

The Possibilities of History

Daniel Nolan. Final version forthcoming in the *Journal for the Philosophy of History*. Draft.

1. Introduction

It can appear sober to refuse to consider any historical possibilities other than the ones that occurred: "Just the facts, ma'am". While the facts are no doubt a central concern of historians, the role of historians is not exhausted by providing a big look-up table of what happened when. Historians also want to explain past occurrences, sometimes in contrast to other events that might have happened instead. Historians want to determine which processes were (more or less) inevitable, and which were purely contingent. We would like historians to be able to give us a sense of what could have been done otherwise and what the result would have been, if only so that we are not doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past. Pessimists of various stripes have doubted that one or more of these goals can be achieved. For those of us who are more optimistic about the achievements and prospects of historical inquiry, however, considering historical alternatives is not something we would wish historians to abandon any time soon.

Richard Evans's *Altered Pasts* takes issue with the claim that considering "counterfactual" histories is central to historical inquiry: instead, he says about counterfactual framing of issues in history, "I hope to have shown that it is not central at all, but marginal" (Evans 2013 p 125). To see why we can be explicit about considering alternatives to our actual history without falling foul of many of the arguments he offers against anything more than a marginal role for "counterfactual history", it is worth distinguishing several different kinds of historical alternatives, and what consideration of each of them might do for us. The most important roles arise for alternatives quite different from the long-term, complex, and specific counterfactual historical narratives that appear to be Evans's main target. While I think there are some uses even for the rich, long-term and specific counterfactual histories that Evans seems most concerned to reject, I agree with him that those counterfactual histories are "marginal" to current good historical practice. Clarity about the range of different alternatives to actual history we might consider will help us be clearer on which historical purposes are served by which. What will emerge is a picture which makes it difficult to argue that we should eschew consideration of all alternatives besides what in fact happened, while making it easier to reject the excesses of counterfactual theorising when these arise.

While Evans does consider the use of counterfactual histories useful "under certain strictly limited conditions and with strictly limited purposes" (p 125), I will suggest instead that once we realise the range of ways historical alternatives figure in historical practice, we should think that consideration of them is wide-ranging and important. Among other things, consideration of them is significant for understanding alternative historical hypotheses; for causal reasoning and explanatory projects within history; and in helping historians to provide historical information useful for non-historians in decision making and in assigning praise and blame to individuals and groups.

In the next section, I will distinguish several different kinds of historical alternatives. Armed with this classification of different sorts of historical alternatives that may be relevant to historical inquiry, section 3 discusses the potential benefits of considering each of these kinds of alternatives. Finally, in section 4, I will argue that while some of the alternatives on this spectrum may be of limited use to historians, others are very important for good historical inquiry.

2. Grades of counterfactual involvement

Let me begin by specifying a very general category of "historical alternatives". These are specifications of events and states that are in some respect different from the true history of the world. Among these alternatives, in the broadest sense, will be various *impossible* ones, ones which *could not* happen. Some of these will be outright inconsistent, others would violate principles of physics, chemistry or biology, and perhaps some violate laws of psychology or history (though we might doubt there are any such laws). For most purposes, we would do well to restrict our attention to the possible historical alternatives. (Or at least the ones thought to be possible: see below.)

This notion of a historical alternative is more generous than Evans's concept of a "counterfactual", even when we leave impossible alternatives to one side. For Evans, a "counterfactual" is an alternative version of the past "in which one alteration in the timeline leads to a different outcome from the one we know actually occurred" (Evans 2013 p xv). Not every "alternative" in my sense need match the actual history for a stretch, nor need they diverge by only one alteration.

Nevertheless, when dealing with historical alternatives we can often neglect those that share *no* initial stretch of the past with our own. (Things are likely different in other disciplines—universes with different boundary conditions are reasoned about in cosmology, and all sorts of strange contrary to fact conditions appear in philosophical thought experiments, to give just two examples.)

Just as it will streamline discussion to set aside outright impossibilities, it will simplify the discussion to come if we restrict our attention to the historical alternatives which agree with the actual past up until a departure point. Let us restrict the discussion to come to alternatives that are "counterfactuals" in Evans's sense, if only so that the discussion in this piece is on all fours with Evans's.

A still more restrictive class of historical alternatives are those which were, in some sense, *genuine possibilities* or *feasible* alternatives. It is already somewhat controversial that there are any such alternatives to what actually occurred: perhaps any departure from the actual course of events is ruled out by the past plus the laws of nature, or the operation of fate, or whatever. Rather than get into any of the subtleties of the philosophical debates on this point, let me assume here, as all of us seem to do when we make decisions, that there is often more than one feasible alternative, given a historical set-up. Ordinary people and historians also assume that feasibility and genuine possibility come in degrees: some possibilities are remote while some are not, and sometimes historical individuals and institutions can bring about some results more feasibly than others.

For many purposes, we will be more interested in possibilities that are "closer": less remote, more feasible, and that were more likely to happen at some earlier stage. It is not entirely straightforward to link our thinking about closeness of possibilities to our thinking about probabilities: when flipping two coins we judge that one head and one tail is more probable than two heads, but we do not normally think that double-heads is in any sense a remote possibility, and it even sounds odd to say that it is more remote than one head and one tails. But we need not make fine distinctions between these measures of possibility here. Sometimes we seem to have a genuine historical interest in more distant possibilities as well: sometimes we want to explain *why* some possibility was remote, for example. When Rudolph Hess flew to Britain in 1941 to propose an arrangement between Churchill's Britain and Nazi Germany against the USSR, his prospects of success were remote, to say the least. We could be interested in explaining why he had so little chance of success, and may contrast (very remote) possibilities were he succeeded with possibilities of an anti-communist arrangement between Britain and Nazi Germany against the USSR before, say, 1937. The possibilities of a 1936 anti-communist pact of this sort also seem remote, to my mind, though perhaps not as remote as in 1941: but I think historians could fruitfully disagree about whether such an arrangement was ever anything but the most abstract possibility, or whether anti-communist and even pro-Nazi sentiments among British elites in the 1930s made it at all a realistic possibility that

Britain may have been led into an arrangement of this sort. (Even if there is consensus that it was at best a very remote possibility in the 1930s, this case would still serve the example's main purpose, since the purpose of the example is just to point to a question about relative remoteness of possibility that we would not be surprised to see mainstream historians take seriously, even if neither possibility is considered a close one.)

A special class of historical alternatives are those that *would* have occurred, had some particular thing in our world been different. It can, of course, be difficult to determine when an alternative has this feature, but here are some plausible ones. Abraham Lincoln would have been president of the United States in June 1865 *if* John Wilkes Booth's assassination attempt in April had been a failure. (There was no second gunman, or magic bullet, or anything like that waiting in the wings.) There would have been significant American casualties *if* the USA had launched an invasion of the Japanese home islands in 1945. Manhattan island would have different street names *if* the Dutch had never founded New Amsterdam on it.

There may on occasions be some talking-past between philosophers and historians when it comes to "counterfactuals". For philosophers, the primary use of "counterfactuals" is to refer to a certain kind of conditional statement, usually in if-then form, though other forms are possible, in which one condition (specified by the "consequent" of the counterfactual statement) would obtain if another condition had obtained (specified by the "antecedent" of the counterfactual statement). For historians concerned with counterfactual history, on the other hand, they are often concerned to consider a historical sequence that differs from our own, perhaps by matching ours until a "departure" event, but may be less concerned to ensure that their counterfactual musings are tied to any particular "if.. then.." statement. The fact that collections of counterfactual histories bear titles with expressions like "What Might Have Been" (Roberts 2005) suggests that counterfactual historians are at least as concerned with what *might* have happened as what *would* have happened.¹

¹ Some philosophers have a slightly broader use of "counterfactuals" so that as well as the "would counterfactuals" discussed in the text, they also count "might counterfactuals", as counterfactuals. Might counterfactuals are those of the form "if A had happened, then B might have happened", and some other forms, though the exact classification is controversial. I gloss over another complication in the text. Philosophers sometimes want to restrict the category of "counterfactual" conditionals to exclude conditionals with antecedents about the future, since it is harder to draw a distinction among these conditionals between those typically used when the falsity of the antecedent is presupposed and those where it is not. I will mostly select my examples so that their antecedents concern past matters.

It would be a mistake, I think, to hold that there is exactly one, completely specific, alternative that *would* have been the one that occurred had a specific alteration taken place. Let us suppose that the United States would have continued until 1990 even if Abraham Lincoln had not been assassinated. (A plausible, if not uncontroversial, assumption.) I think there is no good answer to the question of who would have been president in 1990 had Lincoln not been assassinated. Not because it is very difficult to work out exactly what would have happened in the intervening 125 years, though that would be no easy feat even if there were a correct answer. Rather, there are different alternatives that are equally good candidates to be what would have happened, these candidate outcomes disagree about who is president in 1990, and, following Lewis 1973 p 80-82, that means that none of them are the possibility that *would* have eventuated if Lincoln had not been killed.

Even though there are rival "possible worlds" to be the maximally specific outcomes of any counterfactual difference, some counterfactual claims can still be true, since sometimes all of the rival ways to spell out the complete outcome will agree in some respects. There is no single complete timeline that is *the* future of North Korea launching a successful nuclear strike on South Korea in 2013: but there are true counterfactual claims about what would happen if North Korea did so, because all of the feasible complete timelines where North Korea does so agree about some things. "Were North Korea to have launched a successful nuclear strike on South Korea in 2013, there would have been international condemnation of North Korea", for example, or "Had North Korea launched a successful nuclear strike on South Korea in 2013, there would have been a military response from South Korea", are both true because all of the relevant candidate timelines that include such a strike include international condemnation and South Korean military responses. Some are sceptical even of these counterfactual claims, but I think it is fair to say that they would receive very general support from Korea-watchers of all persuasions (at least outside North Korea, and I would hope within as well).

3. The Value of Different Grades of Historical Possibility

Different kinds of historical alternatives are useful to consider for different purposes, though as should be clear from the above some alternatives can fall into more than one kind of alternative (a possibility that would have happened, if something else feasible had happened, is usually itself a feasible possibility, for example, as well as one we can consider using counterfactual claims). I will

not try to rehearse here all the potential uses for historical alternatives, but will instead select some that seem to me particularly important and, where possible, relatively uncontroversial.

Alternatives that are not feasible, that were never even courses of events that *might* have happened, are likely to be of least interest to the practicing historian. At least this is so when the historian *realises* that this course of events is infeasible. Many historians, without knowing it, spend their days constructing and defending accounts of the past that do not match what in fact happened: it is a virtually unavoidable risk of arguing for an interesting or controversial historical hypothesis that one might be mistaken about it. Even good historians sometimes advance accounts of the past that were not even very feasible historical possibilities. Some chronological debates are presumably like this: modern historians have defended dates for the life of the prophet Zoroaster at anywhere between the eighteenth century BC and the sixth century BC, and whatever the truth of the matter, it is unlikely that a prophet could have made the intervention he did equally feasibly at any time in that period. (For one thing, if Zoroaster did live in e.g. the fifteenth century BC, a prophet attempting to spread his message as a new and revolutionary doctrine 500 years later would have been already comprehensively beaten to the punch!) Whoever is out by several centuries in the debate over Zoroaster's dating is presumably defending an infeasible alternative to our actual history, even if they maintain a hypothesis consistent with what we can be certain about, given the limited state of our information.

The fact that even skilled historians can end up making mistakes about the past, even ending up well wide of the mark, reminds us another reason any historian should be prepared to consider alternative historical possibilities. We are often only able to work out which alternative is the actual one by considering a range of alternatives and judging which one best fits our evidence: if we were not able to consider any alternatives except one, the chance that we would uncover any mistakes in our opinions or discover more appealing theoretical alternatives would be slim indeed. Furthermore, supposing a historian does come to realise which alternative is the actual one, how would she be able to convince others without being able to critically evaluate the alternatives they take seriously? The study of history is a collective enterprise, and requires that we be able to consider a range of opinions about the past in order to be able to communicate or dispute with each other.

One fruitful approach to representing information in general is to associate pieces of information with sets of possible worlds, where the set represents all the possible worlds *not ruled out* by the

information. ("Some dogs bark" rules out worlds where there are no dogs, or where all dogs are silent, and so on, but still leaves most matters open, so the set of worlds associated with it will have great variety in other respects.) See Stalnaker 1987 and Partee 1989 for motivations for using sets of possible worlds to represent the information carried by mental states and by language respectively. Historians will rarely, if ever, need to explicitly invoke the resources of cognitive science or linguistics in this way, but there are some areas where these resources are not too far from the surface. The standard way to think about probability, for example, is as a measure over possible outcomes or possible states: since not only the actual outcome had some probability, but other outcomes have, or had, some probability as well. Sometimes when more than one outcome has some probability these probabilities are only epistemic, merely reflecting our ignorance—the use of these probabilities seems to presuppose using a measure over a range of possibilities to reflect our knowledge.

Sometimes probabilities seem more objective than this: there seem to be genuinely chancy processes in the world. (Though some philosophers argue that all this chance is illusion.) When these chances are represented mathematically, they are usually represented as a measure over different possible outcomes with some chance of occurring, including the actual outcome as only one among many. Again, historians often have little use for precise probability judgements. ("Napoleon had an 83% chance of winning at Austerlitz", or the like), though judgements of numerical probability play a role in some historical inquiries. More common, though, are rough-and-ready judgements of likelihood: there was little chance of a crusader state retaking Jerusalem after 1250, or that the chances were more likely than not that slave revolts in the ancient world would fail. Insofar as these qualitative discussions of chance are meant to be about the same thing as the mathematical theory of chance, they presuppose chances not just for the actual outcome but other possible outcomes as well. Naturally, the most interesting chances are likely to be ones that are measures over possibilities still open at a given stage of history: we would be less interested in what happens in worlds that vary in significant ways from ours before 1250, if we wish to consider the chances of a crusader recapture of Jerusalem after 1250.

When assigning probabilities to historical outcomes, some fairly strange alternatives may receive non-zero probability assignments, and so be taken into account. This is not the only area where quite strange alternatives that are known to not be actual may have a role to play. Even the elaborate long-run counterfactual histories, stretching from some divergence from actual events hundreds of

years ago to a very different world today, may play some useful roles in historical theorising. Considering these alternative histories can have some valuable benefits, such as broadening the mind and leading us to consider hypotheses about what did happen that may not have immediately occurred to us. (See Tetlock and Belkin 1996a p 15, Tetlock and Parker 2006 p 25 and Nolan 2013 pp 320-21). Countering hindsight bias is another function engaging with these elaborate alternatives can serve, as is often pointed out (Lebow 2000 pp 558-600, Tetlock and Belkin 1996b pp 15-16, and Tetlock and Parker 2006 pp 22-28). We arguably have a tendency to judge that what has happened was inevitable given the initial circumstances that led to it. Sometimes that appearance of inevitability is an illusion, and when it is one of the best ways to counteract it is to think about what alternatives are compatible with what actually happened up to some earlier time, with some relatively minor divergence point. Empirical work suggests that reflection on earlier divergence points does reduce judgements of historical inevitability (see the discussion in Lebow 2000). Of course, thinking that "hindsight bias" is a *bias* in any objectionable sense takes a stand on a contested question, namely whether all, or most, historical events *were* inevitable. At those of us who think historical contingency plays a large role in human affairs will want to make sure our historical imaginations are stimulated enough to notice contingency where it appears.

How important these roles are likely lacks a once-and-for-all answer. Some historians will have assumed that the chain of historical events are quite contingent, thank you very much, and will need no counterfactual sagas to convince them of this. They will already be sensitive to hindsight bias, to a range of alternative hypotheses about past events, and to analogies between different historical processes. For other historians and consumers of history, some of these roles will be more important: it is easy to see them as having a role in history education, or in countering politically motivated narratives of manifest destiny, of one sort or another. As far as I can see, none of these benefits *require* contemplation of elaborate long-run alternative histories: we may be able to achieve all of them only by considering short-run feasible alternatives, or perhaps without considering alternative historical possibilities at all. (I argue that all of these benefits may be gained by considering "counterfactuals" in the stricter, philosophical sense in Nolan 2013.) Still, a tool may be useful even if other tools would have done as well.

The most useful alternatives to consider to the actual course of events are the feasible or genuine alternatives to what in fact happened. We may consider these for all of the reasons given above, including their role as possibilities our investigations are deciding between, and the bearers of

chances when more than one outcome has some objective chance, but there are others besides. One is in contrastively explaining notable historical events and processes. Why did global war break out in 1914 but not in 1911 (the year of the Agadir crisis, among other things)? We should look at feasible scenarios of global war in 1911 to help explain the contrast. Why did a successful communist revolution occur in Russia but not in Italy? We should examine whether there are any feasible scenarios of successful communist revolution in Italy, and use these to contrast with the Russian Revolution. Why did large-scale agriculture appear first in Mesopotamia rather than Japan? Here the thing to do may be to explain why the indigenous development of large-scale agriculture in Japan in the years before 10 000 BC was *not* feasible. In any of these contrastive explanations, it makes sense to consider the feasibility of possibilities of the alternative, and the detail of feasible alternatives, if any, as well as what in fact occurred.

Relatedly, historians also want to explain why things that did *not* occur did not: why has there been no mainstream Labor party in the United States? Why has New Zealand not had a referendum on removing the monarchy, while Australia has? Why has there not been a major war in Western Europe since 1945? To explain these absences, historians must appeal to events and processes that did occur. But part of explaining these absences involves some reflection on what are the relatively feasible alternatives to what actually happened: relatively feasible alternatives where a party of labor appears in the US, or New Zealand has a referendum on the monarchy, or what were the feasible possibilities for post 1945 wars in Europe.

Finally, as I have argued (Nolan 2013), there are a wide range of reasons to consider the alternatives that *would* have occurred if something had been different. One reason is a direct interest in what would have happened if interesting events in the past had turned out differently: enough people just are interested in what the result of various hypothetical changes would have been that there will always be discussion of historical counterfactuals, whether or not professional historians choose to inform those discussions. Direct interest in historical possibilities exists for many of the other historical possibilities that require historical knowledge to evaluate too: historians and non-historians are curious about what other possibilities were feasible at various stages, for example, even when they do not plan to use this information about feasibility for anything more than satisfying historical curiosity.

One important reason is the use of counterfactuals about the past in decision making, especially when making arguments by analogy. It is widely believed that had Hoover pursued expansionary policies in response to the Great Depression, the effect of the Great Depression would not have been as extreme in the United States: and this Keynesian reading of Hoover's actions played into decision-making in the US during the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. Often this use of counterfactuals proceeds in two steps: the first is to assert, or argue for, a claim about how things would have gone otherwise in the past, then an attempt to establish relevant analogies between past situations and present ones. Such arguments by analogy are not free from risk, but they do sometimes seem reasonable. See Herrmann and Fisherkeller 1996 for an interesting historical case of the use of counterfactuals to inform policy, leading the United States to block Stalin's invasion of northern Iran in the early cold war. This seems to have been on the basis of beliefs US decision makers had about what would have happened in Europe in the 1930s without appeasement of Hitler, and an analogy they saw between appeasement of Hitler in Europe and potential appeasement of Stalin over Iran.

Whether these particular counterfactual judgments about Hoover or appeasement were correct, it is easy to see why policy makers were concerned to consider them, even if it is harder to give a theory about all the ways our counterfactual judgements make a difference to our non-counterfactual reasoning. Whether or not it is the proper domain of historians to draw these analogies between past and present themselves, it is one of the benefits of the study of history that historical material is available for contemporary decision makers in ways that usefully inform their decisions: and the historical information that plays this role includes the counterfactuals that feed into the kind of decision-making process discussed in the previous paragraph. (I think historians can and should contribute to policy discussions in their professional capacities as historians, as it happens, but my point is that even if they do not, *someone* should apply the lessons of history! And this application requires certain kinds of historical information historians are often best placed to provide.)

Another reason to care about "if p , then it would have been that q " judgements about history is that these judgements are often central to our assessments of *causation*. If history is to be more than a chronology of one event following another or painting a succession of static tableaux, it would be quixotic to ban all talk of one process influencing another, or one group making a difference to another, or the use of any causal verbs: no creation nor destruction, no shaping nor perverting, no production nor distribution nor exchange. So we have little alternative but to take causation in

history seriously (*pace* Croce). Often, when we think one thing causes another, we think the latter would not have happened without the former. Some philosophers have tried to *analyse* causal judgements in terms of counterfactual ones, but even if the link is much less tight than this, when judging causal influence we often go back and forth between the two. There is, of course, the question of whether we could keep our reliable practices of investigating causation while jettisoning all talk or thought of what would have happened if supposed causes had been otherwise. It is hard to see how this could be done systematically, and popular models of causal inquiry often make use of counterfactual resources (see e.g. Pearl 2009 or Woodward 2003). Historians' practice of making causal judgements is likely similar to that of the rest of us, in which case it is likely to be intimately related to judgements of counterfactuals. Dismissing consideration of historical counterfactuals risks undermining our ability to make causal sense of the past. (For further discussion of the connection, see Nolan 2013 pp 326-329).

Counterfactuals, in the philosopher's sense, appear to have close links to explanation. Above I pointed out that a natural class of explanations are those which contrast what happened (or what did not happen) with feasible alternatives. There seems to be another important kind of explanation where we explain an event A in terms of another event, B, where A would not have occurred but for B. (i.e. If B had not occurred, A would not have.) Beyond these explanations, contemplating what an event A counterfactually depends on plays a role in our thinking about many other explanations, even when this constraint is not satisfied. To take a mundane example, a clumsy houseguest's visit may be the explanation of why there are no wine glasses left, even if the wine glasses would have all been broken by now even without the visit—perhaps due to the clumsy homeowner. Still, thinking about what would have happened but for various parts of the visit is a natural way to determine whether the visit explains the broken wine glasses. The exact connection between historical counterfactuals and historical explanation is likely not straightforward (see Nolan 2013 330-331). But since our consideration of explanations often seems caught up in our thinking about the dependence of an outcome on earlier events, and that dependence so often is closely tied to the question of what would have happened if the earlier event had not happened, considering counterfactuals is likely to be part of our best methods for evaluating explanations for some time to come.

Evans does agree that causal judgements and causal explanations both come along with counterfactuals we endorse when we accept the corresponding causal or causal explanatory claims

(Evans 2008a p 81, 2008b pp 125-127). However, he suggests that these counterfactual judgements are "downstream" of our causal and explanatory conclusions: armed with these other judgements we are in a position to accept the corresponding counterfactuals, but this does not play a role in establishing the causal and explanatory judgements themselves. I doubt historical reasoning is this neatly separated into establishing casual and explanatory claims first and counterfactual claims second: it is more faithful to our ordinary methods that claims of all three sorts are made and investigated and challenged, until a consensus or partial consensus is reached. (See Nolan 2013 327-329). I am not sure how to settle this disagreement to the satisfaction of both parties: perhaps careful examination of a sample of extended causal reasoning. In the meantime, we do at least have testimony from some historians about how their practice strikes them: the fact that Evans's practice seems the way he describes is evidence for his take on the connection, and Jeremy Black's short response to Evans (Black 2008) is one data point that one "nuts and bolts" historian finds considering counterfactuals important in coming to causal and explanatory conclusions (e.g. p 112). These testimonials on both sides could no doubt be multiplied, and are unlikely to convince many who already have a position on the role of counterfactuals in history. For those on the fence, however, I urge this rather more abstract consideration: it would be hard to see why we would even *have* a construction like counterfactual "if.. then.." claims if in our reasoning we never went from them to causal or explanatory conclusions, and they only ever figured as "downstream" from already established causal and explanatory conclusions.²

Finally, information about counterfactuals, when it is available, seems to have particularly close links to the appropriateness of praise and blame, and attribution of responsibility for outcomes. (See also Lebow 2000 p 564 and 2008 p 13) While many other factors play a role, one consideration when determining who deserves praise or blame, or responsibility, for an outcome is whether the outcome would have happened without the involvement of that person. Likewise with praise or blame for social movements, the actions of nations, and so on. Whether or not it is part of the duty of historians to pass judgement on events in the past, we look to history when trying to determine praise and blame for historical individuals and institutions: a history that is silent about whether the emancipation proclamation helped lead to the downfall of American slavery, or whether lend-lease

² This issue should not be confused with the issue of whether the philosophical analysis of e.g. causation might be in terms of counterfactual conditionals, or vice versa: even if one could be explained in principle by the other, it may still be in our actual reasoning we accept as inputs information in either of the two forms and sometimes output information presented in the other.

made a difference to Soviet and British war efforts in World War II, or whether the Belgian Congo had a more brutal regime than those that would have been imposed by other European imperial powers, is a history that is silent about too much of what we care about. But all of these judgements of influence and comparative influence seem to require us to contrast what in fact happened to what would have happened in alternative scenarios.

4. Verdict: Counterfactual Histories and the Practice of History

There is a wide range of alternatives to what actually happened, from the entertaining “what if?” narratives that are both specific and cover a significant length of time are a long way away from consideration of much less grand feasible alternatives, to the possibilities invoked by counterfactual judgements used to help determine the dependence of one historical event on another. Once we see that there is a spectrum of alternatives to actual events, we are not forced to give a once-and-for-all answer to the question of how useful it is to consider alternatives to the actual course of history. Different kinds of alternatives have different kinds of uses. Some of those uses are vital for investigation: even wildly different alternatives to the actual course of events must sometimes be considered while we are trying to work out which alternative *is* the actual alternative, since evidence sometimes does not let us select the correct alternative out of our lineup, and or only allows us to do so after patient sifting and a lot of hard work. Alternatives *known* to be contrary to fact are still valuable in our historical inquiries once we seek to uncover causal information or common varieties of historical explanations, or when we try to work out what would have happened in the past, were things different, to argue by analogy about what we should try to make different in the present.

In claiming that consideration of alternatives to what actually occurred is of importance to the practice of history, I do not mean to be claiming that it would be impossible to get these benefits in any other way. I think it is plausible that we can make *some* progress on making judgements about causation and explanation while only considering actual events, for example: when we feel a cold breeze and see the nearby open window, I doubt we need to entertain alternative scenarios where the window is closed, or not there at all, before we make a judgement about why we feel cold. But this sort of relatively immediate and untheorised causal inference is no substitute for a more explicit weighing of strengths of influence and feasible alternatives, when we want to know whether a

pattern of historical events is a coincidence or reveals a causal relationship, when the answer is not immediately obvious.

If I am right, many historians have been thinking about alternative historical possibilities all along, however they understand their own practices and describe their practices to others. Most of the historical alternatives they reason about when considering historical explanations, evaluate causal hypotheses, consider chances of historical outcomes, and so on, are relatively unspecific, rather than the rich, long-run, "counterfactual histories" beloved of editors of "What If?" collections. (Though even those more elaborate "what ifs" have a role in historical practice, if only a relatively marginal one.) So if we interpret Evans's target as restricted to these long-run and rich what-ifs, I do not disagree with him that their role in historical inquiry can be easily overstated. While rich long-run counterfactual histories of the sort found in John Squire's *If it had Happened Otherwise* (Squire 1932), or more recently the essays in Niall Ferguson's *Virtual History* (Ferguson 1997), occupy most of his attention, he does approvingly quote words attributed to Weber to sum up his conclusion: "In every line of every historical book, judgements of possibilities are hidden and must be hidden, if the publication is to have any intellectual value" (Evans 2013 p 125).³ This statement runs together detailed alternate histories with the other uses of possibilities discussed in this paper. Hiding all the "judgements of possibility" in a work of history will at best lead to an esoteric history where the real work is hidden under the surface of what is published, and at worst would lead to historical works stripped of many of the causal and explanatory claims history requires, as well as of many of the historical analogies that may be useful to decision makers in the present and future. This sort of historical actualism would be too arid, if we were to engage in it.⁴

³ Evans cites Demandt 1993 p 14 as in turn citing this line from Weber, but I think either Evans or Demandt has made a mistake. Evans claims this line is in Weber's "Kritische Studien auf dem Gebiet der kulturwissenschaftlichen Logik" (Evans p 140 n 156), but the only line similar to this in Weber's text is translated by Edward Shils and Henry Finch as "In every line of every historical work, indeed in every selection of archival and source material for publication, there are, or more correctly, must, be, "judgments of possibility," if the publication is to have value for knowledge" (Weber p 173). It is clear enough from the surrounding text that Weber is writing in *favour* of consideration of "possibilities" in history, where these possibilities are not merely a matter of our ignorance (p 174), so Weber is in fact expressing the opposite sentiment to Evans. Whether the sentiment Evans cites is due to Weber or Demandt, the crucial thing here is Evans's endorsement of it.

⁴ The writing of this paper was supported by the National Humanities Center and an Australian Research Council Discovery grant, project number DP130104665. Thanks to Alan Hájek and Aviezer Tucker for comments.

References

Black, J. 2008. "Counterfactualism Defended" in Yerxa, D. A. (ed). *Recent Themes in Historical Thinking: Historians in Conversation*. Charleston: University of South Columbia, pp 111-114

Demandt, A. 1993. *History that Never Happened: A Treatise on the Question, What Would Have Happened If...*, 3rd ed. Jefferson: McFarland.

Evans, R. 2008a. "Telling It Like It Wasn't" in Yerxa, D. A. (ed). *Recent Themes in Historical Thinking: Historians in Conversation*. Charleston: University of South Columbia, pp 77-84.

Evans, R. 2008b. "Response" in Yerxa, D. A. (ed). *Recent Themes in Historical Thinking: Historians in Conversation*. Charleston: University of South Columbia, pp 120-130.

Evans, R. 2013. *Altered Pasts: Counterfactuals in History*. Waltham, Mass: Brandeis University Press.

Ferguson, N. (ed.) 1997. *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*. London: Picador.

Lewis, D. 1973. *Counterfactuals*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Herrmann, R.K. and Fisher, M.P. 1996. "Counterfactual Reasoning in Motivational Analysis: U.S. Policy Towards Iran" in P.E. Tetlock and A. Belkin, (eds). 1996. *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp 149-167

Lebow, R. N. 2000. "What's So Different About a Counterfactual?". *World Politics* 52: 550-583

Lebow, R.N. 2008. "Good History Needs Counterfactuals" in Yerxa, D. A. (ed). *Recent Themes in Historical Thinking: Historians in Conversation*. Charleston: University of South Columbia, pp 91-97

Lewis, D. 1973. *Counterfactuals*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Nolan, D. 2013. "Why Historians (And Everyone Else) Should Care About Counterfactuals".
Philosophical Studies 163: 317-335

Partee, B. 1989. "Possible Worlds in Model-Theoretic Semantics: A Linguistic Perspective" in Allen, S. (ed.) *Possible Worlds in Humanities, Arts and Sciences. Proceedings of Nobel Symposium 65*. New York: Walter de Gruyter, pp 93-123

Pearl, J. 2009. *Causality: Models, Reasoning and Inference*. 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Roberts, A. (ed.) 2005. *What Might Have Been: Imaginary History from Twelve Leading Historians*. London: Orion.

Squire, J.C. 1932. (ed.) *If it had Happened Otherwise*. London: Longmans and Green.

Stalnaker, R. 1987. *Inquiry*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

Tetlock, P. E., & Belkin, A. (1996a). "Counterfactual thought experiments in world politics: Logical, methodological, and psychological perspectives". In P. E. Tetlock & A. Belkin (Eds.), *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 1–36.

Tetlock, P. E. and Belkin, A. (eds). 1996b. *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics*. Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Tetlock, P.E. and Parker, G. 2006. "Counterfactual Thought Experiments: Why We Can't Live Without Them and How We Must Learn to Live With Them" in Tetlock, Lebow and Parker 2006 pp 14-44.

Weber, M. 1949. (Shils, E. A., and Finch, H.A., trans.) *Max Weber on The Methodology of the Social Sciences*. Glencoe Il: Free Press.

Woodward, J. 2003. *Making Things Happen: A Theory of Causal Explanation*. New York: Oxford University Press.