Most Counterfactuals Are Still False
Alan Hájek
ABSTRACT

I have long argued for a kind of 'counterfactual skepticism': most counterfactuals are false. I maintain that the *indeterminism* and *indeterminacy* associated with most counterfactuals entail their falsehood. For example, I claim that these counterfactuals are both false:

(Indeterminism)   If the chancy coin were tossed, it would land *heads*.
(Indeterminacy)   If I had a son, he would have an *even* number of hairs on his head at his birth.

And I argue that most counterfactuals are relevantly similar to one or both of these, as far as their truth-values go. I also have arguments from the incompatibility of 'would' and 'might not' counterfactuals, and from Heim ('reverse Sobel') sequences.

However, counterfactual reasoning seems to play an important role in science, and ordinary speakers judge many counterfactuals that they utter to be true. A number of philosophers have defended our judgments against counterfactual skepticism. David Lewis and others appeal to 'quasi-miracles'; Robbie Williams to 'typicality'; John Hawthorne and H. Orri Stefánsson to 'counterfacts', primitive counterfactual facts; Moritz Schulz to an arbitrary-selection semantics; Jonathan Bennett and Hannes Leitgeb to high conditional probabilities; Karen Lewis to contextually-sensitive 'relevance'.

I argue against each of these proposals. A recurring theme is that they fail to respect certain valid inference patterns. I conclude: most counterfactuals are still false.