ON THE TALL NAPOLEON ([1])

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The literature of the counterfactual conditional ([2]) has been concerned to a considerable extent, with establishing, or at least discussing the possibility of establishing, the conditions under which a counterfactual is true. Little, if anything, has been said about conditions under which a statement of this kind might be *false*. In this paper I wish to state one condition of this kind. My contention is that a counterfactual is false when it presupposes a statement of the form «There could be an A the same as B except...» where A and B are of such a nature that the statement «A is the same as B except...» is self-contradictory regardless how the dots are filled in. I do not presume to say what the nature of A and B must be in order for this to be the case, although it is clear that we sometimes think of persons as being of this nature. But my argument is only that *when* A and B are of the appropriate nature, we shall obtain a false counterfactual.

We often use expressions of the form «A is the same as B except...,» and we fill in the dots by naming two or three respects in which A and B differ. Thus we say «This match is the same as that except that it has been scratched.» «A is the same as B except...» should be contrasted with «A is similar to B.» When we use the latter expression, we need only be prepared to name one respect or a few in which A and B are similar. Thus «The Nymphenberg Palace is similar to an igloo in that both provide shelter.» But unless we were joking, we would never say «The Nymphenberg Palace is the same as an igloo except...,» because we would then have to name an indefinitely large number of respects in order to fill in the dots. The Nymphenberg Palace is the same as an igloo except that one is in Germany and the other in Alaska, one is large and the other small, one is made of stone and the other of ice, one is the erstwhile habitation of royalty and the other is the present habitation of nomads, etc., etc., etc. This is indeed just a joke. It is also a contradiction, for

the indefinitely long string of exceptions denies the force of «is the same as.» The Nymphenberg Palace and an igloo are not the same at all, although they are similar.

Someone might challenge my first example. He might say that «This match is the same as that except scratched» is just a joke. For the scratched match, having lighted, is in fact different from the unscratched one in an indefinitely large number of respects. This is true but irrelevant. For in order to compare the two matches with precision, it is sufficient to say, «They are the same except that one has been scratched.» The «except» clause does in effect list an indefinitely large set of differences between the matches, but it lists *all* of these differences; there are no further exceptions. There is no similar way of summarizing the differences between the Nymphenberg Palace and an igloo.

We can say of two different matches that they are the same except that one has been scratched, and we can say that two houses are the same except for location. But we usually do not say of two different persons, «They are the same except ... .» No one objects to finding similarities between Lincoln and Kennedy, but one would not ordinarily be inclined to say «Lincoln and Kennedy are the same except ... .» Normally, persons A and B can be same only if they are numerically identical; and when they are, there is no «except.» Hence to say of different persons that they are the same except... is usually to fall into a contradiction.

Under certain circumstances, however, we do say that different persons are the same. Imagine a conference that is taking place on the fifteenth storey of a building. None of the participants is the same as any other. But if two of them should jump out of a window they would become the same: the most talented participant and the least talented are the same, except in respects that are without importance, when both are falling toward certain death. What has happened here is that all the differences between the two have paled into insignificance before the fact of their sameness as falling bodies. This sameness can reach back through the window to embrace those still in the room. For Smith, who did not jump, is in fact the same as Brown, except that Brown did jump; there, but for the grace of God, goes Smith. Gravity is one of the great equalizers, in the sense that when persons are doomed by it, their differences become negligible.

Sometimes we are speaking somewhat with tongue in cheek when we talk of the sameness of persons. The woman who says «Men are

all the same» is probably exaggerating. But she is not speaking figuratively; what she means is that most men, if not all, literally want the same thing, and their differences pale into insignificance before this identity in motivation. To say this is to regard men as less than persons, just as to emphasize the sameness of falling individuals is to regard them as less than persons.

I turn now to some counterfactual conditionals. Consider «If this match had been scratched, it would have lighted.» This conditional clearly presupposes that there could be a match the same as this except scratched; if there could not be, the requisite lawlike connection between antecedent and consequent ([3]) would surely be lacking. Note that the conditional presupposes much more than merely that there could be a match *similar* to this. For a match could perfectly well be similar to this (say, in length) and yet not light when scratched (because having a head of the wrong composition).

The counterfactual «If Smith had jumped out of the window, he would have been killed» can be analyzed in a similar fashion. It presupposes that there could be a person the same as Smith except having jumped. The Brown mentioned a few paragraphs back is such a person. Brown is not merely *similar* to Smith. All persons are *the same* in free fall.

But consider «If Napoleon had been six feet tall, he would (would not) have been just as great a soldier.» On the analogy of the two previous examples, this presupposes that there could be a person the same as Napoleon except six feet tall. However, to say of Napoleon and someone six feet tall that they are the same is to fall into a contradiction; for in the absence of equalizers, no one but Napoleon can be the same as Napoleon. Since «There could be a person the same as Napoleon except six feet tall» is a contradiction, the counterfactual conditional that presupposes it is itself a contradiction.

Not all counterfactual conditionals having «If Smith had jumped out of the window» as the antecedent are consistent. Thus «If Smith had jumped out of the window, he would have regretted it on the way down» does not appeal to gravity, or anything else, as an equalizer. It presupposes that there could be someone the same as Smith except having jumped, but refers to no crisis in which all others would be the same as Smith. Hence it, like «If Napoleon had been six feet tall he would (would not) have been just as great a soldier,» is inconsistent. Notice that it is the consequent that conveys the notion

([3]) See GOODMAN, *Fact, Fiction & Forecast*, p. 27.

of an equalizer, such as sudden death; for the consistent conditional and the inconsistent one differ only in consequent. By changing the consequent we can in fact formulate a *consistent* counterfactual about Napoleon: to wit, «If Napoleon had been six feet tall, he would have been 72 inches tall.» Analytic truth is thus an equalizer. It is only in the absence of all equalizers that a counterfactual about a person is inconsistent.

It might seem that in asserting that in the absence of equalizers sameness does not apply to persons, I have espoused the nonsensical position of denying that a person can change. Jones was poor, but now he is rich. Is he not, then «the same as Jones, except rich» ? There would be a contradiction if «Jones» could only be interpreted as naming the past Jones; for no one could be the same as the past Jones except rich. But in fact «Jones» is the name of the person who both was poor in the past and is rich in the present. That person is the same as the then poor Jones *and* the same as the now rich Jones. Hence although it is true that «the same as Jones except rich» is selfcontradictory when «Jones» is interpreted as simply the past Jones, the contradiction can be removed by saying instead «the same as Jones past and present, except rich.» Now, of course, the «except» is once again out of place — this time because «except rich» is redundant rather than because it is inconsistent. Rich or poor, Jones is Jones, but we cannot say «Tall or short, Napoleon is Napoleon,» because there simply never was a tall Napoleon; there could thus be no one the same as Napoleon except tall.

What if future scholarship should establish that Napoleon was in fact six feet tall ? The conditional «If Napoleon had been six feet tall...» would still be selfcontradictory. For in addition to presupposing «There could be someone the same as Napoleon except six feet tall,» it also presupposes «Napoleon was *not* six feet tall.» These two presuppositions themselves are mutually inconsistent.

Much has been written on the question whether counterfactual conditionals are truthfunctional. The conditional about Napoleon constitutes additional support for the already pretty definitely negative reply. For since it presupposes a contradiction it must itself be not only false but selfcontradictory. But the only truthfunctional conditionals that are selfcontradictory must have a tautologous antecedent and a selfcontradictory consequent. No one would say that the antecedent of this one is tautologous.

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