STIT AND THE LANGUAGE OF AGENCY

ABSTRACT. Stit, a sentence form first introduced in Belnap and Perloff (1988), encourages a modal approach to agency. Von Wright, Chisholm, Kenny, and Castañeda have all attempted modal treatments of agency, while Davidson has rejected such treatments. After a brief explanation of the syntax and semantics of stit and a restatement of several of the important claims of the earlier paper, I discuss the virtues of stit against the background of proposals made by these philosophers.

1. INTRODUCTION

Among the topics of discussion in this world, none are more common than those concerning the achievements and refrainings, obligations and prohibitions, successes and failures of the agents with whom we share a common space. “What happened when so-and-so did that?” we ask, “What should have been done?” Biographies and narrative histories, which comprise a sizable segment of our reading materials, have as their central concern the doings of agents, their obligations and prohibitions, the outcomes of their choices and the range of things from which they refrain.\(^1\)

Philosophers have long sought to find a distinction between those sentences which attribute agency and those that do not in the verbal configurations we commonly use to talk about such matters. If such a distinction existed it should be a relatively simple matter to uncover some general principle in everyday speech to differentiate

Joshua fit the battle of Jericho

from

Joshua survived the battle of Jericho.

We find, to our dismay, that we are no closer now to a linguistic litmus test for agency than was Aristotle. After all, it would have been of some importance for Aristotle’s peers to decide between an agentive interpretation of

Alexander succeeded to the throne of Macedonia

and a non-agentive interpretation. For if Alexander was agentive in the matter of his becoming king, then there was a prior choice of his which led directly to that outcome, and he was likely guilty of regicide; while if he was not agentive in the matter of becoming king, then there was no choice of his that guaranteed his succession to the throne.

If the difference is not to be uncovered in the study of sentences of ordinary language, then a promising route to a deeper and fuller understanding of agents making choices is to devise a sentence form whose basic syntactic and semantic structures are crafted to illuminate not only their own operations but also the wider linguistic settings in which agentive sentences function.

In an earlier paper (Belnap and Perloff 1988) we introduced a linguistic form whose purpose was solely to represent agentive sentences. For ease of observation we decided to set that form in square brackets, [—...—]. For more substantial reasons we decided that the sentence form would have two open places, the first to take an agent term, the second to take a declarative sentence (the declarative complement of the new form). The point about the second open place is of some importance: having noted that declarative sentences are either agentive or not, we specifically included both sentences that ascribe agency as well as those that do not as possible declarative complements. The resulting square bracket sentence is to the effect that the proposition expressed by the declarative complement is true entirely because of a choice of the agent. The copula for this class of square bracket sentences is the verb phrase “sees to it that”. The sentence form is referred to as a stit sentence. A stit sentence [α sees to it that Q], or [α stit: Q] for short, says that a choice of the agent α guarantees the truth of Q.

We evaluate a stit sentence of the form [α stit: Q] against a background of branching time in which there are multiple routes open to the future but a single branch to the past. A history is set of moments constituting a complete branch of a tree. At each moment each agent faces a set of alternatives representing the available or possible choices, these moments are called choice points. Histories indistinguishable from one another at a given moment are choice-equivalent for the agent at that moment.

As in Thomason’s semantics for tense and modality (Thomason 1970), truth is primarily relative to moment-history pairs. The following definitions will use the notion of a settled truth, where Q is settled true