

Light Bulbs, Flying Horses, and Cleopatra's Nose

Another fallacy in the immigration debate

by David G. Payne

Cleopatra's nose: had it been shorter, the whole aspect
of the world would have been altered.

—PASCAL, *Pensées*, II, 162

In this article I will discuss an odd sort of causal fallacy in logic that one never hears much about — one which I will call the fallacy of the counterfactual conditional. A counterfactual conditional occurs whenever we say something like, “If I had known then what I know now I would have acted differently.” The conditional is contrary-to-fact (counterfactual) because it did not occur — you did *not* know then what you know now. In one obvious sense it is a moot question how you might have acted if something had or had not occurred, yet such turns of phrase are used quite often in discourse, are favorite topics among (amateur) historians, and can be powerful rhetorical devices when wielded with skill.

There is a fine example of the fallacy of counterfactual conditionals in a review by Francis Fukuyama of Roy Beck's book, *The Case Against Immigration* (*The New York Times Book Review*, September 1, 1996). Fukuyama criticizes Beck, asserting that he is on shaky ground when he says that immigration harms all sectors of the economy. As “proof” of this point he proceeds as follows:

But if Eric Benhamou the founder of 3Com, a major computer networking company, had not emigrated from Algeria, his job would not have been filled by a native; 3Com, with its billions in market capitalization, and the 3,000 jobs it has created, would simply not exist.

We can grant Fukuyama the point that if Benhamou had not emigrated from Algeria the exact company,

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3Com, would not exist (of course it still might, but we can grant him this point nonetheless). But how does he know that the existence of 3Com didn't keep another company, say, 4Com, created by a native, from existing, which would have provided 4,000 jobs? Are we to believe that all the computer work done by 3Com would simply go begging? Wouldn't their clients have hired someone else? Such counterfactual assertions (counterfactual since he is saying “if Benhamou had not emigrated from Algeria...”) border on the absurd, since they are impossible to verify or falsify (the burden of proof is clearly on Fukuyama since he is the one making the assertion).

At first glance it may seem that Fukuyama is in esteemed company — Pascal having indulged in counterfactuals himself with respect to Cleopatra's nose. But Pascal's concern was the overarching effects of love on momentous historical decisions, and the clever phrase about Cleopatra seems no more than a tongue-in-cheek example of such. The difference between Pascal and Fukuyama, however, is that Pascal makes no assertion as to the actual states of affairs that follow from what might not have been, while Fukuyama does.

And therein lies the problem. When using counterfactual conditionals to argue specific positions, enormously complex issues are consistently oversimplified. This tendency stems from the fact that the users of such counterfactual conditionals ignore the time-honored dictum: “everything is connected” — along with its corollary: “you can never do just one thing.” All too often writers assume that they can change one factor in a historical situation and then sit back and confidently predict what might have happened. A classic example of this is found in the following statement:

(1) If the Archduke Ferdinand had not been assassinated in 1914, World War I would have been averted.

The oversimplification here is the assumption that the assassination of the Archduke was *the* causal factor

behind World War I, which is obviously false. The causes behind that war were many, and complex beyond our comprehension.

And how do you pick out causes anyway? If we grant that Pascal has a point with respect to Cleopatra's nose, we also have to admit to other factors as well, such as the political climate of the times, the military strengths and weaknesses of the Romans and their foes, etc., etc. Why pick out Cleopatra's nose as the cause? Surely because it makes for a clever quip, and fits in well with Pascal's thesis about the influence of desire on history. The fact is, however, that you could pick out almost any insignificant fact from the past, assume that it did not happen, and show momentous effects in the present. What if Napoleon had not eaten a bit of bad chicken on the eve of the battle of Waterloo? What if the breeze from the butterfly's wings in China had not caused the hurricane in the Caribbean?¹

Here is a statement that illustrates the same general problem, but with a slightly different twist:

- (2) If Thomas Edison had not existed, we would not have electric lights today.

This statement is almost assuredly false — many people were working on the electric light during Edison's time. He just happened to be the first person to be successful in the endeavor to create one that could be mass produced at low cost. You might be tempted to believe (2) only if you knew nothing of the history of the development of the light bulb, and even then you should be suspect.

Here is another statement with similar form, but which fools no one:

- (3) If Giacomo Leone had not won the New York Marathon, then no one would have won.

This statement is easily seen to be false because other important factors (the other competitors) are extremely visible. But (2) is no less absurd than (3), it's just that (2) might fool those who mistakenly or unthinkingly believe that Edison was working in a vacuum (pun definitely intended).

The failure to realize that you can never do just one thing when dealing with causation is also exemplified by statements such as the following:

- (4) If horses had wings they could fly.

This is the error of not taking the system as a whole into account, which is just another way of saying what was said above. Ancient accounts of winged horses are

now usually relegated to the realm of biological impossibility. Whether this is true or not (I don't want to get into a discussion of the various types of possibility), the interesting point is the huge oversimplification involved in assuming that you could simply stick wings on a horse and have it fly. Modern calculations show that the wingspan needed to put a horse to flight would be approximately the length of a football field. But with such enormous wings the muscles and tendons would have to be equally enormous and would need equally enormous bones to support them, etc., etc. — all of which increase the weight significantly, leading to a need for yet larger wings. There is also the metabolism question: in order to generate the energy for flight, the beast would have to be carnivorous (as in prehistoric days). But then, when does a horse cease being a horse? The problems multiply exponentially — we can never change just one thing.

You get the point. We cannot simply pull a fact out of its context and manipulate it causally for our own enjoyment.

Going back to Fukuyama's criticism of Beck — as you can see, Fukuyama has no business telling us what might have been the case had Benhamou not emigrated. He tries to make us believe that Benhamou was a necessary precondition to the creation of 3,000 jobs, when it is more likely that Benhamou is merely to job-creation as Edison was to electric lighting.

In a debate situation, Beck might simply call Fukuyama on the fallacy or, as a technique of rhetoric, he might use the same fallacy in return: if Benhamou had stayed in Algeria and created 3Com there he could have conducted his business via satellites and the internet. This would have allowed him to pay Algerian rather than U.S. wages, passing the savings to his U.S. customers and making more for himself. In addition, the jobs created in Algeria would have lessened migration pressure for our ally, France. The EU would have been strengthened, reenforcing Fukuyama's goal of deregulated world trade.

The moral to all of this is (to revise a phrase from Wittgenstein): we should pass over in silence those things about which we know nothing. And we know nothing at all of what might have been, but never was.

But if we could...

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¹ Philosophers and some quantum physicists illuminate (or obfuscate, depending on one's view) this discussion by talking of possible worlds, superpositions of states, etc.

Ethics Trumping Economics?

The economics of immigration control

by **Vernon M. Briggs, Jr.**

In 1993, the United Nation's Population Fund identified immigration as "the human crisis of the age." Its report pointed out that, historically, there were vast unpopulated spaces on Earth that were livable and where human beings could move in times of conflict, depletion of their local natural resources, climatological changes, or natural disasters. By the end of the 20th century, however, it is no longer possible to move *en masse* anywhere on the globe without confronting territory already occupied by others. Moreover, the report states that these would-be "recipient areas and countries are already under stress" themselves. Consequently, immigration is emerging as *the key issue* confronting the governments of nation states everywhere.

So far, the nation state remains the only significant policymaking entity throughout the world. Even international agreements must be ratified by individual nation states before they become effective. Nation states, in turn, usually act in what they perceive as being their own national interest. Often, such actions appear to be selfish in their motivations. Normally, they are. Yet in each case, "serving the national interest" is the rationale offered for the actions taken by their leaders.

In most instances, economic considerations are paramount in determining how policy decisions reflect the national interest. The 1991 war with Iraq was a prime example of economic interests defining

national interests. The people of the United States had no particular concern about the survival of the feudal kingdom of Kuwait but they did have a major stake in the issue as to who would exert control over the vast oil holdings of the nations surrounding the Persian Gulf. Hence, it was relatively easy for political leaders to rally the country to go to war with Iraq. It has been much harder to arouse support for defending human life from tyrants in Bosnia, Haiti, or Somalia in the subsequent few years because direct economic interests have not been at stake.

But there has been one major exception in the United States to the general principle that economic considerations usually determine national interests. It is with respect to the factors surrounding the formulation of its post-1965 immigration policy. The revival of the phenomenon of mass immigration from out of the nation's distant past has been characterized by policies that completely ignore its enormous economic consequences. These policies have in no way served the national interest. Indeed, public policy in the area of immigration over the past three decades has been enacted and perpetuated in direct defiance of repeated public opinion polls that have consistently indicated a desire for major reforms and course changes.

Moreover, two presidential commissions that have been set up over the past two decades to study the impacts of immigration policy have both concluded that substantial changes are required to make the extant immigration policy congruent with the national interest. So far, their pleas have gone largely unheeded.

Brief Perspectives on Policy Development

The "open borders" policy that characterized the first 100 years of the nation's history made sense. The land mass of the country was rapidly expanding as the result of purchases, treaties, and wars. Most of

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