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Counterfactual Problems: Addressing Difficulties in the Advocacy of Counter-to-Fact Causal Claims

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Counterfactual arguments assert that certain results would occur if conditions were different: for example, if NAFTA had not been passed, Mexico's 1994 currency devaluation would not have been as severe as it actually was. Counterfactual claims are made whenever speculation centers on what *would* happen, *if* something were the case. Counterfactual claims, whether named as such or not, permeate the practice of debate and argument.

Counterfactual claims, however, contain ambiguity. To choose just one level of ambiguity, consider the argument that "if Bill Clinton were a Republican, he would be able to make peace with Cuba." This claim raises a number of questions regarding the stability of the meaning behind the concepts of "Bill Clinton" and "a Republican." Do we, for example, assume that the Republican party has mutated in order to accommodate Bill Clinton, or do we assume that Bill Clinton has changed his own ideology in the act of aligning himself with his rival party?

Writing in 1961, Nicholas Rescher argued that the counterfactual claim is less a matter of logic than it is a matter of discourse. To Rescher, making claims about what would happen under circumstances believed to be non-existent, or in his words making "belief contravening suppositions," is not submitting truth-testable claims, but is instead inviting dialogue:

> The crucial point is this: Anyone (including ourselves) who invites us to make a belief-contravening supposition must be ready to adjudicate doubtful interpretations and to resolve uncertainties as to the bearing of the assumption upon other relevant beliefs. Since this cannot, as we have seen, be done on the basis of logical inference from the supposition itself, it requires an additional, extralogical resource (p. 188-9).

Calling upon the extralogical resources of interlocution and discussion, Rescher in this move dismisses the thorny issue of counterfactual ambiguity, "the *logical* problem of contrary-to-fact conditionals can be laid to rest. *Requiescat in pace*" (p. 196).

The logical problem of counterfactuals may rest in peace, but by all accounts the corpse of counterfactual ambiguity continues to terrorize the village. In practical application, problems analyzing the counterfactual claim persist and in a context of debate and argument manifest

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themselves as practical difficulties in knowing what one advocate must prove, and another must refute. If we want to show that the welfare system has worsened the condition of the urban poor, for example, we must ask, "What are we using as a basis of comparison?" Do we compare the current world to a world without welfare? What assumptions can we make in conceptualizing such a world?

Rescher counsels that the assumptions which accompany such analysis should be resolved through discourse: listeners can remove ambiguity by simply asking what is meant. Using the Cuba illustration above, the question would be whether one wishes to make a point about President Clinton or a point about Republicans. In addressing the critique of welfare we ask, "Compared to what?" Such clarifications can present a solution, but they will not always be satisfactory in adversarial and argumentative contexts in which each side has a strategic interest in making different assumptions about the hypothetical worlds that a counterfactual claim brings into existence. In the context of academic debate, the ambiguities of counterfactual propositions may not be reliably resolved through a mutually agreeable clarification: Interlocution, by itself, may simply reveal disagreements about the assumptions which accompany the counterfactual claim. Where disagreement is celebrated, we need to explore ways of advancing and disputing arguments concerning counterfactual claims based on reasons which can be compared. The "extralogical resources" that Rescher considers should also include a "logic of good reasons": justifications and dejustifications.

To this end, I have in a previous article (Broda-Bahm, 1995) considered several schema for advancing arguments about counterfactual claims and advocated the use of a "branching points" interpretation in which the effect of any social influence (e.g. the passage of NAFTA, the ubiquity of advertising, the form of national news media coverage) would be assessed by considering the most recent plausible point at which that influence could have been avoided. In evaluating the welfare system, for example, our attention would be directed to the most recent historical point at which that system arguably could have taken a different path. We would compare the current system to the alternative that could have developed at the most recent plausible branching point.

This perspective may provide a template for understanding counterfactual claims, but it does not eliminate counterfactual ambiguity, and more immediately it does not address several recent critiques of the use of counterfactual claims in academic debate. Berube and Pray (1994), Voight (1995), and Voight and Stanfield (1992) have all argued that numerous uncertainties and inconsistencies warrant against the use of counterfactual claims in academic debate. An analysis of the criticisms of the use of counterfactual claims reveals that there are two distinct views on the meaning of counterfactual argument in a debate context. The first view sees the function of the counterfactual as allowing the affirmative to interpret the resolution as historically

bounded and to limit their arguments to a specific incident in the past, for example arguing that the forced relocation of Native Americans constituted excessive law enforcement power. The second view sees the counterfactual claim as a basic dimension of causality: support for the argument that NAFTA has improved Mexico's economy would be provided by the claim that if NAFTA had not been implemented then the Mexican depression would have been even worse. In this essay I defend the latter view: counterfactual claims serve as components of causality. I will, however, initially focus on the former view in order to clarify the application of some of the criticisms of counterfactual claims in debate.

VIEW ONE: COUNTERFACTUAL CLAIMS AS TEMPORAL PARAMETERS

To a large extent, critics of counterfactual claims in academic debate seem to be refuting a supposed right of the affirmative to limit their analysis to a specific historical event. Voight (1995), as well as Voight and Stanfield (1992) focus on the use of isolated "past examples" to prove the resolution. Indicting cases which, for example, show that advertising in the early 1900's degraded the quality of life, Voight notes that such affirmative teams "do not view the resolution as time-bound in the present. Thus situated, an affirmative's solitary resolutionally-imposed burden is to demonstrate the truth of the proposition at an historical juncture of their own choosing" (p. 86). Voight's principal argument criticizing the use of contemporary standards to judge past events seems to similarly make the assumption that the affirmative has chosen a past example as their sole parametric obligation. Berube and Pray (1994) also refer to the focus of their chapter entitled *Arguing Counterfactuals* as "contra-history affirmative casing" (p. 325) which they define as "using past examples to demonstrate probable truth of the resolution" (p. 328).

Rather than indicting counterfactual claims as they are otherwise described (e.g., Broda-Bahm, 1995; Hoe, 1994; Roskoski, 1992, 1994) these critics seem to be indicting the parametric ability of the affirmative to simply limit their analysis of their example to a specific point in the past. This ability, if it exists, seems distinct from a causal use of counterfactual claims. The affirmative cases described in Voight's (1995) article (e.g., advertising created the beauty myth in the early 1900's, forced relocation of Native Americans was excessive in the 1800's) do not seem to be using the past example as part of a larger causal claim. As presented, they seem to be simply saying that the resolution was true in, for example, the early 1900's. This is interpreting the resolution within a specific temporal parameter. As Berube and Pray (1994) explain in reference to the object of Voight and Stanfield's (1992) criticisms,

> the affirmative by using counterfactual affirmative casing is not using the counterfactual as a test or hypothesis for a possible causal chain to determine the most proximate cause of a contemporary value displacement, rather, they are asserting the counterfactual as an example, in itself, to demonstrate the probable truth of the resolution. (pp. 328-29)

A rejection of exclusive-past examples, however, does not entail the rejection of the causal use of counterfactual claims. Take, for example, the Spring 1992 topic which served as the exigence for Voight and Stanfield's (1992) paper, "Resolved: That advertising degrades the quality of life in the United States." If Voight's (1995) arguments are correct, then this proposition ought to be read in the present tense. Doing that, however, in no way prevents or discourages the causal use of counterfactuals. Indeed, even a strictly contemporary reading of the proposition gives rise to the evaluative question: "If advertising didn't exist (or existed in another form) would the quality of life in the United States be greater?" Advocates setting out to prove that advertising *presently* degrades the quality of life may make use of the past in arguing, counterfactually, that if we hadn't developed advertising as part of the industrial revolution then the quality of life would be less degraded *today*. Alternately such advocates might have argued that if advertising had not, at some roughly identifiable point, embraced the "beauty myth" (Wolf, 1991), then advertising *today* would not be as degrading to the quality of life. While these arguments include the past, they importantly do not limit the discussion to a consideration of just that past. Present-day advantages would only lose relevance if we were interpreting and evaluating the resolution solely within the frame of a given past time period. The causal use of counterfactual claims provides no warrant for such a limitation.

VIEW TWO: COUNTERFACTUAL CLAIMS AS CAUSAL ANALYSIS

Causality as we know it is a counterfactual phenomenon. As Kahneman and Varey (1990) note, "Causal attributions invoke counterfactual beliefs, for example, about what would have happened in the absence of a putative cause" (p. 1101). Roese and Olson (1995) further amplify that "counterfactuals are thus intimately related to causal inference. A counterfactual conditional always contains causal implications" (p. 15). The counterfactual's function of comparing two conditions, one with the evaluated element present and the other with it absent, parallels Mill's (1879) Method of Differences, which can be seen as a basic template for causal thinking.

This view of the counterfactual as a causal component corrects a misunderstanding relating to the role of time. Berube and Pray (1994), misidentify the counterfactual argument as one that suggests "that by going back in time we could *fix* misguided value systems" (p. 331). They indicate that "we use counterfactual conditions to express a desire to change the past in everyday conversations" (p. 327). Berube and Pray subsequently indict counterfactual thinking based on the familiar paradoxes of time travel. Similarly Voight (1995) cautions that "actual policymakers have no opportunity to travel in time and adjust policy" (p. 90).

This focus on "time travel" reveals a profound misunderstanding of the function of counterfactual argument. Several studies in social psychology (e.g., Dunning & Parpal, 1989; Hilton & Slugoski, 1986; Markovitz & Vachon, 1989; Wells, Taylor & Turtle, 1987) provide evidence that people in everyday conversations use counterfactual thinking in order to make judgements about causality, not to change the past. Counterfactual thinking has nothing to do with time travel. If I suggest that "I would be happier if I never bought that house," I am not suggesting that I can travel back in time and change that decision. Rather, I am suggesting that the decision has led to a current state of mind which is less happy than it would otherwise be.

This relationship between counterfactuals and causality is intuitive. Whenever debaters advance causal arguments they are either implicitly or explicitly making counterfactual arguments. If we claim (causally) that handguns increase suicides, then we are also suggesting (counterfactually) that suicides would be lessened if handgun availability were lessened. Viewed in this light, advocacy of counterfactual claims is ubiquitous.

While the critics of counterfactual claims in debate have focused largely on the view of counterfactuals as "temporal parameters," they nontheless make some arguments which apply to the causal use of counterfactuals. This section will address two principal arguments which apply in this regard. The first argument claims that counterfactuals make causality overly deterministic, minimizing the role of multiple causality. The second argument notes problems of infinite regression in attempts to specify an appropriate comparative world.

Determinism

A common complaint is that counterfactual claims simplify history by relying on an overly deterministic view of causality. This criticism is seen most clearly on the issue of the "but for" test, which can be seen as an alternate means of expressing the counterfactual claim: "but for NAFTA, Mexico's labor practices would be even worse." Voight (1995) argues that 'but for' and 'if not' claims cannot be determined with precision. To support this argument he quotes from Barzun and Graff (1985):

> In a big and complicated case, there is always, at the end of it, a residue of improbable, inexplicable fact. You do not invalidate a hypothesis by showing that the chances were against the occurrence of some of the events that it presupposes: many things that happen are actually improbable. (p. 169)

In this passage, Barzun and Graff (1985) are actually quoting John Sparrow's (1967) discussion of the Warren Commission. Sparrow goes on to say that it is still the investigator's task is to make the best assessment possible "in spite of incidental improbabilities." He continues "What else should an investigator do? It is for the critics to show that they themselves have evaluated the evidence, and can make a selection from it that is as reliable" (p. 14-15). The continuation of Sparrow's argument contains two implications. First, even in the face of unknowns and improbabilities, we do what we can. Second, it is not a question of demanding an absolutely certain answer, but rather of creating an assessment that is reliable and able to withstand criticism.

Even if it is taken for granted that counterfactual claims are incapable of absolute proof that does nothing to make them incapable of argument. The level of uncertainty which is inherent in *all* causal claims may prevent scientific proof, but it does not prevent advocacy. Most basically, causal uncertainty does not make "but for" arguments inappropriate for inclusion within the frame of academic debate: a frame which simply demands grounds for normative evaluation--grounds for assessing what is better and what is worse.

Voight (1995) argues that counterfactual "but for" reasoning "ignores the possibility of multiple causation" (p. 91). Berube and Pray (1994) also mention over-determination, or the possible existence of more than one sufficient causal set such that, even had one cause been absent, another cause would have been sufficient (p. 329). In other words, they posit that some other factor may have stepped in to fill the role of the removed cause: an alternative to advertising might have evolved to play advertising's harmful role, even if advertising had been removed. Such a concern is well placed. Certainly counterfactual arguments, or any arguments, which fail to acknowledge social complexity, run the risk of advancing simplistic claims. In contrast to promoting such simplicity, however, It seems more plausible that "but for" analysis actually *tests* for the possibility and strength of multiple causation. In a world in which multiple and inter-connected influences are a given, the analytical (and counterfactual) tool of the "but for" test creates an opportunity to ask, "would a world absent one causal factor, but still in possession of other causal factors still be a world with the effect under evaluation?" If a "no" answer can be warranted for that question then multiple causality is negated; if "yes", then it is affirmed. An answer cannot be derived with certainty, but the question of multiple causality can

be assessed. Far from ignoring such a question, counterfactual analysis (specifically the "but for" test) is actually a clear way of asking it.

All acts of advocacy are at least potentially plagued by the existence of multiple causal factors. Typically, the convention of uniqueness is used to handle such issues and it can be used to handle counterfactual arguments as well. Failing, for example, to win the absolute claim that the critical press completely caused the Anti-War Movement that absolutely stopped the Viet Nam war, an advocate could still argue that the critical press uniquely promoted the movement which uniquely limited the war. Claims relating to degrees of alternate causality would mitigate, or possibly negate, this argument. But the limitations on this chain are exactly the limitations on any honest disadvantage argued in a "non-counterfactual" round. We never construct absolute arguments which relate to causality. Explicit counterfactual arguments are no exception.

Infinite Regression

Envisioning an alternate past in order to consider the presence or absence of a historical element brings up the problem of infinite regression. How far back does one go in altering the past? The use of a "branching points" schema seems to presume that we can locate a "time of first difference" - a time at which we can pinpoint maximum plausibility for a transition from an actual past to a counterfactual event that is under evaluation. Given the need to account for some plausible transition, the possibility of creating a world in which earlier and earlier changes are built into our comparison becomes a threat.

Joan Weiner (1979) argues that the assumption that there is a non-arbitrary time of first difference can be problematic. In discussing the statement "if the eraser were in position q, it would be reflected in the mirror," Weiner argues that transitions have regressive tendencies. She notes that counterfactuals like "If the eraser were in position q, I would have moved it there," "If I had moved the eraser to position q, it would have been in my way at an earlier time," etc. are true" (p. 506).

The argument is that a branching point, or "time of first difference" must, in itself, have had some causal precursor and a need to account for such a precursor pushes the branching point farther and farther back. Failing to continue this indefinitely, we would also fail to be able to make the claim that we have identified the closest branching point. There would certainly come a time at which the branching point is arbitrarily so far back in time that a meaningful answer to the counterfactual becomes impossible. Elster (1978) seems to acknowledge this point, criticizing moves that "require a branching point so far back in time that the counterfactual reconstruction crosses the line between science and science fiction" (p. 214).

This threat can be seen as a more sophisticated version of the intuitive argument made by debaters responding to counterfactual arguments with the claim, "Counterfactuals lead to infinite regression - how far back do we go?" The threat is also arguably expressed in Voight and Stanfield's (1992) argument that counterfactual claims, once legitimated, can be pushed infinitely far back in time. They provide an example involving the "beauty myth" indictment of advertising:

> The author who linked the rise of the beauty myth with the publication of an advertisement featuring a female with shaved underarms inexplicably ignored the well-established popularity of makeup during the Elizabethan era, and of corsets, hoops and braziers during the reign of Louis the XVI. Arguably, the beauty myth had already been deeply ingrained in the human psyche during Egyptian times, or perhaps even earlier. (p. 13)

Berube and Pray (1994) also assume that the counterfactual claim could be infinitely extended. Working from Goodman's (1973) argument that counterfactual claims depend in turn on other counterfactual claims, they argue that a search for the appropriate comparative world could lead to infinite investigation, without satisfaction. They note:

> the debate surrounding the causal link chain that determined A or ~A needs to be evidenced and not assumed, the affirmative and negative would be engaged in a debate solely around the time before A or ~A and never be able to deduce the counterfactual as either probably true or not true. (p. 335)[1]

The central engine driving this infinite regression can be seen as the *problem of relevant conditions* identified by Goodman (1973). To make a counterfactual claim, like "if I would have struck this match it would have lit" is to assume the existence of other relevant conditions (e.g., that the match was dry, that there was sufficient oxygen, etc.). To Goodman, the act of asserting the counterfactual claim is conjoined with the act of asserting the existence of these relevant conditions (e.g., "if I would have struck this match it would have been dry;" "if I would have struck this match there would have been sufficient oxygen present;" etc.). Assertions of these relevant conditions, to the extent that they emphasize the effect of potential

[1] ~A is a convention for representing "not A." In this quotation, A or ~A represents the occurrence or non-occurrence of any event.

occurrences, are also counterfactual in nature. Thus Goodman concludes that, "to establish any counterfactual, it seems that we first have to determine the truth of another" (p. 16).

As stated, however, such a problem of dependence is neither unique to counterfactuals nor is it particularly devastating in an argumentative context. A more basic issue of dependence can be seen as an element in all instances of reason-giving. A claim must have a reason, and a reason invokes other claims which in turn must carry reasons, and the process continues. Reasons can be questioned in endless succession. Stephen Toulmin (1958), for example, sees an argument as including at least a claim, data, and warrant. The "data" inevitably consists of one or more additional "claims." Similarly, the "warrant" which connects the data to the claim also can be alternately viewed as another "claim." If questioned, the data and the warrant will themselves require data and a warrant. The claim, "there is a forest fire" might be supported by the data "there is smoke coming from the forest" and the warrant "where there is smoke, there is fire." But the data/*claim* that "there is smoke coming from the forest" would, if questioned, be supported by further data, "it has been sighted by rangers" and warrants, "rangers are reliable at spotting smoke." These could in turn be questioned, requiring further development. This process has no *logical* stopping point. It continues indefinitely or, more probably, it continues until the advocates are satisfied that this component of the argument, at least, is true.

I use this illustration to show that infinite regression in itself is nothing new to argument. If counterfactuals depend on other counterfactuals, *ad infinitum*, then that is not a unique problem since reasons depend on reasons, *ad infinitum*. That which might be a problem for the logician, would not be a problem necessarily for the arguer. An opponent's ability to draw reasons into question is answered by further reasons, but this process only continues as long as the opponent is able to question the reasoning being offered. At a certain point, we stop. We show that the policy is bad because it leads to a war, and we show that the war is bad because it could result in nuclear war, and there we stop. Though we could question whether a nuclear war would be bad, usually we don't. The fact that we *could* question the harm of the nuclear war and then, after our opponent answers, question the harm of nuclear winter, then question the harm of the loss of all life, etc., does make the consequential argument in a technical sense infinitely regressive. But the argumentative situation checks that regression: questions only continue as long as advocates are able to continue to come up with reasons to doubt preceding reasons.

Similarly, counterfactual argumentation, or specifically the search for an appropriate comparative world, would continue until we reached a resting point: a point at which a given branching point is not countered with a better branching point. Counterfactual argumentation might be doomed if there were no way to argue that any particular branching point is any better or worse than any other branching point, but such is not the case. In Voight and Stanfield's

(1992) example, for instance, the branching point which occurred in the early 1900's regarding advertising's path toward reinforcement of the beauty myth could be defended as a superior branching point to the path which can be traced to the "advertisement" of beauty to be found in Egyptian paintings. Initially, it could be argued that the 1900's are closer to us and hence, for reasons advanced by Elster (1978), a better comparison. Additionally, it could be argued that topically the contemporary definition of advertising is more consistent with the messages of the 1900's than it is with the art of ancient Egypt. The point is that the issue is an arguable one. Reasons can be adduced in support of a particular 'stopping point' along the path of counterfactual regression.

For example, the national news media proposition could be supported using the 1960's as the time of counterfactual transition; a time when a truly "national" news media emerged as a force in politics (see Huntington, 1975). In an adversary setting such a point may be questioned, or it may not be questioned. Opponents could argue that the Reagan-era of the early 1980's constitute a similar, but more recent, branching point at which the media could have plausibly turned away from its mission to critically influence the public's understanding. If such an argument were made, and supported, then the original proponents of the counterfactual claim would be forced to refute, or to accommodate themselves to, this new comparative world. The potential to question a given branching point with reasons makes the existence of a "true" branching point indeterminate, but it does not make it unarguable.

The important point is that such a dispute would be handled, not logically, but discursively. This essentially brings us back to the central point made by Nicholas Rescher (1961) which was used to begin this essay. Counterfactual claims are not amenable to ultimate truth testing, but are amenable to dialogue. In an argumentative setting, this dialogue employs claims and refutations. Better or worse solutions may be proposed even if no ultimate solution is possible. Argumentation rather than truth-testing seems to be the solution to the counterfactual problem. As Lukes (1980) notes,

> It is obviously a matter for speculation and argument as to whether a given point in historical time was or was not at the origin of an alternative feasible path to the actual course of history. Germany may have been at such a point in 1918: a moderate liberal path in Weimar Germany might have been possible from that point. To make such a claim is, precisely, to advance an *argument*, to adduce reasons that may be more or less compelling and indirect evidence that may be more or less relevant, in the context of a web of suppositions, claimed to be plausible. (p. 150)

We may not be able to, in the constraints of an academic debate round, answer all of the ambiguities of causality, counterfactual logic, history, and time. But, as Roskoski (1992) notes, "we can instead require that the affirmative offering a counterfactual claim be able to explain some implication of their counterfactual with a good reason" (p. 16).

CONCLUSION

The counterfactual argument is not a new discovery, it is simply a way of explicating an aspect of the claims that we have been making all along. Counterfactual claims are not limited to the historical examples identified by critics but are instead entailed in every argumentative use of the hypothetical. While the counterfactual dimension will not always be explored or contested, it is always present. If it is indeed true that counterfactual arguments "have no place in CEDA debate" (Voight & Stanfield, 1992, p. 2), the alternative reasoning that we should employ remains unclear. Whether they are implicit or explicit, counterfactual claims are a component of causality; an abdication of causal argument would cripple most if not all attempts to dejustify or justify claims.

Viewed in this context, all of the troublesome considerations discussed by Berube and Pray (1994), Voight (1995), and Voight and Stanfield (1992) can serve as goals for future clarification, and possibly as avenues for argument. They cannot be reasons to prefer one analytical system over another. As long as resolutions focus on the causal evaluation of some subject,[2] counterfactual analysis will take place either implicitly or explicitly. Given such a choice in an argumentative setting, the explicit claim (or at least the potential to make that aspect of the claim explicit) seems preferable. Ultimately, the question should not be whether explicit counterfactual arguments are 'good or bad', but how they should be advanced and evaluated.

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[2]One implication coming from critics is that one should foreswear the use of retrospectivity by focusing on the prospective: the probable consequences of future action within the familiar policy or quasi-policy paradigm. Berube and Pray (1994), however, admit that we use future oriented counterfactual statements when we are evaluating policy implications (p. 328) by focusing on what *would be* the case if a hypothetical action were taken. Counterfactual claims are used to describe not only past potentialities, but future ones as well (Johnson & Sherman, 1990). Based on this bi-directionality, there seems to be no clear way that an advocate could avoid counterfactual claims-making and its resulting difficulty. Even if prospective claims are *not* seen as equally counterfactual, they are still only sometimes fostered by a resolution's phrasing. In other cases a proposition will not foster or even logically permit such a prospective focus (e.g., "Advertising degrades the quality of life," or "The National News Media impair the public's understanding of political issues").

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