

Questions on Lewis and Elga on counterfactuals

PHIL 1480 Metaphysics

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1. What is the distinction between backtracking and 'standard' resolutions of the vagueness of the counterfactual conditional introduced on pp. 33–35? Why does Lewis want to leave open the possibility of counterfactual dependence of the past on the future even in the standard, non-backtracking sense?
2. On p. 36, Lewis mentions the fact that he accepts counterfactual analysis of causation. We'll be coming back to this topic again, but for now: can you think of any cases where 'event A causes event B' is true but 'if A hadn't occurred, B wouldn't have occurred isn't true' (under the standard resolution of vagueness)? Can you think of any cases where the latter is true but the former isn't?
3. How convincing are Lewis's arguments (36–38) in favour of his preferred account of what the 'asymmetry of openness' consists in, and against competing accounts?
4. Explain why Lewis claims that, if 'change' has its literal meaning, we can't *change* any moment of time, whether past or future.
5. What, exactly, is the view that is refuted by the fact that conjunctions of the form 'If A, then the world would be very different, but if A and B, then the world would not be very different' are sometimes true (42)? What is an example of a truth of this form? Why isn't this a refutation of Lewis's view?
6. In the light of our discussion in Thursday's class, evaluate Lewis's argument (in the first two full paragraphs on p. 45) that the relevant standards of similarity need to count worlds like w_1 as closer to w_0 than worlds like w_2 .
7. According to Elga, Lewis's argument that worlds like w_1 are the most similar to w_0 under the standards of similarity he has described ignores some important competitor worlds. Describe one, and explain why (if Elga is right) it counts on Lewis's account as just as similar to w_0 as w_1 is.
8. Try to think of ways in which Lewis's theory might be modified so as to avoid Elga's counterexample, without dropping the basic idea of analysing counterfactuals in terms of a notion of similarity that does not itself build in some temporal asymmetry by *fiat*. (The most obvious approach would involve adding some new item to Lewis's list of relevant respects of similarity, which captures the intuitive radical dissimilarity between the worlds Elga is talking about and the actual world.)