ABSTRACT. Proponents of the projection strategy take an epistemic rule for the evaluation of English conditionals, the Ramsey test, as clue to the truth-conditional semantics of conditionals. They also construe English conditionals as stronger than the material conditional. Given plausible assumptions, however, the Ramsey test induces the semantics of the material conditional. The alleged link between Ramsey test and truth conditions stronger than those of the material conditional can be saved by construing conditionals as ternary, rather than binary, propositional functions with a hidden contextual parameter. But such a ternary construal raises problems of its own.

“The mind has a great propensity to spread itself on objects.” David Hume.¹

INTRODUCTION

Important work on the semantics of conditionals has been inspired by a certain picture of hypothetical reasoning, condensed into an acceptability rule for conditionals: the Ramsey test. The idea guiding this work is to construct truth-conditions for conditionals by “projecting” the Ramsey test onto the world. If the construction succeeds, the explanation of the truth-conditions can follow Hume’s explanation of causality as an image of our epistemic habits and attitudes. In this paper, I will draw attention to some problems with the projection strategy. I will argue that there is considerable tension between acceptability rule and truth-conditions. Projecting the test does not yield the kind of truth condition that is favored by the partisans of the projection strategy. The Ramsey test induces the semantics of the material conditional if conditionals are conceived, as they usually are, as binary propositional functions. If, instead, they are conceived as ternary functions with a hidden contextual parameter, the Ramsey test coheres well with a special reading of Stalnaker’s possible-worlds semantics for indicative conditionals. But such a ternary construal raises a number of problems of its own.

1. THE RAMSEY TEST AS A SOUND INFERENCE RULE

Frank Ramsey remarked in a footnote that “if two people are arguing ‘If $p$ will $q$?’ and are both in doubt as to $p$, they are adding $p$ hypo-
theoretically to their stock of knowledge and arguing on that basis about \( q \)” (1931, p. 247). The remark concerns a purported link between conditional statements and subjective conditional probabilities. Later authors have transplanted Ramsey’s idea from its probabilistic context into a framework of propositional inference. This is where the idea has come to be known as the \textit{Ramsey test}. Stalnaker’s well-known version of the test is as follows. In order to see whether the conditional \( A \rightarrow B \) (read: if \( A \) is the case, then \( B \) is the case) is acceptable,

First, add the antecedent (hypothetically) to your stock of beliefs; second, make whatever adjustments are required to maintain consistency (without modifying the hypothetical belief in the antecedent); finally, consider whether or not the consequent is then true. (1968, p. 169.)

The Ramsey test has become a familiar prelude to semantic theories that construe ‘if-then’ as different from, and usually stronger than, the material conditional \( \supset \). The epistemic intuitions expressed in the test serve as a heuristic guide in the search for truth conditions. The truth conditions are alleged to result from a “projection” of the test onto the world. For all the talk about projection, however, the epistemic story plays a rather undistinguished role in the details of the argument. Let me give two examples.

Stalnaker’s (1968) argument proceeds by mere analogy between changing a theory and selecting a nearby possible world. No substantial explanation of the alleged parallel is offered. Pendlebury’s (1989) approach is more roundabout. The author proposes to project the epistemic dispositions of a logically \textit{as well as factually} omniscient being. Such a being, he says, “is just like us except that he is not subject to our intellectual and epistemic limitations” (1989, p. 185). The ‘except’ clause, unfortunately, rules out any interesting epistemic similarities between that omniscient being and us. It is not clear what use such a being might have for epistemic rules like the Ramsey test because, being omniscient, it is never in a position of having to change its mind. The epistemology of (factual) omniscience is trivial. (Factual omniscience is fundamentally different from the logical omniscience we will be assuming below. Logical omniscience abstracts away only from problems of derivation, not, like factual omniscience, from all problems of knowledge.) The demon then plays the same role in Pendlebury’s argument that the actual world plays in Stalnaker’s: the revision of the demon’s “beliefs” is tantamount to the selection of a nearby world. Both arguments rest on the same unexplained analogy between theory revision and world selection. It is therefore no surprise that Pendlebury’s projection winds up in the vicinity of Stalnaker’s semantics.