Opting out: Bennett on classifying conditionals.

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Traditionally

(1) If Booth didn't kill Lincoln then someone else did,

and

(2) If Booth doesn't kill Lincoln then someone else will,

are grouped together under the term 'indicative', and contrasted with the 'subjunctive'

(3) If Booth hadn't killed Lincoln then someone else would have.[1]

Recently, though, the traditional distinction has been challenged, not least by V. H. Dudman (in, for example, his 1983 and 1984), and many philosophers now classify (2) and (3) together against (1). One such convert was Jonathan Bennett (in his 1988), until, that is, he recanted and reverted to his original position (1995).

The argument which swayed him runs like this.[2] (a) All type (1) conditionals have the 'confidence property'. That is 'someone who accepts it must, *ceteris paribus*, be disposed, upon becoming satisfied that Booth didn't, to believe that someone else did.' (Bennett 1995, 337). The ceteris paribus clause is hugely important since there are ways of learning the antecedent which also throw the conditional into doubt. I could, for example, learn that Lincoln embezzled millions, faked his assassination and lived it up to a ripe old age in Argentina, in which case continuing to hold (1) would be silly. In other words, conditionals with the confidence property commit their holders to the consequent upon learning that the antecedent is true, *and nothing that throws doubt upon their continued acceptance of the conditional.*

(b) All type (3) conditionals have the 'opt-out property'. A conditional with this

[1] These exemplify the 'didn't-did', 'doesn't-will' and 'hadn't-would' grammatical forms. I shall refer to these as 'type (1)', 'type (2)' and 'type (3)' sentences respectively.

[2] I am dealing here only with the 'positive arguments' Bennett advances for classifying (1) and (2) together. He also employs a 'negative argument' with which he attacks the argument he gave in his earlier paper for classifying (2) and (3) together. The negative argument is taken from Jackson (1990) and answered by Dudman (in his 1992). I do not intend to discuss this point here.

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> can properly be accepted by someone who would, if he became sure of its antecedent's truth, simply drop it, opt-out, say that his conditional had presupposed something false and was therefore inoperative. (Bennett 1995: 341).

For example, Bennett claims that the conditional

(4) If I had not gone to the University of British Columbia, I would have left Canada,

is true of him. If he learnt the antecedent, however, he would not be committed to the consequent. Rather, he would assume that he had gone mad and not know what to think.

Of course, someone who accepted a type (3) conditional isn't *obliged* to opt-out upon learning the antecedent, Bennett isn't claiming this. His point is, rather, that for *all* type (3) conditionals it is possible to properly (i.e. sensibly and rationally) assert the conditional and yet, equally properly, opt-out of it upon learning that the antecedent is true. The difference between the confidence property and the opt-out property, then, is that upon learning the antecedent and nothing else that throws doubt upon their continued acceptance of the conditional, the holder of a conditional with the opt-out property may rationally withhold assent from the consequent by 'opting-out', while the holder of a conditional with the confidence property may not.

(c) Clearly no conditional can have both the confidence property and the opt-out property.

(d) Type (2) conditionals have the confidence property, not the opt-out property. 'This', says Bennett 'is too obvious to need arguing.' (Bennett 1995: 341). So (2) is like (1) and not (3): the traditional way is right.

In view of the central role played by (a) to (d) in Bennett's later paper, I shall call them '*The Argument*'.[3]

I think that The Argument is mistaken. In particular, some type (3) conditionals do not have the opt-out property. Here is one that not only lacks it, but which seems to have the confidence property as well. Suppose that someone asserts the conditional

(5) If I had experienced some great trauma then I would have repressed it totally.

In this case learning that the antecedent is true not only gives one no reason

[3] It seems sufficiently clear that the rest of Bennett's 1995 article either depends upon The Argument, or else is vulnerable to points similar to those I will bring against it. In particular, Bennett needs the opt-out property to show that for type (3) conditionals $p(A>C) \neq p(C/A)$, and hence that, unlike types (1) and (2), they can have truth values (see Lewis 1976). In the name of brevity I shall not pursue this point here.

for opting-out of the conditional, it actually strengthens the grounds upon which it was originally held.

If this is too slippery for you then consider the following. Nobody can properly assert

(6) If I had gone to the local shops this morning, I would have passed a post box,

unless there is a postbox on every route they take to the shops. If I learnt that, much to my surprise, I *had* been to the shops this morning, would I be able to opt-out of the conditional? Not reasonably. Opting-out of conditional (4) is, of course, a reasonable response to learning the antecedent. A reasonable response to the few hours worth of perceptual error entailed by learning the antecedent of (6), however, is to question the strength of my memory and wonder what I ate last night. Opting-out of the conditional on the grounds that 'if *that* were true then I wouldn't know what to think' is not reasonable behaviour, and, let's face it, if you're prepared to be sufficiently irrational you can opt-out of any conditional.[4]

Evidently, many of the type (3) conditionals that we employ in everyday reasoning lack the opt-out property. This is hardly surprising since in many cases the truth of a conditional is guaranteed by factors independent of one's epistemic state (such as the existence of a post box on every route to the shops or the fact that squares have four sides). Where, additionally, the antecedent can be accepted without bringing one's sanity into question, opting-out ceases to be a rational option.

A converse argument applies to type (1) and (2) conditionals: learning the antecedent and nothing else of interest sometimes forces one to opt-out. Consider the type (1) conditional (asserted in, say, 1991)

(7) If the government is selling arms to Iraq then I'll never hear about it.[5]

Not only does learning the antecedent not commit me to the consequent, it forces me to opt-out of the conditional altogether.

Of course someone opting-out of (7) is not doing so for the same reasons as someone opting-out of (4). It seems clear to me that you could hold, say, (2) because you knew of a second assassin, and yet have so much faith in

[4] Compare 'if that had been square, it would have had four sides'. If I were to learn that the antecedent is true then I would commit myself to a great deal of perceptual error, and it may appear that opting-out is the sensible option. The effect of rejecting the conditional is, however, to call into question my understanding of the word 'square', in which case how could I be said 'know' the antecedent in the first place?

[5] This example is, of course, derived from Lewis (see his 1976 in Jackson 1991, 101). Note that it can easily be recast as a type (2) conditional: 'If the government sells arms to Iraq in the future, then I would never hear about it'.

Booth's abilities (perhaps you are Booth) that if you learned the truth of the antecedent you would opt-out, not knowing what to think. According to Bennett (1995: 344–45 and 349–51) this is because you really accept the hadn't-would (future) version of (2), 'If Booth had not been going to kill Lincoln, someone else would have been going to', and using (2) to express this is to subtly misuse it. If he's wrong – and with The Argument defeated I can see no reason to think that he isn't – then vast numbers of type (1) and (2) conditionals lack the confidence property. Even if he is right, however, the damage has been done. The Argument is discredited: the correlation between type (1) and (2) conditionals and the confidence property is at best imperfect, and that between type (3) conditionals and the opt-out property isn't even very good. Whatever else The Argument shows, it does not show that type (3) conditionals are dramatically different from types (1) and (2).[6]

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