305 Lecture 13.5 - Counterfactuals

Brian Weatherson

- To introduce our last topic, counterfactual conditionals.

Associated Reading

- Boxes and Diamonds, chapter 7.

Counterfactuals in Philosophy

These play a central role in lots of fields, including

- Causation
- Explanation
- Evaluation
- Planning

There feel like there is a close connection between these claims.

- Causal event C caused effect event E.
- If C hadn't happened, E wouldn't have happened.

It's not a foolproof connection – maybe E would have happened some other way. But there is a link.
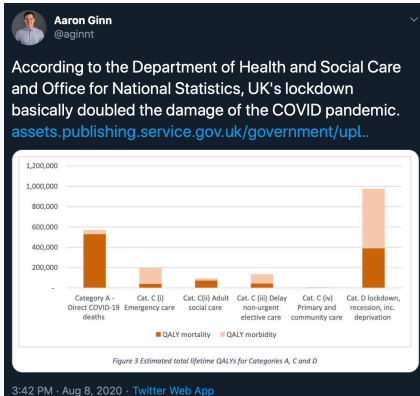
It also feels like there is a close connection between these claims.

- Historical fact H explains event to be explained E.
- If H hadn't happened, E wouldn't have happened.

Again, there are exceptions in both directions. But there is a link there.

Let's do a real-life example. What's wrong with this reasoning?

Aaron Ginn
@aginnt

According to the Department of Health and Social Care and Office for National Statistics, UK's lockdown basically doubled the damage of the COVID pandemic.
assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/upl..

Figure 3 Estimated total lifetime QALYs for Categories A, C and D

3:42 PM · Aug 8, 2020 · Twitter Web App

This tweet compares the following things.

1. How much damage was actually caused by coronavirus.
2. How much damage was actually caused by the lockdown.

But if you want to evaluate the lockdown, you need to compare these two factors
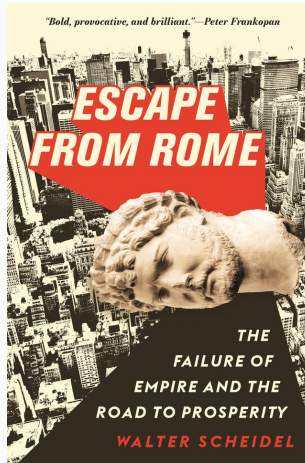
1. How much damage **would have been** caused by coronavirus without a lockdown.
2. How much damage was actually caused by the lockdown.

That is, you need a counterfactual. I can't say what the value of that would be – it's miles outside my expertise. But I can tell you that the comparison here is just wrong.

Planning

If you are trying to decide between two options A and B, it feels like these are the questions you need to answer.

1. If I were to do A, what would happen?
2. If I were to do B, what would happen?

That is, you need to answer two questions about counterfactuals.

Walter Scheidel, Escape from Rome: The Failure of Empire and the Road to Prosperity

Coincidence

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- But Scheidel isn't just interested in explanation.
- He's also interested in which facts about history are coincidences, and which are not.
- In particular, is is a coincidence that since the fall of Rome, there has not been a large empire in Europe that has lasted more than a few years.
- This is a striking contrast to the many empires that have arisen in South Asia, East Asia and the Americas.

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2. Is there a very similar world to ours in which there is a long lasting empire in Europe?

Two Ways to Answer that Question

1. Is there something that could easily have happened such that if it had happened, there would have been a long lasting empire in Europe?
2. Is there a very similar world to ours in which there is a long lasting empire in Europe?

Intuition: These are sort of the same question.

1.1 Introduction

'*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. I shall give a general analysis of counterfactual conditionals along these lines.

Opening lines of Counterfactuals, by David Lewis, 1973

We'll work on turning this intuition of Lewis's into a theory.