

The Problem of Counterpossibles

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Introduction In the first chapter of *Counterfactuals* ([7]), David Lewis raises the question of evaluating counterfactuals with impossible antecedent conditions. Under his initial proposal, all such counterfactuals are vacuously true. The derivatively defined 'might counterfactuals', accordingly, are all false. While Lewis himself is "fairly content" with this, he recognizes that it does not have universal appeal and so proposes alternative sets of truth conditions for counterfactuals which do not have these untoward consequences. The alternatives are a strengthened 'would' and a weakened 'might' for which the values are reversed when the antecedent is impossible: unless "impossible worlds" are added to the semantic framework, stronger 'woulds' with impossible antecedents all become false and the weaker 'mights' become true. Lewis expresses some preference for the mixed pair of the weaker (original) 'would' and the weaker (second) 'might' but thinks the simple interdefinability of either the original or second pair outweighs whatever might be gained. He ultimately opts for the original pair, but notes that the others can be recovered, if not quite so simply.

It will be argued here that Lewis's motivation for vacuously true "counterpossibles" suggests an interpretation using the logic of conditional assertion in the metalanguage of the semantics, and that such an interpretation satisfies all the major desiderata.

1 The problem That there should be any controversy over the matter of counterfactual conditionals with antecedent clauses that describe logically impossible states of affairs might itself be thought odd. There are, to be sure, reasons why *some* theories of conditionals would need to be concerned with impossible antecedents. Any theory of the logical relation "follows-from", such as Relevant Implication, ought to be able to handle the unfortunately all-too-possible case of reasoning from inconsistent data. A theory of counterfactuals, however, is not offered as either an information processing calculus or a theory of some

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