Questions on Lewis and Elga on counterfactuals
PHIL 1480 Metaphysics
Cian Dorr
1 April 2006

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 w₁ as closer to w₀ than worlds like w₂.

7. According to Elga, Lewis’s argument that worlds like w₁ are the most similar to w₀ 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 w₀ as w₁ 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.)