

Against the Stalnaker-Lewis Analysis of Counterfactuals

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Consider the following counterfactual claims:

- (1) that, if the World Trade Center had not collapsed, everything else would have been maximally similar to how it actually was
- (2) that, if the World Trade Center had not collapsed and everything else had been maximally similar to how it actually was, everything else would have been maximally similar to how it actually was.

Robert Stalnaker says:

Consider a possible world in which A is true, and which otherwise differs minimally from the actual world. *"If A, then B" is true (false) just in case B is true (false) in that possible world.* (1968, pp. 33-34)

On Stalnaker's analysis, (1) and (2) are equivalent to (S1) and (S2), respectively:

- (S1) that, in the nearest possible world in which the World Trade Center did not collapse, everything else is maximally similar to how it actually is
- (S2) that, in the nearest possible world in which the World Trade Center did not collapse and everything else is maximally similar to how it actually is, everything else is maximally similar to how it actually is.

(S1) and (S2) are equivalent. Thus, on Stalnaker's analysis, (1) and (2) are equivalent.

But (1) and (2) are not equivalent. First, (1) and (2) have different probabilities. The probability of (1) is less than 100%; the probability of (2) is 100%. Second, (1) and (2) have different modal values. (1) is not necessary; (2) is necessary. Hence, Stalnaker's analysis is incorrect.

David Lewis says:

'If Kangaroos had no tails, they would topple over' seems to me to mean something like this: in any possible state of affairs in which kangaroos have no tails, and which resembles our actual state of affairs as much as kangaroos having no tails permits it to, the kangaroos topple over. (Lewis 1973, p. 1)

On Lewis's analysis, (1) and (2) are equivalent to (L1) and (L2), respectively:

(L1) that, in any possible state of affairs in which the World Trade Center did not collapse, and which resembles our actual state of affairs as much as the World Trade Center's not having collapsed permits it to, everything else is maximally similar to how it actually is

(L2) that, in any possible state of affairs in which the World Trade Center did not collapse and everything else is maximally similar to how it actually is, and which resembles our actual state of affairs as much as the World Trade Center's not having collapsed permits it to, everything else is maximally similar to how it actually is.

(L1) and (L2) are equivalent. Thus, on Lewis's proposal, (1) and (2) are equivalent. But (1) and (2) are not equivalent. Hence, Lewis's analysis is incorrect.

REFERENCES

Lewis, David. 1973: *Counterfactuals*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Stalnaker, Robert. 1968. "A Theory of Conditionals". In *Studies in Logical Theory*,
American Philosophical Quarterly Monograph Volume 2, pp. 98–112.