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Comment on Lowe

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but it need be none the less 'close' for all that: unless, of course, 'closeness' is precisely to be *understood* in probabilistic terms – in which case one might as well go straight for a probabilistic semantics in the first place (something which Lewis himself does not favour, *op. cit.*, p. 71).

Much the same point may be made another way, as follows. If a devotee of Lewis insists on regarding (5) as a standard counterfactual, he cannot explain why transitivity should *fail* in the inference from

- (7) If there had been a thin scattering of snow in the valley yesterday, there would have been snow in the valley yesterday

and (5) to

- (8) If there had been a thin scattering of snow in the valley yesterday, the snow conditions would have been suitable for skiing

For, of course, the antecedent of (7) is *not* 'more far-fetched' than that of (5), as the Lewisian explanation of transitivity failure requires (Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 33).

What I am saying, then, is that *the Lewisian* is in no position to use (5) in purported examples of failure of transitivity, since he is committed to denying that (5) is a standard counterfactual. Perhaps it will be retorted that this only shows that there is something wrong with the Lewisian semantics, not that the examples involving (5) are not genuine cases of failure of transitivity. However, I think that the difficulty which (5) presents for the Lewisian semantics should at least make us wary, *whether or not we accept those semantics*, of assuming that (5) is a standard counterfactual. It can never be satisfactory to present as a counter-example to an important thesis a case whose interpretation is open to some doubt in this way.

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## COMMENT ON LOWE

*By* CRISPIN WRIGHT

LOWE agrees ('Wright versus Lewis on the Transitivity of Counterfactuals', *ANALYSIS* 44.4, October 1984) with my intuitions about the transitivity of counterfactuals, but does not think that I supported them correctly. However, I am not persuaded of his

reasons for thinking so. One way of putting my objection to Lewis is that if transitivity is simply invalid for counterfactuals, then there ought in general to be nothing incongruous about a subject's assertion, 'in the same breath', of the premises for a transitivity step in the kinds of case where, Lewis believes, the step fails; incongruity should arise only when the step is, invalidly, made. Lowe allows, as he envisages Lewis allowing, that there often is such an incongruity *before* the transitivity step is made, but suggests that Lewis should have no difficulty in giving a pragmatic (contrast: semantic) explanation of the phenomenon, thereby preempting my suggestion that the real source of the incongruity is the valid entailment, by transitivity, of an incongruous conclusion. It is, however, quite unclear how in general such a pragmatic explanation should proceed. Lowe's specific suggestion (p. 181) would require that it invariably be the case that one of the premisses is 'common knowledge', after the manner of premiss (2) in the snow example. There is no reason why that should be so. Suppose that I, whom you regard as an expert on the Soviet political system and the kind of characters who succeed within it, inform you that 'If Benn had been born and brought up in Russia, he would have failed to achieve political eminence', and that you happen to believe for sound, though not generally known, reasons of your own, that 'if Benn had failed to achieve political eminence, he would have been a market gardener in Lowestoft'. Manifestly, you are not at liberty to conjoin and file, as it were, the two propositions, without qualification. And the explanation of this cannot be the pragmatic one envisaged by Lowe, since (i) neither is common knowledge, and (ii) no simultaneous assertion of both is anyway being made.

Accordingly, I stick to it that the right explanation of such cases is that the transitivity step is valid, but leads to an unacceptable consequence; and, consequently, that no 'filing' may reasonably take place until the premises have been appropriately reformulated or the grounds for their assertion reassessed. In any case, there are not the 'dire implications' which Lowe finds in my proposal. The proposal is not to relativize the *validity of inferences* to context but to relativize the *content* of counterfactuals to context. What would indeed be dire would be if one and the same proposition, identified across different contexts, possessed only context-dependent logical liaisons. But that is not in view. What I meant to suggest was, rather, that the right account of counterfactuals – and indeed of conditionals in general – may very well involve attributing to them something like, though not to be identified with, token reflexivity: their truth conditions, that is to say, will be a function both of a context-independent sense and of an envisaged context of utterance. The relevant notion of 'context' will involve, of course, not merely aspects of the occasion of utterance but considerations to do with the informational presuppositions and purposes of speaker and audience. How the analysis of the notion should best

be approached, and whether in particular Lewisian semantics have a part to play, is another question.

A final point about Nozick. Suppose we accept that, as suggested in my previous discussion ('Keeping track of Nozick', *ANALYSIS* 43.3, June 1983, p. 138), a convention of the following sort operates:

- (C) When a number of counterfactual conditionals are in play in a single context, some *single* range of relevant worlds governs the assessment of them all.

For Nozick, it is essential that both the following counterfactual conditionals can be true.

- (i) If I were a brain in a vat, I would have no hand;

and

- (ii) If I had no hand, I would not believe that I had a hand.

Plausibly, (i) holds irrespective of the range of worlds in view, since it articulates an analytic implication of what it is to be a brain in a vat; while the possibility of the truth of (ii) is exactly what, on Nozick's account, saves the possibility of my knowledge that I have a hand even if we concede the unassailability of the sceptical doubt whether I am a brain in a vat. Now transitivity will, of course, yield an unacceptable consequence from (i) and (ii). But C can be harnessed to generate trouble for Nozick by a different route.<sup>1</sup> For, in the presence of that principle, the validity of the following pattern of inference follows:

$$\frac{P \Box \rightarrow Q; Q \Box \rightarrow R}{P \& Q \Box \rightarrow R}$$

whereby (i) and (ii) can be made to yield the unacceptable

- (iii) If I had been a brain in a vat and had had no hand, then I would not have believed that I had a hand.

What follows is that Nozick must deny C or admit that, the analyticity of (i) notwithstanding, (i) and (ii) may not be maintained in a single context. And, of course, the cost of the latter option is that (ii) may not be maintained in the context of dialogue with the sceptic.

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<sup>1</sup> Stig Rasmussen persuaded me that this might be a helpful way of presenting the point.