Equivocation and the Paradoxes
April 25, 2001

1. Context-dependence in *de re* modality

'Could Hubert Humphrey have been an angel? A human born to diferent parents? A human born to different parents in ancient Egypt? A robot? A clever donkey that talks? An ordinary donkey? A poached egg?'

Lewis's answer: that depends on what you mean by 'could have been'.

In different contexts, 'could have been a robot' means different things. In some contexts, it expresses a property that Hubert Humphrey has; in other contexts, it expresses a property that he lacks.

Compare: in different contexts, 'is tall' means different things. In some contexts, it expresses the property of being tall for a basketball player. In other contexts, it expresses the property of being tall for a dwarf…

If I just say 'that person is tall' out of the blue, there's very little in the context that could narrow down the different things that I might mean: so what I say is quite likely to be indeterminate. In richer contexts, the range of cases for which it's indeterminate what the answer is is smaller.

Similarly for 'could have been a robot'. If I just ask you out of the blue whether Humphrey could have been a robot, it's probably indeterminate what the right answer is. But if we're debating about our paranoid science-fictional fantasies, or doing biology, there'll be a definite answer to this question (even though other questions might still be indeterminate).

2. Context-dependence in the counterpart relation

Recall that Lewis's analysis of 'Hubert Humphrey could have been a robot' is 'Hubert Humphrey has a counterpart who is a robot'. So if 'could have been' is context-sensitive, that must be because 'is a counterpart of' is context-sensitive.

Lewis also has another analysis of 'could have been an F', which he uses when he's trying to be neutral between counterpart-theory and competing views. On this analysis, 'x could have been an F' is translated as 'there is a world that represents x to be F'. (The counterpart-theoretic account falls out of this if you analyse 'represents x to be F' as 'contains a counterpart of x which is F'.) So the 'representation' relation is also context-sensitive.

3. Names that evoke contexts

Batman isn't very strong: he's just an ordinary guy who works out a lot and has lots of cool gadgets, as opposed to Superman who is from the planet Krypton.

Bruce Wayne is very strong: unlike most other rich industrialists, he spends a lot of his time fighting criminals and so forth.

But Batman is Bruce Wayne (if I'm remembering this right). In some contexts it's true to say that he's "very strong", in other contexts it isn't. Part of what makes the difference between the contexts is the way you choose to refer to him. If you refer to him as Batman, you'll make the comparison to other superheroes salient; if you refer to him as Bruce Wayne, you'll make the comparison to ordinary people salient. If we wanted to get rid of the context sensitivity, we could introduce two different words: $strong_{Batman}$ and $strong_{BW}$. Batman---that is, Bruce Wayne---is not $strong_{Batman}$ but is $strong_{BW}$.

According to Lewis, something like this also goes on in the case of *de re* modal predicates like 'could have been a robot'.

4. Our modal paradox again

1. Lumpl could have survived squashing
2. Goliath couldn't have survived squashing
3. Goliath is Lumpl

Lewis's diagnosis: 'could have survived squashing' is context-sensitive. In a context where we're thinking of something as a lump, it means one thing; in a context where we're thinking of that same thing as a statue, it means another thing. 'Goliath' and 'Lumpl' are "evocative names": using the name 'Goliath' tends to make us think of the thing as a statue, and use a counterpart relation on which it has only statues as counterparts. Using the name 'Lumpl' makes us think of it as a lump of clay, and use a counterpart relation on which it can have lumps of clay that aren't statues as counterparts. So both 1 and 2 are true in the contexts they are likely to be uttered in.

If we wanted to, we could introduce subscripts to make the equivocation clear: Lumpl, that is Goliath, $could_{Lumpl}$ have survived squashing, but $couldn't_{Goliath}$ have survived squashing.

5. Sentences with more than one name

Suppose we have two statue/lumps: Goliath/Lumpl and Jupiter/Clem. What about this sentence:

(*) It could have been the case that Clem survives a squashing and Goliath doesn't survive an exactly similar squashing

You might think that the context-sensitivity strategy can't help us here; whether we adopt the "statue-counterpart" or the "clay-counterpart" relation as the operative counterpart relation, the sentence will still come out false.

Lewis has an ingenious idea about how to get around this problem. He adopts a version of counterpart theory in which the translation of (*) is as follows:

(**)The ordered pair <Clem, Goliath> has a counterpart <x, y> such that x
survives a squashing and y doesn't survive an exactly similar squashing.

Calling that ordered pair <Clem, Goliath>---as opposed to, say, <Juptiter,
Lumpl >---evokes a counterpart relation on which a pair <x_1, x_2> is a
counterpart of <y_1, y_2> iff x_1 is a lump-counterpart of y_1 and x_2 is a lump-
counterpart of y_2. There are such counterpart-pairs!

A similar trick explains how 'It could have been that Goliath and Lumpl were
two different things' could be true. This is translated as: <Goliath, Lumpl>
has a counterpart <x, y> such that x   y. But when we call <Goliath, Lumpl>
that, rather than say <Goliath, Goliath>, we make salient a counterpart
relation on which this identity pair can have non-identity-pairs as
counterparts.

6. Sider's temporal counterpart theory

Recall our original paradox:

Jupiter didn't exist 2 hours ago.
Clem did exist 2 hours ago.
Jupiter is Clem.

Could a similar solution work for this? ('existed 2 hours ago' is equivocal
between two different senses which the two different names tend to evoke)

Sider advocates this view. Really the names 'Jupiter' and 'Clem' are both
names for a *time-slice*, i.e. an instantaneous object. "*x* existed two hours ago"
doesn't mean what we might have thought it did, i.e. that *x* literally is located
two hours ago in the same way that it is located at the present time. Rather, it
means "there is a time-slice *y* such that *y* is located two hours ago, and *y* is a
temporal-counterpart of *x*".

The temporal-counterpart relation is generally a matter of causal continuity,
similarity, etc. But it is indeterminate and context-sensitive, and the context-
sensitivity can be resolved in different ways.