CONDITIONALS LECTURE 2

1. The Adams thesis gives a good account of the behaviour of the indicative conditional, as we saw last time. But all it does is to systematize the *use* of the conditional; that is, it relates patterns of human linguistic behaviour to pre-existing and independently measurable subjective probability distributions. As a theory of the meaning of p→q this might have been acceptable to the Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations* but many people would want more (including the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*). It is after all one thing to describe the use of p→q; it is quite another to say what it says, what its *truth*-conditions are.

2. The bombshell that Lewis dropped in his 1976 paper was a proof that if $\Pr(p \to q) = \Pr(q|p)$ then *no* proposition (i.e. nothing that has truth-conditions) matches the probability profile of $p \to q$. The proof has been refined since Lewis's initial publication of it. The simplest and best version (to my knowledge) is due to Simon Blackburn ('How can we tell whether a commitment has a Truth Condition' in C. Travis, ed., *Meaning and Interpretation*) and runs as follows:

(2.1) Pr(p→q) = Pr(p→q & q) + Pr(p→q & ~q)
(2.2) Pr(p→q) = Pr((p→q)/q).Pr(q) + Pr((p→ q)/~q).Pr(~q)
(2.3) Pr(p→q) = Pr(q/p&q).Pr(q) + Pr(q/p&~q).Pr(~q)
(2.4) Pr(p→q) = 1.Pr(q) + 0.Pr(~q)
(2.5) Pr(p→q) = Pr(q)

Each of the steps except for that from 2.2 to 2.3 is an elementary application of probability theory together with the assumption that p→q is a proposition that can be granted a probability in its own right; the step from 2.2 to 2.3 is the Adams Thesis plus the principle that A→(B→C) is equivalent in meaning to (and hence always has the same probability as) (A&B)→C. Given these assumptions we get the absurdity that is 2.5. Note that it *is* clearly absurd: the probability of p→q *often* diverges from Pr (q).

3. One possible response to Lewis's result, defended at length in Edgington's 1995 paper ('On Conditionals' in *Mind*) is to grant that conditionals do indeed lack truth-values: this is Bennett's NTV thesis. But then what is the probability of a conditional the probability of, in Edgington's view? For her, it is the assertibility of that conditional: that is: we have a linguistic construction $p \to q$ that obeys the rule that your assertibility of it goes with the ratio of probabilities that is $\Pr(q|p)$. But the construction is not a *description* of anything.

4. One additional point in favour of this is Gibbard's argument. This is his famous 'Sly Pete' example: see 'Two recent theories of conditionals', in Jackson, ed., *Conditionals* (Oxford: OUP 1991). Here is a version of it: A sees you leaving a football stadium looking cheerful: but he knows that if your team, Manchester City, is playing then you only look cheerful when they win. B sees that the result of the game at that stadium was that Arsenal won, but she doesn't see who they were playing. Now consider these two conditionals:

(4.1) If Man. City were playing then they won

(4.2) If Man. City were playing then they lost

These conditionals cannot *both* be true; and yet it seems that A has unimpeachably good grounds for asserting (4.1) and B has unimpeachably good grounds for asserting (4.2). Conclusion: they – and by extension all indicative conditionals – don't *have* truth values.

5. There are two problems for this approach. One is to do with propositional attitudes like belief. If conditionals don't express propositions then how does one believe them? According to Mellor ('How to believe a conditional' in J. Phil 1995), belief is a kind of disposition; and so too believing a conditional is a particular kind of disposition: believing $p \rightarrow q$ means being disposed to believe q if you were to learn p. NB this does *not mean* that the conditional describes the mental state that that disposition is.

6. One sort of counterexample to that simple idea is:

(6.1) If Reagan was a spy nobody will ever believe it

This is the kind of thing you might easily believe; and yet even if you do you *wouldn't* believe the consequent if you were to believe the antecedent: on the contrary, you would believe that the consequent was *false* if you were to believe the antecedent. Mellor's response ('How to believe…' p. 243) is that in this case the belief is a *finkish* disposition: a disposition that is lost when activated. In defence of this analysis he says that anyone who believes (6.1) would be caused to stop believing it by learning its antecedent. (Of course this is not true of most indicative conditionals.)

7. The second difficulty is the well-known Frege-Geach problem: conditionals appear to occur in logically complex contexts. For instance, we can conjoin them with other propositions, which may themselves be conditionals ('I'll take my umbrella if it rains but not if it doesn't'.) We can disjoin them likewise ('One of these vases A and B is fragile; so: Either A will break if you drop it or B will break if you drop *it*'.) And we can quantify into them ('Anyone who finds the golden ticket will win a prize'.) How does any of this make sense if conditionals lack truth values: are supposed to give e.g. a three-valued semantics for the quantifiers? This kind of objection is more commonly levelled against moral expressivism (of the type that appealed to the positivists), with which NTV has some obvious parallels.

8. Some of these concerns might perhaps be allayed if we treat the logical constants themselves as conveying attitudes: the most obvious way to do this is with conjunctions. But in both the expressivism case and the conditionals case it is hard to se how to do this with disjunctions, let alone quantifications.