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If Donald Trump were Mexican, would he still be Donald Trump? The problem of identity in counterfactuals and a dispositionalist solution

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Abstract The study of counterfactuals has produced some well-known problems concerning identity. I focus on two of them. I suggest that a dispositionalist account of counterfactuals, not involving possible worlds but dispositions and potentiality, could solve both. First is the problem of identity across possible worlds, concerning the identification of individuals in various possible worlds. Dispositionalism can solve it: its aim is to explain counterfactuals in the actual world, without appealing to possible worlds. This would eliminate the problem because the individuals involved in counterfactuals would be in the actual world, without needing identification in other worlds. Second is the problem of what I call ‘property alteration’. In ‘if Donald Trump were Mexican, he wouldn’t be President of the USA’, denying Trump’s property of ‘being a US citizen’ could lead us to deny the identity between the Donald Trump we know and the Donald Trump of the counterfactual. Barbara Vetter’s version of dispositionalism can solve also this problem, introducing the concept of ‘potentiality’.

Keywords: counterfactuals, possible worlds, identity, dispositions, potentiality, properties

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0. Introduction

The study of counterfactuals has produced some well-known problems concerning identity. The aim of this paper is to show how an account of counterfactuals not based on the traditional Lewis-Stalnaker possible world solution could solve some of these long-debated issues. The focus will be on two problems: the problem of identity across possible worlds and what I call the problem of ‘property alteration’. The alternative account suggested will be within a variation of dispositionalism set forward by Barbara Vetter. The account is still at an embryonic stage, and its development is not in the scope of this paper, but we can already see how an account of this kind could bring many advantages to counterfactual discussion.

The paper will have the following structure. In this introduction, I will quickly introduce counterfactuals and I will sketch very simply the general concept of identity used in this paper. Then there will be six sections and a conclusion. In the first section, I will explain the traditional Lewis-Stalnaker account of counterfactuals. In the second and third

sections, I will show how the two problems concerning identity arise. In the fourth section, I will introduce dispositionalism and Barbara Vetter's version of it, while in the fifth and sixth I will suggest how a new account of counterfactuals based on these could solve the two problems. In the conclusion, I will suggest that an account of counterfactuals based on Barbara Vetter's ideas could represent an important alternative to the traditional account, because it could solve some relevant issues concerning identity.

Before addressing the main themes of this paper, it will be useful to fix some fundamental concepts. The paper tackles some problems concerning identity in relation to counterfactuals, so we need to clarify both what this paper treats as counterfactuals and which idea of identity it adopts.

Counterfactuals are some special examples of conditionals. Conditionals are sentences with the structure 'If A, then C', in which A is called the antecedent and C is called the consequent. Some examples of counterfactuals are:

- (1) If Donald Trump were Mexican, he wouldn't want to build the Wall.
- (2) If Donald Trump had been Mexican, he would have not become President of the United States.

I will not make a distinction between cases like (1) and cases like (2), calling both 'counterfactuals'. Note that I use this term as synonymous with 'subjunctive conditional', in opposition to 'indicative conditional'. I accept the idea that counterfactuals can have both true and false antecedents, so my choice of the name 'counterfactual' is only for simplicity, without implying any reference to the meaning of *contra facta*.

One characteristic of counterfactual conditionals is that they deal with possibility. This can be true not only for counterfactuals, but also for other conditionals, like indicative conditionals. However, in contrast with other conditionals, the truth of counterfactuals does not seem to be determined by actual non-modal facts. Counterfactuals quite often involve possibilities that are non-actual and modal facts seem very relevant for their truth-value.

The counterfactuals taken under examination in this paper are some specific ones, that is those concerning the possibility for an individual or an object of the actual world to be different from what it is: in the examples above, we appeal to the possibility for Donald Trump to be Mexican, when we know that he is not. This is the main cause of problems with identity, as we are going to see.

In this paper, I will adopt an extremely naïve concept of 'identity', without approaching the metaphysical issues that this involves. When I talk about identity in this paper, I intend *qualitative identity*, meaning property-based: identity is identity of properties¹. This means, in this view, that two things should be identical if they both possess the same properties and a thing is identical to itself if it maintains the same properties. However, again in a very unsophisticated way, I consider that the properties needing to be shared or maintained do not need to be exactly all the same properties of the individual, but only those that I call *core* properties. I will not try to define what I mean with 'core', I just want to make a sense of the idea that, in changing the properties of an object, both there are some properties that cannot be changed without threatening its identity and there is a point in which too much has been changed and the object is not anymore

¹ I put qualitative identity in contrast to numerical identity or sameness, by which the relation of identity cannot exist between two things. For a general idea on the concepts of identity see Noonan and Curtis (2018).

identical to itself. Again, my approach to identity is only instrumental to what follows, as we will see talking about property alteration. It is not in the scope of this paper to address the complexity brought about by the concept of identity, so I hope that the sketchiness of its treatment here will be forgiven.

1. Lewis-Stalnaker Account

In the previous section, I outlined what counterfactuals are, while now I will concentrate on how we account for them. Comparing them with other conditionals, I support the idea that traditional accounts of material and indicative conditionals are unsatisfactory or inapplicable to counterfactuals, so that we need alternative accounts. One alternative was offered by Robert Stalnaker (1968) and David Lewis (1973), whose work on counterfactuals produced what is now known as the possible world account of counterfactuals². A general and simplified version of this account goes as follow:

- (PWA) A counterfactual ‘ $A > C$ ’ is true at world w iff:
- i) either there is no possible world in which A is true;
 - ii) or the worlds in which A is true and C is true are closer to world w than the worlds in which A is true and C is false³.

We use the symbol ‘ $>$ ’ to represent the counterfactual arrow. In our analysis, we will take world w to be the actual the world, so we will look for the truth of counterfactuals at the actual world, and in point ii) we will consider the worlds closer to the actual world.

Our interest is on the specific type of counterfactuals mentioned before, so we will limit the application of PWA to examples like this:

- (1) If Donald Trump were Mexican, he wouldn’t want to build the Wall

This counterfactual is true iff:

- i) either there is no world in which Donald Trump is Mexican;
- ii) or the worlds in which Trump is Mexican and he doesn’t want to build the Wall are closer to the actual world than the worlds in which Trump is Mexican and he wants to build the Wall.

The first clause i) is not the case: we can easily expect that there are one or more possible worlds in which Donald Trump is Mexican. Therefore, to evaluate the counterfactual, we need to take under consideration these worlds, in which the antecedent is true – so that Trump is Mexican – and then consider the consequent. The interesting part of these types of counterfactuals is the antecedent, because it contemplates a way in which an object of the actual world could be different. It is at this point that the problems with identity arises. For our purpose, we don’t need to discuss the second part of ii) and the problem of defining closeness between worlds, as the main issues with identity concern overall the first part of the clause.

² Note that the possible worlds account is not necessarily limited to counterfactuals, but it has been extended to indicative conditionals as well, in particular by Stalnaker (1968, 1975).

³ This is a general version of the account given by me but based on the accounts of Lewis (1973) and Stalnaker (1968).

As we said, following ii), we need to consider the possible worlds in which Trump is Mexican. However, in these possible worlds, is Donald Trump still Donald Trump? Or better: is the Donald Trump of these worlds the same of 'our' Donald Trump? From these questions, there are two different, yet similar problems that emerge.

2. Problem of Identity Across Possible Worlds

Asking whether the Donald Trump of a possible world is the same of the Donald Trump of the actual world implies a prior question: who is the Donald Trump of a possible world? There are two possible answers: either he is exactly the Donald Trump of the actual world 'transferred' in another world or he is a 'counterpart' of the Donald Trump of our world. In both situations we are facing what is called the problem of identity across possible worlds, but in two different ways. In what follows, I will offer only a general overview of this problem, which is very complex and has created an intense debate over the years.

Starting from the second answer, this is called 'counterpart theory', developed by David Lewis (Lewis 1968, 1986). The central idea is that individuals cannot exist in more than one possible world. Therefore, the individuals of the actual world cannot be in other possible worlds. However, if this is true, then we should not be able to use possible worlds to judge counterfactuals referring to the individuals of the actual world, because they would not be in these other worlds. Lewis solved the problem suggesting that possible worlds are populated by *counterparts* of the individuals of the actual world. This allow us to keep using possible worlds for counterfactuals talking about individuals of our world: an individual in the actual world and their counterpart in another world are two distinct individuals, and when we use a counterfactual, its truth-conditions involve facts about the counterpart. However, how do we know that some individual in another possible world is the counterpart of an individual of the actual world? How do we identify individuals across possible worlds? This is one way in which the problem of identity across possible world manifests: admitting that the individuals of some worlds have counterparts in other worlds, there is a problem of identification of these other individuals as their counterparts.

A first attempt to solve the problem could come from the idea, initially suggested by Lewis, that a counterpart resembles to the original in content and context in important respects more than anything else in that world (Lewis 1968: 114). However, this appeal to resemblance creates some problems.

Coming back to our example:

- (1) If Donald Trump were Mexican, he wouldn't want to build the Wall.

Following counterpart theory, the Donald Trump-s of the possible worlds considered in judging this counterfactual are not our Donald Trump, but his counterparts in those worlds. However, how do we recognise these individuals in these possible worlds as the counterparts of our Trump? Following Lewis, these counterparts have level of similarity in the relevant aspects with Donald Trump higher than anything else in these worlds. Therefore, we could try to use this idea to identify Trump's counterparts.

In a counterfactual like (1), we are looking for worlds in which the counterpart of Donald Trump is Mexican. The individual 'Mexican Trump' is obviously different from the original Trump, who is not Mexican. Are they still similar in a way that we would still consider this individual a counterpart of Donald Trump? That is, is the Mexican counterpart of Donald Trump still the most similar individual to our Donald Trump in these worlds? We could say yes, if we do not consider 'being Mexican' a relevant aspect

of an individual or we could say no, if we consider that it is. Here is the problem, then: how do we decide if 'being Mexican' stops a counterpart from being similar enough to be considered a counterpart?

Talking about similarity inevitably brings along a problem of vagueness, because we need to put a limit on which aspects are relevant and we need to decide what can be changed without two individuals stopping being similar, and these seem quite arbitrary decisions.

Other attempts to tackle the problem of identification across possible worlds have been pursued. We could try by saying that the counterparts are identifiable because they are called 'Donald Trump' in these worlds, or because they have his same 'origin'. Lewis engages many of these possibilities in his book *On the Plurality of Worlds* (1986), but it is not in the scope of this paper to discuss the issue in its entirety. It should be enough saying that counterpart theory, even if it brings some advantages, it also raises many questions and problems.

Nevertheless, even if we take the first path mentioned above, denying the existence of counterparts in other worlds (Kripke 1971, 1980), and suggesting instead that in other possible worlds we are still considering the actual Donald Trump, the problem of identity across possible worlds is anything but solved, even if it is not a problem of identification anymore.

Without going into much detail, denying that there are counterparts seems to suggest that a same individual can be in more than one possible world. The notion of a transworld individual is extremely controversial, because it seems to allow the same individual to belong to two different worlds at the same time and this seems to put into doubt the identity of an individual as one. This comes for the very simple intuition that a same individual cannot be in two places at the same time. We could explain this more by appealing to the notion of numerical identity, intended as sameness. An individual is numerically identical with itself and with nothing else, so there cannot be two individuals being in two different places at the same time, that are sharing sameness. Note, as I said earlier, that I accept a view in which two things can share qualitative identity intended as sharing same core properties, in contrast to the fact that they cannot share numerical identity, intended as sameness. However, the problem of transworld individuals as presented depends largely on the notion of possible worlds that we adopt, whether we think that they really are 'places' or not, but I will not discuss this here.

Again, this is an extreme simplification of a massive debate. The aim of this section was only to give a taste of the complexity of the problem of identity across possible worlds, without any ambition of covering all its aspects. I just wanted to point out that the problem can manifest in two ways: either is a problem of identification between two distinct objects in two different possible worlds or is the problem of accounting for how a same individual can be in two possible worlds. In the following section, we will discuss another problem, which is not completely unrelated to these, but takes a different perspective.

3. Problem of Property Alteration

Suspending our judgment on counterparts versus transworld individuals, using counterfactuals we come across to another problem: the problem of property alteration. Coming back to our example:

- (1) If Donald Trump were Mexican, he wouldn't want to build the Wall

the problem arises, as we can see, because this counterfactual is changing – altering – the properties of Donald Trump. On one side it is attributing to him a new property, ‘being Mexican’, and on the other it is removing a known property, ‘being a US citizen’, if we assume that the two exclude each other⁴.

If we accept the view of a property-based identity as presented in the Introduction, playing with properties in this way could make us say that a Mexican Donald Trump is not Donald Trump. If being identical with oneself means maintaining the same properties unaltered, then this alteration implies that a non-Mexican individual *i* cannot be the same of the Mexican individual *i*’. However, as we said before, the properties that needs to be maintained are the core properties. The main issue now is then to narrow what we mean by core properties. This is essential because by removing or adding properties to an individual we risk changing them so much that they are not the same person anymore. For example, another counterfactual:

- (3) If Donald Trump were a poor, socialist, brown haired, Mexican woman, he wouldn’t stand how Mexican immigrants are treated on the US border.

In (3), Trump loses most of the properties that help identify him in the actual world: he is not rich, conservative, blonde, a US citizen and not even a man. Can we still say that he is Donald Trump? Which of these are core properties? How can we decide?

The problem of property alteration, almost mirroring the issues we had talking about similarity, concerns how many properties can be changed before two things and one with itself stop being identical. On the one hand, we could say none: all properties are core properties and any change would make the two objects not the same object. This would be too restrictive: if Donald Trump suddenly became white haired, we would not say that he is not Donald Trump anymore. On the other hand, we could say that some can be changed: there are some properties that are core properties but there are others that can be changed without threatening the identity of the object, so that two things keep being identical till a point. However, as said before concerning similarity, the decision on which properties are core properties is too gratuitous and it would inevitably lead us to a problem of vagueness, because the border between *some* properties can be changed and *all* properties can be changed is too evanescent.

We can see how these two problems of property alteration and identity across worlds are very complex to solve. Counterfactuals like the ones considered till now inevitably are connected to some very important issues concerning identity, whether we are considering that there are two individuals, following counterpart theory, or only one. Nevertheless, we use counterfactuals like (1), (2) and (3) everyday, altering the properties of objects regardless. We need to find a solution. My suggestion is that looking for alternative accounts not involving possible worlds could be a valid answer.

4. Barbara Vetter’s Dispositionalism

In looking for an alternative account of counterfactuals, it is useful starting by looking at alternative accounts of modality altogether. One of them is dispositionalism. Dispositionalism wants to offer an alternative metaphysics of modality, based on the actual world rather than on possible worlds. The crucial point is explaining modality

⁴ For example, because we use ‘Mexican’ meaning ‘being a citizen of Mexico, born in Mexico, from Mexican parents and belonging to the Mexican ethnic group’ and ‘US citizen’ meaning ‘being a citizen of USA, born in USA, from US citizen parents and belonging to the USA ethnic group’.

through dispositions. This means that all the main categories of modality – necessity, possibility and counterfactuals – have a dispositional explanation (for possibility, see Borghini and Williams 2008). The main feature of dispositions is that they belong to the objects of the actual world. If we can explain modality through dispositions then, we don't need possible worlds to do it, because modality can be reduced to the actual world⁵.

To understand dispositionalism, we must, quite clearly, understand what dispositions are. Properties like fragility, solubility and irascibility are dispositions. There are different ways to account for this kind of properties. A traditional way of explaining dispositions is the Conditional Analysis:

(CA) The disposition to F of an object x is the property of being disposed to F if G⁶.

For example, fragility is the disposition to break if struck, solubility is the disposition to dissolve if immersed in a liquid, irascibility is the disposition to get angry easily if provoked. (CA) has created a strong connection between dispositions and counterfactuals, because, for example, the fragility of a glass can be explained through a counterfactual like 'if the glass were struck, it would break'. Therefore, the initial approach puts counterfactuals before dispositions, as counterfactuals are used to explain dispositions. However, because the aim of the new wave of dispositionalism is to explain the whole of modality – including counterfactuals – through disposition, (CA) is not satisfactory. With the trend reversal trying to explain counterfactuals through dispositions, we must try to find alternative ways to express the same idea of (CA) without involving conditionals. One alternative could be the Stimulus/Manifestation Analysis.

(SMA) An object has a disposition to F if it has a disposition whose stimulus consists in p and whose manifestation consists in q ⁷.

Using again an example, a glass has fragility if it has a disposition whose stimulus consists in being struck and whose manifestation consists in breaking. This new version has the advantage of not using a conditional structure, substituting antecedent and consequent with stimulus and manifestation. Dispositions in this view are constituted by these two elements and need both to be defined. Because counterfactuals aren't involved in the account, they can be explained through dispositions. Barbara Vetter (2016) tried to develop such an explanation. A first version of True Counterfactual could be:

(TC) 'If p were the case, then q would be the case' is true iff the right kinds of objects have a disposition whose stimulus consists in p being the case, and whose manifestation consist in q being the case (Vetter 2016: 2)⁸.

⁵ Note that on this point I'm supporting what Vetter (2011) calls 'new actualism' (in opposition to 'classical actualism'): the view by which «[p]ossible worlds [...] may be a useful formal device in modal logic [...], but they have little to do with the metaphysics of modality» (Vetter 2011: 1). These actualists eliminate completely any appeal to possible worlds.

⁶ This is a simplification. For more on the Conditional Analysis see Manley and Wasserman (2008).

⁷ Again, this is a re-elaborated analysis coming from what said in Vetter (2011, 2015, 2016).

⁸ This version of the account is the simplest given in Vetter's article (2016). We will not focus on it nor on its problems and criticism here, but it is important to see an example of a dispositional account of counterfactuals.

With (SMA), dispositionalism seems to gain wider ambitions on modality and be able to account for counterfactuals. However, both (CA) and (SMA) suffer of the same criticism. A glass is still fragile even if it is packed in Styrofoam and it would not break if struck because of this, and a person is still irascible even if they are under the temporary effect of a tranquilizer and they would not get angry if provoked because of it. Things like Styrofoam and tranquilizers are called finks and masks, because they mask, inhibit, the relevant dispositions (Martin 1994). Finks and masks are a common problem in explaining dispositions, because it can happen sometimes that given the stimulus, the manifestation does not happen. For example, the glass even if struck may not break, either because it was not struck with enough strength or because it was hit in the wrong place. Dispositionalists tried to solve this issue with a *ceteris paribus* clause, meaning that the definition holds all things standing equal, or by appealing to the context, but there are still some who are unsatisfied with this definition of dispositions.

One of them is Barbara Vetter, who has recently (2014, 2015) offered a new way to conceive dispositions, introducing a new concept: potentiality. The version of dispositionalism relevant for the aims of this paper is hers, as we are going to see.

There are some crucial points of her view on dispositions. First, she is against the Conditional Analysis: for her, fragility is not the disposition to *break if struck*, but simply the disposition to *break*. Second, she promotes a Manifestation-Only Analysis: a glass has fragility if it has a disposition whose manifestation consists in breaking. From these two points we can see that Vetter chooses an explanation involving one element rather than two. This is because the final stage of her explanation of dispositions requires only one element. As a matter of fact, she finally argues that dispositions must be ascribed to potentialities, supporting what I call a Potentiality Analysis.

(PA) The disposition to F is the potentiality to F⁹.

For example, a glass has fragility if it has the potentiality to break. Dispositions do not need a conditional explanation, nor a stimulus-manifestation relation to be accounted for: they only need potentialities.

However, we need to explain what potentialities are and in which way they differ from dispositions. To explain the difference, Vetter says that all dispositions are potentialities, but not all potentialities are dispositions (2015: 19). Potentiality is a much broader category, including also abilities for example. Another difference stated by Vetter is that while dispositions are context-sensitive properties (*Ivi*: 20), potentialities instead are the context-insensitive properties that are the metaphysical background of dispositions (*Ivi*: 21). To understand in which sense dispositions are context sensitive, talking about fragility, we can see that (i) first it doesn't belong to all things that can break – for example we wouldn't say that gold is fragile, but we cannot deny that gold can break – and (ii) second that it can be inhibited – as we saw in the example of Styrofoam. What is fragile and the fact that some fragile things have their fragility inhibited depend on the context. On the contrary, if we consider the potential to break, Vetter suggests that (i) it belongs to all things that can break, from crystal to gold, and (ii) it belongs to objects in any circumstances, independently whether the object would or would not break in that context. To use a metaphor, potentiality is at a much deeper level in objects than dispositions. A disposition failing to exhibit its manifestation is irrelevant for the potentiality to which it is ascribed.

⁹ (PA) is formulated by me on the basis of Vetter's work, for more details on potentiality and dispositions see Vetter (2015).

In her book on potentiality (2015), Vetter outlines an account of counterfactuals based on potentiality rather than on dispositions. This sketch is based on could/might counterfactuals and it refers to ‘iterated’ potentialities.

(COULD) ‘If x were F, then x could/might be G’ is true iff x has an iterated potentiality to be G, and being F is an earlier stage in that iterated potentiality¹⁰ (Vetter 2015: 226).

Being this just an embryonic and partial stage in the development of a full account of counterfactuals based on potentiality, in this paper we will not comment on it in details. To pursue a complete and satisfactory account of counterfactuals is not in the scope of this work. However, if this account sees its culmination, the advantages would be many for counterfactual theory. Here, I just want to show some of these advantages: in following a potentiality-based account, we can solve the two problems with identity discussed above.

5. Solving Identity Across Worlds

The solution of the problem of identity across possible worlds is easy to imagine. As we said before, dispositionalism does not require possible worlds to explain modality, including counterfactuals. Even within the new account based on Vetter’s idea, counterfactuals are explained not by possible worlds but by potentialities. Because potentialities, like dispositions, are properties belonging to the objects of the actual world, then counterfactuals can be explained appealing to the objects of the actual world, rather than to the objects of other worlds.

In our example,

- (1) If Donald Trump were Mexican, he wouldn’t want to build the Wall

for judging the counterfactual, we need to consider the potentiality to be Mexican belonging to the Donald Trump of the actual world. Following Vetter’s view, we do not need to consider the Donald Trump-s of other worlds, because the potentiality required is only the one belonging to the Trump of the actual world.

If the account of counterfactuals does not require the Donald Trump-s of other worlds, then we do not need to worry whether these Trump-s are counterparts of our Donald Trump or if they are himself but in other worlds. The problem of identity across worlds makes sense only if we must consider the same individuals in other possible worlds, but if we limit our scope to the actual world, then the problem does not concern us anymore. We do not need to ask how to identify some individuals as counterparts of the original nor we need to account for an individual to be in more than one possible world. More than offering a solution to the problem of identity across possible worlds, an account of counterfactuals based on potentiality eliminates the problem from the beginning, because without possible worlds, this issue does not even arise. Other similar

¹⁰ To explain what Vetter means with ‘iterated’ potentiality, it is easier going through an argument going as follow:

Premise 1: Things have potentialities to possess properties.

Premise 2: Potentialities are properties.

Conclusion 1: Therefore, things should have potentialities to possess potentialities.

Conclusion 2: This doesn’t stop here, things can have potentialities to have potentialities to have potentialities and so forth.

Any of these potentialities is called by Vetter iterated potentiality (Vetter 2015: 136).

issues concerning identity, like the analogous problem of identity across time, would require more discussion, and maybe cannot be solved in the same way, but it is not in the scope of the paper offering a solution to them. The aim is to solve identity across possible worlds, and I believe that potentiality deals with this problem successfully.

6. Solving Property Alteration

The solution of the problem of property alteration is more complex. In earlier parts of this paper, I tried to explain the difference between dispositions and potentialities. Nevertheless, for the intent of this work, this difference is not essential. For my aim, I do not need to commit to an account of counterfactuals based on potentiality or on dispositions, because what I am going to suggest can work with both. Therefore, for simplicity, I will start calling potentialities and dispositions ‘potential properties’. I’m not considering this an extra category of higher order, rather just a name valid for both kinds, to separate them from other types of properties, that I will call ‘traditional’ or ‘actual’ properties.

Potential properties differ remarkably from traditional properties. The best way to explain this is through some examples. A traditional property is the property of being F, like the property of being transparent. A potential property, instead, is the property of possibly (potentially) being F, like the property of fragility (possibly be broken), or irascibility (possibly be angry). It is important to notice that potential properties belong to an object like the traditional properties: for example, a glass has fragility as a property. However, potential properties refer to other properties that the object *could* have: fragility implies that the glass *could* gain the property of being broken. Equally important is to say that the object does not need to be F to have the potential property of being F. For example, a glass is fragile, and so has the potential to be broken, even if it is not broken¹¹.

Having certain potential properties then do not necessary imply having certain corresponding traditional properties, so that having a potential property does not determine for sure which other properties the object must have. If ‘being fragile’ is necessary for the glass to acquire the property of ‘being broken’, nevertheless it is not sufficient for the glass to acquire this property, because a fragile glass may never break. Trump’s potential property of being Mexican does not imply that he also has the actual property of being Mexican. Trump can potentially be Mexican and still be a US citizen: attributing a potentiality is not like changing the actual properties of an object. As fragility belongs to a glass even if it is not broken, Donald Trump’s potential property of being Mexican belongs to him even if he is not Mexican. Trump does not need to give up nor to add any of his actual properties, because the potential property of being Mexican does not clash with the actual property of being a US citizen¹². The potential property of being Mexican does not mean that Donald Trump *has* the property of being Mexican, but that he *could* have the property of being Mexican. There is not a real alteration of Donald Trump’s properties, but an attribution of a potentiality.

The counterfactuals we are considering are very specific, concerning the possibility for an individual or an object of the actual world to be different from what it is. This ‘being different’ thus far has been associated with a change of properties, either denying that

¹¹ Fragility is a peculiar property, because we could say that when the glass breaks, it stops existing, or that it stops being a glass, becoming, for example, ‘pieces of glass’. However, a comparable reasoning can be done for a property like irascibility, where this issue does not emerge.

¹² Note that here I keep using ‘being Mexican’ and ‘being US citizen’ as if the two properties are excluding each other, referring to what said in footnote 4 of this paper.

some properties belonging to the individual belong to them or attributing some properties that do not belong to them. However, what we are saying now is that with potentiality we are not making such a change. When we are using a counterfactual like (1), we are attributing a potentiality to the object, which does not necessary imply a change in its actual properties. Because of this feature, such counterfactuals may not be a threat to the identity of the object, because they do not really involve property alteration.

Potentiality does not come without a cost, though. Some opponents could argue that some of the issues relating to property alteration have analogues for potentialities. For example, potential properties are themselves properties, so we could risk of facing again the same problem: how many potentialities can we attribute to an object before it stops being identical with itself? Also, there are other problems, not strictly concerning identity. For example, a natural question could be whether Donald Trump can have the potential property of being Mexican, given his actual properties. The problem here involves the scope of a certain potentiality: what in the world can have the potentiality to be Mexican? What can have the potentiality to break? Thinking that any potentiality could belong to anything in the world seems unacceptable: we would not say that Trump has the potentiality to break, nor that a glass has the potentiality to be Mexican. We could try to delimitate the scope of some potential properties as depending on some actual properties: for example, the potential property of being Mexican depends on the property of being human, and the potential to break depends on the property of being a destroyable object. This would also help delimiting which potential properties can be changed before an object stops being identical with itself, because it would depend on its actual properties. However, this would mean that there is an asymmetry between actual properties and potential properties: while actual properties can determine which potential properties an object can have, potential properties on the contrary do not determine the actual properties of an object, as we said earlier. All these issues are strictly related to a discussion on the nature of potentiality, which is far beyond the aims of this paper¹³. However, I do not believe that such issues should imply that an account of counterfactuals based on potentiality should not be pursued, as I think its advantages are still very desirable.

7. Conclusion

Counterfactuals involving individuals of the actual worlds have always represented a problem, because they mostly engage with how these individuals could be different from what they are. Because of this feature, these counterfactuals create issues with identity. How can we conceive an individual different from what they are, but at the same time maintain their identity? This is where the problem of property alteration comes from: counterfactuals, because they concern possibility, comprehend also the possibility for something to be different from what it is, that is, to have different properties. Altering the properties of an object is a threat to its identity. We can try to differentiate between core and non-core properties, but this add more hurdles, because we cannot decide what is core and what is not in a conclusive way.

The traditional possible world account of counterfactuals does not seem to solve this issue, but instead create more problems, including the problem of identity across possible worlds. If we need other worlds to account for counterfactuals involving individuals, then we need to explain either how an individual of one world can be in

¹³ For more on the nature of potentiality, see Vetter (2015).

another world, or how an individual of one world can be identified with one of another world.

The solutions I suggested come from a simple thought: eliminating the problems. The problem of identity across possible worlds mostly depends on the introduction of possible worlds in the account. An account not involving possible worlds would make the problem irrelevant to counterfactuals. The problem of property alteration arises from the changes of actual properties necessary to conceive the counterfactuals discussed. An account in which these changes are not treated like an alteration in the actual properties of the objects would avoid this issue.

An account of counterfactuals based on dispositionalism or on potentiality seems to tick all the desired boxes. Avoiding possible worlds, it avoids the problem of identity across possible worlds. Introducing potential properties, it avoids the problem of property alteration.

On the first point, anchoring dispositions and potentialities to the objects of the actual world and suggesting that counterfactuals are explained by these, detach counterfactuals from possible worlds and allow us to ignore trans-world identity issues.

On the second point, crucial is the fact that potential properties are different from actual properties. Potential properties attribute to an object the possibility to have another property without the necessity for the object to have it: for example, fragility, which implies the possibility to break, belongs to a glass even if it is not broken. In the same way, Donald Trump's potential property of being Mexican belongs to him even if he is not Mexican. The key is that there is not a real alteration of Donald Trump's actual properties, but an attribution of a potentiality.

A complete account of counterfactuals based on dispositions and potentiality still need to be fully developed, aiming also to solve some issues related to potentiality, but I hope that with this paper I have given some reason to wish for this account to come into the world soon.

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