

# Conditionals, contexts and *Apartheid*

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## Abstract

In this paper I will be considering two well-known arguments for a clear semantic (in the sense of truth-conditional) divide between counterfactuals and non-counterfactuals. I will claim that both arguments i) can be defused ii) vividly illustrate the need for taking into account the role of contexts of assertion in the shaping of conditional propositions.

## 1. The Kennedy argument

In this paper I will claim that conditionals are a major example of the underdetermination of truth-conditions and literal propositional content by semantics. I will argue for the view that, contrary to what most authors assume, it makes no sense to talk about *the* proposition expressed by a given conditional – not because conditionals do not express propositions (as some authors claim for non-counterfactuals), but because the propositions they express are partially determined by the speaker's epistemic state and communicative intentions (so that grasping those propositions and identifying the associated truth-conditions entails tracking down those idiosyncratic features of the utterance situation).

The most dramatic way of arguing for this kind of context-dependence in conditionals is probably by relating it to what I will call the *Apartheid* view. The *Apartheid* view on conditionals, made popular by E. Adams and D. Lewis, has it (in its best known version) that counterfactuals and non-counterfactuals have fundamentally distinct truth-conditions. The infamous Kennedy example is the basis of the best-known argument for the view:

- (1) If Oswald didn't kill Kennedy, then someone else did.
- (2) If Oswald hadn't killed Kennedy, then someone else would have.

The Kennedy pair can be made to argue for the *Apartheid* view in a fairly obvious way. For (1) to be true, it has to be the case that Kennedy was killed, but it does not have to be the case that a conspiracy had been set up to kill him; whereas if no such conspiracy existed, (2) cannot reasonably be said to be true. (1)/(2) and similar pairs thus apparently show that the truth-conditions of a counterfactual and

its non-counterfactual counterpart differ dramatically. Hence Lewis's famous dictum in his *Counterfactuals*, according to which there are (at least) *two (semantic) kinds of conditionals*, not one which can appear in two different forms, according to the speaker's beliefs about the truth of the antecedent.

An interesting objection to the Adams/Lewis argument is associated with a point made in Fogelin (98). Contrary the *Apartheid* thesis, the existence of pairs of the Kennedy variety is consistent with the hypothesis that there is just one basic conditional semantics which is made to convey different sorts of content *given different contexts or points being made in asserting a given conditional*. More to the point, adopting such an hypothesis actually seems the best way to account for the way such pairs are assigned a propositional content and truth-conditions, since against one same context both the counterfactual and its non-counterfactual counterpart express much the same proposition and have basically the same truth-conditions, despite differences in the speaker's commitment towards the antecedent's truth-value.

Thus one way to interpret (1) is by assigning to it the "identificatory" reading (the reading which the Kennedy argument relied on), according to which it can be paraphrased as in (1')

(1') If Oswald wasn't the one who killed Kennedy, then someone else was.

Under this reading, someone uttering (1) would be making the point that, given that Kennedy was killed, either Oswald was the killer or he was just a scape-goat for the crime someone else committed. Now, a bit surprisingly to the *Apartheid* theorist, the counterfactual (2) can also be paraphrased in the same vein, as in (2')

(2') If Oswald hadn't been the one who killed Kennedy, then someone else would have been that person.

By uttering (2) under this reading, a speaker would be making exactly the same point as before, with the sole difference that she would also be committing herself to the belief that Oswald was in fact the one who did it. The proposition being expressed by (2) under such a reading is that, since someone killed Kennedy, every (counterfactual) circumstance where Oswald didn't do it is also one where someone *else* did.

Exactly the same phenomenon occurs with the second, "conspiratorial", reading — the one which one would typically assign to (2), and which the *Apartheid* theorist, when presenting the Kennedy argument, assumed both that it was the *only* one that could be assigned to (2) and that it could not be assigned to (1). Under that reading, the counterfactual would then be paraphraseable as follows:

(2'') If Oswald hadn't killed Kennedy, then a fellow conspirator would have stepped in and killed him.

Under this “typical” reading, someone uttering (2) would be saying that in the closest counterfactual circumstance(s) where Oswald didn’t do it, it could not have been the case (in some appropriate sense of the modal) that no one did it; she would therefore be committing herself to the belief that things are such that, should Oswald have failed, there would have been enough other guys prepared to get the job done.

As before, although perhaps not so obviously, the non-counterfactual can also be paraphrased along the exact same lines: it can be understood to be expressing exactly the same propositional content (the difference lying again solely in the (non-)commitment concerning the antecedent’s falsity). In other words, it can be paraphrased as

(1’’) If Oswald didn’t kill Kennedy, then a fellow conspirator stepped in and did.

Under this reading, (1) would be saying that, as far as one knows, if by any chance Oswald didn’t do it (something which is accepted as an actual possibility), then it cannot have been the case that no one did it (due to the existence of some team of assassins lined up along the avenue to ensure the job was done).

To sum up, then, both (1) and (2) can be understood under both readings — both can be understood as making a point about the identity of author of an assassination that is being taken for granted, and both can, alternatively, be understood as making a point about the existence of a conspiracy to carry out that same assassination. The first reading can perhaps more easily be assigned to (1), while the second can more easily be assigned to (2) — a factor which was central in leading the proponent of the Kennedy argument to think these two to be the only readings (1) and (2) have. But however “typical” these two readings of (1) and (2) happen to be, the fact remains that the other two are possible and recognizable as such by competent speakers.

The corollary to this is that the alleged evidence for *Apartheid* provided by pairs of the Kennedy variety is spurious: if understood as making the same point, the only difference between (1) and (2) seems to lie in the speaker’s commitment concerning the falsity of the antecedent. The Adams/Lewis Kennedy argument is therefore a *non sequitur*. It is based on a spurious comparison — a comparison between a counterfactual and its non-counterfactual counterpart in contexts where they are being used to make different points and, *as a result of that*, to express different propositions. The difference in truth-conditions the Kennedy argument purports to expose is the result of what seems to be one same basic conditional semantics being *used* to literally express different propositions, rather than of an essential semantic disparity between counterfactuals and non-counterfactuals.

Other putative pairs of the Kennedy variety display the context-dependent behaviour described above and therefore illustrate its potential for defusing any *Apartheid* tendencies one might want to pursue. Take (3)/(4) and (5)/(6), for instance (the latter pair is used by Lycan (2001) to illustrate a different point):

- (3) If Ann is in the kitchen, George isn't.  
 (4) If Ann were in the kitchen, George wouldn't be.  
 (5) If it's night-time now, I'm having a delusion.  
 (6) If it were night-time now, I'd be having a delusion.

Suppose I know for certain that no one is in the kitchen. Then I see exactly one person entering it. I cannot tell who it is because it is quite dark, but I am sure it was just one person. In other words, I have strong evidence that no more than one person is in the kitchen — hence if Ann, then not George. This would vindicate my assertion of (3) and the conditional's truth. Now, as in the Kennedy dichotomy, a totally different and logically stronger reading is forced on us in the counterfactual case, to the effect that *there is no way* Ann and George would be together in the kitchen (perhaps because they are not on speaking terms). But, as in the Kennedy example, each of these is just one of the ways to interpret the conditionals. For (3) can also be used (and understood as being used) to make the stronger, not-being-on-speaking-terms point (in which case it could be paraphrased as "if Ann is in the kitchen, there's no way George is also there"); whereas the counterfactual (4) can also be used to make the weaker, innocuous point that no more than one person is in the kitchen (in which case it could be paraphrased as "if the person who's in the kitchen were Ann, then it wouldn't be George").

As for (5)/(6), they could also at first be seen as meeting the wishes of the *Apartheid* supporter: the former can apparently *only* be understood as making the point that the speaker is having day-time visual experiences at the time of utterance, while the latter can apparently *only* be understood as making the completely different point that the speaker is apt to have visual delusions at night-time. But, again, these readings can be switched. (5) can, in a perfectly reasonable manner, be used to make the point that, if by any chance it is night-time at the moment of utterance, it is the kind of occasion where the speaker usually has visual delusions; while (6) can, also reasonably, be uttered by someone making the point that, given that she is having day-time visual experiences, any counterfactual circumstance where it was night-time *and* she was having those same experiences would also be one where she would be having a delusion.

Thus, strong evidence exists for the view that, regardless of counterfactuality, the truth-conditions of conditionals cannot be determined until the specific communicative intentions of the speaker have been identified. This view in turn entails that the semantics of "if" and that of the antecedent and consequent fall short of determining the literal propositional content of conditionals. The semantic contribution of the conditional connective to the proposition expressed by a given conditional seems instead to parallel the one made by the genitive construction to the propositional content of any sentence it occurs in (the construction notably discussed by Recanati in connection with the role of pragmatic mechanisms in truth-condition determination): it constrains the sort of proposition in question, but

does not identify it. When I say "if Oswald didn't/hadn't kill(ed) Kennedy", or "if Ann is/had been in the kitchen", I may be referring to a host of different circumstances where Oswald did not kill Kennedy or where Ann is in the kitchen (e.g. in the first case circumstances where, besides, Kennedy was killed, or where, besides, a conspiracy was set up; in the second case, circumstances where, besides, only one person is in the kitchen, or where, besides, Ann and George do not speak to each other). And, in each case, I will be saying different things by adding a consequent. Surely, "if" establishes a connection between antecedent- and consequent-circumstances to the effect that all the relevant antecedent ones are also consequent ones; but until we know which antecedent-circumstances are being taken as relevant *in a given context of assertion*, we are in the dark as to exactly which connection is being said to obtain between antecedent- and consequent-circumstances. Which point is the speaker making in saying that Ann's presence in the kitchen is a sufficient condition for George's absence? One surely endorses (3)/(4) (as true) and rejects (as false) depending on whether one takes the person asserting those conditionals to be making either a point about the number of people currently in the kitchen or about the relationship between Ann and George. Since each of the points being made corresponds, in turn, to different ways things are, this argues rather forcefully for the view that each contextual reading may determine different truth-conditions for a given conditional.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. The Hypothetical Syllogism argument

A second kind of argument for Apartheid, usually adopted by truth-functionalists about non-counterfactuals, is the one based on differences of behaviour with respect to the argument form known as Hypothetical Syllogism (henceforth HS)<sup>2</sup>. HS seems clearly invalid for counterfactuals:

- (7) If Gore had been elected, Bush would (subsequently) have retired from politics.  
 If Bush had died before the election, Gore would have been elected.  
 Therefore, if Bush had died before the election, he would (subsequently) have retired from politics.

<sup>1</sup> This rather loose talk of "circumstances" can straightforwardly be translated into a *possible world* talk, partially in line with the Stalnaker-Lewis general approach to counterfactuals (and also with Stalnaker's approach to non-counterfactuals). Each set of circumstances such that the antecedent A is true and some other relevant condition B obtains (e.g. the condition that there is only one person in the kitchen, or that Ann and George are not on speaking terms) would then be modelled in terms of the set of possible worlds *w* such that A and B, along with other known features of the actual world, obtain in *w*; and a conditional *If A then C* (for whose truth-conditional assessment B is the contextually relevant condition) would then be true if and only if all those A&B-worlds are also C-worlds.

<sup>2</sup> Given that the validity of HS entails that of Strengthening of Antecedent (If A then C; therefore, if A and B then C), much of my analysis of HS would naturally be applicable to SA.

The two premises in (7) could be true in comparatively normal circumstances of evaluation, whereas the conclusion would only be true in possible worlds (if any) where dead people could make decisions. On the other hand, the same argument pattern is seemingly valid for non-counterfactuals:

- (8) If Miss Moldova did not win the contest, John is happy.  
 If Miss Seychelles won the contest, then Miss Moldova didn't win.  
 Therefore, if Miss Seychelles won the contest, John is happy.

We can easily imagine a circumstance where both premises were true; but in any such circumstance the conclusion is bound to be true as well — or so our logical intuition tells us. Given that examples like (7), in their turn, cogently show that HS is invalid for counterfactuals, HS provides yet another reason for holding on to Apartheid.

Unfortunately for the Apartheid theorist, there are a few serious problems with this argument. The first and perhaps most obvious one is that if my arguments in section 1 above can be accepted, much stronger evidence exists *against* Apartheid. Secondly, and more interestingly, it can be shown that non-counterfactuals also fail HS. The most obvious kind of counter-example to HS in the non-counterfactual case is obtained by simply translating problematic cases like (7) into the indicative mood:

- (9) If Gore was elected, Bush retired from politics.  
 If Bush died before the election, Gore was elected.  
 Therefore, if Bush died before the election, he retired from politics.

This and similar “translations” of counterfactual counter-examples to HS typically result in what is usually claimed to be “odd” and unconvincing arguments, in particular because it is thought that the premises can hardly be taken as true in any realistic circumstances (the idea being that they are devoid of truth-value at best, due to something akin to a presupposition failure). Cases like (9) are therefore usually dismissed as failing to be genuine counter-examples to HS. But this is, of course, a rather weak reason for refusing that status to (9), because we could, with not too great an effort, conceive of someone who did not know anything about the latest American presidential election but for the fact that Bush and Gore were supposed to be the only two candidates for presidency, or we could change the topic and use conditionals featuring the latest presidential election in Nepal (supposing they condone such things as elections there). I will therefore assume that there are counter-examples to HS also in the non-counterfactual case.

Fourthly, and no less interestingly, there are various instances of *counterfactual* HS arguments which are as convincingly valid as (8). Unsurprisingly, the very counterfactual version of (8) testifies to this claim:

- (10) If Miss Moldova had not won the contest, John would be happy.  
 If Miss Seychelles had won the contest, then Miss Moldova would not have won it.  
 Therefore, if Miss Seychelles had won the contest, John would be happy.

The same goes for a slightly modified version of (7):

- (11) If Gore had been elected, Gore's wife would have become First Lady.  
 If Bush had died before the election, Gore would have been elected.  
 Therefore, if Bush had died before the election, Gore's wife would have become First Lady.

It can reasonably be said that if (8) is valid, so are (10) and (11), at least as far as logic intuition goes. In all three cases, it does not seem possible to have true premises without also having a true conclusion. The intuitive force of this verdict is as strong in the counterfactual cases as in the original non-counterfactual one.

By and large, then, the HS argument for Apartheid seems to be doomed. The above remarks show that we are faced with a dilemma, both horns of which are inconsistent with Apartheid. On the one hand, if HS fails for counterfactuals, it also fails for non-counterfactuals, for much the same kind of counter-examples is available in both cases. Clearly, if we choose the invalidity route, then some explaining away of the (equally strong) pro-validity evidence is called for. On the other hand, if the pro-validity evidence is seen as establishing the validity of HS for non-counterfactuals, it will have to be seen as establishing its validity for counterfactuals as well (again, the supporting evidence is equally strong in both cases). And, of course, we choose the validity route, some explanation has to be provided for the alleged validity cases (e.g. (8), (10), (11)), for, given the instances of invalidity, it can hardly be claimed that those arguments owe their validity to the fact that they instantiate a valid *argument form*. For valid argument forms are ones whose instances are always valid — in other words, forms for which there are no counter-examples.

In any event, it is quite evident that, whichever option is chosen, no difference in behaviour concerning HS between counterfactuals and non-counterfactuals really exists. The initial evidence to the contrary is therefore spurious and the third argument for Apartheid can be dismissed, just as the other two<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> A promising way of solving the dilemma would be to make sense of the various interpretations which can be assigned to the "middle clause" (by analogy with the "middle terms" of aristotelian logic) in a HS argument, in the following way: if the two occurrences of the middle clause are (contextually) assigned non-conflicting interpretations (as in (8), (10) or (11)), the argument is valid; otherwise, it is invalid (as in (7) and (9)). This might sound a little ad-hoc, but, as the contrast between (11) and (15) shows, the shift between intuitions of validity and invalidity clearly depends on context-dependent interpretation of the conditionals (von Fintel (1999) develops a suggestion along similar lines for Strengthening of Antecedent, but his proposal does not do justice to the role communicative intentions play in shaping the propositional content of conditionals and thereby the validity of arguments involving them).

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