Preface

A person with no acquaintance with academic philosophy would be amazed, perhaps shocked or even scornful, to learn that a whole book had been written on the meaning of the word "if". What then would such a person think upon learning that not only one but more than a dozen monographs had been written about "if"? If a dozen about "if", then a hundred about "whereas"! And that's not to mention the hundreds of articles on the subject in journals and edited collections. How can it be that so many people have invested so much effort into this little word? One answer is simply that we do not understand this word and feel challenged by that fact. We humans, we philosophers especially, would like to think we know something, that we know something in particular about how language works. But then we are confronted with the fact that we do not even understand what "if" means. It is an affront to our dignity, an insult to our intelligence!

There is another, maybe more important, reason why this little word has exacted so much labor: It is the football in a major competition. The different schools of thought on conditionals reflect fundamental differences in approaches to semantics generally, and conditionals are a test case by which we can decide between them. Probably the dominant theory of conditionals among those who are not themselves engaged in the struggle is the Stalnaker–Lewis theory, which explains conditionals in terms of possible worlds (Stalnaker 1968; Lewis 1973). Roughly, "If p then q" is supposed to be true if and only if the nearest possible world (to our world) in which p is true is a world in which q is true. Another approach explains the meaning of conditionals in terms of their probabilities and says, roughly, that the probability of a conditional is the probability of the consequent given the antecedent (Adams 1975). Another approach explains the meanings of sentences in terms of their effects on belief and says, roughly, that a conditional belongs to a set of beliefs if

and only if the consequent must belong to the set of beliefs that results from adding the antecedent (Gärdenfors 1988). Likewise, this book presents the theory of conditionals as a motive and test case for a distinctive kind of semantics, namely, the semantics of assertibility in a context.

A theory of conditionals must satisfy two main desiderata: It must respect the data of natural language, and it must be formally precise. The theory in this book aims to satisfy both of these criteria. The data on which I will focus will be data concerning patterns of valid argument. The precision I am aiming for will be precision in defining logical validity. The theory will provide the means for demonstrating that arguments involving conditionals are or are not valid, as the case may be. Logical validity will be defined as preservation of what I will call *assertibility in a context*. Conditionals will be explicated as a kind of context-relative rule of inference.

Although it may be the competition that makes the subject compelling, the focus of this book will be on developing my own positive proposal, not on defeating my opponents. There will be one chapter in which I develop in detail one particular criticism of Stalnaker's theory of conditionals and in which I briefly criticize several other theories superficially similar to my own. Moreover, throughout my discussion of the data, I will be concerned to correct what I regard as a systematic misreading of the data by most other authors. The right way to decide whether an argument is valid is to decide whether the conclusion must be true, or, as I will say, assertible, in the very same context as that in which the premises are judged true, or assertible. But many authors ignore this and judge arguments to be invalid because they can think of a context in which the premises are true and can think of some other context in which the conclusion is false.

One cannot persuasively defend a theory of conditionals by talking only about conditionals. One must combine one's theory with equally good theories of such things as quantification, tense, anaphora, modality, and truth. More generally, one must locate one's approach to semantics in a comprehensive theory of cognition and linguistic communication. I acknowledge this obligation, and elsewhere I have gone some distance toward meeting it. My book, *Words without Meaning* (2003b), is a compact but wide-ranging survey of many of these issues from my point of view. My earlier book, *Thinking Out Loud: An Essay on the Relation between Thought and Language* (1994), is another wide-ranging though less compact treatment of some of the same issues and some different ones. Here, however, the objective will be depth, not breadth. I will try to establish

the credentials of the context-logical approach to semantics by means of a very thorough treatment of one very narrow range of phenomena.

This project has been in gestation for more than twenty years. In 1984, as a diversion from my work on my doctoral dissertation on an issue in the philosophy of mind, I started thinking about how one might construe conditionals as rules of inference. I must have taken that early idea from Robert Brandom (although we have never talked about it). In that first year, Charles Cross helped me make a few key moves (such as introducing the concept of deniability to handle negation). In those early years I also had several long, crystallizing discussions about conditionals with Peter Vallentyne. In 1987 I published the fruit of my early research, and that theory of conditionals survived until 1994 when it made an appearance in *Thinking Out Loud*. (I have borrowed the title of this book from my 1987 paper, although the present theory is only distantly related to the theory in that paper.) Now and again, from 1987 onward, I tried to iron out certain difficulties that I could already see in what I had proposed. Throughout those years, I learned a lot from jousting over questions of semantics with my colleague John N. Martin. In 1998 I started again in earnest, focusing on the conception of conditionals as context-relative rules of inference, and at that time Frank Döring helped me give shape to the ideas that I was still just hammering, stammering out. I was able to include a short presentation of my theory in roughly its present form in my 2003 book. Gabriel Sandu read a draft of the present book at the request of MIT Press; I thank him for his flawless comprehension and astute questions. In the final stages of composition, Giovanni Mion's close reading of the whole enabled me to make many small improvements. At all times, I am indulged and encouraged by my wife, Alice Kim.