

Lumps of Thought: A Reply

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In a handout entitled "Conditionals in Possible Worlds: Times Three" for a talk at NASSLI on June 29, 2002, Stanley Peters reported results that are based on a misrepresentation of definitions from my 1989 paper "An Investigation of the Lumps of Thought". The results reported in the handout are not derivable from the original definitions. A crucial relativization to a parameter was dropped. The Lumps of Thought paper was published in Linguistics and Philosophy 12, 607-653.

Both Kratzer 1981 ("Partition and Revision") and Kratzer 1989 ("Lumps of Thought") assume that the truth of counterfactuals depends on a parameter. The parameter provides a set of propositions that uniquely characterizes the actual world in Kratzer 1981, and a so-called "set of propositions relevant for the truth of counterfactuals" in Kratzer 1989. Both papers try to find empirical constraints for the relevant sets, but - crucially - without characterizing them uniquely. The vagueness and context-dependency of counterfactuals is assumed to be in part due to the fact that the set of propositions that the truth of counterfactuals depends on is underdetermined.

In "Lumps of Thought", I consider three constraints for the set of propositions relevant for the truth of counterfactuals, making it very clear

that that list of constraints is not meant to be exhaustive. The first constraint is that only actually true propositions are relevant for the truth of counterfactuals. The two other constraints are presented as conjectures. One is persistence, and the other one is the requirement that all propositions considered for candidacy in premise sets be “graspable by humans.” This last constraint does in fact some interesting work. It prevents lumping from bringing in propositions that are too specific. Singleton propositions, which play a crucial role in Peters’ reported results, are the most specific propositions there are, of course.

Here is an argument showing that “graspability by humans” excludes singleton propositions from candidacy in premise sets. Let’s agree that a necessary condition for a proposition to be graspable by humans is that it can in principle be believed by a human being. Now consider Jones, a woman whose beliefs determine a non-empty set of doxastic alternatives. Suppose Jones believes the singleton proposition $\{w\}$, where w is an arbitrary possible world. This means that $\{w\}$ has to be true in all of Jones’ doxastic alternatives. Assuming that there is at least one doxastic alternative, we can conclude that there can only be a single one, namely w itself. But that makes Jones a goddess, not a human being. Her beliefs have discriminative powers that allow her to distinguish a single possible world from all the others. Humans can’t do that. Singleton propositions, then, are not graspable by humans in the sense assumed here. How general a proposition has to be to be graspable by humans is an empirical question. I wouldn’t want to venture an opinion. Some of the constraints for admissible sets of propositions that are relevant for the truth of counterfactuals are empirical constraints, then. We’d better approach them very, very cautiously. “Lumps of Thought” is not a logic paper. It’s an invitation to find more constraints for the sets of propositions relevant for the truth of counterfactuals and investigate what the consequences

are. It's an empirical investigation, and as such it looks at issues that cannot be "quickly settled once and for ever" (p. 651).