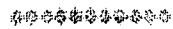


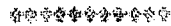
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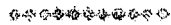
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**2012**



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## **Counterfactuals**

*By Bernie Cantens*

Counterfactual conditionals are conditional statements in which the antecedent is a non-factual claim, usually about the past, although they can be about the present or future. For instance, (1) "If the Vice-President Al Gore would have received the 25 electoral votes of Florida, he would have won the presidential election in 2000." Counterfactuals are also referred to as subjunctive conditionals, because they use the subjunctive mood (rather than the indicative) of the verb.

In philosophy counterfactuals raise many perplexing metaphysical puzzles. First, note that while the antecedent of (1), "The Vice-President Al Gore received the 25 electoral votes of Florida," is a false claim about the past, it refers to a logically possible state of affairs that could have been actual. In other words, counterfactual conditionals are about logically possible yet false state of affairs. So even though the antecedent of (1) is false, it was one possible outcome among many. Notice also that we are here speaking of logical possibility and not plausibility. Thus, any false antecedent about the past that is logically possible is sufficient to construct a counterfactual, no matter how unlikely a state of affairs it represents. For instance, (2) "If Ralph Nader would have won the Presidential election, the US would not have gone to war with Iraq."

The most intriguing factor about counterfactual conditional statements is purely ontological. The antecedents of counterfactual conditionals refer to events in the past that are both possible and false. What is the ontological status of these antecedents? If the antecedents are false, then they must refer to nothing or non-existent events. However, the antecedents are not nothing in the way contradictions are nothing, because antecedents represent a way the world could have been.

Do counterfactual conditionals have a truth-value? Consider the difference between a true and false counterfactual: (3) "If Ralph Nader would have received the 25 electoral votes of Florida, he would have won the presidential election in 2000" is false, but (1) is true. However, the traditional notion of a realist conception of truth roughly states that a proposition is true, in any given language, if its meaning represents or "corresponds" to the way the world is. But, then, how can a claim about a *false* and *non-existent* event (i.e., that the Vice-President Al Gore received the 25 electoral votes of Florida) be true, if it represents the way the world is not?

In 1973 the American philosopher David Lewis (1941-2001) published *Counterfactuals*, and he argued that we should treat counterfactuals as claims about possible worlds. Possible worlds are ways the world could have been rather than the way the world actually is. The use of possible world semantics in late-twentieth century Analytic philosophy became common use, and it is still a practical way of interpreting the meaning of counterfactual conditionals. Nevertheless, even if we speak about counterfactuals in terms of possible worlds, the fundamental ontological questions about their *being* (*esse*) remain unresolved and controversial.

Lewis argues that possible worlds should be treated as *maximal* and therefore as mutually incompatible. Possible worlds are maximal if for any proposition, *p*, in any possible world, *w*, either *p* is true in *w* or not-*p* is true in *w*. The point being that, if the referent of *p* exists in any possible world, then it exists in all possible worlds, even if *p* does not *obtain* in all possible worlds.

Possible worlds are not without their problems. Lewis argues that all worlds, possible ones and the actual one, have the same ontological status and their combination

account for all of reality. This view is referred to as “modal realism.” Lewis’ modal realism goes contrary to our common sense understanding of possible worlds. For instance, it appears counter intuitive to consider the possible world in which Vice-President Al Gore receives the 25 electoral votes of Florida as real as the actual world. In addition, a possible world realist view gives rise to the problem of “transworld identity.” That is, if all possible worlds refer to real entities, then numerically identical beings (e.g., you and me) exist in all possible worlds, but how can there be more than one of a single individual. A deflationary view about possible worlds overcomes these difficulties because it attributes no ontological status whatsoever to possible worlds. Instead, it treats possible worlds merely as a convenient way to talk about non-existent objects.

Finally, there are many benefits that counterfactuals and possible world semantics have provided for our understanding of philosophical issues. First, counterfactuals have played a role in our explication of causation. The meaning of the claim “event x is the cause of event y” can be given by the claim, “If event x would not have occurred, then event y would not have occurred”. Second, possible world semantics has contributed to our understanding of the meaning of modal claims, and these new insights have given rise to new interpretations to philosophical issues such as Anselm’s ontological argument. Finally, counterfactuals of freedom -- such as “If John would have been had the opportunity to cheat on the exam, he would have cheated” -- have helped elucidate the problem of whether God has middle knowledge.

**Word Count 858**