

Contesti Controfattuali

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Abstract

The subject of counterfactuals has been and nowadays is widely discussed in a number of disciplines: at the beginning it was mainly of a philosophical import, but recently it has become central in at least artificial intelligence and cognitive psychology. Philosophers have focussed their interest mostly on the structure of counterfactual conditionals and on questions related with their problematic truth-functionality.

Our aim in this paper is to examine not only the linguistic aspect of counterfactuals, but counterfactual thinking as a cognitive process that comes with the production and the comprehension of counterfactual sentences and other equivalent linguistic forms. In order to reach this goal, we intend to make use of the theory of Multicontext Systems developed by the research group of Fausto Giunchiglia in Trento, with some reference to Gilles Fauconnier's notion of Mental Spaces and John Mc Carthy's Logic of Context.

With this methodological choice, we try to find a new line in the philosophical analysis of counterfactuals, different from the one traditionally put forward by David Lewis and based on the paradigm of possible worlds, still widely accepted. The main advantages of a contextual approach with comparison to the possible worlds' theory are suggested by the notion of context itself, since *contexts are partial structures related to subjective perspectives*.

In fact, when we assert a counterfactual sentence, as "If I had won the lottery, today I would have been in Australia", the antecedent opens a space alternative to reality at least because of a very specific detail. However, this space needs not to be as complete and omnicomprehensive as a possible world, because what is really of interest is the specific feature that variates inside a limited context of knowledge and that is relevant to infer the content of the consequent.

The focus of our paper will be on a very peculiar kind of counterfactuals: the ones in which the antecedent operates a partial overlapping of two different cognitive contexts related to two different individuals as in "*If I were you*, I wouldn't have bought that car". In order to reach a deeper understanding, we try to locate them inside a general frame containing a rough taxonomy of conditionals, based on the following parameters:

the timing of the antecedent and consequent with respect to the time of the speaker, the degrees of “realizability” of the events described in the antecedent and in the consequent.

The grammatical form by itself is not always sufficient to indicate the presence of a counterfactual scenario: in those cases it is the semantical content to play an important role in the determination of counterfactuality. Even when we consider counterfactuals of the type “If I were you, ...”, we cannot neglect taking into account the semantical content of the antecedent. In fact, what is relevant here is not the causal role of the antecedent with respect to the consequent - as in the kinds of counterfactuals usually considered by the classical literature on the topic - but *a sort of modification of the cognitive context of an individual*, implying the importation of some knowledge or belief from the context of another individual.

This kind of counterfactuals could be considered the foundation of co-operative and antagonistic reasoning, since every time two or more individuals face the problem of developing a common plan or are in a situation of competition, it seems necessary that everyone tries to figure out beliefs, intentions, purposes etc. of co-operating or competing people. In doing so, they need to activate a mechanism of importation between contexts, i.e. between cognitive spaces. What we can now call a “counterfactual attitude” is then a very pervasive process, often encountered in common sense reasoning and not necessarily expressed through conditional statements.

Furthermore, we think that the interest of studying counterfactuals cannot be fully understood without considering the pragmatic functions they solve. Immediate aims of counterfactuals are to express causal connections between events, or feelings like regret or relief, to give advices, justifications or explanations, to develop a diagnosis of faults, to make comparisons between states of affairs, actions or even cognitive spaces, as in the case under focus in the present paper. All these immediate aims seem to have in common an ultimate purpose, that is *learning from an experience that didn't take place*.

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