing hand), I should affirm only one conditional: (6b). And I should reject (6a), although I *still* believe what Zack told me!

The sentences (6a) and (6b) express seemingly contrary propositions. We might then argue that they express contrary propositions only relative to a *single context* (like the context-dependence of the pronoun ' I '). However, what *is* that proposition expressed by the open conditional?

The Sly Pete example shows that open conditionals are tied to the epistemic states of the agents who utter them. Only then they express propositions that can be separated from their contexts.

But there is a clash here with a plausible conversational maxim:

(7) In uttering U, assume that your addressees have the necessary information to determine what is being said in U.

Since the proposition expressed by the conditional *sentence* like (6b) seems to depend on whether
it is affirmed or denied in a given context, Gibbard concludes that open conditionals do not express 111
propositions at all.

YSB