

(Counter)factual want ascriptions

Thomas Grano and Milo Phillips-Brown

What are the truth conditions of want ascriptions? According to orthodoxy, championed by Heim (1992) and von Fintel (1999), the answer is intertwined with the agent's beliefs—specifically on the set of worlds compatible with what she believes, her belief set.

We propose to think of the belief set as representing, in a sense we make precise, the agent's *indicative conditional beliefs*. Under our proposal, the orthodox truth conditions amount, roughly, to these: $\lceil S \text{ wants } p \rceil$ is true just if S prefers what she believes will happen if p is true to what she believes will happen if $\neg p$ is true. (Theorists will disagree on what this notion of preference is.) 'Schwartz wants to read War and Peace', for instance, is true just if Schwartz prefers what she believes will happen if she does (her new friends will think she's an intellectual) to what she believes will happen if she does not (they'll think she's boring).

The orthodox approach is falsified when we evaluate $\lceil S \text{ wants } p \rceil$ if either (i) S believes p or (ii) S believes $\neg p$. Call an ascription in case (i) a 'factual want ascription' (the agent treats p as fact); in case (ii) 'counterfactual want ascription' (the agent treats p as contrary to fact); and let the umbrella term for both be '(counter)factual want ascription', or '(C)FWA'.

The problem, presented impressionistically, is this. Consider a counterfactual want ascription

Promotion. Wu wants to be promoted (but believes he won't be).

Orthodoxy has it that *Promotion* is true just if Wu prefers what he believes will happen if he is promoted to... We needn't continue any further with the orthodox account, since it's broken down already: there's nothing at all that Wu believes will happen if he is promoted; he believes that he won't be.

Theorists have noticed this problem before, if not in the form that we've presented it. Indeed, Heim herself saw it—and gave us the memorable 'I want this weekend to last forever (but of course I know it will be over

in a few hours)' (p. 199)—when she brought the orthodox approach onto the scene. Yet Heim did not venture a solution; only one theorist has. That would be Rubinstein (2017), and even she did not pursue the issue, instead merely mentioning in passing that her view may solve the problem. It does not—or so we argue.

We develop a solution of our own—on which conditional belief is integral to the semantics of 'want'. We mentioned above that one can think of the belief set as representing indicative conditional beliefs; this is just part of the picture. Our account is inspired by a striking parallel between indicative vs. counterfactual conditionals on the one hand and non-(C)FWAs and (C)FWAs on the other.

To give you a taste of what we say, here's an example: while the non-(C)FWA 'Schwartz wants to the War and Peace' is true just if Schwartz prefers what he believes will happen if he reads War and Peace to what he believes will happen if he doesn't, the (C)FWA 'Wu wants to be promoted' is true just if Wu prefers what he believes *would happen* if he were to be promoted (he'd be invigorated by new challenges) to what he believes will happen if he's not (he'd be stuck with his current, repetitive work).