Counterfactuals: A Hybrid Approach

The subject of my talk is the semantical question of counterfactuals, i.e., the truth-condition of expressions such as "If it were the case that $A$, then it would be the case that $C$" (formally "$A>C$"), where $A$ and $C$ stand for the antecedent and a consequent respectively. There are at least three popular approaches to this question: support theory (Goodman 1947; Chisholm 1955), possible worlds semantics (Stalnaker 1968; Lewis 1973), and truthmaker semantics (Fine 2012). While each of these has interesting consequences, all of them are grounded in notions that are somehow considered controversial or opaque. These are, respectively, notions of cotenability, similarity, and outcome. Accordingly, some claim that each of these accounts faces the charge of circularity of analysis.

In my talk, I want to propose a fourth, hybrid approach. This is grounded in three assumptions, imported from the philosophy of science. The first one has it that to explain a phenomenon is to show how it depends on something else (e.g., Skow 2016). The second states that the correct explanation ought to be contrastive (e.g., van Fraassen 1977). This means that a good explanation justifies the occurrence of a phenomenon and -- at the same time -- excludes occurrence of some other states of affairs. The third assumption concerns the aim of explanation, which is considered being understanding (de Regt & Dieks 2005). I am going to argue that – together with the assumption that conditionals express a dependence relation between $A$ and $C$ – the above gives ground for analysis of counterfactuals. According to this proposal:

> "$A>C$" is true at the world of evaluation iff there is a relation of
> dependence that hold between referents of $A$ and $C$, and the same relation
> of dependance holds in the world of evaluation.

As opposed to the mentioned three approaches, the one I am going to propose ought to be free from the circularity fallacy. This is due to the fact, that the notion of dependence relation is formulated without modal terms and in does not come in degrees. Hence, either a dependence relation holds at a world or not. Given that in this picture (i) worlds are sets of truthmakers, (ii) truth-condition is expressed in terms of possible worlds, and (iii) the truth of a counterfactual is supported by the existence of the dependence relation, this can be taken to be a hybrid view, that combines all three popular analyses of counterfactuals.

References:
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