

William Lycan's *Real Conditionals*
(Oxford University Press 2001; isbn 0-19-924207-0; 223 pp.)

Real Conditionals is the result of a couple of decades of William Lycan's thinking about conditionals. It is a good example of what might be called "systematic ordinary language philosophy," combining an accommodation of what we would say with the equipment of formal semantics and linguistics. It takes as starting point that most of what most people think to be true remarks are in fact true. The job of philosophical analysis is not to come up with a better and more revealing language, but to understand how ordinary utterances do their job of saying what is the case. The book is packed with arguments, counter-arguments, and examples to ponder. There is much for everyone to admire and something for everyone to disagree with strongly.

After setting out the theory and defending the claim that indicative conditionals have truth-values, there are two chapters attempting, inconclusively, to find a satisfactory theory of "even if" that accords with the over-all theory. A chapter, "Indicative/subjunctive" then persuasively applies a main device of the theory, the variable parameter R, about which more below, to the problem of counterfactual versus indicative conditionals. After a discussion of Gibbard's "Riverboat Puzzle" the book concludes with an appendix, written with Geis, dealing with "non-conditional conditionals" such as, "If you're curious, Fred is the new department head." A postscript to that appendix gives yet another indication that *Real Conditionals* is a report of work in progress.

Real Conditionals begins with a discussion of syntactic features of English "if..then" sentences. On linguistic grounds, "if...then" sentences are like "when...then" and "where...there..." sentences. Thus, "If Fred goes, then I'll leave" is of the same kind as "Where Fred goes, there I'll go" and "When Fred goes, then I'll go." The natural

analysis of such sentences is as adverbial clauses. In the “when” and “where” sentences, it is further natural to regard them as quantifications over places and times. It is also natural to treat such sentences as having truth-values. It is also natural to regard “then” and “there” as resumptive pronouns that pick up the times and places referred to in the previous clauses.

Lycan's idea is to extend this quantificational analysis to “if..then..”s and related kinds of sentences using “unless,” “even if,” “only if” “except if,” and the like. For that purpose, some kind of entity must be quantified over. The entity Lycan chooses is adapted from a plausible paraphrase of “If Fred shouts, then Bill jumps” as “In the event that Fred shouts, Bill jumps.” Following the “in the event that” locution, Lycan postulates appropriate events. Appropriate events are, roughly, possible circumstances or situations. Conditionals are quantifications of such events. So, “If you leave, then I'll sing,” is analyzed as $(e)(\text{In}(e, \text{“you leave”}) \rightarrow \text{In}(e, \text{“I sing”}))$. “Any event in which you leave is one in which I sing.” “In” is treated as a sentence operator with an extra argument place. “In” holds between an event e and “I sing” just in case I sing in the event that e , i.e. just in case that I sing is a part of e .

The “events” the analysis quantifies over are one kind of referent of “that”-clauses. Events are something like large possible states of affairs, something like intersections of possible worlds, and quite a bit like Barwise and Perry's (1983) situations, as Lycan notes. Fundamentally, however, they are whatever sort of thing “event” in “in the event that Fred is promoted” refers to. So they contain and are contained by other events, but, unlike possible worlds, are neutral about some events,

including neither those events nor their opposites. That is, the non-inclusion of an event B in event A does not amount to the inclusion of the event that not-B in event A.

The ontology should not detain us, I think. Perhaps "in the event that S" can be reduced to something less exotic, perhaps not. In either case, the "in the event that" sentences seem to be used to say something true, so any theory will have to have an analysis of "events" in this sense. Lycan's theory reasonably takes them as primitive.

This preliminary analysis, though, needs some immediate refinement. "Any event" is too broad, if we want apparently true conditionals to have true analyses. Consider again "If you leave, then I'll sing." One event in which you leave is an event in which I am hit by a meteor. Since that is presumably a possible event, it will not be the case that, in every event in which you leave, I sing. Given that the analysis is correct and that the sentence is true, the quantifier must be restricted by a parameter, R, for "relevant and envisaged," more or less. This parameter, a restriction on determined by context and the epistemic state of the speaker, in effect builds assertibility conditions, appropriately modified to conform to reality, into truth-conditions.

Exactly what goes into the determination of the parameter is difficult. It is not exactly "what the speaker has in mind," since Lycan, for instance, can use conditionals even though he is entertaining the sorts of counter-examples he uses in the book. Lycan can truly say "I will be happy if I get a MacArthur" even while writing up the accompanying antecedent-strengthenings that would make him miserable. Lycan characterizes the parameter as being set "dialectically and conversationally," (page 30) which sounds "conventional," perhaps.

The definition of this parameter occupies much of Lycan's discussion. On the one hand, you would like the parameter to allow some sentences to be true, even though there are possible events that would make the antecedent true and the consequent false. If the events are restricted to actual events, then the conditionals would amount to truth-functional conditionals, since there is only one leaving event and it either includes or fails to include my singing. On the other hand, if the actual event, because improbable or not "envisaged," is not included in the class of possible events R, then we get a conditional that comes out true on the analysis but has an actually true antecedent and a false consequent.

The discussions turn on examples of problem conditionals, and the success of various accounts of conditionals to account for them. This is the "scorekeeping" component of the over-all argument—an account of conditionals is better if it can comfortably accommodate more problem sentences than its alternatives. A detailed discussion of even a large number of examples would be a responsive treatise, rather than a review. To give one example, consider the following apparent counter-example to modus ponens, from pages 66-67, using an example from Vann McGee (1985):

Premise 1): If a Republican wins, then if it's not Reagan who wins, Anderson will win.

$(\forall e \text{ e an element of R}) (In(e, \text{ a Republican wins}) \rightarrow In(e, (\forall f \text{ f an element of R}) (In(f, \sim(\text{Reagan wins})) \rightarrow In(f, \text{ Anderson wins}))))$

Premise 2): A Republican wins. $(\exists e \text{ in actuality}) (In(e, \text{ a Republican wins}))$

Conclusion: If it's not Reagan who wins, Anderson will win. $(\forall f \text{ f and element of R})$

$(In(f, \sim(\text{Reagan wins})) \rightarrow In(f, \text{ Anderson wins}))$

Lycan's account allows a nice explanation of what is happening: The embedded conditional in the first premise has an R that rules out victory by a Democrat, since the events being considered are Republican wins. The conclusion, on the other hand, has no such restriction, and the R includes plausible victories Democratic and Republican. So the counterexample to modus ponens is accounted for as an expected shift of parameter.

Lycan has similar success using a reasonable parameter-shift to account for the difference between "If Oswald didn't shoot Kennedy someone else did" and "If Oswald hadn't shot Kennedy someone else would have," in the chapter on the alleged indicative/subjunctive distinction.

For this reader, working through this book raises two questions:

1) How do we systematically adjudicate what is part of semantics and what is part of pragmatics? The test of an analysis of the truth-conditions of conditionals is that true conditionals come out true on the analysis. A preliminary question, of course, is whether the conditional in question, in the circumstances described, is true. An appeal to intuition is pretty unreliable, unless we have a module that can detect the difference between inferences that are based on structure and inferences that are based on implicature, for instance. So, with Yogi's famous "Nobody goes to that restaurant; it's too crowded," do we make the sentence true by restricting the quantifier appropriately by context, or do we treat our understanding of what Yogi meant as starting from the obvious falsehood and interpreting so that Yogi means something reasonable? The processes and fillings-in seem much the same to me.

In the Yogi case, the question is whether the "specially restricted quantifier" interpretation is treated as a semantic matter, thus part of the form, or as an interpretation

that makes Yogi reasonable, even though his words are false. When Lycan characterizes the reference class of possible events as excluding (page 19) "...possibilities that would not have occurred to the utterer," one has to wonder how we can include Lycan himself in the class of people able to use comprehensible conditionals, given the rich variety of the possibilities he constructs.

Lycan's account puts the maximum into truth-conditions. It's hard to see how the characterizations of "R" will actually work to admit and exclude the appropriate cases. If Bill says, "If the plane leaves on time, I'll be in Charlotte by 8:00," the reference class of possible events cannot include the possibility that the plane will crash, if his utterance is true. But it is hard to imagine anyone getting on a plane who does not envisage a crash as a "real" possibility. Perhaps he's not taking that possibility into account, or implicitly meaning "unless I crash." But these patches would in effect take people off the hook as long as it did not happen that the antecedent was true and the consequent false. Of course, one can say that "he didn't mean that," but does "mean" have to characterize the semantic content of his utterance?

Since every theory of understanding and communication has to construct something like the "R"-classes, the above questions may be just questions of what is properly called "semantics." And that issue may only be answered by a complete theory that handles everything.

2) The second issue is why the counterexamples seem to always be future tense. Most of the counterexamples to the traditional view that, for instance, modus ponens is valid, work only with examples in the future tense. The "antecedent-strengthening" examples, for instance, if put in the past tense, are unpersuasive. "If Smedley finished his book, I

was happy" *does* imply "If Smedley finished his book and concluded it with a vicious personal attack on me, I was happy." If it is true that you were happy in that event, you were happy, whatever untoward accompaniments there may have been.

Other examples are so odd that intuition fails. From page 32, "If it rains tomorrow there will not be a cloudburst./ If there is a cloudburst tomorrow it will not rain," becomes, "If it rained yesterday, there was not a cloudburst/ If there was a cloudburst, it did not rain." Since the conditional is presumably based on seeing how little erosion there was, the contrapositive can only be a conditional like "If Clinton is a statesman, then I'm a monkey's uncle," i.e. an odd way of denying the antecedent.

So, something about the future tense matters in these conditionals. Future tense clauses, however, are plausibly modalities. For one thing, as Lycan notes, Dudman (1983, 1984) has argued that conditionals with future consequents are virtually synonymous with subjunctives. Futures are not actual, even though some features of those futures may be knowable.

Woods (1997, pages 82-83) notes that syntactic futures can be used as modals. There is a knock at the door. "That will be Fred"/ "That must be Fred." We can also note that future tense "that"-clauses are not factive in subject position. "That the stock market will fall worries John" does not imply that the stock market will fall; whereas "That the stock market fell/is falling worries John" does so imply.

Suppose the future tense is a modal construction, and deals with not-yet real possibilities. Suppose also that "would" in counterfactuals is actually the future tense of will, as Wood argues. Then Lycan has a great explanation of why conditionals seem to be truth-functional in the present and the past: The conditionals have the same form in both

past, present, and future. A conditional is a quantified truth-functional conditional. In the past and present tenses, however, the quantifier over events determines either a single event, the one that actually happens or happened, or no event at all. In either case, Lycan's analysis comes out true. In either case, the analysis in the case of past and present-tense sentences will amount to a truth-function. The truth-functional conditional thus works for past and present tenses because they constitute the degenerate case of the "if...then..." construction in which the domain of the quantifier is a single event, the one that actually happened or is happening.

Works referred to:

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