

Preface

I started this project a long time ago with the naive idea that if only I was free of the deadlines and space limitations imposed by the conferences I was writing papers for, and if only I had some time away from teaching and administrative distractions, I could get to the bottom of the problems I was thinking and writing about. In the succeeding years, including two and a half years on leave, I learned that the bottom was farther down than I thought. I am not there yet, but it is time to stop and make a progress report.

My topic is the abstract structure of inquiry—the enterprise of forming, testing, and revising beliefs. My goal was to provide a philosophical foundation and motivation for an apparatus for describing that structure—an apparatus that might help to clarify the relationships among some problematic concepts in the theory of knowledge and the philosophy of mind, concepts such as belief and conditional belief, presupposition and presumption, probability, counterfactual dependence, causation and explanation.

The apparatus I discuss begins with possible worlds and with an analysis of propositional content in terms of possible worlds. The possible worlds framework is recognized as a technically fruitful theory for doing semantics, and philosophers have found the imagery of possible worlds useful for stating philosophical problems and solutions, but there remains widespread suspicion of philosophical explanations which presuppose an ontology of possibilities. And even setting aside general worries about the ontology of possible worlds, there are serious problems with the possible worlds analysis of propositional content, problems that many philosophers have taken as sufficient reason to dismiss the analysis. But it seems to me that the possible worlds framework has a compelling philosophical motivation. The problems it faces are problems not just for a piece of semantic machinery but for an intuitively plausible conception of informational content and for a persuasive philosophical account of mental representation. I don't think that recognizing this will solve the problems that the possible worlds

framework faces, but it does provide a reason for trying to solve them within that framework, and it does help to point the way toward some possible solutions. I tried, in a paper published in 1976 (Stalnaker, 1976a), to sketch the connection that I saw between a pragmatic account of belief and the possible worlds analysis of the objects of belief, and to suggest a strategy for solving some of the problems that the analysis faces. The first half of this book develops this theme in more detail.

The second half of the book focuses on the dynamics of belief and on the relationship between what we believe and our policies for changing our beliefs in response to new information. More specifically, it focuses on the relationship between conditional beliefs, which represent policies for changing beliefs, and belief in conditional propositions, which purport to represent the world. I try to motivate what I call the projection strategy, a strategy of explaining concepts of causal and counterfactual dependence as projections of epistemic policy onto the world. The strategy does not suggest that our concepts of causal and counterfactual dependence are in any way illegitimate, nor does it point the way to a reduction of these notions to something more fundamental. I argue that the projection strategy motivates a semantic analysis of conditional propositions that I first discussed and defended in 1968 (Stalnaker, 1968), and in the concluding chapter I defend a modest form of realism about counterfactuals.

Three very general philosophical prejudices help to motivate the project and to explain why I make the moves I make at various points. The first is a pragmatist prejudice. I assume, for example, that mental representation should be explained in terms of its role in the determination of rational action and that concepts such as causation and explanation should be explained and legitimized, ultimately, in terms of their role in helping agents find their way about in the world. The second is a realist prejudice. I assume that the world is the way it is independently of our conceptions of it and that the goal of inquiry is to find out how it is. I don't regard this as an exciting or controversial philosophical thesis, but it seems to me true. I am not sure that I am what Hilary Putnam calls a metaphysical realist—I certainly do not believe that "there is exactly one true and complete description of 'the way the world is'" (Putnam, 1981: 49), but I don't see why a realist should believe that. The third is a naturalist prejudice. Human beings, I assume, are part of the natural order. They are physical objects whose mental capacities and dispositions—specifically their representational capacities—need to be explained in terms of natural relations between natural objects and systems of natural objects. There are some tensions between these three prejudices, some of which I discuss in the last

chapter, but I think they can fit together into a coherent philosophical view.

In the years that I have been working on this project, I have received support, encouragement, and advice from a large number of individuals and institutions. I cannot hope to name them all, but I want to acknowledge and thank some that stand out.

Cornell University granted me leaves in 1974–75, 1978–79, and the fall term, 1982. The first of these leaves, supported by the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, was spent in London where I enjoyed the hospitality of the Philosophy Department at University College. The second, supported by a National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship, was spent at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Stanford. Both years were pleasant and productive. They inspired in my son the ambition to be, when he grows up, a philosopher on leave.

Earlier versions of two parts of this book have been previously published. First, a paper based on a draft of chapter 3 was published as "Possible Worlds" in *Nous*, 10, 1976. Second, the last part of chapter 7 was the basis of "A Defense of Conditional Excluded Middle," which appeared in William Harper, Robert Stalnaker, and Glenn Pearce, eds., *Ifs: Conditionals, Belief, Decision, Chance, and Time*, published by D. Reidel in 1981. I thank the editors of *Nous* and D. Reidel for permission to use this material.

Many people have influenced my ideas and arguments. The work of a number of them (for example, Robert Adams, Donald Davidson, Dan Dennett, Michael Dummett, Hartry Field, Allan Gibbard, Gil Harman, David Lewis, Steve Stich, Bas van Fraassen) is discussed in the text. In these discussions, disagreement and criticism are often in the foreground, but this should not be allowed to obscure the common ground I share with the philosophers I am criticizing or the extent to which their ideas have contributed in a positive way to my own.

A number of colleagues read parts of what I have written and provided me with comments and suggestions. Richard Boyd's comments on a draft of chapter 1 helped me to clarify a number of points. Philip Bricker's criticisms, in his dissertation (Bricker, 1983), of some of the claims in Stalnaker (1976b) helped me to correct some mistakes and to get clearer about some issues in chapter 3. Hartry Field sent me detailed and constructive comments on a draft of the first four chapters, which I hope have helped me to improve my discussion of his work as well as to clarify some other points. Gil Harman read the whole manuscript, and his concise and illuminating comments helped me to avoid a number of confusions and obscurities.

My greatest debts are to Rich Thomason and David Lewis. The theory

of conditionals discussed in chapter 7 was developed in collaboration with Rich when we were colleagues at Yale from 1965 to 1968. David and I began corresponding in about 1967 when we discovered that we had developed, independently, similar theories of counterfactuals. Correspondence and conversation with both over the years have been important to the development and clarification of my ideas about all the issues discussed in this book. Both have read the whole manuscript and provided extensive comments and advice, for which I am very grateful.

Thanks also to Harry Stanton of Bradford Books for encouragement and advice, to Nan, Tom, and Joanna for putting up with it all, particularly in the last hectic stages, and to Tom for help with the typing.

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