# Modalities and Future Contingencies. Nelson Goodman's and David Lewis' Analysis of Counterfactuals

## (Gabriele M. Mras)

In the empirical sciences the role of counterfactuals is based on what ones takes to be true or probable. Scenarios as to what would have happened, if something which was present had been absent, are constructed *after* explanations of what actually did happen are given. The possibility of formulating counterfactuals when predictions are made, as well rests on what one believes or takes to be true. Counterfactuals – as it looks – are not used to *express* what there will be in a future totally different from the past ("if I were to win …, I would …") but come into play when expectations about singular cases are express relative to what ones believes to be to be necessarily so.

As Quine and Goodman have pointed out decades ago, no one could judge a counterfactual conditional to be true, i.e. believe it, if alternatives were envisaged such that nothing could be thought as remaining the same. The significance of Goodman's analysis of subjunctive conditionals "if …., would …" , now, lies in the fact that what has to be believed to remain the same is not exhausted by beliefs in same basic laws. Some other contingent regularities have to be presupposed if something is given as a description of an event such that something else is said to follow from it. What this shows is that explaining some particular events by saying "if $e_1$ had been absent, $e_2$ would not have been" is not equivalent in meaning with expressing the expectation that the absence of $e_1$ is going to be followed by the absence of $e_2$ . The reason for this is (a) the difference between "could not have if" and "would not have if" and (b) the irreducibility of "would not have if" utterances to sentences asserting the realization of some conditional dependencies. What would not happen *if*, is not the same as what could not happen, despite the fact that what did actually happen under some given circumstances is something whose possibility of its not happening is excluded. I want to stress the importance of this point when questions about the possibility of ascribing truth conditions to counterfactual conditionals are raised.

Goodman proved that in formulating counterfactuals concerning the future what is assumed to remain similar in the future and the past must not exclude the possibility of things being other as asserted in the consequence of a counterfactual conditional, i.e. that $e_2$ is not absent, if $e_1$ is absent. David Lewis' account of counterfactuals in terms of possible worlds is a reaction to the very problem that arises with this analysis. Since on an interpretation of counterfactuals as material implications this would turn all

counterfactuals into right ones, some other interpretation has to be found to understand the significance of counterfactual belief. Lewis's analysis does try to do justice to Goodman's point that belief in the rightness of a counterfactual is not equivalent to the belief in the fulfilment of its truth conditions insofar as counterfactuals are understood as "variably strict" conditionals. But I want to show, that Lewis account is confronted with a dilemma that arises when similar worlds are used as background for judging whether some beliefs about a sequence of events have a modal character. If Modality is thought to be accounted for in terms of similarity and sameness of other situations or worlds "looking" into other "possible worlds" is no means for ascribing truth conditions to counterfactuals for two reasons: either the modal aspects of explaining a certain sequence of events gets lost. If, in order to secure this modal aspect, the similarity of the world envisaged is such that by expressing "if $e_1$ had been absent, $e_2$ would have been absent" the occurrence of $e_2$ without $e_1$ is excluded, counterfactuals have to be understood as expressing the necessitation of a possibility. "Could have if" and "would have if" would then be understood as having the same meaning in singular cases. But this runs counter Lewis' own ideas of constructing counterfactual conditionals not as strict implications and using the idea of similar worlds to judge their truth conditions.